

Hilda's groundbreaking ceramics in retrospect

“The approach to ceramics should start from basic knowledge of the material and from making pottery. Only thereafter can a ceramist proceed toward another level.” This is what Hilda Soemantri, Indonesia's foremost fine art ceramist, scholar, lecturer and founder of the ceramic section of IKJ used to tell her students.

The truth of this rule is unfolded in a current retrospective display of her exquisite work at Cemara-6 Gallery, Jakarta. Thirty pieces in raku clay and glazes, combined with mixed media, give evidence of the consistency and integrity of an artist who took ceramics in this country to the level of modern art.

Representing the stages of her interaction with clay, incorporating events and accidents into a new ceramic presence, the story of Hilda's involvement over more than 30 years with clay is an account of the artist's passage from exploration to revelation. Her groundbreaking *oeuvre* testifies to deep human emotion and refined artistic creation.

Widely considered the mother of modern ceramic art, Hilda Soemantri was the founder of the ceramics department at the Jakarta

Institute of Arts (IKJ), focusing on modern ceramics based on both craftsmanship and new images. She is also known for her quiet courage, the first Indonesian artist ever to introduce installation art here (1976), and a scholar — the first-ever female art historian to obtain a PhD degree abroad. Holding a solo exhibition in 1978, she was the first woman artist to do so.

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Her relationship with clay started in the 1960s when she entered the ceramic section of the Department of Fine Art and Design at the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB). In those days, it was a rarity for women to study art, let alone ceramic art. She became fascinated by the nature of clay, its character in the course of breaking up — its cracks, edges, flaws and fragments — and the interplay between clay's fluid, yielding response and its grainy, weighty resistance. Clay became the medium for exploring her *raison d'être*.

Hilda reveals she works

without preconceived ideas, allowing the feel of the texture against her bare hands to determine the shape. Searching for truth within reality, she lets the medium explore and trace experiences, memories and visions stored in her subconscious, and intertwine with the forces occurring in nature.

Gradually she moved away from the usual stoneware vessels and pottery of her early works, shocking the world of art in 1976 with an installation.

Even more daring was the use of ceramics and broken pieces of ceramic in the installation that sought to highlight the compelling transformative power of clay. Only in hindsight did many come to understand the profoundly contemplative meaning of the installation that pondered a person's life and the process by which broken pieces ultimately come together at the Center of all Life.

By infusing clay with abstract expressionism, Hilda Soemantri broke through the conventional and enlarged existing perceptions of art, particularly ceramic art in Indonesia.

Her works gained a profound sensuality. Staggering

in their refined sensitivity, the abstract lines, curves, cracks and holes in her profoundly delicate works suggest the artist's increasing sense of the transcendental, which to appreciate indeed requires a thorough understanding of the material, meticulous precision, but above all, a cohesive, natural feel.

Fascinated by the mountains of Victoria (Canada), where she was an artist in residence giving lectures to the university, her works of that time present images in which the beauty of Victorian mountains, the cosmic mountain of ancient myth and the spirit of Javanese *Gunungan* (the tree of life), seem to melt into one compelling power. This is particularly tangible in the series of the *Cosmic Mountain*, which, except for some bright colors, is dominated by somber hues with just a golden dot or stripe to light up the view.

Hilda's interest in art, however, is not limited to her own, as evident from her dissertation *The Terracotta Art of Majapahit*, which she wrote for her PhD in art history at Cornell University and was published under the same title. The Majapahit was a Hindu kingdom around the 14th century, stretching from

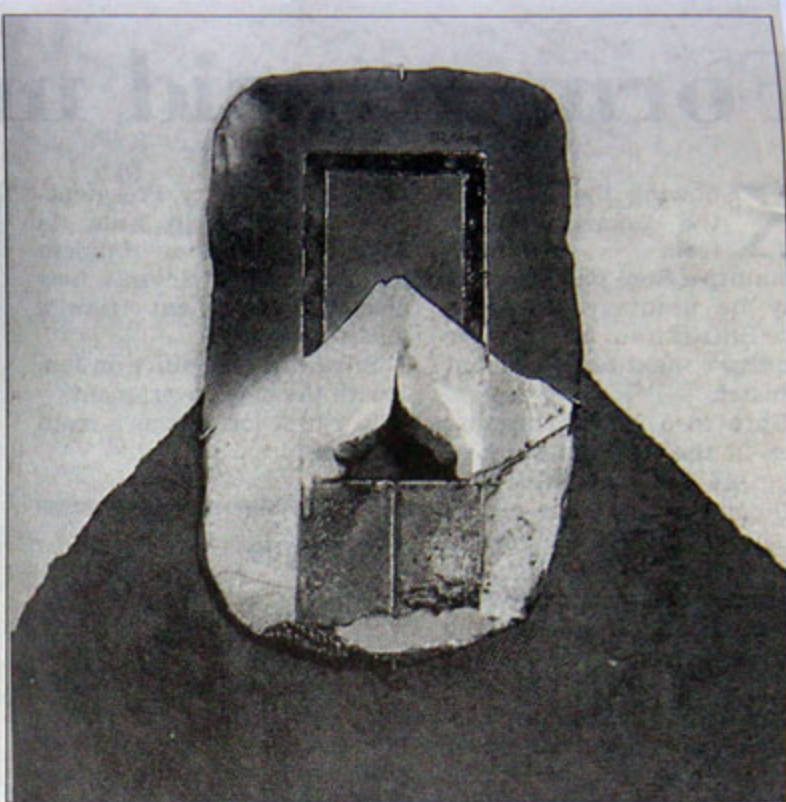
East Java to Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia and beyond.

"It is her great virtue that she restores the missing dimension: the close-at-hand, the intimate, the familiar feel of the everyday," states Stanley J. O'Connor, her mentor at Cornell University and a luminary of Southeast Asian studies, adding, "she has demonstrated that the small-scale and marginal can become the central and tremendous."

John Mistic, art historian at the National University of Singapore, considers the book a highly reliable resource for scholars.

Hilda was born in Jakarta in 1945. She grew up in the Netherlands, pursued her secondary and university education in Indonesia, obtained her Master's from Pratt Institute in New York and received her PhD in art history from Cornell University. She is currently very ill, but was, nevertheless, able to oversee the selection for her retrospective exhibition, and there are high hopes she will attend the opening on Dec. 17, at 5 p.m.

A video will be showing works that are not in the exhibition, including her groundbreaking installations. Selected works and the Majapahit book will be for sale.



Hilda Soemantri's *Gunungan VI* (the Tree of Life VI), 1998

Hildawati Soemantri untuk Seni Rupa Modern Indonesia (Hildawati Soemantri for Indonesia Modern Fine Art) Cemara-6 Gallery, Jl. HOS Cokroaminoto 9-11, Menteng, Central Jakarta, Dec. 17 through Dec. 27.

To be formally opened by Prof. Dr. Fuad Hassan on Dec. 17 at 5 p.m.

*Information: Cemara-6 Gallery, attn. Ms Etty
Tel. 324 505, 391 1823*