

# SPACING IDENTITIES

J. ARIADHITYA PRAMUHENDRA

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Co-organisers

**NUS** MUSEUM



Gajah Gallery 

## FOREWORD

In her book *Family frames: photography, narrative, and postmemory* (1997), Marianne Hirsch argues that family photographs "locate themselves precisely in the space of contradiction between myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of family life", in which acts of affiliation and affirmation are complicated by mediative struggle to read, to render palpable conceptually and emotionally the distant figures captured and framed in distant moments. Faced with the vexing questions of Self and the layered contexts of the cosmopolitan, globalising and capitalistic patterns of identity formation, the family photograph have been strategically deployed by contemporary artists to anchor, problematise, deconstruct, reenact or recast the nature of relationships and ties, and as such provide a productive site of questioning and contestations.

*Spacing Identities* features a series of charcoal paintings by J Ariadhitya Pramuhendra, a Bandung based artist whose practice consistently traverse the question of Self and identity as concerns that displaces the preeminence postcolonial regard for ethnicity and nation on one hand, and on the other seek to (re)state the immediate - the familial and the received faith - as points of identitarian originary and contestation. This is not merely staged as indicator of the artist's predicament, but significantly too as tableaux that accommodate trajectory of readings for the viewer, simultaneously familiar and unsettling. Based on photographs taken at various stages of his childhood, Pramuhendra produces large scale charcoal paintings as if through their enlargements, to accentuate or clarify details. Yet the attempt of willful remembering can also frustrate. Pramuhendra's

charcoals highlight memory's failure. The photograph, the commemorative, as a descriptive document is not able to prevent an inevitable loss. In his charcoal works, the photographic image is recoded, imbued with a sense of residual absence. The sharpness gave way to impressions, to traces and to residues – a blurring that is seemingly produced by a slow burn – and the shadows blackened and the whites blinding in a cathartic intensity. In his 'incomplete' rerenditions, Pramuhendra sets up a productive space for his audience that simultaneously de-personalise and re-personalise the familial gaze, and de-signify and re-signify subjects relative to the viewer; involving textual (ideologies, beliefs, perceptions or expectations) interjections – conscious or otherwise – onto the images. Included in this exhibition catalogue are essays by Shabbir Hussain Mustafa and Aminudin TH Siregar exploring aspects of contexts, production and receptions.

The NUS Museum wishes to thank J Ariadhitya Pramuhendra for this valuable opportunity to present his works in Singapore. We are grateful to Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB) and ITB's Galeri Soemardja for this collaboration, undertaken with the kind and significant partnership of Gajah Gallery, Singapore. We wish to convey our gratitude to Dr. Binarul Anas Zaman, Dean, Faculty of Fine Arts and Design, ITB, Mr. Jasdeep Sandhu of Gajah Gallery and Mr Aminudin TH Siregar. Their various contributions are significant to the development and fruition of the project.

Ahmad Mashadi  
HEAD  
NUS MUSEUM

## FOREWORD

I gladly welcome the goodwill extended by the National University of Singapore (NUS) Museum to display the latest works of one of our alumni, J. Ariadhitya Pramuhendra, who has been a student at the Fine Arts and Design Faculty at the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB). It is an honour for me to be part of this collaboration between the NUS Museum and ITB-Fine Arts represented by Soemardja Gallery. This exhibition also brings me the personal satisfaction of being able to see one of our alumni present his work in the regional contemporary arts scene. I believe that this solo exhibition of Pramuhendra's works will contribute to the consideration among art lovers within the academic climate of the campus. I hope that this partnership between ITB- Fine Arts and NUS Museum will continue in the future.

Pramuhendra is a young graduate of our Graphic Arts Studio who has been active in the arts scene from the day he graduated. I can still remember the opening of the exhibition of final year students; work at Soemardja Gallery in 2006, where I had the privilege of giving the opening remarks. At the time, I said that exhibitions are among the important milestones in the life of those who wish to become artists. Through an exhibition, the arts public can see the works that the students create. This interaction helps build a positive attitude or fortitude that helps them enter the fine arts world.

Pramuhendra and the artists of his generation are of course the ones who will fill the ranks of Bandung's contemporary arts scene, and Indonesia's arts scene in general. His charcoal works, to me, have their own strength, derived from skills in using techniques that other artists rarely use.

Indeed, this exhibition of Pramuhendra's at the NUS Museum will be the source of some meaningful discussions because I am sure his works are able to compete with the works of the artists of his contemporaries.

I hope that this collaboration does not end here, but will continue into future exhibition programmes that build upon the good relations between our two institutions. As such it is very important that the collaboration between ITB-Fine Arts and NUS Museum also encompasses various forms of information exchange, mediation, workshops and seminars, which in the future, would benefit the development of discourse and arts practices.

On behalf of the ITB-Fine Arts academic community, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all parties who have helped make this exhibition a reality.

Success to us all,

Dr. Binarul Anas Zaman  
DEAN OF FACULTY OF FINE ARTS AND DESIGN  
BANDUNG INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

## SPACING IDENTITIES by Aminudin TH Siregar

The debate about the identity of Indonesian art and culture continues to leave gray areas. The cultural polemics of the 1930s were followed by the birth of Persagi (*Persatuan Ahli Gambar Indonesia – Indonesian Union of Painters*), which brought nationalist fervour to painting in 1938. Agendas of propaganda were then institutionalised through the *Keimin Bunka Sidhoso* to build eastern values during the Japanese occupation (1943-1945). The debate on the existence of distinct 'Indonesian' painting between Dutch critic J. Hopman and Indonesian artist S. Sudjojono in 1947 was soon followed by *Surat Kepercayaan Gelanggang* (Arts Forum Letter of Confidence) affirming the equal status of Indonesia's artists as part of universal culture in 1950. The birth of pro-people concepts of national culture through the Lekra institution in 1954 was followed by the countermovement of the Cultural Manifest espousing universal humanism in 1963. The debate continued: in 1969 artist Oesman Effendi denounced the labelling or notion of an identity of Indonesian art; through the notorious Black December 1974 to the subsequent New Fine Arts Movement of 1975. This tortuous journey instilled the discourse on identity into the consciousness inherited by the artists of the 1970s and 1980s. Throughout the 1990s, these issues continued to have significant echoes. It would seem that questions of identity have become part of the vocabulary that will continue to haunt any arts movement in Indonesia.

Despite all this, entering the first decade of the new millennium, this issue of identity began to diminish, especially in the hard and ideological form prevalent in previous decades. This reduction was caused by a drastic change in social background, attitudes and behaviour after the reforms of 1998. Young artists who emerged and began to establish their careers in the 2000s could not escape from these issues. Nevertheless, in their art practice, they are finding their own ways of addressing it.

The artists of this new generation are not troubled by 'identity' in any nationalistic definition. In fact, they seem to be building a new consensus that the identity they are living is temporal in nature. Then how can we place the discourse of identity among the current cultural constellation? This is the question that troubles a number of young Indonesian artists.

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J. Ariadhitya Pramuhendra is one among the artists of this current generation who brings issues of identity to the fore by traversing various curves of thought: in a number of things he seems to have inherited the academic thought pattern that perceives identity as a discursive practice. However, Pramuhendra unearths this issue through appreciating the life he is living. In spite of this, Pramuhendra also represents – understandably

– the figure of a young person uprooted from the historical context where identity in a national sense has not only become foreign, but is also viewed as an 'entity' that cannot easily be accessed.

The young generation of Indonesian artists practising this first decade of the second millennium have emerged after the social upheaval of the 1998 reforms, with technologies that have become integrated as part of the reality of life. This generation discovered itself when the globalised world had already become a reality. Together with the artists of this generation, Pramuhendra is discovering himself among the realities of a contemporary society that can be described as a community unaware of its limits of identity (such as East or West, for instance).

If we go back in history, this is the community once imagined by Indonesia's former Prime Minister Sutan Sjahrir. He once stated, "We do not need to take one or the other (West or East), we can refuse both, because both must be of the past and the present is already sinking into the past." Sjahrir perceived nationalism as a spiritual projection of low self-esteem brought about by colonial attitudes, fostered between the coloniser and the colonised. Sjahrir's views are in line with the ideas of French intellectual Julien Benda who stated that nationalism is a corrupted facet of the intellectual spirit which in turn feeds the greed for power. With his

