

Mella Jaarsma

the shelter

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Mella Jaarsma

the shelter

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These series of gouaches with the theme "The Shelter" were realized during my residency at Studio 106 in Singapore last March 2003. The costumes and cloaks I have been working on more recently have developed into "flexible housings". The basic function of a roof above your head is to protect you in tropical climates from the sun and the rain. The idea of a roof though can also be further developed. It captures a certain space (like a temple) covering a vision/belief of a group or organization. The shelter is the minimal construction needed for protection, not yet a shape of a house, directly related to the proportions of the human body. The shelters only give space for one person and some are made out of movable constructions. It gives the feeling that the person is trapped in a certain spot because the roof is low and almost becomes a costume or (refugee) tent.

Wearing a veil or costume signifies the group to which we belong. On the other hand, it conceals identity much in the way camouflage does. In both cases, it is about giving up individuality and personal identity for the sake of becoming unapproachable and untouchable in a group. Through my work, I try to reject the question of origin and actually deconstruct identities by producing renewable identities, seeing identity as a transient invention.

Everyone who confronts my work comes at it from different backgrounds and cultures, dealing with highly personal sets of taboos and therefore experiencing the work in different ways. I want my work to relate to these specific audiences, to deal with some of their taboos and interpretations. This takes great sensitivity, and therefore I try to find ways to open up dialogue, rather than work in a more confrontational way. I am not looking for symbols to make a meaningful artwork, but I am searching for a phenomenological reality, with images that speak for themselves, a reality that is an intriguing variety of cultural experiences.

- MELLA JAARMA





"Four Legs", 2003, gouache, acrylic & conte on paper, 32 x 25 cm.

opposite: "Peranakan Shelter 2" (detail), 2004, gouache, acrylic & collage on paper, 29.5 x 18.5 cm.



Taking Cover

ADELINE OOI

DEFINING Mella Jaarsma is a complex business. She cannot be fitted into any neat category. She stands on a unique threshold, belonging to Indonesia and Netherlands, neither authentically Indonesian nor Dutch. Moving against the grain, her art education brought her from the Netherlands to Indonesia on a personal exploration of shadow and light, and she has now called Yogyakarta home these past twenty years, in the meantime establishing herself as a moving force in Indonesia's contemporary art scene. It is difficult to put into words the unusual position she assumes in her locale. Against the epic backdrop of Central Java's largely insular and feudal world, she has had to face a doubled share of marginalization and prejudices, vilified for her "white otherness" in an environment burdened with struggle and fear, still coming to terms with issues of identity, racial hegemony and religious hatred. The process of un-learning and re-learning a new way of life as she shed her Dutch upbringing would have been displacing and overwhelming; but the attempt to belong to Indonesia would have been a greater challenge. To say that Mella's world

view has altered tremendously since her arrival in Indonesia would be something of an understatement.

MELLA'S time in Yogyakarta has taught her to look beyond the superficial layers of things. From the height of Suharto's New Order regime to post-Reformasi, her art has been molded by historical turning points in her surrounding environment. She works from a unique perspective—that of an insider/outsider, in between worlds, at once detached from and involved in that environment. The scope of her work communicates on various cultural levels, intending to provoke, extend into wider issues, challenging viewpoints and inviting diverse interpretations.

ADOPTING the notion of garments as an outward or symbolic expression, Mella's elaborate costume installations (usually made out of animal skins, horns, or cocoons) are manifestations of something more. They are loaded metaphors of race, sexuality, authenticity and origins. They deconstruct identities; unearth deeper underlying issues of cultural representation, questioning humanity, individualism, religious beliefs, taboos, displacement and migration. Austere and usually shroud-like, the costumes cover the body

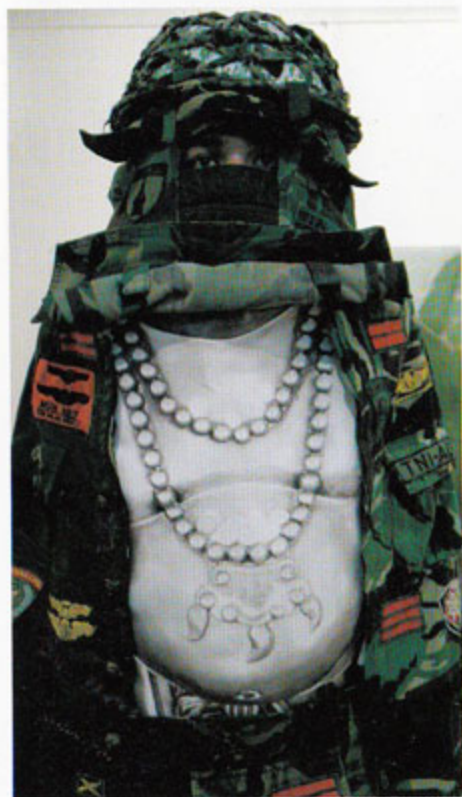


and face with openings to reveal the eyes or expose other body parts. The images adopted are direct and simplistic but stunning nonetheless—we find here no exclamatory disenfranchisement, no accelerating roars or piercing wails. Her choice of materials has been carefully made to reinforce the dramatic impact of these key idioms in her work. Her earlier works (with animal skins, shells and horns), corporeal and charged, address identity issues such as ethnicity and gender politics. They also question the position of the “Other”—who is the native and who the master. Read from the context of Muslim Malaysia and Indonesia, the image of the shroud, commonly associated with the jilbab, or the muslim veil, unleashes hypersensitive issues of belief, taboos and women’s rights.

“SHELTER” marks a significant direction for Mella Jaarsma. The exhibition brings together the artist’s extensive collection of previously unseen gouache sketches and new costume installations developed during her time in Malaysia. The sketches, culled from the artist’s personal working studies since 2000, include recent studies made during a brief stay at the Rimbun Dahan residency this year, and a body of work made during her residency at Studio 106 at LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore last year. Other drawings are early results of developing studies for past installation and performance projects in Bangkok, Limerick, Singapore and Yogyakarta.

IT seems fitting to address the concept of shelter at a time when mysterious plagues pose a widespread threat to all in Asia, and rancour in the Middle East is further aggravated by conflicting responses towards the Iraqi War. Terrorism—post 9/11, Bali, the Jakarta Marriott bombing and now Madrid—continues to cast its

ominous shadow worldwide while, closer to home, the Acehnese struggle has steered itself into an impossible impasse. It is our primordial instinct to seek shelter, physical and/or emotional, during such troubled times. The desire to hide away, to seek solace, to escape, avoid or slip away unnoticed are warranted reactions as our senses warn us to keep out of harm’s way. It presupposes a sense of removal or detachment; solitude; implying a disengagement from the rest of the outside world or perhaps giving up something for the sake of protection and security. Yet this safe space or ‘wall’ which we build around ourselves can be confining and limiting. It has the ability to trap, to conjure claustrophobia, and suffocate as we become cut off from the rest of society. The security of this space closes us in; we are made vulnerable by the very object that is meant to protect us.



OUR shared Peranakan heritage with Indonesia and Singapore is a key focus in the most recent costumes. An upturned metal basin—usually used for holding water or as a communal rice bowl—doubles as the wearer's headgear in "Peranakan Shelter (Small)". Rare batik tulis (drawn batik, instead of the usual printed batik) from Mella's neighbouring village in Yogyakarta forms the innermost layer of the costume. Strips of common Batik found in Indonesia and Malaysia are intricately knotted, net-like, and strung with Chinese soup spoons and Buddhist



beads. The digital photograph, an open belly in earth tones, inspired by the ubiquitous Laughing Buddha we pray to for luck and prosperity, is attached to the costume's torso area.

THIS image, common among Taoists Singaporeans and Malaysians adds an unusual twist to Mella's usual shroud-like costumes and is repeated in "Peranakan Shelter (Medium)" here in the context of military regalia. Belts, epithets and badges are sewn onto army fatigue to form a camouflage jungle gear with a strangely exposed Buddha belly. The upturned metal basin reappears, a dismal substitute as a helmet to keep the wearer safe. They are whimsical and kitschy, recalling costumes from agit-theatre, so commonly associated with Indonesian street protests in the late 1980's and early 1990's.

YET the figures stand quietly; the compulsion to stare at them is overwhelming. Our eyes are inextricably drawn to the image of the exposed belly, yet not quite. We cannot help but look up; even if the quiet voice in us tells that it is rude to stare. It is difficult to detect who stands behind this shroud. His or her eyes give no clue. They are no longer instruments of vision, merely its object. The models are weakened by the inward gaze of others, as they stand immobile, frozen in their private thoughts. People regard and ignore them in the same way tourists do exotic attractions. Some approach with trepidation, too embarrassed to look yet too curious not to. Others cast a cursory glance and walk away, while some examine with utmost attention, prodding and poking, as though the person standing behind this costume is inanimate.

THE sketches reveal a gentler Mella Jaarsma at play. They offer a compelling view of the artist's exploratory process and

private world. The artist's zesty palette of vibrant pinks and reds, cool greens, and refreshing orange belie the weight of her commentaries and the austerity of her developed output. Some bear a childlike indulgence; that impulsive doodling, cutting and pasting, and frenetic layering of colours, marks, and media. Others, slowly drawn out in quiet irony are uncompromisingly feminine yet menacing. The narrative within each individual sketch tells its own unique story. They meld textures and emotions—spontaneous, at times irreverent though introspective, foreboding yet playful, addressing the human condition resplendent with its glaring contradictions and hypocrisies.

THESE works are powerful in miniature and impressive in their entirety. The effect of looking at each individually is different from looking at them collectively or when seen in relation to the costumes. Who has the upper hand in Mella Jaarsma's inversed world? You feed me. I point my keris at you. Who is the refugee? Who is the oppressor? Who is the victim and who wields power? Food turns to poison, taboos become accepted norms and shelters transform into traps. From the images, they tell us we are barbaric, contradictory, complex. Indeed, Man has

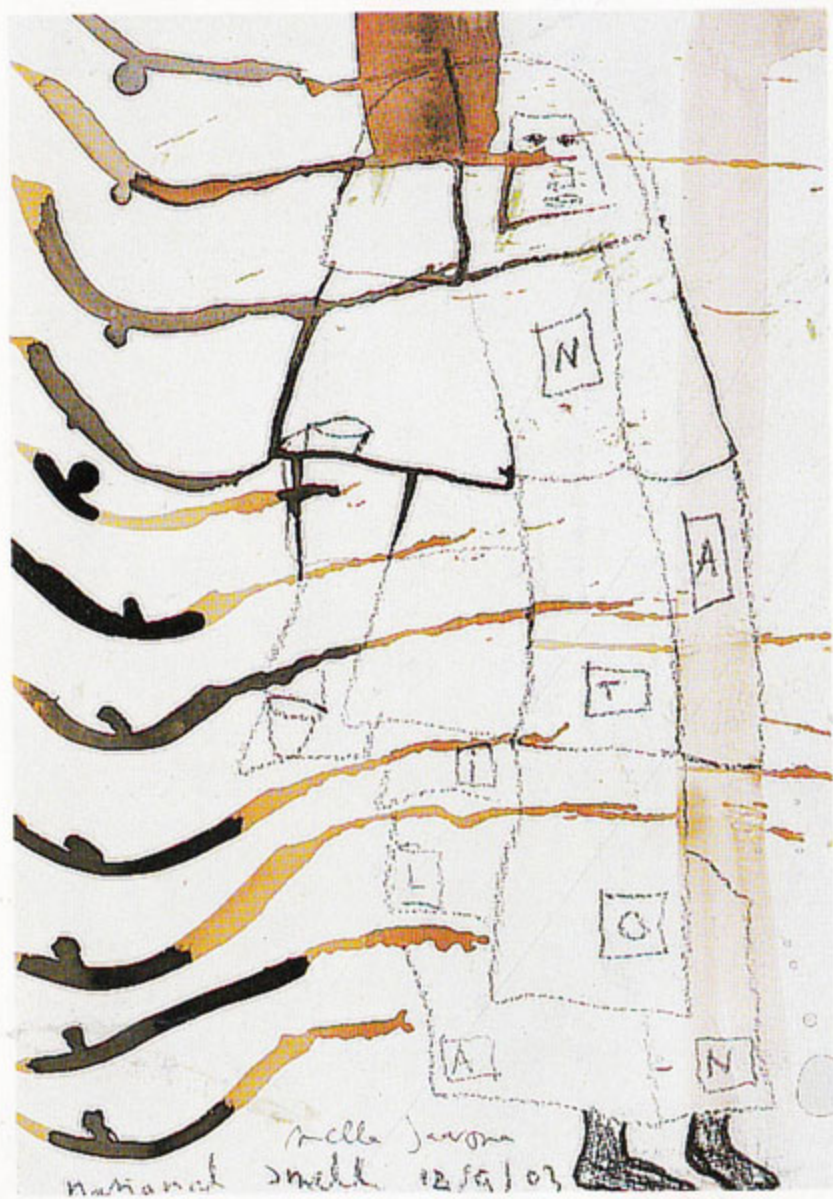
moved away from his cave and we have since traded our hides and weapons for technological advances and urban accoutrements. Yet we kill, we feed, we hunt, we hide and we heal; barely escaping our savagery, merciless with our excesses and follies, and our horrifying capacity to summon up evil in the name of justice, or survival or for mankind's greater good.

MELLA'S work is laden with no great "take-home" messages. She highlights the ruptures in our supposed perfect world and tells us that the ground we walk on is rarely solid. Through the inversion of things, she reveals how different and unsettling the world might seem from the reverse viewpoint. As the common adage goes, "there are two sides to every story"; yet Mella's observations tell us there are more, that life is more convoluted than any single narrative pulled out, and human nature is far too complex to be traced; that ethics and moral values are more knotted than we would like to admit.

March 2004



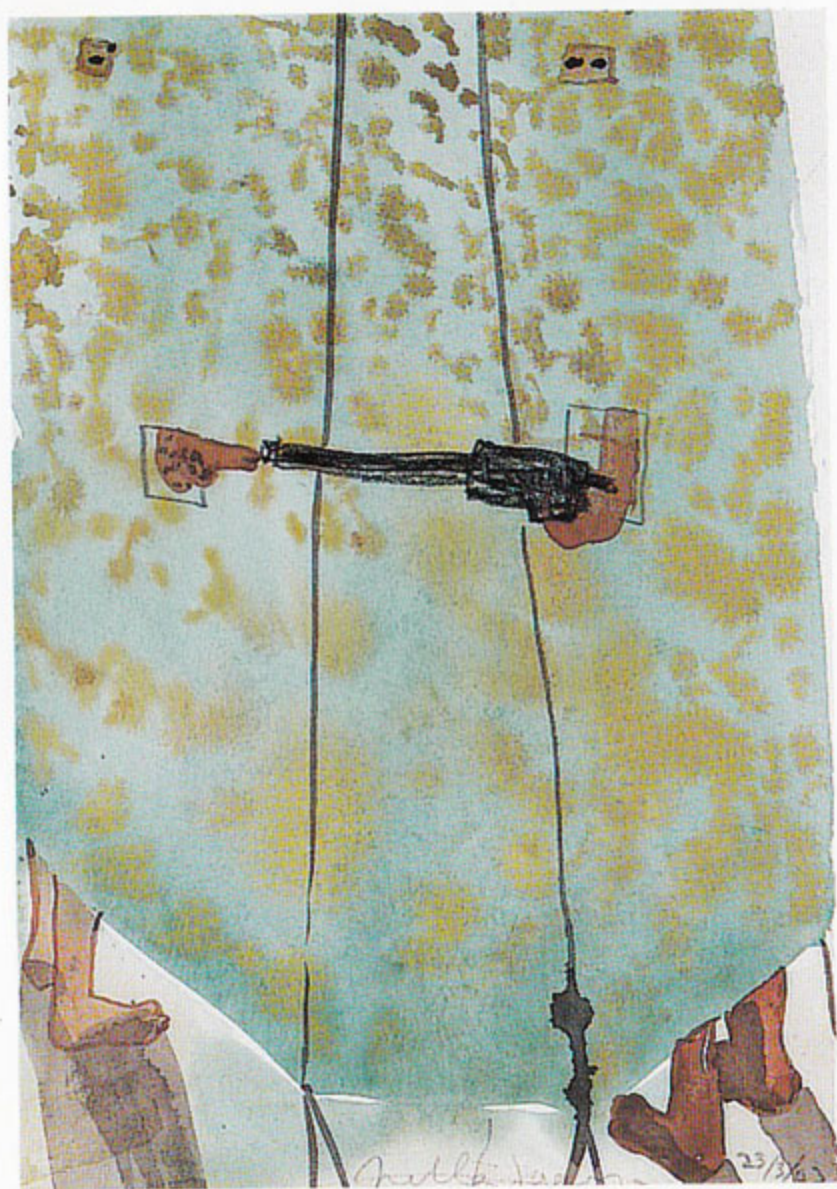




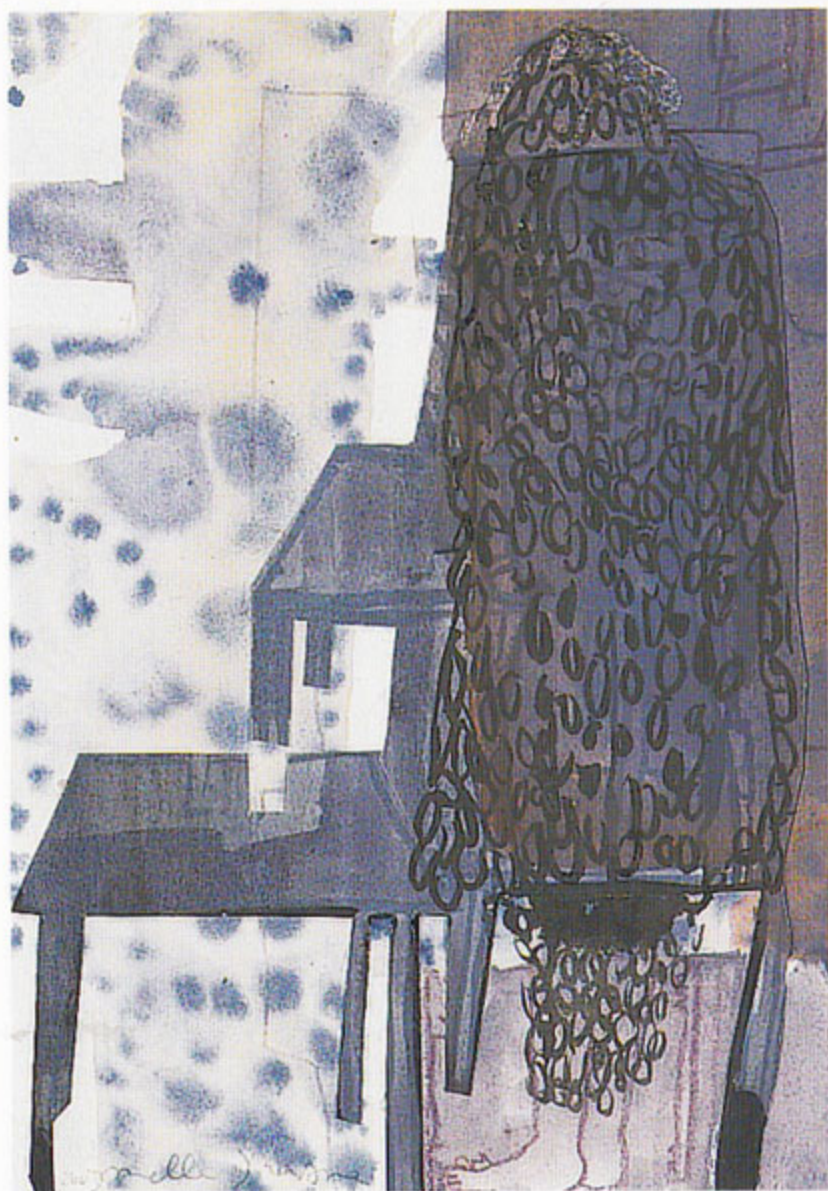
A F R T
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F O U N D A T I O N
D O K U M E N T A T I O N

left: "The Feeder 1", 2003, gouache, conte & ink on paper, 24 x 18 cm.

this page: "National Smell 2", 2003, gouache, ink & conte on paper, 27.5 x 19 cm.



"The Refugees", 2003, gouache & conte on paper, 26 x 18.5 cm.



"The Constructor 4", 2003, gouache, pastel, ink & collage on paper, 26 x 18.5 cm.



"Peranakan Shelter 6", 2004, gouache, photograph, acrylic & ink on paper, 29.5 x 21 cm.



"Peranakan Shelter 1", 2004, gouache, photograph, acrylic & ink on paper, 29.5 x 21 cm.



"Peranakan Shelter (China)", 2004, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 110 cm.



MELLA JAARSMA

born 1960, Emmeloord, The Netherlands
Lives and works in Yogyakarta,
Indonesia since 1984

EDUCATION

- 1978-84 Fine Art Academy 'Minerva',
Groningen, The Netherlands
- 1984 Art Institute Jakarta, Jakarta,
Indonesia
- 1985-86 Art Institute of Indonesia,
Yogyakarta, Indonesia

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

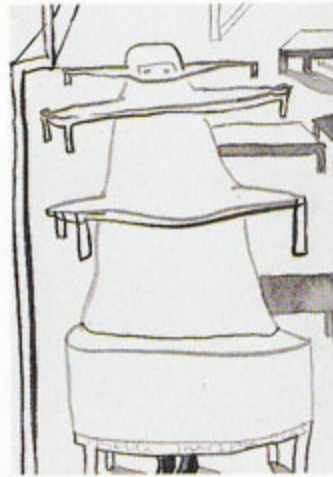
- 1987 Artoteek, Groningen, The
Netherlands
- 1988 Cemeti Contemporary Art
Gallery, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
- 1989 Cemeti Contemporary Art
Gallery, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
- 1991 Foundation of Fine Arts
(SBK), Amsterdam,
The Netherlands
- 1992 Cemeti Contemporary Art
Gallery, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
C-Line Gallery, Jakarta,
Indonesia
- 1994 Erasmushuis, Dutch Cultural
Centre, Jakarta, Indonesia
- 1995 Cemeti Contemporary Art
Gallery, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
- 1997 **Think It or Not**, Bentara Budaya,
Yogyakarta, Indonesia
LIP (Lembaga Indonesia-
Perancis), Yogyakarta, Indonesia
Temporary Space, Sapporo,
Japan
- 2000 **Saya Makan Kamu Makan**

Saya, Cemeti Art House,
Yogyakarta, Indonesia
Saya Makan Kamu Makan
Saya, Lembaga Indonesia-
Perancis, Yogyakarta,
Indonesia

- 2001 **I Eat You Eat Me**, curated by
Dr. Apinan Poshyananda, The
Art Center, Center of Academic
Resources, Chulalongkorn
University, Bangkok, Thailand
- 2002 **Moral Pointers**, Lontar Gallery,
Jakarta, Indonesia
- 2003 **The Warrior**, Jaske Gallery,
Sydney, Australia

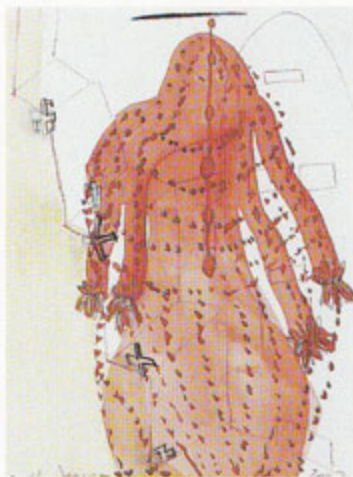
SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1994 **Weather Report**, travelling
exhibition through the
Netherlands, Bangkok,
Yangoon, Kuala Lumpur,
Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Hanoi, Ho
Chi Minh City, Chong Qing,
Singapore, and Hong Kong
- 1995 Artoteek, Den Haag, The
Netherlands
Chejun Pra Bienalle, Chejun,
South Korea
- 1996 Base Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
Kas Gallery, Sydney, Australia
Dogget Street Studio, Brisbane,
Australia
Mata Perupa, Kraton,
Yogyakarta, Indonesia
- 1997 **Biennale V**, Art Centre Taman
Budaya, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
Heart, Teguh Gallery, Jakarta,
Indonesia



- Kampanye Anti Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan Indonesia**, Museum Benteng Vredenburg, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
- Axis**, National Gallery, Jakarta, Indonesia
- Gift for India**, Lalit Kala Akademi Galleries, Rabindra Bhawan, New Delhi, India
- 1998 **Kopi Susu**, Erasmus Huis, Jakarta, Indonesia
- Asia Print Adventure 1998**, Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art, Sapporo, Japan
- Drawing and Diagrams Ideas Personified**, Chijmes, Singapore
- Plastic and Other Waste**, Asia-Pacific Artist Solidarity, Chulalongkorn University Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand
- Yamanote Gallery, Sapporo, Japan
- 2000 **Menyikapi Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan**, Cemara 6 Gallery, Jakarta, Indonesia
- 1999 **Biennale VI**, Art Centre Taman Budaya, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
- Womanifesto '99**, Saranrom Park, Bangkok, Thailand
- Wearable**, Touring Exhibition, Galeri Padi, Bandung; Bentara Budaya, Yogyakarta; Sika Gallery, Ubud, Bali, Indonesia
- Volume & Form**, Environmental and Urban Sculpture Exhibition, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
- Soul Ties**, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
- Fuukido Gallery, Asahikawa, Japan
- Third Asia-Pacific Triennial**, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia
- Festival Pekan Seni Ipoh IV '99**, Art Foundation Perak, Perak, Malaysia
- Makasar Art Forum**, Ujung Pandang, Indonesia
- Reformasi Indonesia**, Museum Nusantara, Delft, The Netherlands
- Asap**, Taman Budaya, Banjarmasin, Kalimantan, Indonesia
- Snapshot**, Contemporary Museum, Baltimore, USA
- Woven Maze**, Women University, Hannover, Germany
- 2001 **Palu - Indonesia Forum**, Palu, Sulawesi, Indonesia
- Not I am I**, Nadi Gallery, Jakarta, Indonesia
- Floating Chimeras**, Edsvik Art, Sollentuna, Sweden
- ARS 01**, KIASMA Museum, Helsinki, Finland
- 2002 **EV+A 2002**, Limerick, Ireland
- Site + Sight: Translating Cultures**, LaSalle College of the Arts, Sculpture Square, Singapore
- Art of Bamboo**, Kasihan-Bantul villages, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
- Gwangju Biennale**, Gwangju,

"The Carrier 1", 2003, gouache & ink on paper, 22.5 x 15.5 cm.



- 2003 Korea
Visual Poetry, Hokkaido
 Museum of Literature,
 Sapporo, Japan
**5th International Exhibition of
 Sculptures and Installations**,
 Lido, Venice, Italy
GRID, Cemeti Art House,
 Yogyakarta, Indonesia
GRID, Erasmushuis, Jakarta
Sorak-Sorai Identitas, Galeri
 Langgeng, Magelang, Indonesia
Witnessing to Silence,
 Canberra Contemporary Art
 Space, ANU Humanities
 Research Centre Project; Art
 and Human Rights, Canberra,
 Australia
Girl Talk, Edwin Galeri, Jakarta,
 Indonesia
Interpellation, CP Open
 Biennale, National Gallery,
 Jakarta, Indonesia
Country-bution, Yogyakarta
 Biennale VII, Taman Budaya,
 Yogyakarta, Indonesia

GRANTS AND RESIDENCIES

- 1988-91 Artists' Work Grants, The
 Ministry of Culture and
 Education, The Netherlands
 1998 Travel Grant to Sapporo, The
 Japan Foundation, Jakarta,
 Indonesia
 2001 Artist Residency, Art Center,
 Chulalongkorn University,
 Thailand
 2003 Artist Residency, Studio 106, La

- 2004 Salle-SIA College of the Arts,
 Singapore
 Artist Residency, Rimbun
 Dahan, Kuang, Selangor,
 Malaysia

PERFORMANCES

- 1986 **Gunung Sari**, Yogyakarta,
 Indonesia
 1987 **Gambir Anom**, Artoteek,
 Groningen, The Netherlands
 1988 **Gambir Anom**, USVA,
 Groningen, The Netherlands
 1990 **Intro-Extro Variform**, Cemeti
 Contemporary Art Gallery,
 Yogyakarta, Indonesia
Intro-Extro Variform, Mitra
 Budaya, Jakarta, Indonesia
Gunung Sari, Korzo Theater,
 Den Haag, The Netherlands
 1991 **Everything=Nothing**, Tropen
 Museum, Amsterdam, The
 Netherlands
 1998 **Pribumi**, Marlioboro Street,
 Yogyakarta, Indonesia
 1999 **Hi Inlander**, APT3, Queensland
 Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia
 2000 **Under Cover**, Lembaga
 Indonesia-Perancis, Yogyakarta,
 Indonesia
 2001 **Under Cover**, The Art Center,
 Center of Academic Resources,
 Chulalongkorn University,
 Bangkok, Thailand
Do I Need to Feed You? I, EAT
 ME Restaurant, Bangkok,
 Thailand
Do I Need to Feed You? II,

left: "Peranakan Warrior", 2003, gouache & conte on paper, 29.5 x 21 cm.

right: "Shield I", 2003, gouache, pencil & conte on paper, 24 x 18 cm.

- Jakarta; Habituspublik 2001,
Blok M Plaza, Jakarta,
Indonesia
- 2002 **Do I Need to Feed You? III**,
Edsvik, Sollentuna, Sweden
- 2002 **Under Cover**, Lontar Gallery,
Jakarta, Indonesia
- 2003 **Rubber Time I**, Theertha
International Artists Workshop
2003, Lunuganga, Sri Lanka
- Rubber Time II**, Yogyakarta
Biennale VII, Taman Budaya
Sosietet, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

ART PROJECTS

- 1991 **Inspiraties I**, City Theatre,
Arnhem, The Netherlands
- Inspiraties I**, Museum of
Modern Art, Arnhem, The
Netherlands
- 1993 **Art and Environment**,
Cremation Place Pralina at
Munduk Village, Bali, organized
by the Goethe Institute,
Jakarta, Indonesia
- 1996 **Kita Makan Apa Hari Ini**,
Surabaya Art Festival,
Surabaya, Indonesia
- Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju,
South Korea
- Collaboration at Studio 106**
with Amanda Heng, Singapore
- 2003 **Theertha International Artists
Workshop**, Theertha, Sri Lanka

WORK IN PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- Municipal of Groningen, The
Netherlands
- Municipal of Amsterdam, The
Netherlands
- Municipal of Apeldoorn, The
Netherlands
- Municipal of Filderstadt,
Stuttgart, Germany
- Foundation of Fine Arts,
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- Sampoerna Bank, Jakarta,
Indonesia
- Dutch Embassy, Jakarta,
Indonesia
- Singapore Art Museum,
Singapore
- Widayat Museum, Magelang,
Indonesia
- Lontar Foundation, Jakarta,
Indonesia
- Museum Oei Hong Djien,
Magelang, Indonesia
- Ministry of Education and
Culture, Jakarta, Indonesia
- Artoteek Den Haag, The
Netherlands
- Deutsche Bank, Jakarta,
Indonesia
- Queensland Art Gallery,
Brisbane, Australia

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Exhibition date

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cover: "Refugee Only" (detail), 2004, acrylic, silkscreen & embroidery on canvas, 172 x 105 cm.