

# Mella's artwork lifts the cover on prejudice and ignorance

Mella Jaarsma's tent positioned amid the National Gallery's exhibition space here might have evoked some surprised reactions among the thousands of visitors to the month-long CP Open Biennale.

More important is that they got to feel, albeit briefly, what it is like to be a refugee by stepping into the structure made of canvas, in the shape of a cloak and with a head and face cover attached. Snugly fitting the human figure as though tailor-made, it resembles the *burqa* Muslim women's head and body covering.

The installation *Only for Refugee* is made up of two tents set against the background of a photograph. One of the tents contains the minimal necessities grabbed by someone forced to flee their home: a bar of soap, toothpaste, a toothbrush and a set of prayer beads.

Even after visitors returned to the comfort of their homes, the installation provided a poignant reminder of the plight of refugees, estimated to number almost 15 million worldwide in 2001. It's especially relevant in this country, beset by conflicts from west to east and with displaced people forced to subsist in shoddy living conditions.

Mella's tents denote anxiety, the sensation of being confined but with no place to go. With the selection of an almost camouflage green as the color for one tent, the artist may have been linking the issue of refugees with war and its perpetrators.

While the installation was meant to be interactive (the Biennale closed last week), and children gladly played in and out of the "tent", it stands for the feeling of uncertainty in a world where anything can happen at any time.

The *jilbab* (head covering) and *burqa* have been Mella's

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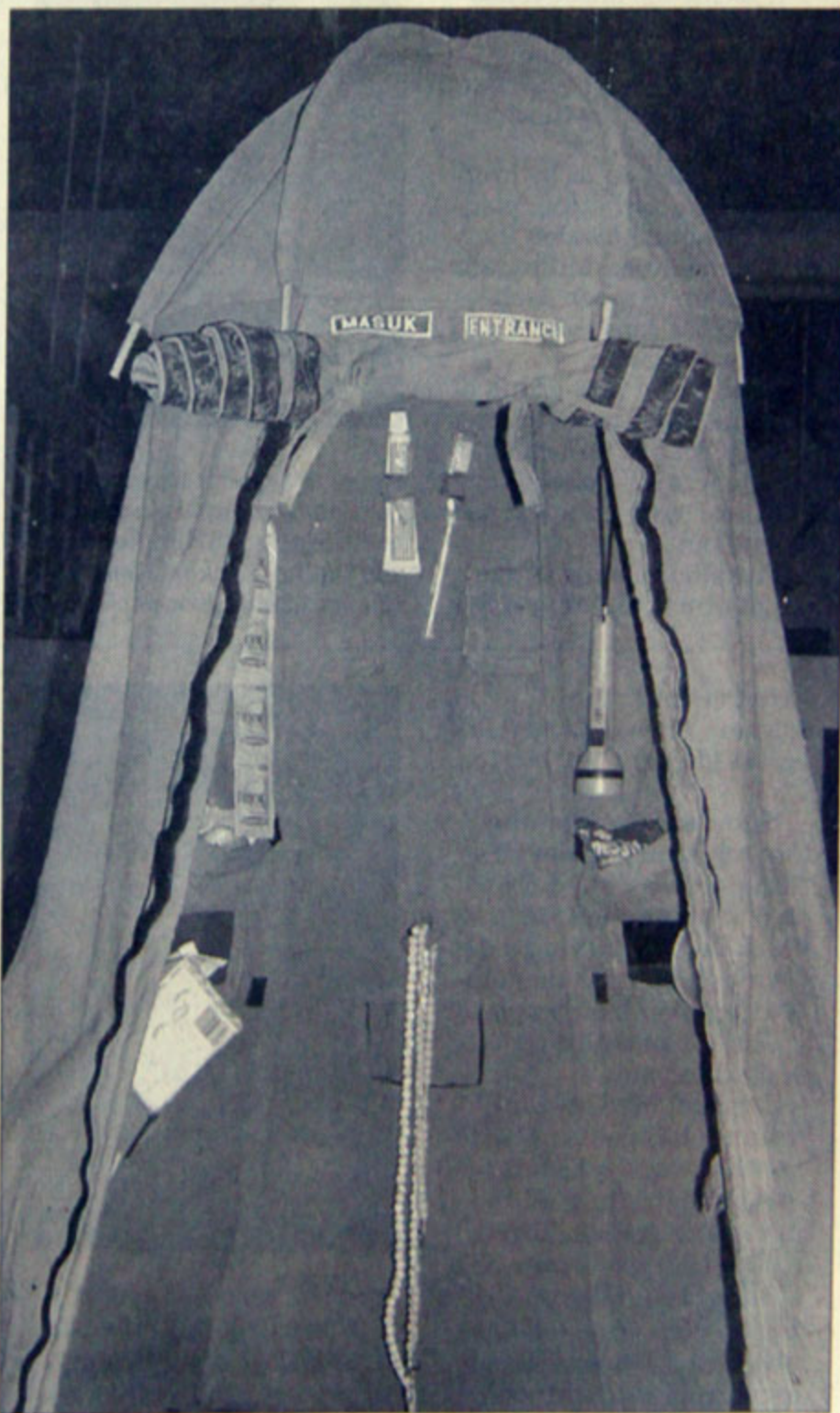
artistic metaphors ever since she tried to make audiences aware of the issues shackling people in prejudice and hatred as the consequence of self-centeredness and lack of communication.

"With my works I want to confront the audience with their own existence, their memories and the cultural, religious, social and politi-

cal circumstances," said Mella, who as a foreigner living here for almost 20 years knows how deeply rooted biases take a firm grip on human behavior.

"I create art where people are a physical and psychological part of the work and actively get an experience."

Intent on breaking through biases and taboos, this artist, enriched by her crosscultural experiences and as a participant in various international exhibitions, made her first attempt with the *jilbab* in *Hi Inlander*, in which a person was clad in the cloak that also



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Mella Jaarsma's *Only for Refugee* (photos above and left). The Dutch-born artist, a longtime resident of Indonesia, highlights the plight of refugees, living in a state of anxiety but with nowhere to flee, and the prejudice that cloaks many of our interactions with others.

covered the head and face up to the eyes.

The cloak was made of frog skin — consumption of frog meat is prohibited for Muslims but is a delicacy for the ethnic Chinese — while *inlander* was the Dutch colonists' dismissive term for native Indonesians. The person inside the cloak had difficulty breathing.

A cloak covering the body and face represents a dress code signifying the group to which the person wearing it belongs. At the same time, it conceals identity; Mella sees it as giving up individuality and personal identity and

becoming unapproachable and untouchable from the "outsiders".

Cloaks made of animal skins have served to give people the experience of being in another "skin". Mella made cloaks of buffalo skins and horns, goat hair, cocoons and embroidered emblems.

If it all looks quite confrontational, Mella argues that the contrary is true.

"I am trying to open up dialog," she said. The way to do so seems to be through challenging the viewers of her works to look into their own existence.

Such has been Mella's obsession since the very beginning of her artistic career when she searched for the expression of the basic elements in life. Birth, growth and death include breathing, listening, seeing, feeling, thinking, and so on. These themes have filled her canvases, which in a way connect to her current preoccupations with dialog.

Born in the Netherlands, Mella came here as an art student. Initially fascinated by the light of the sun that could make long shadows of one's own figure, she later

became obsessed with the oil lamps producing shadows on the wall of flickering the little sidewalk eatery.

She married fellow artist Nindityo Adipurnomo and they set up the Cemeti Gallery, later named Cemeti Art House, which has grown into an important center for alternative contemporary Indonesian art development.

Her works questioning racial, ethnic, religious and other prejudices will continue to break through the glass ceiling of entrenched attitudes at future exhibitions, and hopefully make us think.