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# WHERE I WORK DADANG CHRISTANTO

PROJECTS BY MICHAEL YOUNG FROM NOV/DEC 2010

INDONESIA AUSTRALIA



**DADANG CHRISTANTO.** Photo by Carl Warner for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

When the 53-year-old Indonesian artist Dadang Christanto was eight years old, his father was abducted in the middle of the night by army-sanctioned thugs, never to return. “My father was a communist sympathizer,” the artist explains, “but not a member of the party,” and to this day it remains unclear why the older Christanto was singled out. This wound in the artist’s life has never healed, and it continues to inform every one of his works, from the graphic, stylized paintings of disembodied heads crying tears of blood to reflective site-specific installations and performances that quietly act as memorials to victims of violence in all its forms.

We sit at his home in Ferny Hills, on the northwestern fringe of Brisbane, where urban sprawl meets bush. We drink Japanese tea the color of maidenhair fern and eat Indonesian spring rolls that his wife has made. It is still winter in the southern hemisphere, but by 9 a.m. the temperature has already climbed to a warm 22 degrees Celsius. The garden is huge, and a golf course abutting the property creates the illusion of vegetation stretching to the horizon. The screeching of parrots is the only disturbance.

The artist keeps two studios. The main working space is a double garage in red brick with a corrugated steel roof, cut off from the road by an extension in the driveway that houses a white cube-like viewing gallery. Christanto begins work at five in the morning—“the most creative time of the day,” he says, and a period, one can readily infer, when he can wrestle with the darkness and isolation, which characterizes his oeuvre. He pauses at seven to make breakfast for his children, and then works until noon.

On an easel in the garage studio sits an elongated portrait-format canvas that Christanto has placed as a landscape; it would be too tall for the space if turned upright. The work is part of a new series featuring his distinctive violent imagery over batik cloths mounted on raw canvas. The paintings will be shown in a solo exhibition at Canberra’s Drill Hall Gallery in November.

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The batiks for the new work have been sourced by the artist's 84-year-old mother, who still lives in Kemantran, central Java. When Christanto was a child, batiks (along with rice, sugar and everyday provisions) were sold in his family's shop, now run by his sister, his mother having long since retired. "Kemantran itself does not have a strong batik tradition, and most of the designs were copies from other regions of Java," he points out, but it was through these textiles and their densely repetitive motifs that Christanto's mother taught him the language of art—pattern, color and texture. On a visit home in January 2010, the artist decided it was time to somehow utilize this familiar resource, ultimately bringing back armfuls of fabric. Neatly folded and stored in a studio cupboard for months, they are now finding their way into his paintings.

He has just returned from Japan, and he shows me photos of his most recent installation, *Voices From Disappeared People*, a series of 1,000 five-meter-high bamboo poles installed in rice fields for the Setouchi International Art Festival. Christanto drilled holes in the bamboo that, when the wind blows through them, give off an eerie, flute-like whistling sound. The remnants of this and several other sculptural works sit in the corner of the studio. "They are far too noisy to even think about installing here," the artist notes.

Christanto's painting and sculpture is an ongoing meditation on the nature of violent death and suffering which touched him as a child and will never leave him. The peace he has found in his daily working practice allows him to express himself, with piercing clarity, as he continues to confront the unspeakable