

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA ART MUSEUM

Dadang Christanto

contemporary Indonesian artist

1 August - 31 August 1991

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA ART MUSEUM

Dadang Christanto

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Dadang Christanto's exhibition at the Art Museum and lecture series in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney, is a joint project hosted by the University of South Australia Art Museum and the Discipline of Asian Studies, Flinders University.

The Australia - Indonesia Institute, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra, has generously provided the funding for the exhibition and the artist's travel to Australia.

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Dadang Christanto

Brita Maklai

"My art is my forum for discussion - I want to shock people into thinking and questioning".

Dadang Christanto

Born in a small village in Tegal, Central Java, on 12 May 1957, Dadang Christanto grew up searching for something to believe in. In 1975, he went to study in Yogyakarta (Yogya), Java's 'city of culture', which has produced many of Indonesia's finest modern artists. As well as being steeped in traditional culture, Yogya was Indonesia's capital during the Revolution (1945-1950), and so attracted many Indonesian painters, who settled there and formed the basis for Yogya's future direction as one of Indonesia's foremost art teaching locations. The experience of the Revolution and the close contact with the *rakyat kecil* (little people) that occurred when artists joined in the guerrilla struggle, resulted in a tendency for Yogya artists to paint the people and to sympathise with them; during the Sukarno era art in Yogya became increasingly associated with the left. This was in contrast to the artists who studied and lived in Indonesia's other main art centre, Bandung. There, the emphasis was on form rather than content, and artists were more interested in exploring the possibilities of abstract art.

When in 1965 communism was outlawed, all forms of leftist art activity were suppressed, and the Bandung school came to dominate art teaching in Indonesia. Social themes in art all but disappeared. The early 1970's saw an increasing interest in traditional themes and motifs and *batik* was used experimentally, particularly by painters like Amri Yahya and Bagong Kusudirdjo. *Batik* painting became a fine art medium, and the flat and decorative aspects of traditional *batik* design and *wayang* (shadow theatre) began to appear in the work of a number of artists. In Yogya, traditional motifs tended to appear as an expression of the inner world of the artist; in Bandung, they were used in a more conceptual way.

By the time Dadang arrived at the Akademy of Seni Rupa Indonesia (ASRI)¹ in 1975, disenchantment with the New Order had already begun to surface. Against a backdrop of student protest in many campuses and criticism of the new regime by the well known poet and playwright Rendra, a new wave of artists, mainly from Yogya, were beginning to express dissatisfaction with what they saw as narrow-mindedness and conservatism in Indonesian modern art. Some abandoned painting for more experimental forms such as installation and mixed media works. Of those involved with painting, some turned to photorealism, with elements of surrealism or magic realism.

In 1974, a group of these artists formed the Indonesian New Art Movement and wrote a manifesto calling on artists to reject the narrow concept of 'old' Indonesian art (painting

graphics and sculpture) and redefine art more broadly to allow the emergence of a truly Indonesian art.

Dadang's formative years as an artist consequently involved contact with many artists and ideas, and participation in exhibitions with the Indonesian New Art Movement. Experiment with form was only one aspect of art in Yogya during the 1970's. The other was a desire to create images that exposed the reality of Indonesian society instead of idealising it in art.

In 1979 the Army, reacting to an increasingly active student movement, occupied campuses throughout Indonesia; the 'normalisation of campuses' law was enacted, and the student movement was suppressed. The last New Art Movement exhibition was held that year. Although the group got together for another exhibition in 1987, as a potential instrument for change it seemed to lose its impetus, and most member artists turned to teaching or writing, and painted as individuals.

A small number of artists, however, including Dadang, and two other ex-New Art Movement artists, Moelyono and Harsono, as well as Semsar Siahaan, have continued to be committed to working in ways that raise awareness of social problems, as well as working with the disadvantaged of society, helping them to help themselves. This embryonic and informal movement represents an important development in Indonesian modern art history.

For Dadang, art is not about creating something that appeals to the aesthetic sensibility of the viewer, "I don't want to produce a catharsis in the viewer through aesthetics - I want them to feel a shock that causes them to think and feel critically, not just accept things as they are". In presenting these works, his intention is to communicate an awareness of the reality of life in Indonesia. "If people (in Indonesia) want to protest, they can go to Parliament, or they can start up a discussion group such as the Forum for Democracy² to put forward their views. My works are my parliament - a forum for discussion and communication".

Dadang often uses the word 'communicative' when discussing his art. To him it's an essential element in a work of art, as important as technique or creativity. He also believes in the importance of empowering the powerless in society to communicate their needs, and has worked in villages and poor urban communities. As well as being involved in theatre groups as both actor and director, he has worked for the audio-visual studio known as PUSKAT, a Catholic organisation, holding workshops for village people in media communications.

More recently he has been living and working in a small village on the slopes of Mt Merapi, where he organises a studio for the children. Sanggar Merapi, as the little workshop is called, gives children the opportunity to learn to draw, paint, make ceramics and puppets, and at the same time, are encouraged to think for themselves, and see their environment through their own eyes and not with the stereotyped vision that devalues them as simple villagers. There is also a library where children can come and read. Their families are too poor to buy books themselves. The children help raise money for their activities by selling cards they have designed themselves, and with a goat raising project.

Involvement in the village works both ways. As well as helping the community, much of the inspiration for Dadang's recent work came from seeing the daily struggle for survival that goes on in the village. Empathy with the plight of the farmer or the woman labourer is directly related to his close contact with the people.

The eurocentric attitudes that until now encouraged the idea that modern art in Asia was merely copied from the West, therefore not worthy of serious attention, is fortunately changing. The work presented in this exhibition is modern Asian art of an international standard and orientation, while being at the same time recognisably Indonesian. Dadang's modern art practice is integrated with elements derived from the still living traditional art forms of Indonesia, especially Java and Bali. Dadang explained that he did not consciously choose to include these, rather, they arose spontaneously from his Javanese cultural background. It also reflects his concern to give his ideas a form that is communicative to ordinary Indonesians, as well as the small educated minority who are familiar with modern art.

It seemed natural to Dadang to represent the 'monster' of uneven development, or development without dialogue, as a character from the left or evil side of the *wayang* or a *raksasa* (giant). His qualities which can be read from his stylised form include coarseness, greed, cruelty and arbitrary use of power. The giant figure threatening the humble landowners from above is the natural enemy of the *halus* (refined) characters who represent harmony, balance and wisdom.

Javanese of all social groups recognise the visual appearance and characteristics of the *wayang* figures. The influence of *wayang* is evident in Dadang's hierarchy of plywood cutout faces in two dimensional profile, like the leather puppets. They appear here ranked according to status, just as the *wayang* puppets are arranged during a performance, stuck into

Dadang Christanto

a banana trunk until the *dalang* (puppeteer) is ready to manipulate them when it is their turn to perform. Dadang's modern *wayang* parodies the ideal types of human being embodied in the *wayang* stories, exposing the social-cultural myths of the New Order Indonesia.

Primary colours - red, yellow, blue, black and white - as well as stylised pictorial elements, echo the traditional Kamasan paintings of Bali. Stylised clouds, water, flames, as well as the human figure drawn in two dimensions according to rules that determine the sex, status, and character of the individual, can be found in Balinese traditional painting too, as well as much current transitional art in Bali. Deriving originally many centuries ago from Hindu Buddhist iconography transferred and adapted from India, similarities can be found in the

Hindu Buddhist art of Nepal and Tibet. In Dadang's art, the complex cultural heritage of Indonesia has been integrated with modern art media to create art that is relevant not only within an Indonesian cultural context, but also as contemporary art of relevance to international art historians and art lovers.

The caricature used to depict bureaucracy and big business in some of the works contrasts with the images of the 'little people' - the farmers and fishermen - who appear in more naturalistic form, emphasising their humanity in opposition to the less than human forces that threaten their existence.

Another traditional art form, one rarely seen today, has been adapted by Dadang to tell his own story, in *Dialogue with Myself*. The *wayang*

beber (a traditional form of narrative story telling) or scroll *wayang*, was unrolled by a professional story teller, to illustrate each stage of the story. Dadang's scroll has been in process for several years.

The art of Dadang Christanto describes the life of Indonesia's people movingly, but also with a great sense of humour, giving us a glimpse of the diversity, complexity, but most importantly, the humanity of the Indonesian people .

1. *ASRI* was the former name for the FSRD-ISI (*Fakultas Seni Rupa Desain - Institute Seni Indonesia*).

2. *Forum for Democracy* is a pro-democratisation discussion group recently formed in Indonesia.

The Works

Dialogue with Myself 1984-

The long scroll, its form derived from traditional story-telling, grew over the years like a diary on which the artist recorded images, ideas and events in his life and from the life around him.

Bureaucracy 1990-91

This hilarious comment on the functioning of the military bureaucracy from the smallest village head up to the top military elite needs no explanation. The Indonesians have an expression: *Asal bapak senang*, which means 'as long as the boss is happy'. The sculpture also suggests a hierarchy in which all resources flow to the centre of power.

Golf Ball 1990-91

A reference to the increasing appropriation of land for non-productive uses, creating many social and economic problems for farmers and other small landowners, who are often forced to re-locate with inadequate compensation.

Hands 1990-91

There is a Javanese expression: 'Kill a louse, smell the blood'. The blood from the crushed insect has a characteristic smell said to be pleasant. Dadang's installation shows a hand of power crushing the life of a powerless human being, and sadistically smelling the blood.

Who will be sacrificed Kedung Ombo? 1991

The four canvas series tells a story about the victims of the Kedung Ombo dam project, whose land was flooded for a development project that many critics say will mainly benefit the rich. The case continues to receive much media coverage in Indonesia, and the resulting controversy has raised the question of who benefits from development? *Who will be sacrificed Kedung Ombo?* is a tribute to the silent endurance of the 'little people', who although politically weak, have a strong and angry spirit.

The signboard appearing in the work is a slogan often erected at the site of such projects. It reads: 'Development requires sacrifice'. The word

for sacrifice, *pengorbanan*, is derived from the base word *korban*, meaning victim, perhaps suggesting an element of human sacrifice is demanded in order to reach the 'heaven of the future' promised in the 'magical formulas' of New Order slogans.

The paintings, *Farmer*, *Mt Merapi farmer*, *Merapi Rock-breaker*, and *Tie and Clay-pot seller*, are all inspired by scenes from the village where Dadang lives. In the last one, *Tie and Clay-pot seller*, the artist compares the price of a tie in a city department store with the amount earned by the pot seller with many trips down the mountain with his load of good

June 1991

Brita Maklai is a graduate of Flinders University and currently lives in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, where she is researching contemporary Indonesian art and artists.

“Exercise,
take another step”



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