

TALES FROM WOUNDED-LAND

EKO NUGROHO + WEDHAR RIYADI

This exhibition features two of Indonesia's leading younger artists, Eko Nugroho and Wedhar Riyadi. They are part of the "2000 Generation" that came to maturity during the period of violent upheaval and reform that occurred in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the subsequent fall of the Suharto regime and the transition to democracy in Indonesia. Although Nugroho and Riyadi have exhibited widely, their works have so far been rarely seen in the United States. *Tales from Wounded-Land* marks their first New York gallery exhibition.



Both artists grew up in Java and reside in one of the island's major art centers,

Yogyakarta. Their works are grounded in both local traditions and global popular culture. Nugroho in particular has cited the influence of traditional batik and embroidery styles, as well as Javanese shadow puppetry. The influence of the latter can be seen in the strange, hybrid figures that appear in his works.

In contrast to the artists of the generation just before them, many of whom became deeply involved in the political activism of the student and youth movements of the late 1990s, Nugroho and Riyadi base their work in daily personal experiences rather than political activism. For that reason, their artworks always leave a space for satirical commentary or passing impressions of the origins of the socio-political issues they observe in daily life. In order to achieve this they employ the visual language they most favor and are most familiar with – that of drawings, comics, cartoons, and animation. Even so, this does not mean that their works lack a powerful socio-political dimension. Nugroho and Riyadi are firmly engaged with the culture of their time. With *Tales from Wounded-Land*, they make a pointed commentary about the current state of politics and society in contemporary Indonesia, a period in which the newly democratic country is going through great transformation.

For this exhibition, Nugroho presents a major new work, *Human Religion*, a series of three related canvases that address the role of religion in contemporary Indonesia, a topic much in the news in recent years. The central figure in *Human Religion #2* is shown in a traditional shirt worn by Muslim men in Indonesia; he holds a diamond, symbolizing wealth, while tucked in his pocket is a pair of scissors, suggesting the half-hidden threat of violence. Embroidered plus and minus signs indicate the binary opposites of good and evil, right and wrong, that are essential components of religious dogma. In the flanking canvases, *Human Religion #1* illustrates the dominance of animal passions in human nature, while *Human Religion #3* shows a man holding a mirror, which represents his incapacity to reflect on his own actions, and points accusingly towards others.

Nugroho makes further use socio-political commentary in *Fertile Land*, the title of which originates from a Javanese phrase that can be translated as “a prosperous nation for people of all faiths.” In this work, he comments on the exploitation of natural resources and subtly calls into question the Indonesian prosperity dream. A final work from the artist is the latest installment in his *Mono* series of tapestries which challenge the rhetoric of national unity and cultural identity. With *Mono Democracy*, he suggests that despite the much celebrated political pluralism in Indonesia, governments still somehow continue to look only to their own interests.

This work brings to mind the title of the exhibition itself, with its implication that, despite the rhetoric that Indonesia is a wonderland of harmony, in many ways it can be viewed as a “wounded land” whose scars from past traumas are still to be healed.



A vigorous critique of Indonesian society also marks the paintings that Riyadi exhibits in the exhibition. With these works, he creates strange, rather macabre fantasy worlds populated by figures that are at once playful and disturbing. Using comic book styles, he comments on the condition of contemporary youth culture and the contradictions between modernity and tradition in Indonesia.

With *In Fashion We Trust*, we can clearly see how Riyadi reacts to his own social environment: a younger generation that has become swallowed up in fashion and other trends. A cell phone, sneakers, and other trendy items are shown against a background of the tropical foliage of Indonesia. A leering dragon from traditional mythology snaps a photograph of the scene. A related work, *Under Attack*, tells the story of how modernization has come with a cost: environmental degradation and cultural disconnect. A mischievous dragon pokes a girl in the eye as she kneels on a stump, surrounded by a devastated forest and dangling ears of corn, symbols of the temptations of consumption.

Finally, Riyadi presents an unusual series of drawings in colored pencil on black backgrounds. He transforms familiar comic characters, such as Bart Simpson, from symbols of irreverent youth into elderly figures that emerge from the gloom. With these new works, he continues to plumb the psychological depths of pop cultural imagery while showing off his mastery of line and color.

Both Nugroho and Riyadi take the absurd and banal elements of their daily existence and channel them in an intensely personal manner into their art. The works they exhibit in *Tales from Wounded Land* reflect the crisis of life in Indonesia today, pointing out some of the problems facing the country while also indicating, through their imagination and active engagement, a cultural vibrancy that offers hope for the future.