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A haunting exhibition at SAM

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Singapore Art Museum, which is displaying for the first time the works of a living Indonesian artist in its main hall, has stretched its limits by using a design expert for the display, making FX Harsono's solo show one of a kind.

FX Harsono is an Indonesian artist of Chinese descent who has played a pivotal role in developing contemporary art in Indonesia and actively resisted authoritarian regimes through most of his artistic oeuvre.

Spanning four decades of Harsono's artistic involvement, the works are a haunting reminder of his struggle against authoritarian repression, discrimination and dramatic emotions. The show also denotes Indonesia's political history over the last forty years.

One of the most gripping works is the *Rewriting the Erased* installation. When entering the space solely dedicated to the installation, Chinese calligraphy on a black background already introduces a heightened suspense of what is to come.

In the darkened space is an empty chair, a desk, ink, a brush and pieces of paper on which his name is written in calligraphic script, lining the floor like neatly laid tiles.

In the video, one can see how Harsono painstakingly tries to write his Chinese name in Chinese script.

Meditative and poignant, the artist here seems to make an effort to remember, and reclaim what had been lost and erased through a government strategy aimed to fully assimilate the Chinese into Indonesian society. Harsono did not know a single Chinese word except for his Chinese name.

Rewriting the Erased is one of Harsono's latest works reflecting the ongoing process of switching from the political that used to mark his earlier works, to the personal, which began around 2002.

At that time, his screen print images on canvas were like an acupuncture session, with needles all over his body. In fact, the needles referred to the hidden pain he had been experiencing from years of being discriminated for his Chinese origins.

FX Harsono is known as one of the founding members of Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (GSRB) or the New Art Movement in the early 1970s, which refuted the elitist status quo in the arts and experimented with new modes of art-making, incorporating found objects and conceptual approaches. GSRB is considered as the roots of contemporary art in Indonesia.

At 60, FX Harsono — who became a force in Indonesian contemporary art — is still an active artist. His works in the show span four decades of constant social and political struggle.

True to the GSRB manifesto, his works have always been socially engaged and laden with political messages. Paling Top '75 (The Most Top '75) for example, which consists of a plastic toy gun, a wooden crate and wire mesh made in 1975, refers to the climate of fear prevalent at the time, where opposition to the authoritarian regime was brutally suppressed and military presence was pervasive in all facets of Indonesian life.

The same can be said of his installation Rantai yang Santai (the Relaxed Chain) featuring a small mattress, cushions and a chain, embodying his observation of a society that had lost most of its self-respect and was beginning to get used to and accept oppression as inevitable.

The 1997-1998 period was a turbulent one, in which social, political and economic issues ruled our lives. In 1997, Cemeti Gallery called on artists from across the country to produce new works that would comment on the electoral fraud during the New Order regime. Harsono then made Destruction, a work he performed on an open field.

Dressed in a business suit, he set fire to three wayang masks representing the only three political parties at the time.

He then hacked into pieces the three burnt chairs on which the masks had been set, as a metaphor for breaking the power over the electoral process.

His chef d'oeuvre was a powerful and courageous act that "earned" him the surveillance of the police, but the video of the performance remains as powerful as it was then.

But Harsono, who had until then been obsessed with fighting oppression and struggling for equal rights for all — no matter what skin color, religion or ethnicity, was appalled when rioting mobs set a shopping mall on fire in 1998, leaving people trapped to death.

The Burned Victims installation, featuring burnt torsos trapped in iron and burnt footwear placed alongside, is a stirring account of this dramatic terror.

Amid social, economic and political turbulence, strongman Soeharto stepped down, followed by the euphoria of "Reformasi".

However, the mass rape of women of Chinese origin in Jakarta was like a slap in the face for Harsono. He wondered about his own identity, finding he could not write a single Chinese calligraphic script, and slowly switched his political and social focus, to exploring his life and his family himself.

His works soon became expressions of the hidden pain he had endured all these years. Needles and butterflies in acrylic or screenprint on canvas became his metaphors.

In the course of his explorations, he discovered in his parent's house an album of pictures his photographer father had taken when he was involved in excavations and identifying skulls. His father's notes on the pictures described the genocide of Chinese in Blitar, East Java, which took place in 1947-1948.

Subsequently, Harsono made many trips to Blitar and its surroundings, interviewing survivors of the massacre, their relatives, to listen to their stories that inspired his most recent body of work.

In the video of these interviews titled nDudah (Javanese slang that means 'once again taking something apart or digging up'), Harsono brings to light the massacre of ethnic Chinese in his birth place Blitar and surrounding areas, at a time when the Dutch tried to take back the newly independent nation by force, and the Republic responded with a "scorched earth" strategy in places that the Dutch would attempt to occupy. Because a number of Chinese were suspected of helping the Dutch, Chinese-Indonesians scattered around the outskirts of the city were murdered by militias.

"FX Harsono: Testimonies" was curated by Seng Yu Jin, Tan Siu Li (Singapore) and Hendro Wiyanto (Indonesia). A cooperation between the Langgeng Art Foundation in Magelang and Singapore Art Museum, the entire preparation and transportation of works benefited immensely from the generous sponsorship of Deddy Irianto, the Foundation's founder and the owner of Galeri Langgeng.



Rewriting The Erased,
By FX Harsono, installation and performance video.

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