

FX Harsono: Testimonies through art

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When prominent artist FX Harsono's father sent his son away from Blitar to Yogyakarta in 1969 to pursue a higher education, he thought his son would study engineering.

Little did he know Harsono had other plans for his future: To paint.

"I lied to my father," Harsono recalled. "He didn't approve of me studying art," he said.

Besides enrolling into a technology institute, Harsono was also accepted into then newly established art school STSRI ASRI. Having a huge urge to paint and learn about the arts, he entered both schools, but lasted only three months in the technology one.

"A year later, I finally told [my parents] and they had to willy-nilly accept my decision," he said. "My father said: 'Do as you wish, you're an adult'."

A brave decision to make, Harsono knew he was to endure a trying experience as a struggling artist. His determination, however, paid off.

Entering the fourth decade of his career as an artist, his paintings, installations and videos that delve into the issue of political repression, discrimination and identity, are acknowledged around the world.

Locally, he is deemed the person who helped develop contemporary art in Indonesia as the exponent of the 1970s new art movement.

Currently, the Singapore Art Museum is displaying his works from 1975 to the most recent 2009 exhibition, "The Erased Time". The exhibition titled "Testimonies", which opened on March 4 will run until May 9.

In his Tangerang house in Bintaro, the bespectacled 62-year-old reminisced on his early years as an artist. "It was very tough... very tough," he said. "But I persisted to make a living from my art," he said.

He founded the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru or New Visual Art Movement with fellow young artists in 1975 as a response to what he viewed as a very Western-influenced art favoring decorative painting by an older generation of artists.

An Indonesian of Chinese descent, Harsono began using social and political themes in his art because he believed they represented the current Indonesian situation at that time.

In a discussion at the Dutch cultural center Erasmus Huis earlier this month, Harsono said that had he and his friends returned to tradition to create more Indonesian-themed art, it wouldn't have been representative of the times they lived in.

One of his 1975 works, *The Relaxed Chain*, shows mattresses wrapped in chains, commenting on people being oppressed under Soeharto, including in the most intimate parts of their lives.

His 1994 work *The Voices Controlled by the Powers* is an eerie piece showing rows of wayang masks with their bottom half severed looking inward toward a pile of their cut jaws. The installation was a commentary on the banning of the progressive *Tempo* magazine.

“During Soeharto’s era, we can say that democracy was nonexistent. No one could talk freely, no one could criticize Soeharto,” he said. “People were oppressed and we depended on courageous people to voice criticism,” he said.

Harsono said he knew things needed to change. However, only a handful of people were brave enough to voice their dissent. “As an artist I also needed to voice my concern,” he said.

With the fall of Soeharto and the emergence of a fledgling democracy, Harsono shifted his focus from social political commentary to inward reflection.

He used art to search for his identity as a man of Indonesian-Chinese descent in early 2000. Three years later, he exhibited his works titled “Displaced”.

“‘Displaced’ showed I felt I was in a space that didn’t feel right. I felt uncomfortable, curious and restless, and started to question many things,” he said.

He used the image of a butterfly stabbed with a needle as a metaphor for the pain Indonesian-Chinese individuals endured in the country.

“I feel I had been constantly discriminated.

“I am not overpowered by it, but it is a constant injustice,” he said.

During Soeharto’s era, Chinese culture was repressed. Even writing in Chinese was forbidden and Harsono had to change his Chinese name, Oh Hong Boen.

He explored this concept at a deeper level in his 2009 exhibition, “The Erased Time”, in which he juxtaposed images of the mass killing of Chinese-Indonesians in Blitar — after Indonesia’s independence, and his personal experiences. His father, a photographer, was part of the exhuming team.

At one point after the reform era, Harsono thought of leaving the country. “I did think about it after the 1998 May riots. I thought we truly lived in a country where people of Chinese descent would always be victims during social change,” he said.

During the 1998 May riots, mobs attacked Indonesian-Chinese businesses. There were also reports of alleged rape of females of Indonesian-Chinese descent.

Harsono, however, stayed and channeled his frustration into art instead. A testimony of Indonesia’s ugly truth.