

1. 2003, "Witnesses from Indonesia", *TAASA Review*, Volume 2, (Issue 4), pp. 22 - 23.

WITNESSES FROM INDONESIA a roundabout route to Australia

Recent art from Indonesia seeks to bear witness and counteract the silence surrounding crimes perpetrated on the powerless not only in Indonesia but everywhere. Dadang Christanto has made bearing witness to crimes the subject of his art throughout the last decade of the 20th century, a century he says that was a horrible century.

One of Dadang's major works on this theme is the centrepiece of the new Asian galleries at the Art Gallery of NSW that opened on October 25th. With this new wing the Art Gallery of NSW has greatly extended the space available to display its permanent collection of Asian art as well as hold temporary exhibitions of traditional and contemporary art, for cutting edge contemporary art from Asia. Dadang's work comprises 16 figures, male and female and larger than life, all facing in one direction and holding in their outstretched arms stiffened clothing in the shape of the bodies that once wore them. The figures are victims but the clothing represents further recent victims: the victims are presenting the victims.

The work is titled *They Give Evidence* and it has had a long and dramatic journey for an artwork. It began in 1996 when Dadang constructed the figures with the assistance of the people in his village of Kaliurang, central Java, using a ground brick mixture the villagers use for building. The work sprang from Dadang's personal experience for he not only represents victims, he is one himself. In 1965 his father was taken from his family as they were sleeping at night and never seen again; one of thousands, some say millions, who were 'disappeared' during the bloodbath surrounding the overthrow of President Sukarno and the installation of President Suharto. Dadang's personal pain was compounded in 1998 when the riots surrounding the end of the Suharto regime targeted Chinese. Dadang has experienced discrimination in Indonesia because he is ethnically Chinese which he explains by referring to the Hindu caste system. The caste system has four levels and below the last in India are the 'untouchables'. In Indonesia these are the Chinese, Dadang says. (interview 21/9/03). A subtle connection is the fact that Hinduism is still close to the surface in Central Java, lying around in the form of stones from crumbling temples and mixed in the customs of the people.

Not only was wrong done to Dadang and his family, they are required to carry the burden of it, to be silent about being one of the "families of '65". Under Suharto's regime it was dangerous to do otherwise, but now he and his family are living in Darwin and he teaches at the Northern Territory University School of Art and Design, he has rebelled against the double stigma. He was prompted by a documentary on SBS Television that followed the efforts of a man to find the bones of his brother who disappeared in 1965. The man was able to identify his brother, an event rare in itself, but when he returned to his village, members of the village didn't want the bones buried there. Somehow these 30 year old bones were not those of a man deserving sympathy but those of a criminal to be avoided: that strange mental justification of blaming the victim. Although there is greater freedom to speak in Indonesia now, there has been no formal or government revision of the crimes of '65, so Dadang must bear witness; as he said, "Isn't keeping quiet just the same as acceding to something?" (Wiyanto 2000).

They Give Evidence was first shown in the group exhibition, *Art in Southeast Asia, 1997*, in Japan. The figures resonated with the Japanese audience for, in the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, offerings and mementos were left at the feet of the statures. Dadang understood that some of these were made in the spirit of apology for the Japanese occupation of Indonesia during World War 2. The work was also shown in Hiroshima and then it continued its journey to be exhibited in the XXIV Bienal de Sao Paulo, Brazil in 1998.



In July 2002 Dadang held a exhibition in Bentara Budaya, Jakarta, the exhibition space of the newspaper, *Kompas*, with some major pieces installed inside and the figures, *They Give Evidence*, outside. *Kompas* advertised the exhibition widely with photographs. Two days before the exhibition opened local residents objected to the figures, saying that children were playing obscenely with them and that the figures were pornographic (Harsono, 2002). Dadang and Hendro Wiyanto, the curator, discussed the situation with a delegation from the residents and Dadang agreed to cover all the figures with black plastic. Dadang had found that black plastic had an interesting impact, in effect creating a new work as the figures looked “like Ninja” (lecture 8/10/03). But the day after its opening, at Friday evening prayers in the local *mesjid*, or mosque, the *imam* said he would report the exhibition to the Council of *Ulamas*, the powerful religious leaders. *Kompas* was sufficiently concerned by this that they removed the figures and stored them.

History in Indonesia continues to be a battleground of cultural forces competing for power and influence. The military or the police under Suharto’s regime would have censored a work that recalled the painful history of the victims of ‘65. Now, although formal permission to hold the exhibition was not required, other forces could suppress it. The increase of fundamentalism amongst Muslims is in part a genuine response to the swamping of their culture by global, usually seen as American, influences. But then there are forces that

manipulate this fundamentalism for their own purposes, stirring up fears and resentments for political ends; and art has been caught up in this cultural conflict. The *Ulamas* can, and have, made rulings that accept sculpture of the human form as an ornamental artwork, not a religious idol (Yusuf 2002); but there are still many Muslims who reject figuration in art, particularly those living outside the more worldly urban areas. In response to the removal of the works there were cries for freedom of speech and expression, and strangely, while the newspaper, *Kompas*, bowed to pressure and had the figures removed, they also published articles describing the event and criticising the censorship.

Now, after Dadang repaired the figures in a studio provided by the University of NSW, College of Fine Arts, they are installed in the Art Gallery of NSW and will become part of the gallery collection. Dadang declares he is happy the figures are in Australia but he would like to see the day they can be shown in Indonesia in their original form. In a performance to mark the event and end its travels, Dadang will remove the black plastic.

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Endnotes:

Interview, Sydney, 21/9/03.

Hendro Wiyanto, *The Unspeakable Horror*, exhibition catalogue, 2003, p33, quoted from an interview of Dadang by Hendro, 9 April 2000.

F X Harsono, "Dadang Christanto's Fine Art Exhibition, Proving that violence still occurs", *Kompas*, Sunday 14 July, 2002.

Public lecture, University of NSW, College of Fine Arts, October 8th, 2003.

Yusuf, Susilo Hartono, "Artist relives 1965 tragedy, May riots", *The Jakarta Post*, July 9, 2002. He reported Buya Hamka, a former chairman of the Council of *Ulamas* made such a ruling.