

WITNESSES FROM INDONESIA a roundabout route to Australia

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Silence surrounding a crime compounds the crime. Recent art from Indonesia seeks to bear witness and counteract the silence surrounding crimes perpetrated on the powerless not only in Indonesia, although that is bad enough, 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.¹

One of Dadang's major works on this theme is the centrepiece of the new Asian galleries at the Art Gallery of NSW, opening 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. Like many art institutions, foremost amongst them the Queensland Art Gallery, there has been a recognition in Australia of 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 work is titled *They Give Evidence* and it has itself had a long and dramatic journey for an artwork.

The work began in 1996 as part of Dadang's on-going theme representing victims with collections of silent standing figures. Local people in his village of Kaliurang, central Java, assisted in making the figures from a ground brick mixture they themselves use for building. Since these figures represent the earth, they are somewhat appropriately made from it. The figures are victims themselves, but the clothing they hold in their arms represent more victims, the victims presenting the victims.

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 at night as they were sleeping 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 is connected to the universal pain of victims of power and compounded in 1998 when the riots surrounding the end of the Suharto regime targeted Chinese. Dadang experiences discrimination in Indonesia because he is ethnically Chinese and he explains this by referring to the Hindu caste system. The caste system has four levels and below the last are the 'untouchables' in India or the Chinese in Indonesia.² 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

¹ Public lecture, University of NSW, October 8th, 2003.

² Interview, 21/9/03

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 psychological twist of blaming the victim to avoid responsibility for injustice. Although there is greater freedom to speak in Indonesia now, there has been no formal or governmental 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?"³

They Give Evidence was first shown in 1997 in Japan in a group exhibition *Art in Southeast Asia*. 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 statues. 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 then shown in Hiroshima and the following year continued its journey, being shown in the XXIV Bienal de Sao Paulo, Brazil in 1998.



In July 2002 Dadang held a exhibition in Jakarta curated by Hendro Wiyanto, in Bentara Budaya, the exhibition space of the newspaper, *Kompas*. Inside the building he installed his recent major pieces, *Red Rain* and *Cannibalism*, both of which have been shown in Australia, and outside the figures, *They Give Evidence*, were installed. *Kompas* advertised the exhibition widely with photographs of the figures. Two days before the exhibition opened local residents of the Palmerah area surrounding Bentara Budaya objected to the figures, saying that because they were naked, they were pornographic. It was said that the local children were playing obscenely with the figures and this was a danger to their morals.⁴

³ Quoted from an interview held 9 April 2000 with Hendro Wiyanto, curator, *The Unspeakable Horror*, exhibition catalogue, p33

⁴ F X Harsono, "Dadang Christanto's Fine Art Exhibition, Proving that violence still occurs", *Kompas*, Sunday 14 July, 2002.

Dadang and Hendro Wiyanto discussed the situation with a delegation from the residents and Dadang agreed to cover all the figures with black plastic. Dadang then discovered that the black plastic had an interesting impact, in effect creating a new work as the figures looked “like Ninja”.⁵

The exhibition opened on Thursday night but the next evening, Friday, the *imam* in the local *mesjid*, or mosque, proclaimed that the figures were still naked and that he would report *Kompas* and 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.

Life and history in Indonesia are still battlegrounds of forces competing for power and influence. A work that recalled such a painful history as the victims of '65 would have been suppressed under the Suharto regime, censorship being applied by the military through the police. Now, although Dadang was free to mount an exhibition and did not need to seek formal permission, other forces could achieve the censorship. 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 in Indonesia can get caught up in the cultural conflict. The *Ulamas* can and have made rulings that accept sculpture of the human form as an ornamental artwork, not a religious idol;⁶ 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 being 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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⁵ Public lecture, University of NSW, October 8th, 2003

⁶ Buya Hamka, a former chairman of the Council of *Ulamas* made such a ruling; see Yusuf, Susilo Hartono, “Artist relives 1965 tragedy, May riots”, *The Jakarta Post*, July 9, 2002.