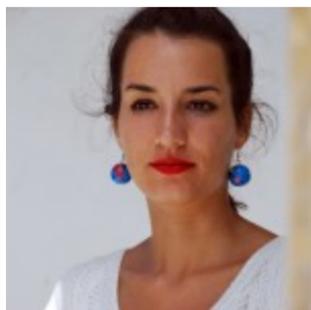


# Interview with Aditya Novali: The Poetics of Transformation | COBO Social



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From child-painter, teenager puppet master to architecture student, Aditya Novali is completing his creative path by devoting his life to visual art now.

Solo-born Aditya Novali is the paradigm of the versatile artist. Recently nominated for Best Emerging Artist Using Installation at the Prudential Eye Awards in Singapore, he has explored many ways of being an artist.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

PHOTO: Courtesy of Aditya Novali

From his beginnings as a child-painter, then teenager puppet master, he went on to study architecture at Parahyangan University in Bandung. He later took a Master's degree in conceptual product design at the Design Academy Eindhoven in the Netherlands. Today he devotes himself to visual art full-time. His curiosity has led him to explore a range of different issues, from the ever-shifting identity of Indonesia to the nature of art making.

## In your artistic process do you start with a concept or from the material?

Many people think I'm a material-based artist, but I usually start with an idea of what I want to do. Then I find the suitable medium for it. Sometimes though I might take the opposite approach, where I don't have any concept. I know that's not good in contemporary art, where you should always have a statement. However, I sometimes want to get out of my comfort zone and allow myself to be guided by the material. The result is always surprising. I try to always be open to possibilities.



NGACO : Solution for nation, exhibition view

Aditya Novali's work in this exhibition is a combination of installation, design, and even performative object that is connected to very basic idea about wall.

## You were trained as a *dalang*, a puppet master, but you never reference Wayang puppets directly in your work. How so?

Although I feel very close to Indonesian traditions, I prefer to reference them in a more subtle way. For me the most interesting thing about the Wayang is not really the puppets themselves, but the fact that the performance can be seen from two different angles. You can sit in

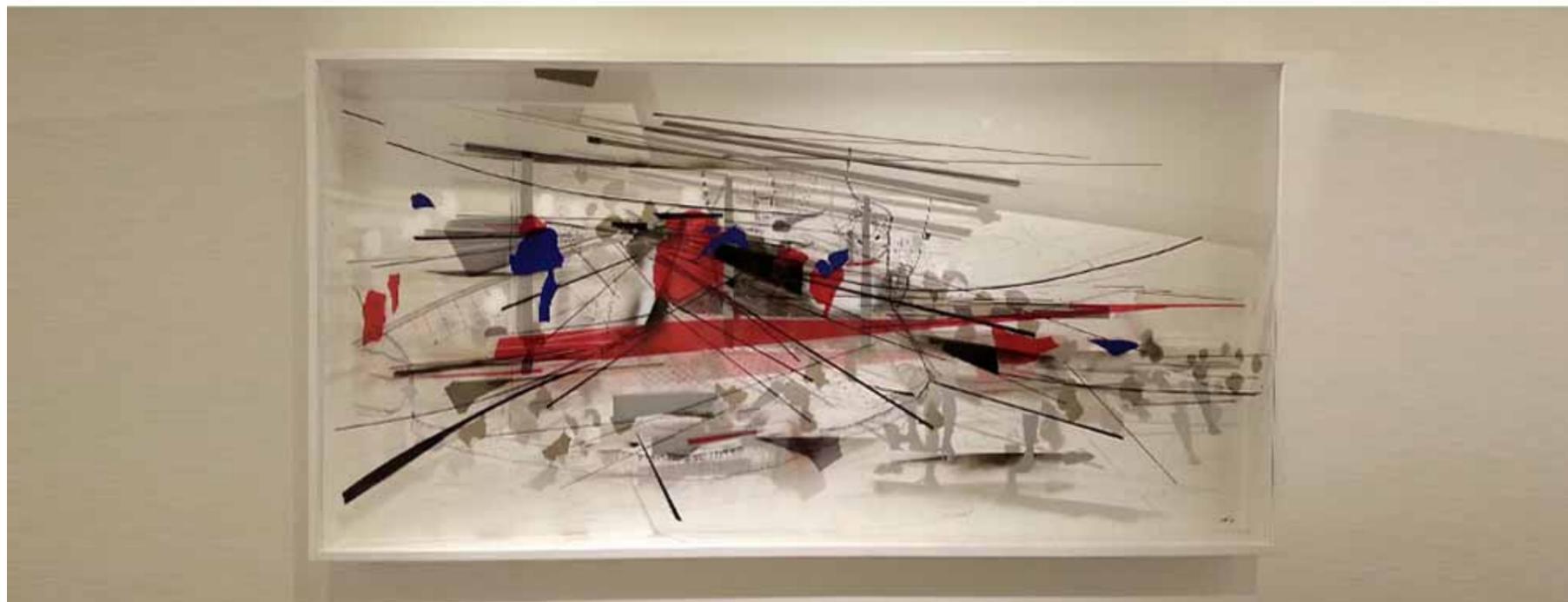
front and see the shadows, or you can sit behind the puppet master and see the figures. They correspond to different hierarchies. If you see the shadows it means you have a higher status. This is the part that inspires my work the most. Sometimes I'd put the shadows in my architectural constructions. For me a building is not just about building, it's a complex system of life which can be also seen from different perspectives.

**You were only seven when you were introduced to puppetry, but your first encounter with art happened even earlier through painting. How old were you when you first started?**

At four I had already started painting – it was a time when there were a lot of children's competitions. We were travelling almost every week to other cities to participate. At seven I started doing puppetry. I continued until I was eleven, but then stopped, because of my studies. But I kept on painting and making art even when I started university at the architecture faculty. It was challenging, but it was worth it in the end.

**That's quite a lot of transitions, from painter to puppet master, then studying architecture, design and finally becoming a full-time artist. How was it to shift from one identity to the next?**

I didn't experience it as a transition at the time. All the decisions that led to each step were very natural. Sometimes people ask me why I enrolled in architecture and if I ever regret the decision. I don't regret it. I was interested in the challenge. But after I graduated, I realized I didn't really like creating buildings.



Abstract Logic series – The Arrest of Diponegoro (1895) – Raden Saleh – the arrangement of unknown, 248 x 125,5 x 15 cm, plexiglass, paint, ink, sticker, wood

**At the same time, your architectural background is clearly visible in your work...**

That's a common observation, but it wasn't intentional. I'm not interested in conventional architecture. For my thesis, for example, I looked at portable architecture. Usually students write a thesis that will get them a job, but it wasn't the case with me. My friends were like: "How can you get a job with such a thesis? No one wants their house to be portable!" But I was totally fascinated by the subject. I think this interest has stayed with me to the present day. My work is all about interaction, transformation. I don't like things to be stable – I like them to transform and assume different meanings and values.

**And that has been true not only of your work, but also of yourself. Has art always had the same function in your life?**

Actually I have a quite strange way of making art. I'm not really an emotional artist. I'm quite regular with my work and do things even when I'm not in the mood. Deadlines make you go faster; one day can be just blown in a minute and another day you can do everything! However, I don't work exclusively towards deadlines and shows. Especially in the case of difficult work, I often don't know when it's going to be ready to release into the world. I work on several projects at the same time. But for some more manageable projects I like to have a clear proposal. I love to plan, so I'm much more comfortable when I know what is going to happen in the next one or two years.

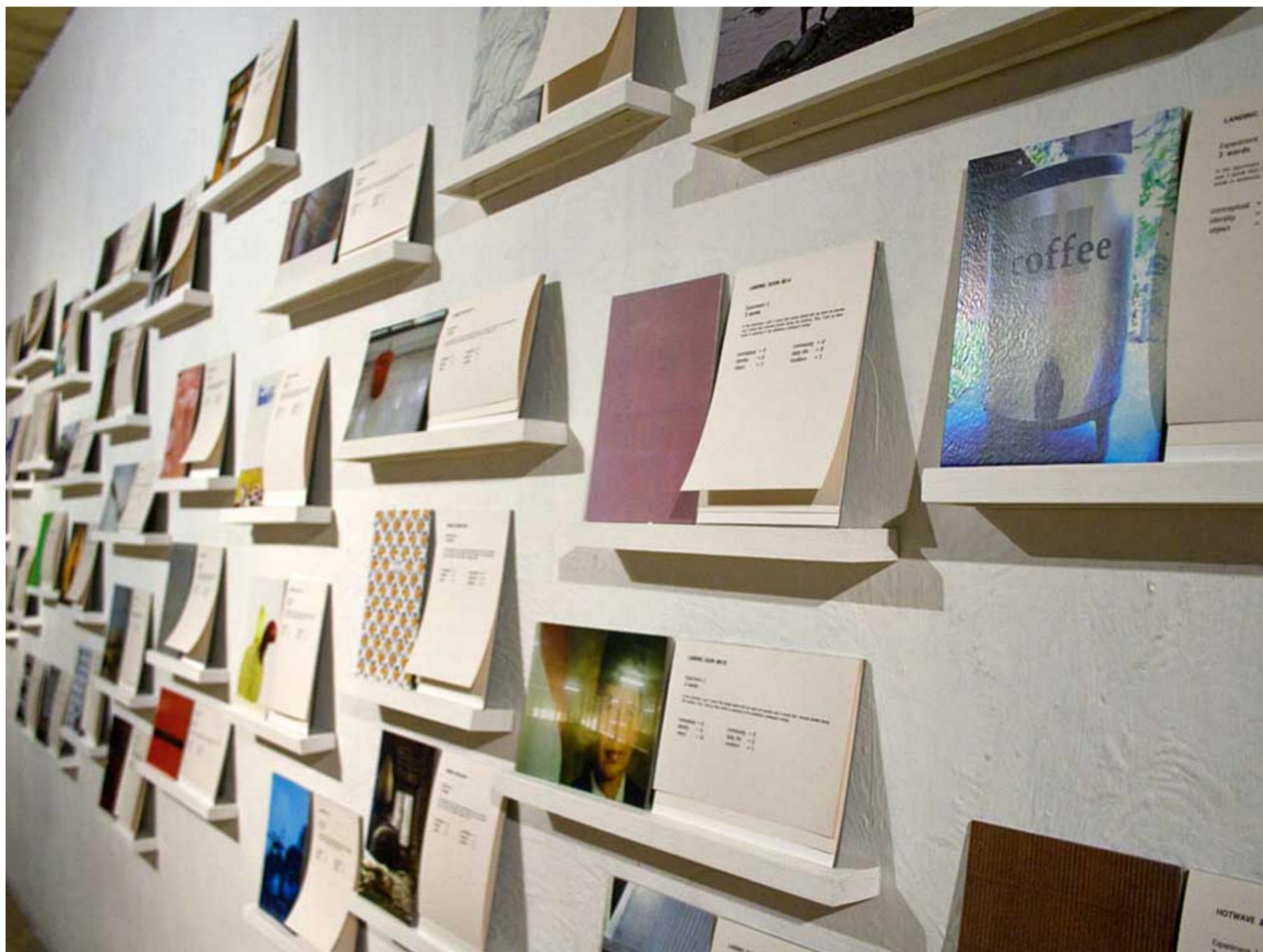
**You also have a line of art merchandise called Statement, which, in a way, is connected to what you do in your art practice.**

It is good to have a second string to your bow, in terms of balance. For starters, I don't have any pressure, so I can experiment with small

things. I love to getting obsessed with the details – I’m a bit OCD in that sense. And sometimes an idea for a bigger art project will spring from it. Another perk is that you get to have completely different social interactions. When you’re making art, you talk with gallerists, curators, collectors. Instead when I’m working on the Statement line, I meet with fashion people, craftsmen, artisans, dealers. There are so many new things to learn. And I love to learn.

**You are also a keen reader. Does your reading inspire your work?**

Definitely! I’m a book freak and I spend all my money on books. I like all sort of books, especially design books and biographies. I also read politics, economics, basically everything that can open up the imagination.



THE ORDER : Texts and its hidden inspiration, platform view

Sourced from the catalogues of previous residency programs at Cemeti , the artist created a number of methods for artistic reading to “interweave” the existing data into new stories and new issues, without trying to know the visual forms or other contexts of the works. The results of these methods of reading are what then became the artwork. (2014)

**Economics is a recurrent theme for you. In the installation New God you explore economics in relation to art. Can you tell be a bit about this work?**

*New God* is about how people value art and artists. The installation is composed of a series of crosses and each one represents a different artist. Some of these artists are really successful in the market and have very high auction prices. Others are not, but I just love their work. What I wanted to say is that, especially in Asia, we don’t have set criteria to decide when a piece of art is good. Many people equate good price with good work.

**It seems that when you create art you have a very clear idea in mind, but the viewers will of course have their own personal interpretations. How do you deal with the “open work”?**

I love the fact that people can have different perspectives on the same work and come up with unexpected readings. I think good art should always be subject to multiple interpretations. The more layers you have, the better. When a work can be interpreted from just one angle, then for me it’s not a very good work.

**About Aditya Novali**

Aditya Novali was born in 1978 in Solo, Central Java, Indonesia. From 1997 to 2002 he studied architecture at Parahyangan University in Bandung. It is evident that architecture school influenced his work to become more structural and formalistic. Subsequently he studied conceptual design at the Design Academy Eindhoven, Holland. In recent years he has been working on various concepts around ideas such as boundaries, identity and nation. In 2010 he presented his “rotatable painting”, which focused on interaction as a way to communicate and challenge an audience. This was followed by *The Wall: Asian Un(real) Estate* project (2011), *Identifying Indonesia* (2012) and *NGACO* (2014).

More recently he has tried to trace back his early passion in drawing and mathematics, emotion and calculation, archive and imagination, in more recent contexts. This can be seen in his *Painting Sense*, *The Order* (2014) and *Conversation Unknown* (2015).

**Naima Morelli** is an arts writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of “Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un’introduzione” a book focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.