



# HERI DONO

MAKING FUN OF  
THE KING,  
THE GODS  
AND  
THE PEOPLE

INTERVIEW  
Naima Morelli

**Heri Dono was standing in front of his studio window** looking typically casual and comfortable. He wore his hair in a pigtail, a grey t-shirt, mimetic pants and Crocs, and was slowly sipping Java tea from a winged pot of his own creation.

Behind him was a series of smiling heads dangling on wires, alongside a group of animalistic figures with their tongues sticking out. An army of winged half human-half machines was hanging from the ceiling. I was doing my best to remain nonchalant whilst sitting among a group of dinosaurs with the faces of dictators. I wondered, was Heri Dono's studio an accurate reconstruction of Heri Dono's mind? It was as if all these mocking characters had materialised into real space direct from the artist's fervid imagination.

Heri Dono had recently returned from an exhibition in Vaduz, Lichtenstein, when I met him. His fellow artists had joked that I was more likely to meet him at some crazy art exhibition on the other side of the word, than I was in the streets of Yogyakarta. Being the total opposite of snobbish, Heri was amused to hear that feedback. The first motivation for his travels, as he explained, was curiosity, and the need to bring home worldly impressions to add to his aesthetic. "I'm deeply inspired by traditional culture, especially by shadow puppets, glass painting and textiles techniques. At the same time, I draw from international modern and contemporary artists like Joan Mirò, Paul Klee and Gauguin."

According to Heri, if you are Indonesian there is no need to go to Europe for new stimuli: "In a diverse country like Indonesia an artist can get very different influences from the archipelago's cultures. Balinese traditions are dramatically different from those of North Sumatra, Borneo or Papua. Indonesia is extremely plural. During the regime of Suharto, from 1967 through to 1998, we had the so called 'Javanisation'. During that time the culture from Java has been propounded over the others. At that time there was only one channel on TV, and the shadow puppet performances had a fundamental role in education. As a reaction to that, in 1986 I created *Wayang Legenda*, featuring stories from Batakne and other Indonesian regions that have been neglected."





*Traditionally shadow puppets have stories from the Ramayana or Mahabharata, but in Wayang Legenda your main focus was on social issues. In this sense you introduced an element of novelty. Do you see contemporary art as continuation of tradition or as a comment on tradition?*

**Heri Dono:** I think contemporary artists should be allowed to criticise traditional art. Tradition does not always suit the expressive needs of younger generations. Sometimes it can be a burden that doesn't allow the creation of something new. Often, people try to pigeonhole art and look for a clear distinction between artistic disciplines. The beauty of shadow puppets is that you have visual art, theatre, handicraft, performance, music – all these different disciplines – working together. Obviously with *Wayang Legenda* I didn't want to make an exoticist collage mixing Javanese culture with Balinese culture. I rather wanted to get to the core, to the basic pattern, and create from there. In Indonesia there are many problems to solve, and art can represent a tool to inform people. It is the artist's responsibility to spread awareness, and I think knowledge is aesthetic in its own right.

## **“He comes in the middle of the night and makes fun of the king, the gods and the people.”**

*And that's one thing that you have always pursued with your art. Do you see other artists sharing your same concerns?*

**H.D.** The problem is that nowadays artists are no longer interested in social and political issues. They are all about the market. In cities like Berlin often artists make art for art's sake. At the same time in Europe there are a lot of problems. Artists should take responsibility to think not just for themselves, but to contribute to society and connect with life. After all, it wasn't such a long time ago that Picasso made *Guernica*, to remind people of fascism.

*My impression is that in Indonesia a political role for artists is particularly important, considering its turbulent recent past.*

**H.D.** Yes, in Indonesia we didn't have a democratic government until 1998. It's only a very short time since we can consider ourselves free. Before that there was a lot of police interrogation going on and often exhibitions would close before the opening. Now the situation is different, but because of that new freedom, many artists have given up on social and political issues. I think it's better if we don't see the enemy as a particular person, but as the system that is no good for people. We can criticize through parody. The Indonesian way is about being humorous and to make jokes about everything. Even in shadow puppetry there is the character of the Joker. He comes in the middle of the night and makes fun of the king, the gods and the people.



*Your work is emblematic for this parodic character that is quintessential to many Indonesians.*

**H.D.** When I exhibit my work, the Indonesian public understands the irony very quickly. It's like graffiti or slang language. In this sense visual art communicates quicker than the news on newspapers or television. In football, when the player wants to attack, he throws the ball in another direction. It's the same when it comes to current affairs in Indonesia. If there's the urgency of talking about corruption, be sure the media will talk about something completely irrelevant, just to distract people. It has always been like that.

*When you exhibit your work abroad it can assume different meanings. A foreign audience that is not informed about Indonesian history and politics may read your work very differently. How do you deal with misunderstandings or alternative interpretations?*

**H.D.** I feel that the political and social problems Indonesia faces are similar to those in other countries. That's why I like to use objects and symbols close to my Indonesian culture and mix them with influences from abroad. (Heri indicates a series of small statues squatting on a shelf). For example that one is Basquiat, this other one is Beyus, Beethoven ... This is a series of twenty artists making poo. You know, sometimes the great ideas comes when you're in the toilet!

(laughs) *Being an artist seems to be much fun for you!*

**H.D.** It is. Sometimes people think of objects just as simple objects. It's up to the artist to change the perception of things. Like when I went to Germany – it was an island in the North Sea – they had a lot of signs like 'don't drink this water', 'don't poo in the garden'. So I made a sculpture called the golden shit. It was a dog making poo. When I exhibited it in China, Chinese people associated it to the horoscope. So again, another perception that I didn't mean to include in my work. Misunderstandings are interesting for me because they are tied to perception.

*What about you comics background? I know you were an eager reader of comic books ...*

**H.D.** As an art student in Yogyakarta I came into contact with the work of Walt Disney, Hanna-Barbera and local comics like Panjia Comics, Kompasicon, Metukaren and many others. At first my art was solely inspired by masters like Paul Klee, Picasso, Mirò, Gaughin, then I started looking also at comics and cartoon figures. The connection with comic books is not direct, but the colours, the fun and the joy that I try to put in my work come directly from comics. You know, in cartoons no one ever dies! Even if they fall down from the fiftieth floor, they just splat on the floor and come back to normal after someone pumps them with an inflation pump. In animation even a drop of water can smile, chairs can run, everything has soul!

In Java people believe in animism, believing that stones and trees have a soul. What I do is combining the concept of animism with animation. At that time my teacher didn't understand my research. For them I should have drawn just from other painters' work, or limit myself to paint the Bourboudour Temple.

*You actually started as a painter. When did you start making installations?*

**H.D.** I started to make paintings in 1977 when I was seventeen years old. I moved in Yogyakarta in 1980 to study art, because the academy was very good. During the first semester we had to make five hundred sketches of typical places in Yogyakarta, like the traditional market, the cemetery, the Chinese temple. And in the second semester we had to sketch five hundred objects from imagination. As the saying goes: 'You' must know your enemy from the front and from the back.' My education at the academy in Yogyakarta was extremely traditional. In 1984 I told my teacher that, for me, the medium of painting was over.

**“In animation even a drop of water can smile, chairs can run, everything has soul!”**

I started making installations, even though we didn't have a word for that back then. What had really pushed forward the boundaries of contemporary art in Indonesia in the seventies was the New Visual Art Movement, along with an artist collective called PIPA, an anagram meaning 'questioning about art'. They were the first to question the identity of Indonesian Art. They asked themselves if we were just followers of what has been done in the West, or if we had something new to say. They inspired me to become an artist and enrol in Yogyakarta's art academy. I don't have a certificate from the art academy though, because three months before finishing I dropped out. My parents were pretty upset because after seven years of studying ...

*Why did you take this decision?*

**H.D.** At that time I was reading a book about Socrates, the great Greek philosopher, and I was inspired by his moral consistency. I felt that I absorbed the knowledge I needed. I didn't need a certificate. It really didn't mean anything to me. Everybody thought I was crazy, but I felt ready to start as an artist. At that time there were few galleries in Jakarta and they were all very commercial, showing paintings with flowers and landscapes. Rich artists would invite the ministers to their exhibition and appear on television. One time my mother said: 'Why don't you make paintings with flowers, so the Minister of Culture can say nice things about your work?'



Of course I couldn't care less. At that time I was often exhibiting in public spaces, like Bentara Budaya or the French Cultural Centre, or the independent space, Cemeti Gallery. I was artistically free from the beginning, but there was a period when artists working with social and political material in Indonesia could get in trouble.

*When did you start travelling?*

**H.D.** In 1990 I went overseas for the first time. I went to Switzerland first and I stayed in an orphanage for six months. During that time I met with some artists, I visited museums and galleries. I was invited there by the Director of the Museum of Ethnology in Basel, who I met in Bali, and I had some friends there as well. I sold my work in the Ethnology Museum and I travelled to Czechoslovakia, Italy and France.

*And from there you never stopped!*

**H.D.** That's right! I read a lot of art books, so I travel to see the works in person. Muslims call it Hajj. Museums are my Mecca. Also here in Yogyakarta I go often to Prambanan Temple and to the zoo. They're both so inspiring! When I travel I'm more interested in the local situation, rather than just the art exhibitions, because you know, it's always the same people!

*One last question. Many of your statues have wings. Do wings have a particular meaning for you?*

**H.D.** That's true, I did a lot of installations based on the concept of flying. Many statues look like angels. Angels, for me, have no religious connotations. Rather, they are symbols of inspiration and freedom. My first flying figure was inspired by Flash Gordon. He arrived on the moon before Neil Armstrong! For me that means imagination is faster than reality.

**Heri Dono** has been a leading figure in Indonesian art since the early 1980s and is now one of the most prominent contemporary South-East Asian artists. He is represented by Rossi & Rossi - [rossirossi.com](http://rossirossi.com)



Naima Morelli is a freelance arts writer and journalist with a particular interest in contemporary art from Italy, the Asia Pacific region and art in a global context. She is also an independent curator focusing on Italian, Indonesian and Australian emerging artists. At the moment she is working on a book about contemporary art in Indonesia.