

MELLA JAARSMA

GIVE ME SHELTER

INTERVIEW
Naima Morelli



It's not easy to introduce Mella Jaarsma because she's so many things at the same time. Let's limit ourselves to the basic coordinates to begin with. Mella is an artist who is widely known for her body-covering shelters made out of the most unusual materials.

The skins of frogs, squirrels, bats, snakes and chickens are all put to use in her wearable works, as well as moth cocoons, water buffalo horns, the bark of banana trees, and more. The garment becomes a symbolic protection and a visual representation of fear or a need for security. Her work also alludes to the isolation of human beings and the need for a filtered approach to the world.

Jaarsma grew up in the Netherlands and studied visual art at Groningen in her early years, before leaving for Jakarta to attend the Art Institute and later the Indonesia Institute of the Arts in Yogyakarta. Her name is one you'll never fail to find in both Indonesian and Dutch art catalogues.

In 1988 she founded Cemeti Art House in partnership with her fellow artist and husband Nindityo Adipurnomo. This Yogyakarta gallery has been seminal in the development of contemporary art in Indonesia, and in connecting Indonesian artists with the International art world.

"I met Nindityo in the art school in Yogya, and after his scholarship in the Netherlands we married and we came back to Indonesia, starting the Cemeti Art House soon after," she said. "At that time the landscape of Indonesian art looked completely different."

In the 80s and most of the 90s there were only a few art spaces in Yogyakarta. One was run by the government, another held by *Kompas* (the national newspaper), and last was the Indonesian Cultural Center.

"We wanted to start something different, an exhibition space that would also be an information and documentation centre. Over time we started doing many other projects, like the residency program that is still running now."

At Cemeti, Mella and Nindityo started out by exhibiting their friends from art school. There were the likes of Heri Dono and Eddie Hara, just to be clear. In the beginning the space was the front of a house and it was quite small, but over time Cemeti expanded, both physically and in their cultural scope. They become an art foundation which later evolved into IVAA, the Visual Art Archive.

You grew up in Netherlands and studied visual art in Groningen. Why did you leave for Indonesia?

Mella Jaarsma The first time I travelled to Indonesia I was still a student in the Netherlands. I just came as a tourist. I travelled around and I became incredibly inspired by Indonesia. In the Netherlands I was working with shadows and I found that shadows are a very important part of Indonesian culture, not only through the Wayang Puppets but also in a more spiritual kind of way. I wanted to find out why the presence of shadows is so strong here, and when I graduated I won a scholarship to study in Jakarta. I visited the art schools and took a look at the art scene ...

How was the art scene in Jakarta in the 80s?

M.J. When I came to Jakarta in '83 the trend in art was painting, especially abstract painting. It was not the art that inspired me at the time, but the culture. I stayed half a year in Jakarta and I thought that if I wanted to know more about the culture I had to move Yogyakarta. So I attended the local art school and I studied in Yogya for another year. The local art scene welcomed me, because I studied at the art school and I had a European art history background. I was foreigner, so kind of a new thing, and I brought connections to the international scene.

Working with shadows is quite different from the work you're doing now. How has your work evolved?

M.J. I think of my art practice as a reflection on human existence and a visual representation of the reality of life. When you come into a new culture you're the foreigner, you are an outsider. At the same time if you live in a place long enough you also become an insider. I like to comment on what I see and what I experience in life. I try to put all that in my artworks. The first years of my art practice I worked on shadows and their role in the local culture. I stayed quite a while in Bali and I saw the cremation ceremonies. They have a different way of cremating people. The one for the low castes is about burning the bodies straight away, and then collecting the ashes. They then recreate the shape of a human body with the ashes. Of course, there is very little ashes compared to the actual body, so the shape they made is small, just like a baby. For me this new shape represents a shadow, a border between life and death, between the visible and the invisible. In this sense Wayang puppets are also interesting. They convey the message from the Gods to the earth. They are also in this state 'in between', so I looked at that as well. I translate these cultural observations into my work.



“Wayang puppets ... convey the message from the Gods to the earth.”

After the riots that led to the fall of dictator Suharto in '98 you did political work ...

M.J. Yes. During the Suharto regime it was extremely difficult to comment on the political situation. With Cemeti I exhibited a lot of political artists who had strong statements against the political situation. At the time I felt that I couldn't really make a political statement with my own work. Even if I had lived a long time in Indonesia I still felt the burden of colonial history. I used to think: 'Who am I to comment on that?' But after '98, because of the riots, my perception changed. In Jakarta in '98 they set many shops on fire and many Chinese women were raped. I was just appalled when the stories of what happened came out. It was then that I did my first political performance. I asked my friends to fry frog legs – a Chinese food – in the streets, and we offered them to the passersby to eat. We tried to open up a discussion about what had happened to the Chinese people and the violence among different communities in the country.

And from that political work you slowly moved onto your first veils ...

M.J. Yes, the first veil work was closely related to the performance with frog legs. In fact, it was made out of frog skin. Then I started using chicken and squirrel skin. I was interested in skin and flesh and the perception of wrapper and content. I had some exhibitions in Australia and I continued to make variations on the type of skin, changing animals and colours.

Using animal skin as material has obviously a very strong connotation. I assume that each country where the work was presented reacted differently to the work, according to their cultural background. Are you interested also in provoking different responses from different audiences?

M.J. I'm definitely interested in different perceptions of the same work across various cultures. For one of my projects I collected squirrel skins from farmers living around Yogyakarta. They killed the squirrels because the squirrels ate their coconuts. I brought this project to Bangkok and I wrapped the squirrel skins around the trees in the park with living squirrels dwelling on the trees. People in Bangkok love squirrels and they were quite bewildered to see my work. With a project like that I like to point out the contradictions across different cultures, like the fact that you could be loved in one place and hated in another.

In the body shelters - the work you've been celebrated for - one can clearly see architecture and costume design as well as a great knowledge of the materials. How has all of this diverse set of skills come together in your art?

M.J. I use all kind of materials, it really depends on the concept. The material has to be part of the work's meaning. I start with a strong concept, then I choose the material. The veils for example were really about the meaning of clothing, carrying these kinds of layers with you. Of course, this is closely related to identity. Your identity is changing all the time so it's hard to wrap it. I started conceiving of clothing not only as a body protection, but also as a spiritual shelter. That leads me to architecture. Churches, mosques and other religious buildings are nothing else than a spiritual protection. That's how my series about shelters came about. One of these work is composed by a nice Chinese shrine, which I found in an antique shop. I deconstructed it and re-built it around the body of my model.

Has your approach to art changed over time?

M.J. I actually started as a painter in Netherlands. I was doing monumental paintings, so there was the same spatial concept of installations. The relationship with the space was part of the painting. For me it was important for people to stand in front of the work and feel the proportion. I wasn't interested in creating an image, but rather a situation. I think the distance between the viewer and the artwork has to be as short as possible. I've always wanted to create a connection.

Even in your current installations you push people to come closer to your work and interact with it. It's interesting because in galleries and museums you never know if you're allowed to touch the work or if you're risking being handcuffed on the spot!

M.J. Interaction is my point, and I like this situation when you don't know if it's art or not. For example in my project *I Eat You Eat Me* the idea was that the people coming to the performance had to feed other people in a mutual relationship. I presented the performance in restaurants rather than in a gallery, because the idea is that it doesn't matter if it is art or not. What matters was that you were there and you could have this experience.

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Mella Jaarsma: Give me Shelter / Naima Morelli

At Cemeti you have a platform which aims to link art and society. How does it work, and how can art impact society?

M.J. One of the first projects we did with this platform – and with support of the Ford Foundation – was the one on the earthquake in 2006. Many people were killed and many others didn't have a house anymore. We worked for one year in villages affected by the disaster. We did workshops and traditional theatre, which is still a strong tradition in the villages. We wanted them to forget about the trauma, to rebuild the community, and we wanted to give them strength to continue with their lives. In this sense art can help in some way, as therapy. Another example is some projects with did with bamboo. Now the new generation of artists work with bamboo, but at the time we did the project nobody did. We did a festival where people made instruments, ran competitions, cooking, and all sorts of things using bamboo.

You use art as a tool to connect with people and build something together, rather than making the art carry the whole message ...

M.J. I think every generation has its own way to express things, and ways of looking at art and dealing with art. The generation of artists I work with is very socially engaged. They work on the edge, trying to find the balance to be able to denounce without being thrown in jail. After Suharto, social and political art became popular. I think many artists now understand that criticizing the government or politics can be more effective if it is supported by an education program. So it's not just about sitting and thinking, but about becoming involved in the action, especially because the current educational system is bad here. It's about thinking how far you can command as an artist and how you can be part of the development. In Indonesia it is very important have initiatives. There is still a lot to do!

Artist site - mellajaarsma.com/

Cementi Art House - cemetiarthouse.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.

< **Mella Jaarsma**, *Refugee Only*, 2003. (image found on Pinterest by Christine. Found on tica-albania.org)