



Every Image Is Questionable: Fendry Ekel

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15 APR 2016



For Jakarta-born artist Fendry Ekel, art is a way of dealing with doubt in what we understand about our world. In the 80's, Ekel's family moved from Indonesia to the Netherlands, where he studied art mentored by top-notch artists such as Luc Tuymans and Michelangelo Pistoletto.

Growing up in a family with a military background, for Ekel being an artist was an intentional choice. Painting is his medium of selection, and he is aware that the visual and conceptual aspects of an artwork go hand in hand.

In his recent solo show "1987" at Galeri Nasional Indonesia, Fendry Ekel recreated a mental journey of the mankind through a series of monumental paintings. His depictions of models of sailing ships are a metaphorical display of how memory is constructed, how its layers are formed, and a meditation on the nature of painting itself.



Fendry Ekel, Man on the Moon (Leon), 2013, oil and acrylic on canvas, 75×60 cm

Where do you trace the beginnings of your interest in art?

My first encounter with art was in Jakarta when, as a young boy, I happened to enter the tiny painting studio and sleeping annex of a mysterious neighbour when he wasn't at home. I was struck by the solitude and by this guy's orderly and basic way of living. Also, the light coming through the window of the room, falling on the painting on the easel and the intense smell of oil medium made a strong impression on me. It seemed I was witnessing the essence of truth, a beauty. It was a sublime experience, very spiritual and physical at the same time. It was like entering a small chapel with nobody else around.

My interest in art started when many years later I asked myself how I wanted to live my life. I wanted to study something that would allow me to follow a profession with no retirement, one that could encourage me to 'see' the world, to penetrate national and geographical boundaries and that I could practice until the end of my life.

How did your migration as a teenager from Indonesia to Europe influence your worldview?

The migration as a teenager shook my whole cultural and mental orientation. It confronted me with the idea that identity, one's picture of oneself, is constructed and fragile. It made me realize that it is very easy to fool oneself if one wants to, because the whole system will support one to do so. I promised myself not to forget this concept and I started to develop ways of remembering things: remembering as a political act. I became more aware of the difference between being a citizen and a person, between being an individual and a human. From then on, nothing was taken for granted. Investigating my surroundings became my passion; every image is questionable.

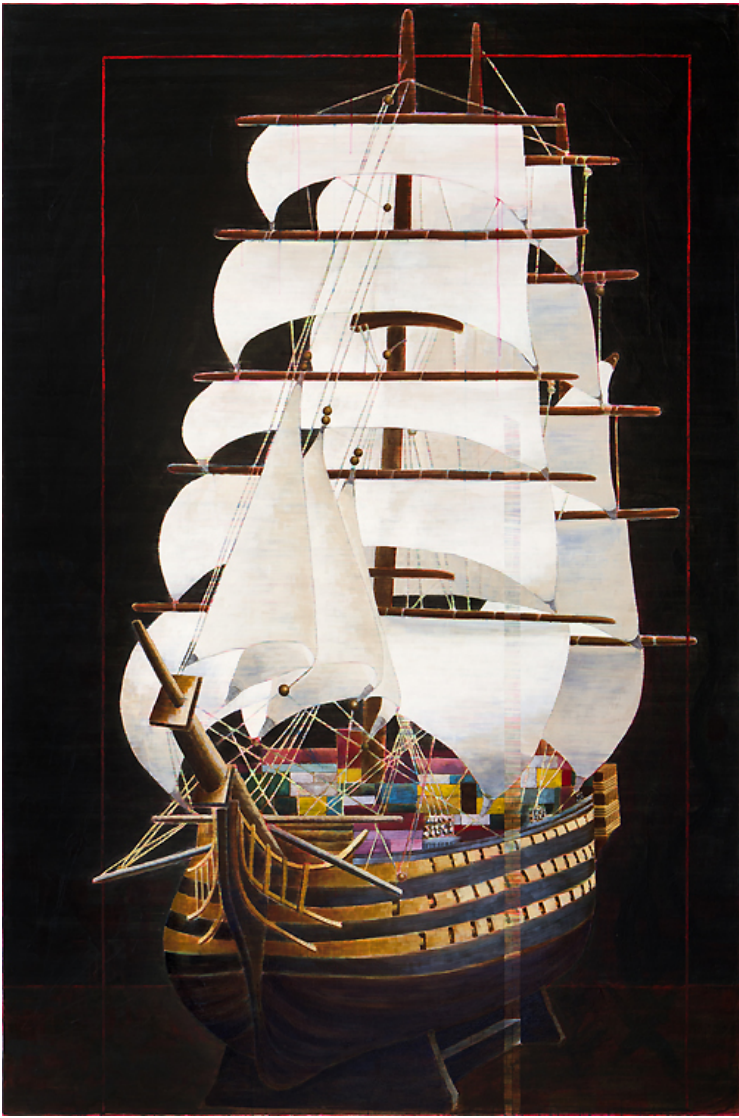


Fendry Ekel, Investigation #7, 2013, oil and acrylic on canvas, 160×270 cm

Did studying in the Netherlands affect your way of thinking of art history?

The Netherlands is part of Europe, a continent with a great tradition of being aware of the importance of writing and creating history, including art history. Society is built by construction, destruction, reconstruction and restoration. People have to learn by documenting and conserving, therefore academia is an important foundation of society. By studying and spending many years living in this society, I was fortunately able to learn from close up. This first-hand experience allowed me to better understand the motivation and the mechanism of all of this.

History and memory are central in your work. Do you have a structured method you follow to research the historical characters, issues and connections you refer to in your work – both visually and conceptually? History and memory are like brothers-in-law; they are connected by the human desire to understand life. I refuse to have or follow any particular method. Like in life, I prefer to trust my intuition, using my instincts in researching the matters you mentioned above. I realize that only in the process of making art is it possible to let mistakes happen with no consequences. Therefore, it would be a big loss to me if I didn't allow myself to do so.



Fendry Ekel, Carpe Diem, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas, 300×200 cm

Today you are based between Berlin and Yogyakarta. Does being in one city or another influence your work and if so, how?

As an artist I have a great need to be able to reflect on my own existence in order to feel it better and not become trapped by daily routines. Travelling is kind of filtering out of the unnecessary and a qualification of things. After having lived in different places and countries, for me living only in one particular place is a claustrophobic idea. Continuous physical movement is one of the ways in which I can create the mental distance necessary to see the pictures of reality in sharp focus and to believe that I am not dead yet, not brain-dead.

Have you maintained a connection with Indonesia throughout the years, or was it something you had to recuperate?

Departing from Java by plane, it takes a couple of hours before you leave Indonesia; long enough to see the country from above and think about it at the same time. This is what I did in 1987 on my first flight experience travelling to Europe and on this flight I also made a promise to myself: that I will always challenge myself to find ways to maintain my connection with places and people mentally as well as physically. It can be considered as an act of control over my own destiny, my 'revenge' on what I felt I was not able to do at that particular moment. The internet, Facebook, Photoshop and Wikipedia are great human inventions of my lifetime. I feel blessed to be part of this era.



Fendry Ekel, Republic, 2014, oil and acrylic on canvas, 270×160 cm

About Fendry Ekel

Fendry Ekel (b. 1971, Jakarta, Java, IDN) studied fine art at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy and the esteemed Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten in Amsterdam. As an outcome of his solo exhibition in HVCCA in New York in 2010, he was invited to participate in the International Studio and Curatorial Program (ISCP), New York in 2011.

This year a comprehensive monograph with contributions by several international art historians will be presented by Black Cat Publishing, Berlin. Fendry Ekel has exhibited his work internationally and has had reoccurring solo shows in Amsterdam, Jakarta, Milan, Valencia, Mexico City and New York. Ekel lives and works in Yogyakarta, Indonesia and Berlin, Germany.

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.