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Ivan Sagita, the spirit of Jogja Surrealism



Ivan Sagita, File Ball Pulung Gantung, Fibre glass



Ivan Sagita is one of the most prominent artists associated with Jogja surrealism, a style that emerged in the 1980s in the Indonesian city of Yogyakarta. His painting and sculptures combine a strong social element to the spiritual realm – what the artist calls “the unreal”.

TEXT : Naima Morelli

What is spirituality? In the modern age, it is becoming harder and harder to tell. Equipped with our smartphones, our 3G following us everywhere, we start doubting that such a thing even exists.

In this respect, art has traditionally been the place where the spiritual finds a visual representation. From the reliefs of the Borobudur temple to the paintings of Fra Angelico, artists have always made the things of the spirit not just a prerogative of the elite, but rather available to all people.

Today though it's rare to find artists directing their efforts towards an immaterial sensitivity. The focus of art is mainly on scientific and aesthetic theories. While this kind of research is important, we need now more than ever artists willing to put the mystery of existence into images.

Ivan Sagita has been committed to this idea since he first picked up a paintbrush, becoming a unique interpreter of the existential condition. In his eerie work the artist gives voice to the strength and inner wisdom of the simpler people in society.

Was art ever part of your childhood?

Oh, you want to start from the very beginning! I was born in East Java, in Lawang, a small city, with a few kampungs and a market. When I was young I met a painter called Bambang Soegeng. He was very successful and used to live in Bali, but because of the dangerous political situation in 1965, he moved to Lawang. I started going to his studio every day and we talked for hours. Politically he was left-leaning, so to him the artist must close to the people and the society. Art shouldn't be just about the aesthetics. His ideology sure rubbed off on me.

Sounds a lot like Yogyakarta's ethos for art making as well. Was it Bambang Soegeng to suggest you to study at the Indonesian Institute of the Arts in Jogja?

Yes, he gave me a letter, and recommended to meet with local artists such as Kartika and Affandi. I was 16 years old at the time and back then Yogyakarta was the big city in my mind. I figured that, if I wanted to be an artist, I had to accumulate first-hand knowledge, and I did that by delving into social issues.

What were your expectations when you first joined art school?

I just wanted to be a painter. As a child I studied at a catholic school, which was extremely disciplined. In Yogyakarta though was the exact opposite – it was wild! A completely different way of living. But even then, I used to read a lot. I was eager to absorb as much as I could.

What kind of books were you reading?

I was into Indonesian existentialism. My favourite author was Iwan Simatupang. I was also reading a lot of Western art books. But Western art for me was mostly about the technique. In my work there were two kind of realities I was trying to depict, a higher reality and a lower reality. I wanted to combine the social element with the transcendental.

How did you balance these two seemingly opposite aspects?

It's a difficult equilibrium. Some artists care more about the political message and neglect the spiritual and the aesthetic side of the art. But if you care only about the destination of your work, you can easily achieve a better result with a pamphlet or a poster. I wasn't interested in that. Since the beginning my work has been highly symbolic. If I'd depict a *selendang*, the traditional scarf, I use it as a metaphor. Because the *selendang* is an item which is used for a lot of different purposes, from fashion to carry babies. Other symbols I use, like the banana leaf, or the hair, are like visual cues. Entry points to the spiritual realm.

How much does Javanese culture influences your way of thinking about spirituality?

Spirituality is something that is entrenched in the culture in Yogyakarta. We don't necessarily perceive reality as reality, but as somebody's dream. It is another layer behind the material reality. While the artwork itself is still part of the reality, the content of the work is drawn from the unreal world. This is the basis for my conception of surrealism. I'm not interested in the techniques of Western surrealism, such as automatic writing, the cadavre exquis etc. I want to look into the unreal world.

You are the main exponent of the “Jogja surrealism”. At its inception, was it as an actual movement of artists working together and exchanging ideas? Or did you work individually?

We weren't really working together. Jogja surrealism was more of a style, everyone was doing their own thing. We came from different contexts. For example, Lucia Hartini's art was more of a cathartic way to express herself. She tried to heal herself with painting. Other artists like Agus Kamal, or even Affandi had other approaches to surrealism. Today there are many young artists who have a surrealist style, although they conceive it differently.

In what does the surrealism of younger generation of Indonesian artists diverges from the Jogja Surrealism?

The main difference is that instead of connecting with the spiritual element, younger Indonesian surrealists are concerned with associating ideas. Their art is more psychological in this sense; it's mental work rather than spiritual work. They are very rational, and they apply this logic vision to everything. As a result, you tend to appreciate their art more at an intellectual level.

Is it more difficult in contemporary times to connect with the spiritual, compared to when you were just starting out?

Yes, it might be more difficult, but we must do everything we can to keep our sensitivity alive. The key here is our own experience. Artists might be researchers, but they are not scientists. We must be aware that reality doesn't stop to what we see, and there is depth to everything. Today we have access to a variety of languages to express ourselves. Thanks to the internet, we might feel it's easy to know everything. Our intellect can be endlessly fed. But when it comes to our inner world, it requires us to build it slowly, step by step, with our own experience.

As they say, today what we get is a lot of information but little wisdom. In this respect, can art help cultivating our spiritual side?

Isn't that like asking what is the function of the art? Well, I think we shouldn't talk about utility when it comes to art. Does the air we breathe or the wind have an endgame? No, but still though, we can experience them around us, and perhaps they can even cheer us up at times. Likewise, art just *is*. It's up to each one of us to discover our personal relationship with it.

About Ivan Sagita

Born in 1957 in Lawang, East Java, Indonesia he received his BFA from the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI), Jogjakarta in 1985. In 2003, he was awarded a Fellowship Artists in Residence from the Vermont Studio Centre, USA. He is also the recipient of numerous awards including Indonesian Painting Biennale (1987 & 1989), Silver Medal at the Osaka Triennale (1996) and Mainichi Broadcasting System Prize at the Osaka Sculpture Triennale(1998). Sagita has exhibited extensively in Japan, Australia, Indonesia, Singapore and USA. Selected exhibitions include The First Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (Brisbane – Australia, 1993); Under Cover (The Pretoria Art Museum and Ipopeng Project, Pretoria – South Africa & Sandton Civic Gallery, Johannesburg – South Africa, 1998); Soul Ties(Singapore Art Museum, 1999); Freezing The Time (Gallery of Northern Territory University, Darwin – Australia, 2001); CP Open Biennale: Interpellation (National Gallery, Jakarta – Indonesia, 2003); Beyond: The Limits

and Its Challenges, Biennale Jakarta XII (Jakarta – Indonesia, 2006). The artist lives and works in Jogjakarta, Indonesia.

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.