



DOSSIERS AFICIONADOS ARTISTS EXHIBITIONS @COBO SALON 1 WORK 2 MINS 

## Sri Astari Rasjid: Bringing Out the Warrior Within Us



*An inspiring woman as well as a prominent artist, Sri Astari Rasjid creates empowering imagery for both women and men. An attentive observer of the social and political issues in her native Indonesia, Astari continually challenges stereotypes and cultural constructions.*

TEXT : Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist

In the works of Sri Astari Rasjid, we can find an unconventional reading of Javanese traditions, and an assessment of how its symbolism and values can still be relevant to the fast-paced modernisation of Indonesia. An example is her re-configuration of the *kebaya* – the traditional Indonesian blouse-dress combination. In Astari's work the *kebaya* becomes 'armour for the soul' – hardly a surprise from a true cultural warrior in the landscape of Indonesian contemporary art.

In the painting “Petruk Can Do Everything Superman Can Do” (2010), the Javanese puppetry character Petruk is depicted as a flying woman, holding in her arms a surprised Superman. This fierce ethos is also apparent in her latest photographic series “Aku Diponegoro”, in which Astari herself impersonates the Javanese prince, Diponegoro, who opposed Dutch colonial rule.

**Javanese traditions are central to your work. Are you still surrounded by tradition, or is your work a way to keep traditions alive in your life?**

I grew up in India and Burma and had to re-learn Indonesian as a child. This experience of living overseas in different cultures has been extremely enriching for me – it also had the effect of making me think about my own identity. It definitely had an impact on how I see my own culture, and helped foster my interest in exploring tradition in my art. In my everyday life Javanese traditions are all around me. They still play a central role in the lifestyle and decisions of politicians, regardless of their ethnic background. For instance, official inaugurations and events are always preceded by ritual ceremonies.

**You studied visual arts at the University of Minnesota, and at the Royal College of Art in London. Did you have mentors along the way?**

My professors at the art department in Minnesota were important mentors to me. Also, during my many visits to the US and in attending international forums, I have been fortunate enough to meet great artists such as Frank Stella and James Rosenquist. Studying in the West affected my way of thinking about art history and art-making. It played a big role in my process and practice on both a technical and conceptual level.

**What is your artistic process like? Does it vary depending on the medium you choose?**

Certainly my process varies depending on the medium, but I enjoy equally the conceptual and the practical parts of art-making. I can't ignore the fact that our lives are deeply influenced by the rise of new technologies. These are opening up a range of new, interesting possibilities; today, as artists, we have so many media available to us. Personally, I am always open to discoveries and lately I have been experimenting with photography. However painting is still the medium closest to my heart. Within the realm of painting I like to use many different techniques. I might print a background with silk screen and then paint the figures on top. I also often work with found objects that for me have a personal, social or political significance.

**Can you tell us about the genesis of your 2014 photographic series “Aku Diponegoro”?**

“Aku Diponegoro” has been an important part of my ongoing exploration of photography. I created the work for the exhibition “Diponegoro 2015” at the National Gallery in Jakarta. The show was dedicated to our national hero, Diponegoro, who played an important role in the Java War. For the series I travelled to Mount Bromo in East Java, to shoot in the beautiful landscape. I dressed as Diponegoro and rode a horse to symbolize the warrior hero within us all, men and women. I also visited the historical site of Trowulan, the capital of the ancient Majapahit Kingdom, where the Gate of Bajang Ratu is found.

**This empowering imagery has been present since your earlier work. Do you feel there is a need for young men and women to see more of this kind of image and – in this sense – do you consider yourself a feminist artist?**

My work is a reflection of my thoughts on politics, society and culture and deals with both female and male issues. As such, I don't consider myself a feminist artist. With my art I try to deal with the human condition in general and I hope it may be able to inspire others.

**You have just been appointed as the Indonesian Ambassador to Bulgaria, Albania and Macedonia – any thoughts to share about this new phase of your life?**

I might be the first artist to represent Indonesia as an ambassador. Given this responsibility, I will try my very best to promote Indonesia through my cultural diplomacy, which hopefully will enhance bilateral opportunities for tourism, trade, investment and cultural exchange.

**Can you tell us a bit about your recent retrospective exhibition “Yang Terhormat Ibu” (“Dear Mother”) at the Koesnadi Hardjosoemantri Cultural Center (PKKH) in Yogyakarta?**

Just before leaving Indonesia for Bulgaria, I put on this retrospective exhibition featuring selected works from my journey of almost three decades in the arts. I was interested in showing how culture and traditions have not only been an important source of inspiration for myself, but have contributed to the rise of contemporary art in Indonesia. I hope the show has made a contribution to the discourse of contemporary art internationally.

## **About Sri Astari**

Born in 1953 in Jakarta, Indonesia, Sri Astari Rasjid briefly studied English Literature at the University of Indonesia (1973). She went on to study fashion in London in 1976 and honed her art education and technical skills at the University of Minnesota, USA in 1987 and the Royal College of Art in London in 1988. For the past 30 years, Sri Astari Rasjid has been creating work that deals with Javanese cultural issues within a modern cultural framework. She was one of the recipients of the Philip Morris Indonesia VI awards and was also one of the winners of the Millennium Painting Competition at the Winsor & Newton Awards (1999). More recently, Sri Astari was awarded the Kartini Award in 2015.

Having started her career as a professional artist in the early 90s, Sri Astari actively takes part in exhibitions in Indonesia and abroad. Sri Astari has exhibited multiple times in the National Gallery of Indonesia and, as a feminist artist, she was also part of the “Kartini: The Power of Women in Art” exhibition in Yogyakarta in 2011. Prior to her shift towards the international art scene, Sri Astari also held solo exhibitions such as *Recollections, Bali* (1999-2000), *Wings & Excursions, Bali* (2000-2001) and *His/Hers Exhibition in 798 District, Beijing* (2008). In 2013 she participated in the Indonesia National Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale Arte and the 56th Spoleto International Festival in Italy. The following year, Sri Astari also exhibited in South Korea, Hong Kong and Art 14 London in the UK. In early January 2016, Sri Astari was also appointed the Indonesian Ambassador to Bulgaria.