



The contemporary Indonesian art scene in the 80s was populated by superheroes. These were young artists who studied in the west, each one following a unique, non-conformist path. In their work they bridged ancient traditions and contemporary culture. These artists were fierce opponents of the Suharto regime, and after the fall of the dictator, they continued to fight for social justice and environmental issues.



TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art

One of the stronger personalities in the group was certainly [Arahmaiani](#). Unforgettable is the image of the artist wearing a Balinese headdress, a pair of aggressive sunglasses, holding a colourful plastic gun in the performance *Nation for Sale* – a stark critique of consumerism.

Today Arahmaiani hasn't lost her combative spirit. However, in her art, she has shifted the mode of expression from criticism to activism – always supported by a strong theoretical background. Based between Indonesia, Tibet, Germany and India, the artist's most recent research explores the natural environment and spirituality. She will bring the results of these investigations in her next solo at [Tyler Rollins](#) in New York, from September 15 to October 29.

Since 2010 you started working with Tibetan monks and lamas, using art to address local environmental issues. One of the work from that research was *Memory of Nature*, presented at Art Stage in 2013. How did you become interested in working with the environment in Tibet?

The idea of working with the environment came after my very first staying in a monastery in Tibet for ten days. When I got there I was struck by the beauty of the area, but at the same time I saw garbage everywhere... it was so disturbing! Before starting this new modern lifestyle, Tibetans would throw waste around because everything was organic. Today, they keep on doing it with plastic. I thought that problem was a good place to start. When I suggested the monks to collect the garbage, in the beginning they were shocked. What? We monk, we have to clean? For them it was i-m-p-o-s-s-i-b-l-e! It's not in our tradition, they said. I told them well, it's up to you, it's your culture and I'm coming from another planet, but this is my idea, and it would be good in my opinion! I gave them some time to think about it and I went back to Indonesia. After two weeks I got a message on my phone from my interpreter, saying "the Lama said it's ok," and then they send me a picture of monks dancing in the middle of the garbage.

How did the project developed from there?

There was a strange coincidence; I ended up in a monastery where about one hundred years ago there was a lama who started planting trees and predicted that this is what will be needing in the future. I suggested to

take on the Lama's idea and start planting trees again. The monks till today have already planted 320,000 trees. But since two years ago the government approved and supported the project, so altogether the trees that has been planted till spring time this year have been already more then one million..

It's interesting to see the evolution of your artistic practice, from denouncing social and political issues, to step in and becoming part of the solution.

That's right. Because in the past I have been questioning, questioning and protesting and criticizing. But ultimately, who is it going to answer? Not the authority. In fact, that almost never happened. I realized the most realistic thing was to answer to the problem myself. You have to try to give an answer, rather than limiting yourself to questioning and criticizing. In a way, through the answer you also express a critique, but in a subtler way, through action. As an activist, you can of course be manipulated, so the trap is always there. But by going more directly into a solution, you get something more real which can't be manipulated so easily by other people's agendas. The important thing is that it never becomes us against them. When it becomes all about defeating your enemy, you lose sight of the change you want see in the world. That's what I've learned from my experience anyway.

Did you arrived to this conclusion gradually throughout the years, or did it come at a particular moment in time?

Well, when I started the project with the Tibetan monks I was actually in a moment when I was full of doubts about my approach on socio-political issues, in Indonesia and globally. Because after more than 20 years, we didn't really see the result of our work. We had spent so much time and energy, and actually it made me a bit depressed to see how much destruction is still going on in the world today. So I started concentrating on my grey paintings, because they were more about my inner reality, my own disappointments or my own happiness. They were individual rather than social. But then I met the Tibetan monks and lamas and something opened up. I saw another way of thinking about problems. They gave me a renewed sense of hope, purpose and possibility.

In 2014 you had a big anthological solo show called “[Fertility of the mind](#)” at Tyler Rollins, in New York, curated by Leeza Ahmady. It was the first survey of more than thirty years of artistic production. What have been some major shifts you noticed, since you first started out?

That show was very interesting for me, because I had never looked at my work in that way. The most interesting thing was to see how much a western audience wants to connect to traditional eastern philosophy and how this is relevant in the modern world. Today we are heavily reliant on the scientific approach. This method has its strength in the fact that it is experimental and everything has to be proven, but it still can't provide answers for all the aspects of human experience. It can't possibly encompass reality as a whole. Religion, on the other hand tends to conflict with the scientific method, being based on belief. But spirituality is actually different because it doesn't deal with belief, it also uses reason and objectivity. It's about your own self and your own way of thinking, being critical and try to understand how the mind is working, consequentially shaping your attitude, way of living and behaviours.

This negotiation between tradition and technology, spirituality and science is definitely present throughout all your work. Today, as you observed, this very much part of the zeitgeist.

Thirty years ago it was like; what is that strange thing from the east? But today it seems normal. The intersection between technology, science and eastern spirituality is also the topic I have been investigating with my students at the Department of South East Asia, Faculty of Philosophy, Passau University in Germany. As an artist, they asked me to develop a program based on giving a practical counterpoint to the theoretical teachings. From these kind of invitations I received, I guess I have become an example of how artists with an Asian cultural background can bring their own culture to the table, and engage in the modern world, bringing everything together. In many cases Asians can look at their traditional culture as irrelevant in today's modern world. So they dismiss it and just learn science and technology. Or they exoticized it. Of course, in this world of commodification, if something is exotic you sell it and make money.

In the art world, exoticism can mean artists exploiting the most stereotyped aspects of their own traditional culture to mould their art according to the market's expectations. But I'm curious to know how would you define exoticism.

When I speak of exoticism, whether it is directed towards other cultures or your own, I mean being concerned only with the form, not going beyond that, not going deeper into the real understanding and meaning. It's just playing with the surface, the superficial aspect of a particular culture.

In your work and life, you have always taken the opposite approach, committing to a deep investigation of your own complex cultural background and finding commonalities between different traditions. In art, this is what expands lateral thinking; at the same time, in the past this approach caused you troubles, shocking audiences with a more monolithic worldview and beliefs.

You know in the 90s I made this work called *Lingga-Yoni* that created problems with the radical groups of Muslims in Indonesia. They misunderstood it – or perhaps they didn't want to understand. It was based on the ancient Hindu Buddhist philosophy which in a way I inherited from my ancestors. My struggle to connect ancient traditions with science and technology inevitably gets through my artwork. Lately I have been gotten closer to Buddhism, but this isn't about changing religion for me. I see the essence of all religions being basically the same; it is for the good of people of this earth. But of course there are different cultural contexts and different way of doing it. I don't make a big deal about it, I'm more interested in the idea of pluralism, respecting the differences.

Arahmaiani: Shadow of the Past

Tyler Rollins, New York

15 Sept – 29 Oct 2016

About the artist

Arahmaiani (b. 1961, Bandung, lives and works in Yogyakarta, Indonesia)

Since the 1980s, Arahmaiani's work has been exhibited widely in museums and biennials throughout the world, from Asia to the Americas, Australia, and Europe, including: the Venice Biennale (2003); Biennale of the Moving Image, Geneva (2003); Gwangju Biennale (2002); Bienal de São Paulo (2002), Performance Biennale, Israel (2001); Biennale de Lyon (2000); Werkleitz Biennale (2000); Bienal de la Habana (1997); Asia-Pacific Triennial, Brisbane, Australia (1996); and the Yogya Biennial (1994). Arahmaiani was included in the landmark 1996 exhibition, *Traditions/Tensions*, at Asia Society in New York City, as well as the

acclaimed group exhibition, Global Feminisms, at the Brooklyn Museum in 2007. She was recently featured in the group exhibition, Suspended Histories, at the Museum Van Loon in Amsterdam, the Netherlands (2013-2014). Recent group exhibitions include Women in Between: Asian Women Artists 1984-2012 at the Mie Prefectural Art Museum in Japan (2013), as well as museum exhibitions in Singapore and Australia.