

Interview with Ari Bayuaji: What Censorship in Indonesia Is Really About? | CoBo Social

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What Censorship in Indonesia Is Really About? Interview with Ari Bayuaji



Sunsilk Girls, 2016 (detail) Acrylic paint and paper on plywood Dimension variable



Ken Dedes (After Jim Supangkat), 2016 Carved stone, metal stand, fabric, wood, coloured pencil
Dimension variable



Fashion Victim, 2016 Wood, paper, copper alloy, brass wire, batik print 38 X 35 X 12 cm



Mother, 2016 Carved stone, metal stand, fabric, wood, acrylic paint Dimension variable



Silent is Golden, 2016 Carved stone, metal stand, fabric, wood, acrylic paint, gold leaf Dimension variable



Burden, 2016 Wood, paper, wooden statue, brass, copper wire, gold leaf 35 X 25 X 12 cm.



Ari Portrait: Ari Bayuaji by Anjali Nayenggita

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Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia...

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In the show *CEA.SCR*, at REDBASE Foundation Yogyakarta, artist Ari Bayuaji takes the pulse of the Indonesian socio-cultural environment that is changing – not necessarily for the better.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist and REDBASE Foundation Yogyakarta

Ari Bayuaji's exhibition *CEA.SCR*, at [REDBASE Foundation Yogyakarta](#) is one of the most important shows of this year to advance the public conversation in Indonesia. In the spirit of contemporary Indonesian art, the works deeply engage with local culture and society without being didactic, but rather fuelling reflections.



Sunsilk Girls, 2016 (detail)
Acrylic paint and paper on plywood
Dimension variable

During his residency at REDBASE Foundation the artist tackled the controversial theme of censorship. He looked at the shifting power dynamics embedded in the rampant wave of conservatism in Indonesia, especially around women's clothing and behaviours.

The works carrying these reflections are striking in their own right. A series of busts of the traditional statue of Queen Ken Dedes had their faces erased or painted on top. The work's title spelled out the connection to the famous Jim Supangkat's *Ker. Leaes* (1975). This seminal work from the Seni Rupa Baru Movement was reflecting the westernisation of Indonesian society, occurring at the time the work was created. What Ari Bayuaji shows in his version of the traditional statue, is conversely a shift towards a controlling attitude on women's bodies.

Ari Bayuaji was born in Mojokerto, East Java, in 1975, and grew up in a family that always valued art and believe it would make the children more independent. In 2000 he left his product designer job in Bali to take a course in design and drawing in Germany for 16 months and travel across Europe – an experience which put him on the arts path. After studying at the Concordia University of Montreal, he decided to stay in Canada. Today he is based in Montreal, which he describes as a great place for artists, but keeps on travelling regularly to Indonesia.



Ken Dedes (After Jim Supangkat), 2016
Carved stone, metal stand, fabric, wood, coloured pencil
Dimension variable

Does living in Canada gives you a particular perspective on the issue of censorship?

Yes, definitely. Censorship in Canada, especially on television programs, goes together with parental guidance. It's about education, not simply censoring and letting the children guessing why things are being censored. Although I still follow the news from back home, having a distant relationship with Indonesia gives me the good advantage of tackling censorship with a clearer point of view.

During your research at REDBASE Foundation, did you felt any worry at all in working

on such a sensitive topic like censorship?

No, not really. I just wanted to share something to make people reflect or discuss, because there is not really much open discussion about censorship in Indonesia. The residency was the perfect platform for me to be integrated with the society in Yogyakarta, to witness local social life and to have conversations with people. I believe censorship is not just about one group of people creating standards on what women should wear; it is also about our responsibility to respect the cultures of Indonesia and the ethnic diversity that has been around for hundreds of years.

Can you describe me how the idea for the show evolved throughout the residency?

I did as much research as I could during my residency in Yogyakarta. I visited the archive centres and libraries, as well as the junk stores selling old books and old magazines to collect material. I went around asking questions like "What you would answer if your children asked you why some women's clothes are censored?" Surprisingly, almost all of the parents replied that those women's clothes are inappropriate to wear! Full stop.



Fashion Victim, 2016

Wood, paper, copper alloy, brass wire, batik print
38 X 35 X 12 cm

Why in analysing censorship did you decide to focus on women?

I focused on that because censorship is getting more and more ridiculous in Indonesia. I've seen images of censored women – even cartoon characters – in so many different kinds of forms. The government and the majority people in society really believe that censorship on women's images is a priority. The common view is that censorship is necessary to prevent men to sexually assault

women. Instead of educating men or campaigning for having them treating women with respect, the society has chosen to keep promoting the idea that women must wear something appropriate to protect themselves and the moral of men. It is very dangerous way of thinking.

How does the enforcement of “proper” clothing on women influence their confidence and attitudes in the public realm?

The issue of what women should wear in Indonesia has been a “trending” subject at the moment. There are many teachers in public high schools suggesting their female students should wear specific religious clothing. Instead of talking and encouraging achievement for girls in their future, the clothing issue seems the most important. Those educators have forgotten to remind girls that they can be beautiful just the way they are. I think that kind of education is a form of censorship on women’s power.

An important point you make through the show, is that the so-called “women issues” are not just about women, but are rather a symptom of the state of an entire society. Do you feel this perspective is still hold by a minority of people in Indonesia?

Yes, many, many Indonesians do not realize that “the battle” on women’s body has a big impact on the broader society. While everybody is busy talking about what’s appropriate for women to wear, they have forgotten to talk about the power of women or mothers to prepare a great future for the young generation.



Mother, 2016
Carved stone, metal stand, fabric, wood, acrylic paint
Dimension variable

The experience of your mother, a teacher of aerobic, was brought into the show. How did you interweave the personal and the political?

That is right, my mother's experience with dealing with social pressure inspired many works in the exhibition. It sounds very personal, but I see many women in Indonesia facing similar challenges to the ones of my mother.

Two years ago, after her return from haj, my late mother was advised by some family members to get rid of her collection of statues. Most pieces were Balinese women who were naked above the waist, and it was considered "improper" for her to keep them after her pilgrimage. She didn't get rid of the statues she had collected for many years, but she found a compromise – censoring parts of the statues with batik fabric.

After her haj pilgrimage my mother had also to wear a headscarf herself. It was not easy for her to teach aerobic wearing an hijab, as you can imagine. She really felt that her freedom was diminished by this new "costume" she had to wear in her daily life, especially at work. In the end she decided to design her own aerobic clothing to keep her coolness and her business going. As a smart woman, I think my mother was successfully negotiating with the social pressure which she could not fight against, because of her religious belief.



Silent is Golden, 2016
Carved stone, metal stand, fabric, wood, acrylic paint, gold leaf
Dimension variable



Burden, 2016
Wood, paper, wooden statue, brass, copper wire, gold leaf
35 X 25 X 12 cm.

This process of negotiation between rule and freedom is clearly shown in the works. In that it seems that censorship in Yogyakarta is more enforced by the social environment than from actual rules.

Social pressure can be more powerful than government laws in Indonesia. To fit in with moral standard of the society and be respected, many people, especially women, have to be compliant. Many follow the standard in public, but keep pursuing their freedom in private. I am afraid this might create a "hypocritical culture".

By the use of ancient statues in the installations we can also read a sort of nostalgia towards a heritage which risks to disappear. Should that be accepted as an inevitable consequence of history, or should we take a different attitude? And if so, how contemporary art and artists can help?

As a contemporary artist, I think it is important for me to address some contemporary problems within my society. We are living in a very interesting time, and as an artist I want to use my visibility to give my voice to something that matters. Hopefully my work will create dialogue and improve the current state of things.

Indeed, in the show it looks like you are not directly taking a hard-line ideological stance, but rather showing a process of de-secularisation, making people aware of what they are gaining and losing. What feedback did you get from the public?

During the residency I had two artist talks. We had many people such as artists, arts students, and journalists, who asked many interesting questions that generated discussion. I have always believed in "diplomacy" in delivering my opinions, so that they can be heard. If people can hear what we are trying to say, the possibility to be rejected is a lot smaller; from there we can create a good discussion.



Ari Portrait: Ari Bayuaji by Anjali Nayenggita

About the Artist:

Ari Bayuaji was born in Indonesia in 1975. Moving permanently to Canada in 2005, he transferred

his studio from Indonesia (Bali) to Montreal. Bayuaji studied Fine Arts at Concordia University (2005-2010) and continuing to create his artwork at his studio in Montreal and in Bali. In 2008, Ari Bayuaji received the Danfoss Art Award (bronze) – an international arts award from Denmark for students of art, design, and architecture from around the world.

Ari Bayuaji has been just accepted in a residency at the Montreal Fine Art Museum of Montreal's from January 9 until February 17, 2017, and has another show coming up at Kunsthall Rotterdam in March 2017.

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.

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