

CONVERSATIONS · NAIMA MORELLI · OCTOBER 31, 2020

Ugly/ Beautiful: WOHA's Richard Hassell on the Curation and Collection of Indonesian Art



Walking around Singapore, you couldn't have possibly have missed the buildings of [Oasia Hotel Downtown](#), the [School of the Arts \(SOTA\)](#), or [PARKROYAL on Pickering](#). These extraordinary examples of

green architecture by firm WOHA certainly contribute to the “City in a Garden” reputation of the city-state, but there is something more to those buildings beyond their sustainable, innovative design.





Oasia Hotel, designed by WOHA. Image courtesy of Sua Truong via Unsplash.

They offer a way of looking at the world not only in terms of function but also in terms of spirit. When speaking to WOHA founder, Australian-born, Singapore-based Richard Hassell, it's clear that the architectural firm's outlook corresponds to his own vision. It's a worldview that Hassell infuses in everything that he does, from his own art to architecture projects and now, to his curation of the show *Complex Humour* at Gajah Gallery.

This virtual show kicks off the series *Fresh Vision* – Gajah's online exhibitions curated by creatives of all stripes. "I had never been a curator of my own show, although as an architect I have curated shows on our own work, and as an artist I have been part of shows," Hassell told us.



Hassell's own art practice includes works such as the *Archimedes Aquatics* collection of scrolls, which were developed between 2018 and 2020. These will be exhibited in 2021 and feature a set of tessellated creatures based on Archimedean tilings that can make an infinite series of tessellation patterns.

Hassell's selection of works for this show comes from a range of available pieces within the Gajah Gallery stable – although, on a personal basis, Hassell owns one edition of Yunizar's *Kucing* (pictured below).



Richard Hassell, pictured with his personal art collection. Image courtesy of Richard Hassell.

Titling the show *Complex Humour*, Hassell chose to highlight works by I GAK Murniasih and Yunizar – both artists who present humorous works overlaid with much more difficult themes, as well as tribal elements. The latter also happen to be recurring aesthetics in Richard’s personal art collection.

“I love tribal art. I am not a spiritual person, but I do respond to beliefs embodied in objects,” he says.

“Somehow, the deep belief guides the hand and influences the beauty of the design, so the depth of passion is communicated across time, through design and craft, even though I might have only a very superficial knowledge of what these objects were (originally intended) for.”

On his Gajah presentation, Hassell had this to say: "I could see that the artworks had aspects in common, as well as their own unique qualities. That is the curation part, in my view – to put pieces together which reveal more in combination than they do on their own."

In your opinion, what aspects do a virtual show emphasise, compared to a physical show? In other words, do you think this location-free way of approaching shows will change the way art is curated?

A virtual show can reach people anywhere and anytime, and it can also persist for longer than a physical show. And in the time of Covid-19, maybe it is the only kind of show people can see. There is no doubt that the pandemic has accelerated the trend of experiencing the world and each other virtually, and forced the mass adoption of technology in an abrupt manner.

Virtual shows give a lot more control and are therefore more highly curated than physical shows, as you can choose exactly how the viewer experiences an artwork. For instance, if a piece had a better side, you could just show that! But of course you miss all the nuance and physicality of a real show – in terms of scale, and distance, maybe even how it smells or moves, how it is to move around it, see it in different lights, how it compares with other pieces nearby.

But with the technology, I think it is inevitable that a combination will be used, where you have a physical show augmented with a virtual one, and where the virtual one can be archived and experienced even decades into the future. That would combine the best qualities of each medium.

Personal stories, hidden narratives, and universal values. How did you relate these ideas to the pieces you chose for *Complex Humour*?

I do enjoy humour in art, as I think the world is a pretty frightening place in many ways, so artists who manage to address issues with humour are offering ways for us to process or face difficult issues or complex emotions. For both (Yunizar and Murni), they attracted me with easy and simple means – (through their use of) cartoonish creatures, or sweet colours. They then counteract them with disturbing or ugly things – which is why I think they are art rather than just cute images.



Murni's undated soft sculpture, *Thumb*. Image courtesy of Gajah Gallery.

You've said that these two artists are "like taking bitter medicine with some honey!" What is the disease that the works of these two artists are medicine to?

Murni in particular exposes all kinds of private thoughts, obsessions, histories. She was abused, and also sick, so she has a lot of pain. But in her artwork, the pain is rather attractive, colourful, light, and airy. She suggests that pain is life, it is experience, it doesn't destroy her spirit, it can be transformed into comical objects and creatures that can then be set free.





Murni's 1999 work *Tali Kbku Di Caplok* (Translation: A fish is pinching my birth control device). Read more about Murni [here](#).

Image courtesy of Gajah Gallery.

Yunizar comes from a traditional culture, the Minang people in Sumatra, with a strong oral tradition, and an Islamic culture that overlays an older animist and Buddhist culture. His art is full of pictograms and words, but it is opaque and does not communicate anything clearly, although the works appear to be full of information. It is like there is too much inherited culture. To me, his work seems to say "although you cannot understand me, you can enjoy what I make" as there is a common humanity that connects despite, rather than through, the torrent of symbols – it is the lumpiness of the form, or the mark of the hand that is telling the story.



Yunizar, *Kucing (Cat)*, 2019. Image courtesy of Gajah Gallery.

What was the first art piece you ever collected?

I bought a sculpture at an exhibition at my university in 1988. It was by an artist called Stuart Elliot and was a sort of mechanical human figure, a bit like Yunizar's *Big Boss from the East!* It was a great exhibition called *The Red Boat*, which I can still remember. It was set up in a mysterious world of boats full of nameless figures. I don't think it was a great investment, but I still enjoy it, it has very beautiful hands.



Yunizar, *Big Boss from the East*, 2015. Image courtesy of Gajah Gallery.

Does ownership modify your way of looking at a particular artwork?

Definitely, artworks assume a kind of atavistic power once you commit to them, they become part of your deep visual references, and I find them like old friends from whom I draw some kind of peace and power. Ownership deepens the relationship — it's a bit like getting a pet. What was just a cat in the pet shop becomes part of the family, as you learn more about them, get to know them, and learn things from them.

What kind of relationship do you have with the pieces of your collection? Do you look at them often, or do you keep them in a storeroom to preserve them?

In theory, I move them around quite often, but in practice not as often as I like! For small ones, I do like to move them around as I find you stop seeing them once they become too familiar. I have a small storeroom where I keep them in my place, so it is actually quite easy to exchange them. Bigger ones stay where they are for the most part. Sculptures are actually more flexible as they sit on the floor rather than the wall so they can be shifted to all kinds of new places.

How did you first start approaching Indonesian contemporary art? And have you seen the art scene changing over the years and now with the Covid-19 crisis?

I have been interested since travelling in my 20s to Asia, but with periods of more or less interest depending on what was going on in my life. My interest in the last 15 years was triggered by working in hotel projects and thinking about authentic ways to communicate culture and location. Art Stage's [focus on Indonesia](#) (in 2013) was a further trigger, as (it featured) great large works by Entang Wiharso and others. I really responded to the works, as they were of an architectural scale and interesting to me for projects.

What are you exploring at the moment?

I am designing a hotel in Singapore on New Bridge Road in Chinatown and have had an interesting time looking for art to add depth to the guest experience. It's a heritage property that was built for a remittance business — where coolies would send their money home to China. I was really interested in the human side of the situation so I developed an art program that is about the diaspora, about being away from home, about networks.

I have a mix of Singaporean, Indonesian, and Chinese artists being commissioned for the project, all site-specific works, which I am finding really interesting. (We are also) using the entire new façade as a text-based artwork based on what we discovered in the deeply personal letters that were sent home with the remittances.

Complex Humour can be viewed online at [this link](#). Gajah Gallery's Fresh Vision series is currently in its third edition, entitled Rejuvenating Hope. It is curated by Adhika Maxi, a Jakarta-based celebrity chef and restaurateur, and can be viewed online [here](#).



La terra, il cielo, i corvi

19 € Tre uomini, un russo, un tedesco e un italiano, in fuga da una pri;

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