

# VIEW FROM THE PEAK



With Indonesian artist Dadang Christanto.

## ART AND REMEMBERING

“The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”

Milan Kundera’s words resonate with the artist Dadang Christanto so deeply, he is wont to repeat it. He quotes it in his interview this month with *The Peak* and, again, to me at a closed-door dinner held by Lim Wei-Ling, the gallery owner who is representing him in Malaysia and whose art space is housing Christanto’s works until November.

For Christanto, a remembrance of things past is of utmost importance to him. The artist has been, for years, tackling the difficult and deeply personal subject of the mass killings, rape and torture that occurred in Indonesia in 1965, ending in 1966. Christanto’s own father was taken away during the purge and, to this day, he

does not quite know what had really become of him or where he might have died. Christanto’s art revisits the massacres again and again because, “I have made myself a witness.” He claims that if we don’t confront our past, it will come back to haunt us. “Why shouldn’t we stand as witness through artwork about such violence?”

Art and remembrance seem to be the prevailing themes among the artists we have interviewed this month and maestro Fernando Botero is a great purveyor of this. In an exclusive interview, the 86-year-old recalls the precise moment he decided to highlight the human rights violations in Abu Ghraib prison, creating a masterpiece that afterwards left him “emotionally exhausted.” While Botero does not consider himself a political artist, he does concede that, “What art can do is

leave a testimony. If an artist has the ability and will to approach political events in order to leave a testimony of the horror, the absurdity, or the injustice of violence, corruption and stupidity, he should do it.”

One of our own native sons, Teh Hock Aun, channels his memories into positive action. The Glasgow-based artist, who is set to showcase a solo exhibition here at Balai Seni Visual Negara at the end of the year, laments the state of art in the country and is determined to set things right, creating a highly structured arts programme called ICE (Imagination Creation Expression) in his old high school to encourage more students in fine art. “Encourage students to make a mess and find solutions,” he says. “This is how you encourage students to do art – imagination. If you have good imagination, you have good art.”

Sometimes, that imagination is served through grim reality. At the dinner with Christanto, I point at the year emblazoned in bronze on the t-shirt he is wearing. “Never forget,” he tells me, even managing a smile. ☺

**MINDY TEH, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**



# THE HEART OF DARKNESS

Praised for his unflinching artistic interrogations of the Indonesian mass killings of 1965 to 1966, Dadang Christanto's first solo exhibition in Malaysia, *Missing*, has arrived at Wei-Ling Contemporary. The Indonesian artist speaks to *The Peak* about his country's violent past, peering into the depths of human brutality and the power of remembrance.

TEXT RENYI LIM PHOTOGRAPHY LAW SOO PHYE





from portraits in the style of 1960s-esque Indonesian identity card photographs are more than artistic allusions. They bear witness to the artist's own experiences as a child during the anti-communist purges, which saw supporters of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), opponents of the military dictatorship, union members, intellectuals, landless farmers and ethnic Chinese being arrested, brutally interrogated and murdered.

While the exact number of victims of the 1965-66 mass killings remains unclear, the East Timor Action Network has stated that reliable estimates suggest between 500,000 and one million people lost their lives. (Recent estimates have stretched further, pointing towards a higher death toll of two or three million people, cementing its grisly record as one of the bloodiest massacres of the 20th century.) Although Joshua

Oppenheimer's 2012 documentary, *The Act of Killing*, helped drag the purges into the glare of the global spotlight, the events of 1965-66 have remained shrouded in silence, both in Indonesia and abroad – with a few brave lone voices being raised in protest.

I ask Christanto whether he watched Oppenheimer's film, which – controversially – was overlooked for Best Documentary Feature at the 86th Academy Awards in favour of a documentary on American backup singers. "I saw it, yes," he says evenly. "It shows the reality of what happened, but remember – the film only focused on Medan, which doesn't have such a big population. Things were horrible everywhere in Indonesia during 1965-66, but in Java, it was even worse." The artist himself was born into an Indonesian family of Chinese descent and raised in Tegal, a modest village in Central Java.

He was only eight years old when the rumblings of General Suharto's campaign of terror reached his village – and once they did, Christanto's father was dragged from their home by soldiers, never to be seen or heard from again. "I still remember my mother crying throughout that time, but she wouldn't explain what had happened," he recalls. "She just said: 'Your father's gone away to another city, and he'll be there for a long time.' It was only later, when I was playing in a field with some other children, that some of my friends told me: 'Your father is being held in the military headquarters – he's being tortured.'"

"To hear about my father from my friends – it was horrible for me. Since I belonged to the family of a 1965-66 victim, I was stigmatised and bullied by my classmates. I didn't want to go to school, so I quit and slept on the streets instead. It was a very hard time for my mother – she went from jail

02 Indonesian Genocide, 2015

03 Ninety-Sixty-Five

04 Installation view of Dadang Christanto, *Survivor*, 2014, Lumpur Lapindo site, Sidoarjo

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brought to our attention,” Lim points out. “Take what’s happening in Syria or Myanmar, for instance. You think, ‘How much power do we have? What can we do to empower ourselves to make a difference?’ So, we always try to push boundaries with the work that the gallery shows, and if an artist has purity in their delivery, we want them to say it as it is,

without censorship.”

The exhibition offers a cohesive selection of his artwork, including new installations, sculptures and a performance piece – a reflection of his diverse body of work, which also includes drawings and paintings. Within them, elements such as tortured figures that weep tears of blood and red threads dangling





Dadang Christanto sits in a corner of Wei-Ling Contemporary, eyeing an assortment of *kuih* that's just been set down in front of us. "Now, I shall be greedy and take more than one!" he exclaims, his eyes gleaming with impish humour. It's mid-July and the Indonesian artist is making his first of several visits to the sixth floor of The Gardens Mall, scoping out the gallery in preparation for his upcoming solo exhibition, *Missing*.

Christanto's debut exhibition in Malaysia, on now until 4 November, stands in stark contrast to his gentle personality. His art is steeped in the bloodstained history of Indonesia's mass killings of 1965 to 1966 and its countless victims of political violence. Repeated motifs of blood, disembodied heads and anonymous faces – symbols that highlight the ease with which crimes against humanity can be committed – carry the same chilling, highly unsettling qualities that run through Jake and Dinos

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01 *This Blood Still Flesh*

Chapman's *Hell*, Annie Leibovitz's images of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and Vann Nath's paintings of Cambodia's notorious S-21 prison.

"Dadang's work leaves an indelible mark on your mind and visually, too," says Wei-Ling Lim, the Gallery Director of Wei-Ling Gallery. "This is not going to be a pretty exhibition. It's not a show that's easy – it is confrontational. But who wants a show that's easy? Robert Rauschenberg once said: 'The artist's job is to be a witness to his time in history.' Someone like Dadang has

got such a strong voice – not just in Indonesia, but internationally as well – because he's being honest and truthful. He's showing and talking about issues that people want to ignore." Christanto's pieces, it must be noted, are as much a warning as they are a memorial to the dead.

"If you look at the atrocities of World War II, everyone said: 'Let's never let this happen again.' They asked how such war crimes were possible, but it's still happening today, all around us – atrocities are occurring that haven't even been



to jail in the city, trying to bring him food, but the military headquarters never allowed her to see him. That was the struggle of so many victims and their families, though.” Did he ever find any clues as to his father’s fate?

“I’ve never been sure. Four or five years ago, I met someone who was a former executioner in Tegah and tried to find the possible location of where my father might have died. There was a field near a beach where he said they’d executed prisoners and thrown them into the water or a nearby river after killing them. Every city in that area has a lot of mass graves. Near Yogyakarta, for instance, there’s a cave with a deep ravine and a river at the bottom. I spoke with a witness from that time, and he said every night, truckloads of people were pushed from that cliff – alive. And

**05** Lumpur Lapindo Commemoration, 2018 at the Lumpur Lapindo site, Sidoarjo

**Description:** One year after the *Survivor* installation, citizens gathered around the Indonesian flag and an aluminum sculpture, spreading flowers to commemorate the tragedy.

when the water flowed from the river afterwards, it was red.”

It is the Indonesian government’s refusal to acknowledge and apologise for the events of 1965–66 that fuels Christanto’s determination to carry on producing bold, challenging artwork such as *Slaughter Tunnel* (2015) and his 1979 performance piece, *In Red*. “Even my family in Indonesia – my brother and sister – don’t want to talk about that time. They’ve said: ‘The past is the past, don’t talk about it anymore.’ But that’s not for me: I have made myself a witness. Why? If we don’t talk about it, the same forces behind the fire and violence of the military will be back,” he asserts.

“No one was ever charged in court and, if that’s the case, they’ll return in the future. So,

why shouldn’t we stand as witness through artwork about such violence?

“In Milan Kundera’s words: ‘The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.’ We must remember because the regime and its fascist movements will try to shut out the past, but it’s dangerous for the future. So, I hope that my work encourages the Indonesian public to open up and discuss their future as a nation.” He brings up the International People’s Tribunal on 1965 Crimes Against Humanity in Indonesia (held in the Hague in 2015), which declared that Indonesia committed crimes against humanity during the 1965–66 mass killings, and that the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia were complicit in these crimes.





“The government reacted by holding a 1965 Symposium in Jakarta, but nothing happened after that. I mean, what is the next step? There are human rights groups in Indonesia who are still asking the government to come up with a solution and make it clear what happened during the killings. If the nation is always stuck when it comes to thinking about what happened, it’s a nation that is not free. It’s different in Germany: they’re open about the Holocaust and they’ve apologised for it. After the Rwandan genocide, the Hutu and Tutsi communities reached out towards a reconciliation. But in Indonesia, nothing’s happened and that’s not good for our future.”

Despite the fact that Christanto moved to Australia in the 1990s, where he now lives contentedly

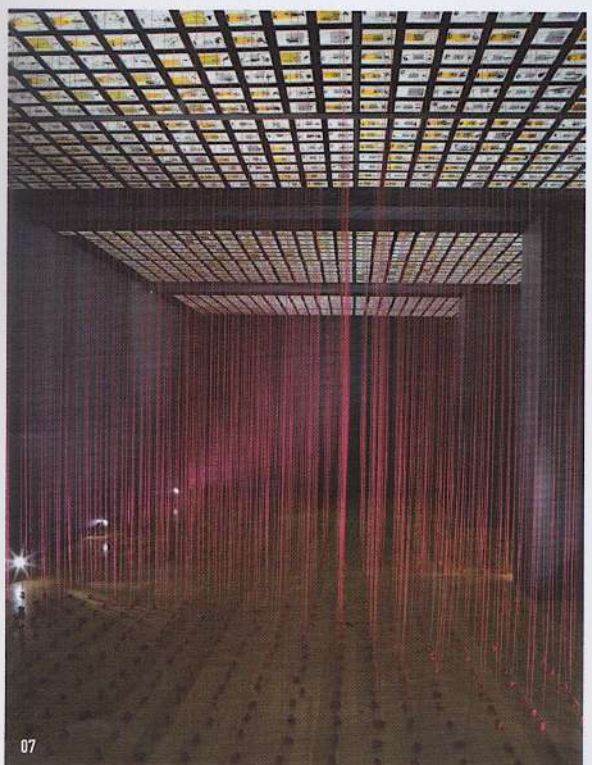


**“THE STRUGGLE OF MAN AGAINST POWER IS THE STRUGGLE OF MEMORY AGAINST FORGETTING.”**

in Brisbane (though he makes it a point to travel to Indonesia at least two or three times each year, where his sister runs a shop), has he ever worried about facing retribution for steadfastly producing his art? “Before this, during Suharto’s regime and the military order, there was always censorship. At that time, my artwork was quite metaphorical,” he laughs wryly. “Now, things are slowly opening up and my new works are fairly direct.

“But I am lucky. I have been lucky because I can say what I’m thinking, people know about me and my artwork, and I have a medium to communicate with an audience and with people. I can express myself and inspire them to think about Indonesia’s past.”

*Dadang Christanto’s Missing is on show at Wei-Ling Contemporary, 6th Floor, The Gardens Mall, until 4 November. Details: +603 2282 8323*



06 Dadang Christanto, *Slaughter Tunnel*, 2015, QUT Art Museum, Brisbane

07 Dadang Christanto, *Red Rain (Hujan Merah)*, 2003, QUT Art Museum, Brisbane

