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## A Hidden History of Injustice

Mia Maria discovers a haunting past through FX Harsono's art

By Mia Maria on 7:51 pm July 22, 2013.

Category Arts, Features

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A regular morning in June with my usual hazelnut latte at a coffee shop suddenly became special as artist FX Harsono began to show me pages and pages of his research on history of massacres of Chinese Indonesians between 1947 and 1949.

Now that doesn't happen every day.

Our encounter happened as Harsono was preparing his solo exhibition at the Yogyakarta (Jogja) National Museum, which ends today.

Over the past 50 years, Harsono's works have been a response to, a record of, and a struggle with the political and social dynamics in Indonesia.

My soul trembled as I flicked through his work and came across a long series of huge massacres in the region where my own family was rooted, East Java.

My entire family could have been swept dead then and there, my siblings, cousins and I could have never existed at all.

I brought the findings to my mother, who grew up in East Java during that period, expecting a soul-shaking story from her. A tragedy, maybe? A legend of how the family survived the massacre? Only to find that she knows nothing, never even heard about it.



FX Harsono's solo exhibition in Yogyakarta unravels the hidden past of Chinese Indonesians through thought-provoking poetry, Peranakan traditions and installation art. (JG Photo/Mia Maria)

How was that even possible? In this context, like the tendency of many Chinese Indonesians, my family is expert at hiding fear, swallowing awkwardness from subtle discrimination and giving history and identity the silent treatment.

Harsono's research on this topic has been reflected in his works since the May 1998 tragedy, all rooted in his findings of an album in his family house, where he stumbled upon a collection of photographs taken by his own father: Images of skulls and dug out mass graveyards taken in 1951, when Harsono's father was ordered by an organization called Chung Hua Tsung Hui to document the process of tracing the identities of the Chinese buried in the mass graves.



FX Harsono's solo exhibition in Yogyakarta unravels the hidden past of Chinese Indonesians through thought-provoking poetry, Peranakan traditions and installation art. (JG Photo/Mia Maria)



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Harsono then began his own extensive research and found a mass graveyard in Bong Belung (Graveyard of Bones), Blitar, East Java. He also was able to meet no less than 10 eyewitnesses of the massacre.

In his work in 2009, "Rewriting the Erased," Harsono sat in a darkened room, repetitively and dramatically writing his Chinese name. It is the only thing he can write in Chinese characters — for 33 years of Suharto's regime the use of Chinese names or the Chinese language by Indonesian citizens was forbidden.

His latest exhibition at Jogja National Museum was titled poetically by curator Hendro Wiyanto, "The Beauty in Truth/Truth in Beauty," twisting words from Friedrich Schiller:

"What we have here perceived as truth/we shall some day encounter as beauty."

With seven large installations, this exhibition reflects a continuation of Harsono's research. Along the years, he has found five more mass graves.

He visited one after another, a pilgrimage trip, as he called it. Harsono traced the names on the tombs to a white cloth using red pastels and presented these in his installation "Rewriting the Tomb."

A total of 1,401 names spread in mass graveyards across six cities in East Java, with the highest number in Nganjuk, where there were 784 victims.

Harsono also did a series of interview videos with eyewitnesses, among them Tio Teng Liep, also known as Mbah Slamet, a 92-year-old man who helped to bury the bodies in the grave.

He also presented a very moving and heart-gripping work that was previously showcased in his exhibition in New York, called "Writing in the Rain."

In his artist's statement, Harsono touched on the topic of authority defining history, that history depends on who has the authority and power to write it.



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Harsono mentioned his finding on a historical map of seating at the conference of 1945's Committee to Investigate Preparations for Independence (BPUPKI).

There you can find four Chinese names on the seat map, but the involvement of the Chinese Indonesians in preparing Indonesian independence has never been mentioned in (Indonesian) history.

Harsono stated that any facts about Chinese Indonesians, be it positive political moves or the tragedies of discriminations, tended to be kept hidden.

His work, "Journey to the Past," a boat with 26,000 terracotta letters, reminded me of the importance of written history. Most of the time, we get to encounter the past only through written history.

In "The Raining Bed," Harsono arranged one of his poems using ceramic letter in a traditional Chinese Peranakan bed, the poem reads:

" Dalam tidur kuurai masa lalu, di ujung pena sejarah direka, di ujung senapan sejarah ditipu, di ujung pancuran sejarah tersapu ."

"In my sleep I entangled the past, at the tip of the pen history is predicted, at the tip of the gun history is deceived, at the end of the fountain history washed away."

Rain pours on the bed in the installation, leaving those standing in the same room with the feeling of choking humidity and a cold breeze.

In his installation "The Inner Side of Life," Harsono collected stories and testimonies from a few people that he interviewed regarding their perspective as Chinese descendants.

Their stories are rewritten inside a number of typical Peranakan clothes. Clothing, as a symbol of our

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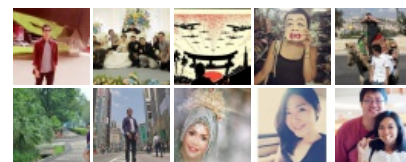
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identity, sometimes make us fail to recognize what is behind the cloth, the comfortable or uncomfortable side that touches our skin and the inside traits that build the true identity.

As I walked along the quiet rooms of the Jogja Museum and talked for a long time with the artist, I began to tie another new thread to my roots, an attempt to bridge a huge gap between self and cultural being, self and history, self and security.

To find hidden facts, realizing the tendencies to be silenced and preference to keep silent.

Nevertheless history formed identity. Harsono's work is not about self-defense, nor it is about cries.

Also unlike his previous works, this time they are no longer about fighting authorities, nor about emotional struggle.

They are about presenting another fact, a history that meant to be buried, identity that was once forced to be erased.

Here, keeping quiet is made different from being kept silent, as the brutal truth is presented in such a beautiful manner.



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***Mia Maria is an art curator based in Jakarta.***

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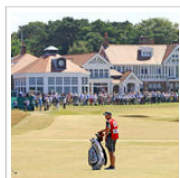
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