



Indonesian veteran artist FX Harsono's *Memorandum Of Inhumane Act No 3*, which is on show at A+ Works of Art gallery in KL. — Photos: A+ Works of Art

# Talking through art

An Indonesian and Malaysian double bill in KL revisits rarely-talked about periods of each nation's past.

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ART as a conversation piece need not be limited. It's really a matter of how far an artist wants to take a particular subject matter, especially something challenging like part of a nation's troubled past, and whether the viewer is willing to engage with such issues.

In the second edition of KL-based gallery A+ Works of Art's *Kadang Kadang Dekat Dekat Akan Datang* series, Malaysian artist Chong Kim Chiew and Indonesian veteran FX Harsono are using their works to create a dialogue about their respective nation's histories.

*Kadang Kadang Dekat Dekat Akan Datang No. 2* takes a critical look at tragedies that affected the Chinese communities in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Chong's *Isolation House* installation touches on the resettlement of some 530,000 local Chinese to New Villages during the Malayan Emergency. This is the first time Chong's installation has been set up outside a New Village.

The first two iterations were done in Air Panas, Setapak, KL in 2005 and Serdang, Selangor in 2008.

Initially, for the *Isolation House* work, there were eight cages filled with symbolic items taking from Chinese myths. However, in this latest version at A+ Works of Art gallery, Chong chooses to ditch the extra symbolism and to only display two empty cages.

"It was previously shown in a more Chinese area, so I felt they would be easily understood. Now the work is in a different space. I feel it would be better without symbols," says Chong, 42, adding that an exhibit has to reflect the space it was in, even considering the potential viewers.

"For me, I feel very sensitive about the space. Every time I'm invited to exhibit in a space, I feel it out first," he shares during a recent interview at the gallery.

Chong, a graduate from the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in China, says the unique

layout of the gallery – having a front and back entry way – offers a new way to present the work.

"The space has multiple entrances, the same way there are multiple view of history. One does not just go back into the past and see one thing, our understanding of a story will also change as time goes forward," he says.

He partitioned the gallery with tall walls of wood and chain-link, with 44 signboards representing the 44 New Villages scattered around the Klang Valley on one side, and stark white gallery walls on the other.

Which side represents the inside of a New Village? Chong answers that it is not about who was inside or outside the village, as much as the isolation one feels separated from others by a wall.

FX Harsono's *Memorandum Of Inhumane Act No 3* is shaped by his time spent abroad. While researching into the massacre of Indonesians of Chinese descent in Java between 1947 and 1949, he found a record of the victims, in a tome in the Leiden University Library in the Netherlands.

In reprinting the book's 33 pages, he made charcoal drawings on the pages – depicting excavators holding uncovered human skulls – referencing a photo taken by his late father, who was a photographer of an excavation team that investigated the slaughter of Chinese citizens in their hometown of Blitar, East Java.

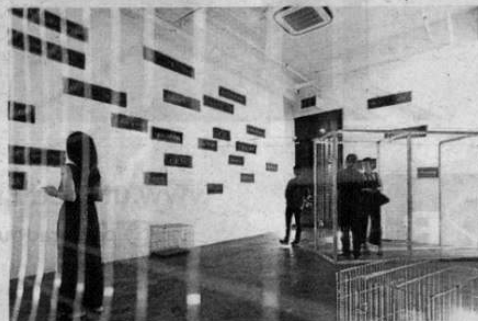
Though born directly after the tragedy, the 68-year-old FX Harsono has extensively explored the violence committed against ethnic Chinese in Indonesia in one over-arching project, including *Rewriting On The Tomb* (2013), a series of digital prints depicting inscriptions from the mass gravesite markers of the 1948 killings, and the *The Light Of Spirits* (2016) installation, which uses plastic electric candles, LED bulbs, sand, cement and wood to replicate a single mass gravesite marker.

"I consider this important because the mass killing of the Chinese Indonesians in 1948 has never been told in history. The

project that I have done since 2009 with research literature and field research provides many ideas for making the art work that can eventually provide information to the public about the truth of history," he says, in an email interview.

He is currently also working on an independently funded documentary about the tragedy, titled *The Last Survivor*, which is due in 2018.

Though the two artists in the *Kadang Kadang Dekat Dekat Akan Datang No. 2* exhibition did not work together when putting up their respective works, Chong calls it an honour to be displayed alongside the Indonesian legend.



Chong Kim Chiew's *Isolation House* installation addresses the British authorities' decision to resettle 530,000 local Chinese to New Villages during the Malayan Emergency.

"I feel the pieces are very matched, both talking about the history affecting the Chinese population and the nature of memory," says Chong.

"Art isn't just documentation – it's about using the material to talk about an issue. When people come to a gallery, they don't only talk about the art work, it should make them discuss the topic of the work, too," he sums up.

*Kadang Kadang Dekat Dekat Akan Datang No.2* is on at A+ Works of Art (D6-G8, D6 Trade Centre, 801 Jalan Sentul) in Kuala Lumpur till Oct 7. Open noon to 7pm, Tuesday to Saturday. Closed on public holidays. Contact 019-915 3399 for more information. Singaporean researcher Dr Tan Teng Phee will hold a talk (Behind Barbed Wire: A Social History Of Chinese New Village In Malaya) at the gallery (3pm) on Sept 30. FB: A+ Works of Art.

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