

# Indonesian artist Jumaadi paints in an ancient language

## Primordial Party

By Elizabeth Pandolfi

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Looking at the Indonesian artist Jumaadi's works, one is reminded of art from long, long ago: ancient Greece, perhaps, or the cave paintings of Lascaux.

It's not because of any similarities in style. Jumaadi's work, which will be on display at the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art through Dec. 6, is rougher, without the formal constraints of the Greeks or the fluidity of Lascaux. Rather, it's because Jumaadi's visual language, like those bygone artists, is one of archetype. Rain, trees, wild beasts, and stark, disembodied human faces haunt his paintings and drawings, creating a world of primordial and universal symbols that one could devote much time, and anthropological study, to reading.

Given this fact, it's not too surprising that anthropology is one of Jumaadi's many passions. And not just in a hands-off, academic sort of way — he doesn't confine his study to the classroom. While going through some of his smaller drawings in the downtown Charleston garage that's currently serving as his studio, he started talking about walking along the Battery and hearing a couple playing loud music in their car. "It reminded me of an African ceremony or New Guinean ceremony. With the drumming really loud,"

he says, puffing up his chest and holding his arms out with fists clenched in that universal warrior pose. "We all try to get closer to our previous time, just with different technology."

But Jumaadi, who is currently based in Indonesia, has also conducted some more formal anthropological work. He spent time living in a painters' village in Bali, studying their traditional art-making — painting and shadow puppetry — as well as storytelling. The experience has influenced his own art, he says, making him aware of what it takes to connect with a community on a deep level. "You can only get to an audience through psychology. If you don't have this connection, it's very difficult to maintain the intricacy of a conversation between the audience, the work, and yourself," Jumaadi says.

Jumaadi's work is nothing if not metaphorical. One of his drawings is of a face that seems to be either coming out of or going into a hole. It's up to the viewer to decide what's going on, he says. Then there are images of people bent under the weight of carrying huge burdens, like bulbous sacks or crudely drawn houses. He's also returned several times to images of people connected to each other, whether tied together with string at the arms or linked by their own hair.

Yet Jumaadi is also concerned with narrative structure, however loose or changeable it might be. Often, the artist says, it's not even clear to him what the narrative is. His larger paintings, he adds, are more like prose, with sentences and paragraphs that settle into a fixed story; his drawings, however, are different. "I don't think of grand stories," he says. "When they're individual [drawings], I like the symbols, the poetics ... I try to find ways to get them to engage one to the next, to construct their own story." This necessarily involves lots of moving the drawings around, physically lining them up on a floor or a wall and trying to read whatever story it is they're trying to tell him. It's one of the last steps of his artistic process.

So while each drawing is a stand-alone work, the whole collection is greater than the sum of its parts. What's more, throughout Jumaadi's process, that whole can shape-shift multiple times, giving him new understandings of his creations — and of himself. "This was all inside me before," he says, gesturing to the drawings of faces, headless bodies, and pointy-haired monsters that litter the floor. "Sometimes I recognize things that were inside me. Which is strange. It's something that's probably not obvious, maybe just a little mark. When you start to recognize it, it's like, 'Wow,'" he says.

Jumaadi creates shadow puppets too — in fact, it was his puppetry that first stood out to Halsey Director Mark Sloan, who learned about the artist from local shadow puppeteer Geoffrey Cormier. Sloan was struck by the poetry of his work. "Jumaadi manages to create a self-contained universe of poetic imagery," Sloan says. "There is something wonderfully evocative, yet imprecise about his drawings. They reveal an imagination richly layered with poetic possibilities."

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Even though Jumaadi's become known for his puppetry, he is hesitant to claim any authority as a practitioner of this traditional Indonesian art form. "If you don't train very well in jazz, for example, and you try to make jazz, it will sound a bit silly. It might sound like it, but the people who know jazz very well might think that you are naive," Jumaadi explains. "I'm interested in something that's innocent, more than naive. You forgive people for being innocent."

Sloan heard about Jumaadi from Cormier about two-and-a-half years ago and began talking with the artist via Skype. Cormier eventually went on a Halsey-sponsored trip to Indonesia to meet with the artist, and last year Jumaadi traveled to North Carolina for an artist residency in Wilmington.

Once that residency was complete, he spent two weeks in Charleston, during which time the puppeteer and Sloan finalized not only the Halsey exhibition, but also an artist residency that Jumaadi and Cormier will do together this month at Academic Magnet High School. The idea is to interpret, through shadow puppets, poetry that teacher Junius Wright's students have written. "I think it's quite a beautiful study," Jumaadi says.

Jumaadi's Halsey show, called *forgive me not to miss you not*, is his first American exhibition. After Charleston, he'll travel to Wilmington, N.C. and Brooklyn, N.Y. for two commercial gallery shows.

But for now, he's holed up in his temporary studio, putting the finishing touches on his new pieces. "It's a constant struggle, but it's also pleasure at the same time," he says. "It's better than just sitting on a chair on your own and thinking of the darkness."

**Tags:** Jumaadi, Halsey Institute, Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art

## Location

**Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art**

161 Calhoun St.

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