

Jumaadi: An arm and a leg

2018 EXHIBITION ESSAY

King Street Gallery on William, Sydney

In most parts of the developed world the human condition is a state of permanent distraction. In Sidoarjo in East Java, where Jumaadi was born, there was a different pace of life and a very different relationship with nature. Free from the pervasive white noise that surrounds us, people told stories. Some tales, such as those from the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, had been around for centuries, seeping into the folk culture of villages across the Indonesian archipelago, including the shadow puppet performances that form one aspect of Jumaadi's artistic repertoire.

That story-telling tradition is part of Jumaadi's personal history and his psyche. Living in Australia he still dwells in that world of demons and spirits, fanciful creatures and struggling humanity that he knew in his childhood. If his work has the sense of abundant fantasy one finds in a children's storybook it is because when he sits down to paint or draw he is transported back the realm of childhood.

The world of Jumaadi's art is not a lost paradise, it's a comedy-drama in which there are no hard-and-fast distinctions between the categories of animal, mineral and vegetable. In *Delicate*, a grey buffalo has grown a row of small trees on its back, rhyming neatly with a row of teats dangling from its block-like torso. It's an image of nurturing – the mother buffalo provides for her calf, the land provides for the animals. The trees are rooted in the very spine of the buffalo, which resembles a mountain.

In *Tree of life, white wedding dress*, a woman's garment is inhabited by the trunk and branches of a tree, as if the bride has been transformed like Daphne in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Yet the tree is also a road, with tiny cars crawling along the branches that serve as the bride's arms. The infill at the bottom of the work is a mass of small, identical houses. A snake resides in the upper branches, perhaps a cousin of the serpent that offered the apple to Eve in the Garden of Eden.

This complex image, painted on buffalo skin, is full of cross-cultural references, mixed promiscuously by an artist who now inhabits two worlds, straddling the divide between east and west. We might even see Jumaadi's bride as folk culture's answer to the machine aesthetic of Duchamp's *Bride Stripped Bare*'.

Jumaadi's work conjures up thoughts of those famous trackers of myths and legends, from J.G.Fraser's

Golden Bough (1890), to the books of Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell. Fraser believed that human civilisation began with magic, progressed to forms of organised religion, and eventually adopted a more scientific and rational outlook.

In retrospect this seems like a textbook case of late Victorian optimism. The further we move into the 21st century, the more irrational the world becomes, as millions embrace fundamentalist cults and wild conspiracy theories. With the Trump ascendancy even truth has lost its value, with "alternative facts" being promulgated by the leader of the free world on a daily basis. Things that were unspeakable, if not unthinkable, only a few years ago are now barely newsworthy.

Rationality has let us down badly, the demons and spirits are running amok, even in the White House. At the same time the planet is getting hotter, with a growing procession of extreme weather events and natural disasters. Science tells us it's time to act but the skeptics put ideology before evidence. It's a march of folly on a scale that puts the dark ages to shame. In an age of religion people could blame their troubles on an angry God, today we simply deny there is a problem - or look for scapegoats.

No wonder we embrace Jumaadi's magical imagery that celebrates mutually sustaining connections between different orders of being. His motifs – an arm and a leg – are reminiscent of the *ex votos* one finds in places of Catholic pilgrimage. The emblem of an arm or a leg begs reliefs for a physical ailment, or offers thanks for a cure. For Jumaadi, however, it's not so simple to enjoy a one-on-one relationship with an all-powerful deity.

In his works all human activities, all cultural signs, are bound up with the natural world. A tree wraps itself around a house, a man carries a blue dog on his head. A buffalo walks a tightrope in the presence of a monumental human foot - severed at the ankle it looks like the last fragment of a heroic statue. These vignettes suggest that Nature will get us in the end if we don't relinquish our arrogant conviction that among all the entities on this planet, humans are in some way special.

John McDonald, August, 2018