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Jumaadi, *Tirai hujan [The curtain of rain]*, 2019, Acrylic on buffalo hide, 77 x 96 cm. Photograph by Tim Connolly.

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JANE O'SULLIVAN

## Jumaadi on doing the work to translate poetry and displacement into art

ARCHIVE INTERVIEW 3 December 2019

Jumaadi's exhibition *My love is an Island Far Away* at Mosman Art Gallery has been years in the making. It includes a major installation in the form of a timber shelter, an immense series of new paintings, and seven intricately carved buffalo hides. Many of the works are also reflections on

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**Jane O'Sullivan:** One of the starting points for the exhibition is the story of hundreds of Javanese and Sumatran political prisoners who, at the request of the Dutch, were moved from West Papua to a camp in Cowra, NSW, in 1943. Their story is now in the Jan Lingard book *Refugees and Rebels*, but how did you first find out about it?

**Jumaadi:** I went to Sydney in 1996. I came across six poems written by detainees, which were published in an Indonesian community newspaper. Even Indonesian magazines were very difficult to get in Australia, there was no online thing, so any reading material reminded you of home.

So I discovered the story in 1997, and then I went to art school. In 2004, I took a residency – that was my first residency ever – in Cowra to see the space, the area and landscape. I had travelled across Australia in 1999, and seen all the astonishing landscapes, different to what we have in Indonesia. But to read those six poems by the detainees again, it gave me another hit and another perspective on how I could approach the landscape.

The poems were mostly their perspectives on the landscape. I just found the language and the words that they used resonated with me, more than reading Banjo Patterson or Henry Lawson.

**JOS:** So this is a story you've been thinking about for a long time then, first in terms of landscape and now through a different lens?

**J:** For a while I was interested in the Australian landscape and also landscapes in general. I studied with Euan Macleod, and at the beginning of art school I was looking into Fred Williams, Colin McCahon and various landscape painters.

But then I felt I should bring a cultural or historical perspective into this. The poems gave me a bit more of a clue about the things I could potentially produce or articulate. And now, working with Mosman has been a two or three-year conversation. It's becoming quite a large body of work.



Jumaadi, *Siapa yang menjelma sunqai & siapakah perampoknya [And who is the river and who are the thieves]*, 2019, Acrylic on cotton cloth print

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The paintings take a lot of time. Each has individual imagery – of what might happen, or Dutch portraiture, or still life of tropical fruits. I was trying to accumulate it, to approach it with various different painting styles. I'm not working often in illustrative ways. I just let things develop intuitively and then edit it.

For this one, it's 120 paintings. You just keep working on it over a period of time. You maybe make 200. It's like shooting films. But you have a plan in your mind, and the research also grows and develops, and then you have doubt, but your articulation and vision is getting sharper.

**JOS:** The title for the exhibition, *My love is an Island Far Away*, is taken from a poem.

**J:** The poet, Chairil Anwar, was the most important poet of the 20th century in Indonesia. The poem is celebrating the independence from the Dutch in 1945. It was written about 1946, and then he died a year later, around 27-years old. It captured the restlessness of the time, but in the manner of romantic poetry. I guess that's how I approach my work, with a grand narrative but very personalised. It's about love and birth and a way of connecting people.

**JOS:** You work across so many different mediums. How do you decide how you'll explore different ideas? Can you talk me through your process?

**J:** My answer to that question is actually, I'm not a conceptual artist. Just to finish the work, it takes time. I don't have time to think too much like that.

Mike Parr was inspirational at the beginning when I was at art school because he'd get up at four o'clock in the morning and finish at 11pm or something. It was very conceptual art, but also, you know, you just have to finish the work. There's no other way around it.

Sometimes I get stuck, just overwhelmed by the amount of work. Like for this exhibition, six works, and each work is sometimes hundreds of images. It's a very, very good moment when I get confused and angry. We all have problems. But when you have an artistic problem, there is an artistic problem for you to resolve. I just have to control myself within that work situation.

**It's just like a farmer or a builder. All of a sudden you get overworked, then you come back to the**

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**JOS:** This is not the first time you've worked with historical events that are incredibly brutal or sad, or that deal with displacement and trauma. How do you manage the emotional toll of working with that kind of material?

**J:** I guess I can see the resonance for myself. I can see myself there, otherwise I don't choose it. I think I'm familiarised with those situations – of the sadness and loneliness and isolation and love, to the extreme.

I left home when I was 19. I lived on the streets for a while. Now, I live in Australia and I have family here, but a lot of the time I'm in Indonesia. I'm not saying I'm not privileged, but you reflect on all of this. Usually I identify with good songs or good poems, and seeing what people make out of this situation – with great respect to whoever was involved– and this condition.

I'm not making illustrations of these conditions, and I'm not preaching to people to be supportive or take action. I'm working with archetypal emotions or situations or conditions, using an artistic approach.

**My love is an Island Far Away**

Jumaadi

**Mosman Art Gallery**

4 December – 9 February 2020

Jumaadi is also exhibiting at Artisan Gallery in Queensland with House of Shadow running from 16 November – February 2020.

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