

CULTURE ART & DESIGN SYDNEY FESTIVAL

Intricate tales emerge from the shadows

By Jacqui Taffel

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Growing up in East Java, Jumaadi was taught by his father to weave grass puppets. He was a village farmer but also had a strong creative side and had lived through the mass killings in the 1960s of workers with communist links by the Indonesian government and military.

"Most young artists like him were killed because of their association with the communist party," says Jumaadi, who became an artist himself after moving to Sydney in 1997 and studying at Darlinghurst's National Art School.



Artist Jumaadi with his work at Mosman Art Gallery. JANIE BARRETT

Since graduating, his art has travelled the world with exhibitions, residencies and projects including the Moscow and Jakarta Biennales and the Istanbul Triennale.

Jumaadi's Sydney base now is the Mosman home he shares with his wife and two small children, and his solo exhibition is showing nearby at the Mosman Art Gallery.

Over two years he has produced more than 350 new works for *My Love is in an Island Far Away*, working with distinctive materials including cotton canvas primed with rice paste and intricately chiselled works on buffalo hide. He has also created a special live performance as part of this month's Sydney Festival. *Island of Shadow* is a contemporary form of *wayang kulit*, the traditional shadow puppet plays that emerged from Java and Bali.

Jumaadi first began studying shadow puppetry as a way to connect back with the local people in Imogiri, a village "far from tourists" outside Yogyakarta where he has a studio and creates much of his work, shuttling between Australia and Indonesia.

He began talking to puppet masters, singers and gamelan musicians, listening to their poetic, complex stories and learning how to make the puppets, each with their own character. These ancient stories reminded him of traditional Australian Indigenous stories, he says.

After working for five or six years to master the art form, he began thinking about developing new forms for audiences who didn't have the cultural knowledge to interpret the stories. Working with musicians on original music, he made up his

own stories and characters. "Now I can make new puppets with my eyes closed, I don't have obligations to that culture," he says. "I want to be independent."

Island of Shadow is based on the surreal but true story of two islands being bartered by colonial powers in 1667. The English gave Banda Run in the remote Maluku Islands, known as the Spice Islands for their treasured nutmeg harvest, to the Dutch in exchange for New Amsterdam, now better known as the island of Manhattan, New York.

Jumaadi's puppets, made from buffalo hide, cardboard and paper, are instantly recognisable from many recurring figures in his paintings, bringing them to life using light, sound and the music of Gamelan composer Suwandi Widiyanto to tell the story of Banda Run's original inhabitants devastated by this callous political swap. The British burnt the island's precious nutmeg trees to the ground before they left; the parallels to Australia's colonial history are unmistakable.

The exhibition at Mosman Art Gallery draws more connections between Australia and Indonesia. It is inspired partly by the story of about 1200 Indonesian political prisoners banished to a remote camp in West Papua by the Dutch in the 1920s before being transferred to Cowra during World War II in a deal with the Australian government.

Though themes of loss, displacement and struggle underpin Jumaadi's art, it is infused with beauty, humour, breathtakingly crafted detail and the power of bringing these stories into the light for people to share.

"It's not screaming gravity," he says of his work. "It's more about subtlety, symbolism and personal stories."

Island of Shadow, January 22-24; My Love is in an Island Far Away, until February 9, Mosman Art Gallery, 1 Art Gallery Way, Mosman,
mosmanartgallery.org.au
