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Jumaadi

Art as a Vehicle to Connect

Tiffany Tsao



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Jumaadi's art spans worlds. Born and raised in Sidoarjo, East Java, and trained at the National Art School in Australia, he is based in Sydney, but he returns frequently to Indonesia. He uses a range of techniques and materials: works to date include paintings in gouache and acrylic, drawings in chinagraph on old maps, sculptures of aluminium and bronze, cutouts of paper, and puppets of translucent buffalo hide. He also stages shadow-puppet plays, one of which he performed at the 2013 Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art. Hindu epics, Javanese folklore, poetry, and present-day goings-on all influence his creative process, as do interactions with painters, writers, composers, and dalang (traditional Javanese puppet masters).

Over the past few years, Jumaadi has come to view his art as 'a vehicle to connect' with other people. Indeed, the course of his career, when charted, takes the appearance of a spiral, as he moves in ever-widening circles to experiment with new art forms and exchange ideas with new people. Yet, seeking new ground never means abandoning older familial, social, and professional ties: 'You can't deny the community you have,' he observes.

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This accumulation of experience often generates difficulties and 'creates more doubt.' As such, Jumaadi's evolution as an artist is not unilinear. The line he quotes from Sitok Srengenge's poem 'Mata Danau' aptly describes the trajectory of his

practice: 'sampai tak sampai'—to 'arrive and not arrive.' One of his most recent works, *The Bridge to Alengka*, also provides a fitting metaphor for this artistic journey: not starting here and ending there, but circular, seemingly chaotic, and diverse in composition.

The following interview has been pieced together from exchanges that took place over the course of several weeks, through email, during visits to his studio, and on video chat. This was necessitated in part by his busy travel schedule; but the protracted and conversational nature of our interaction reflects the primacy of the social in his professional life. As he himself notes: 'Art isn't independent of personal connections.'

—Tiffany Tsao

You work across an astonishingly wide variety of media. You paint, draw, and sculpt; and you also stage shadow-puppet performances.

Yes, I started with painting. That's my training. I only started doing shadow-puppet performances after spending some time back in my home village. I'd just graduated from painting school and set up an art centre near my mother's place, and I was invited by the French Cultural Centre to do an exhibition. My family went to see it and thought my paintings were a little silly—things any child could do. But after spending time with shadow-puppeteers, I thought that it might be easier for my family to relate to my work through performance. So I began making shadow puppets. But it took me a decade to develop my own techniques.

You've said elsewhere that you feel uncomfortable thinking of yourself as an authority on the art of shadow puppetry. How does your work with shadow puppets diverge from *wayang kulit*, or shadow-puppet theatre, as it is traditionally practiced, and how do you see yourself as different from a *dalang*, or puppet master?

Traditionally, a *dalang* functions also as a sort of manager or a businessman. He is educated and wealthy, and owns a lot of music instruments and a set of puppets. Before he reaches that level, a *dalang* has to learn all aspects of the art form—sound, movement, light, how to charm people. As a *dalang*, you also have an obligation to take care of your community spiritually: you tell stories based on the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and communities hire you based on how well you narrate, how well you create plots, how well you compose and perform music. That's a *dalang*—as I understand it.

My performances come from a different place. I don't tell those stories. I make my own puppets from cardboard and paper, and I'm not trained as a musician. I have studied a little bit of classical music—European music, Spanish music, guitar. But I make my own sounds to accompany the visuals that I want to portray, which are inspired more by silent movies. Buster Keaton. Charlie Chaplin. A big band would make the sounds for what was going on in the film. That's the difference. And I don't really tell clear narratives.

Could you say a little more about the shadow-puppet performance you put on for the Moscow Biennale in 2013—*The Woman Who Married a Mountain*?

I wanted the play to deal with contemporary and classical social issues. The idea came about when I was making sculptures in Indonesia. In the afternoons, I would ride my bike in the mountainous areas of East and South Yogyakarta. The performance ended up being about the people living there—combined with what happened in a village in East Java near Gunung Kelud where a lot of women left to work in the Middle East and Malaysia, leaving only a few women behind—women who were married to the mountain, Gunung Kelud. A lot of social problems emerge when people are working overseas and sending money back home—husbands taking off somewhere else, using the money for gambling or prostitutes. Or the money is used to build mosques—for example, there's this flash mosque on the north coast of Java near Lamongan, but most of the villagers don't live there; they're working in the Middle East. At the time, I was also looking into traditional stories from Java in which people marry nature—like the tale of Lembu Suro, which also inspired the play.

I worked with a Russian singer for the performance—Lisokot, who sang beautifully. And Cameron [Ferguson], my good friend, worked the puppets and sang *Down There by the Train* by Tom Waits. I played percussion and did narration and some of the sound. We used twenty-five different instruments: bits and pieces to create the sound of birds and water; a singing bowl; a didgeridoo; a guitar. Each sound could only be played once or twice, not like music, not repeated over and over—like in poetry. You don't use words when they don't have weight. Every punch has to have weight. I wasn't dealing with melody; each sound had to be articulated in its own way.

If I'm not mistaken, you're staging a shadow-play performance in October called *Journal of Dusk*—about the construction of Australia's first gamelan.

Yes. The gamelan was constructed in a Dutch prison camp near the Digul river in New Guinea. Fifteen years ago, I read some poems written by Indonesian exiles about the Australian landscape, which led me to do more research about the Indonesian nationalists who were sent to Cowra by the Dutch during World War II, and about the gamelan they made and brought with them. You can read more in Jan Lingard's and Margaret Kartomi's books. I've been performing the play here and there on a small scale, but this will be a more intensive production.

It sounds as if the subject matter of this performance brings together both the Australian and Indonesian aspects of your personal and artistic identity. You were trained in Australia, but born in Sidoarjo. And you're based in Sydney, but you travel around Australia and stay in Indonesia for extended periods of time.

Well, being an artist is like being a serial killer: you don't want to be noticed, but you want to leave your mark. [*Laughter from both.*] It's about your self, but you make out like it's not you.

How do you see these different components coming together or creating tension in yourself as an artist?

You have social obligations. Your sponsors, your friends, your family—they pull you back. You can't deny the community you have. It's not just about you speaking for yourself; you're always part of a community. Sometimes these people feel like I'm ignoring their interests, but I never mean to hurt them. As individualistic, or even selfish, as you can be as an artist, you're actually always quite sensitive to what is going on with them.

But at the same time, you live in the immediate as well. I'm happy being here [in Jabiru] . And when I'm in Sydney, I walk around as if I'll never be anywhere else again. It's the same when I'm in Sidoarjo.

You say poetry inspired your upcoming performance; it plays an integral part in your painting as well. *Dusk*, for example, features poetry in Indonesian, composed by yourself. Another one of your works includes lines from T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. How do you think of poetry in relation to your art?

Poetry influences me a lot when I compose pictures. I spend a lot of time with poets in Indonesia. Poetry in my art functions how lighting or dance might in a theatrical performance. Painting is a space that can be expanded or reduced. Poetry has the ability to add to or reduce that space. It can further your reading into an artwork or cause you to stop.

Working with many different art forms seems to be one of the main differences between the way art is practiced in western countries versus Indonesia. In Indonesia, artists often don't do just one thing—an artist will do visual art, but also drama, or poetry as well.

I think it has to do with how the schools are set up and your social interactions during your early career as an artist. In Sydney, you have four major art schools, and one of them deals purely with visual art—the National Art School, where I went.

In Indonesia, you have the Institut Seni Indonesia in Yogyakarta and the Institut Kesenian Jakarta, where you have film, painting, dance, and theatre all together—and this carries over into your interactions with your peers and *patmates*. Also, in Indonesia, many people consider theatre the ultimate art because it contains all the other art forms. So often as a young

artist you hang out with theatre companies. Over there, you're part of a greater art system, part of the whole construction of art making.

In that same vein: you produce art on your own, but you engage in a lot of collaboration with other artists as well.

Yes, I'm close to many artists in Indonesia on a personal level. I call them often, and when I'm there I visit—poets, dancers, composers, traditional artists, *dalang*—just to be in touch with what's going on in different fields. Art isn't independent of personal connections. So it's not 'this is my art, and I'm behind it,' but 'this is my art, and I'm also with it.' It's also about the connections. With *dalang* especially, you have to spend a lot of time [with them] . . . over *gorengan* and coffee and tea . . .

So it's not just about the product. It's about the interaction, the communication that takes place in the process of making art and connecting between artists?

That's it. Art is a vehicle to connect with other like-minded people outside the academic sphere, outside of reports, even outside of 'official' artwork—in a way that uses metaphors, shapes, lyrics, notes. We end up talking about art and its language, and we all get excited deep down. Like when we talk about poetry and how it's composed, and I think, wow, I do the same thing with shapes. Or when another friend of mine (a Javanese composer who does beautiful work) says he's interested in social commentary, but that he also wants to *menyampaikan getaran*—convey vibrations—because that's what sounds and notes are, I think how very interesting it all is.

I do see the practice of art as a vehicle to connect. If it weren't, I might as well paint happily by myself in Sydney.

Do you feel the absence of working collaboratively when you are, say, painting instead of putting together a performance?

Painting is sometimes enough too. They're different. I like variation. Different things require different means of execution. Take a line from one of Sitok's poems, which talks about the water reaching the shore—'*sampai tak sampai*.' You can't achieve the exact same impression with a painting.

So working with different mediums and different artists—this is something you've had to reconnect with as an artist trained in Australia, but who works closely with artists trained in Indonesia?

Definitely. I'm a purist by all means because of my academic training. That's why I make a point of combining forms and working with different people—because doing this doesn't come naturally. It's been a struggle, but that's what makes it exciting.

Are there any motifs that remain constant throughout your artwork as a whole, despite the different mediums you work with?

Experimenting with and defying gravity is a big part of my work. Most objects and figures [in my work] are floating. Images from nature such as mountains, clouds, rain, water, light, mud, horizons, also appear a lot in my work.

I'm especially mindful of gravity and weight when it comes to painting. Painting is about pushing pigment with your brush, having it stay on the surface or seep in between the grain of the paper or woven cotton or linen—and some pigment slowly escapes from the rest of the pigment and evaporates.

Or sometimes you have to shift mountains: let's say you have a square painting and you've put the mountain in the left corner, but because the composition isn't working, you have to shift the mountain to the middle. You have to think like a builder: How do I maneuver this?

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The words 'story,' 'narrative,' and 'poetic' frequently occur in descriptions by others of your work. What do

these words mean to you and why are they so important in your art?

In my work I often try to create shapes. One shape is connected to the next shape with lines or with empty air. I think, 'Let's try to experiment with the following: if you put two or more shapes near each other, they will create some kind of narrative or suggest some kind of meaning.' Like a tree and a shoe, like a man and a snake, like a durian and an ant, like earth and sky and clouds. Though I should say, it is not important for me to *tell* a story. The feeling, the emotion of that story being left to the audience and my self—that is what I am after—the atmosphere helping the setting and creating the location and time.

You've said that your work is 'not about message.' Could you comment on the distinction between a 'message' and a 'story' for you, and how this distinction shapes your creative process?

A message is related to a statement. I don't know if I make any statements in my works. Even though I feel the strength of my works when they do possess an urgency or immediacy, I don't know if that urgency is a message. I don't feel comfortable taking on the role of a postman delivering a message, or a radio presenter who presents listeners with songs or with news. I think art has different function, if there is any functionality at all to it.

Before I form a connection with any particular work, I usually spend time cutting and drawing, drawing and cutting. Days. Months. Nothing happens. But after a while, things start to merge in a good way. As for the works that don't end up happening—when I look back later, it may turn out that they have something to them. I don't destroy them. Rather, I talk to them for a while. Those unresolved works may lead me somewhere, where I can find another way to give them a chance. Or they teach me different ways to give my *self* a chance—to forgive a technical or visual mistake and embrace it as part of history or memory.

Last but not least, could you say a bit more about your installation *Bridge to Alengka*, which is now on display at the Art Gallery of New South Wales?

The work is based on the part of the Ramayana where the monkey army builds a bridge to Alengka to help Rama rescue Sita. When the Ramayana is performed or depicted in artwork, the bridge doesn't usually receive that much attention, but it's always fascinated me—especially the underwater creature who keeps eating the pillars of the bridge, causing it to collapse. But I've never been interested in bridges as skinny or long. This work is oval, in the shape of a womb, which is a shape I often use in my construction of narratives. The work has taken me about a year to make.

This installation is composed of one hundred and twenty cutouts, and in the process, I made a total of two hundred cutouts or more. I treat this kind of work as a study—fuel for the next artwork because it's not sellable. It's just . . . *ideal*. Not many people are interested in buying something like this and it'll be ruined very quickly if you don't take care of it (and I won't). And it's on paper. Though once upon a time, paper had a magic to it—a lot of Chinese calligraphy is on paper—nowadays, if an installation is made of paper, people are a bit funny about it. But there's no guarantee that a work on the same scale made out of bronze and aluminium will have the same power.

How do you see your work evolving as you continue to practice your art?

It's become more difficult. You encounter different challenges and you question yourself. You visit a lot of galleries and it creates more doubt. When you work with other people you encounter different understandings of art.

Right now, I feel my role as an artist is to travel and connect and get inspired, and maybe inspire others. The process might not produce anything—or rather, it results in a different product. I've started connecting more with people. I'm no longer a studio-based painter. ♣

Read bio

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Jumaadi was born in Sidoarjo in East Java, Indonesia, in 1973. Recipient of the inaugural John Coburn Emerging Artist Award in 2007, he earned his MFA the following year from the National Art School in Sydney, Australia. His work spans a variety of mediums, including painting, drawing, sculpture, poetry, photography, and performance. He has held residencies and presented his work all over the world, including Malaysia, China, the US, the Netherlands, and

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different parts of Australia and Indonesia. In 2013, he was selected as one of five artists to represent Australia at the Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art. These days, Jumaadi largely divides his time between Australia and Indonesia.

Tiffany Tsao is *Asymptote's* Editor-at-Large for Indonesia. She grew up in Indonesia and Singapore, lived in the US and the UK, and now resides in Sydney, Australia. She received her PhD in English from the University of California, Berkeley, in 2009. Her written work, which includes fiction, poetry, and literary criticism, has appeared in *Transnational Literature*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *LONTAR*, *Comparative Literature*, and the anthology *Contemporary Asian Australian Poets* (Puncher & Wattman, 2013). She holds an honorary associateship in Indonesian Studies at the University of Sydney.

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