

## **Spirituality, Ritual and Materiality: Hendrawan Riyanto's Contemporary Ceramics Practice in Indonesia**

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### **Abstract**

The development of Contemporary Art in Indonesia since 1980 has been a reflection of the country's economy, social and political changes for over several decades. Set against this, as the background is the diversity in culture and religion, which have influenced and affected all the customs and traditions and have created complexities and layers of problems in the everyday life of Indonesian people. The development of Contemporary Ceramic Art in Indonesia is still very much connected to the wider Contemporary Art Practice. Hendrawan Riyanto is one of the artists who addresses the issues about cultural and religious diversity and also brought Ceramic Art to the domain of Contemporary Art practice. His works address the syncretic nature of Javanese culture. His ceramic works explore spirituality and the ritualistic aspect of Javanese folk religion and mysticism through Ceramic Art practice. The aims of this study are to put his practice as an important part of the ongoing study of Indonesian Contemporary Art and Contemporary Ceramic Art, and also to analyze the importance of his practice in two main points. The first is his view in using clay as a metaphor of the human body and spiritual transformation. The second is his method in using forms to convey religious symbolism, spirituality and cultural identity. Hendrawan Riyanto's practice addresses the notion of immateriality through materiality.

Indonesia is a home to cultural diversity in which religion has had a significant impact on the traditions, beliefs, values, and customs of the people, creating complexities and layers of problems in the everyday life of the people. Hendrawan Riyanto is one of Indonesian ceramic artists whose works address this issue and are considered influential for the development of Indonesian contemporary art and contemporary ceramic art. The aim of this presentation is to analyze the significance of his practice to the ongoing study of Indonesian Contemporary Art and Contemporary Ceramic Art.

Riyanto was born in Yogyakarta in January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1959. He earned his degree from The Ceramic Department, Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB) in 1986 and came to study ceramic art in Japan in 1992 at Kyoto Seika University. He was the head of the department at ITB until he passed away in 2004 not long after he finished his post-graduate study in 2002.

Bandung, the city where he had studied was among the first cities to be westernized during the Dutch colonial era. It is the first art university in Indonesia to ever established a ceramic art department in 1965. Since its inception there were two strains of influences that made ITB Bandung became the center for modernist art in Indonesia. The first was the influence of Cubism style in painting brought in by one Dutch painter who helped established ITB and the second was the influence of a formalistic art rooted in the Bauhaus style, brought in by one German sculptor who helped developed the curriculum.

Hendrawan Riyanto came to ITB in 1978 and received a great amount of influence from this modernist and formalistic style early in his career. In the beginning of 1990's he started to develop a style that would soon become the most recognizable visual characteristic of his works. A search for spiritual meaning and connection with his own cultural background lead him to expand his practice in two major points.

### **Clay as a metaphor of the human body and the process involved in ceramic making as a symbol of spiritual transformation and enlightenment**

For Hendrawan Riyanto, clay stands as a metaphor of the human body, a human life cycle, and the process in ceramic making, which involve transformation of the material, may symbolize the process of spiritual transformation or enlightenment. This view is addressed in his own artist statement, quoted from the catalog of *Modernities and Memories: Recent Works from the Islamic World* exhibition, Venice, 1997.

A piece of clay has a flexible capacity to be changed into a 'personalized' figure, since a piece of clay is also an example of a piece of life, with the same vitality imbued in all creatures. The clay is not only an object, it is a subject. Human beings should love this natural subject, since they all will become earth/clay themselves in the end. When I play with clay, it is as though I open the pages of a book of science: from the 'page of fire,' the 'page of air,' the 'page of water,' up to the 'page of earthen conclusions.' They are part of a process of temporary understanding, about pages being briefly read.

(Hendrawan Riyanto, 1997)

His word 'personalized' figure may be interpreted as the clay that is formidable and flexible enough to record the action that our bodies make towards the clay. The shape that comes out is the trace of the action that we make towards the material. The installation titled "Inner Mother" is a representation of personal narrative about a spiritual journey and the creation of life. The word 'inner' refers to the spirit, something unseen and hidden, something that doesn't belong to the material world, while the word 'mothers' refers to fertility and the creative power. In Javanese folk religion, Goddess Sri is regarded as the symbol of life, wealth and prosperity.<sup>1</sup>

The objects included in this configuration were meant to symbolically represent birth and death. Started from the two oval-shaped objects with images on each of them that appears to be like a human fetus or embryo. These two objects symbolized birth. In a circular movement, the two objects are followed by some other smaller objects made of the same materials accompany by some unhulled rice grain and ends up in an object which appears to be a simplified form of a boat. The boat refers to the story of the spirit boat present in several folk religions across Indonesian archipelago. It is said that the deceased soul will embark on a boat, a vehicle for horizontal movement that will carry the soul away off the land.

### **Forms that convey messages related to religious symbolism, spirituality and cultural identity**

Riyanto also developed ways toward incorporating symbolic forms that convey messages related to religious symbolism, spirituality and his own cultural identity as a Javanese Indonesian. There are two things that are significantly present in his work. First is that he seems to be fascinated with the 'crack' in the body of low-fired ceramics and the use of some transient materials. The second one is the

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen C. Headley, "Durga's Mosque: Cosmology, Conversion and Community in Central Javanese Islam", Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2004, pp.149

incorporation and appropriation of 'ritual' process that exist in some of Indonesia pre-modern societies.

### **1. Fascination with the 'crack' in the body of low-fired ceramics and the use of transient materials.**

A 'crack' is usually something that is considered as a flaw by many ceramic artists. However, in his works, Riyanto explored this type of surface feature up to a point of exploiting it until the later period of his works. The 'crack' is the imperfection in the process of making and firing. Yet, he used it to explore memories of his own cultural tradition. In some of the objects, the cracks seem to cause the body to fall apart, reminiscent of the decaying process of natural entities. And yet, these 'cracks,' where the bodies are breaking apart, also may refer to a condition where the spirit is transcending the confines of the material and the transient nature of our physical body. In other word he was trying to express also the notion of impermanence.

Hendrawan Riyanto's works also engaged with the notion of tradition or things of the past that belong to a pre-modern society and to borrow Mircea Elide's term, an archaic society. He did several works using this low-fired terracotta bricks which were shown in several different exhibitions and culminated in his last solo exhibition titled *Ning* in Jakarta in 2004.

In Indonesian language that word that is commonly used to describe this type of material is *gerabah*. The word *gerabah* simply means pottery or vessels, refers to this orange or red colored clay that is naturally present all over Indonesia. Its color may vary from light orange to red or red brown color. However, the problem that the word *gerabah* implies is not just a simple problem of material categories. In Indonesia, *gerabah* is very much associated with the handicraft or the cheaply manufactured roof tiles and bricks. For most people, even for artists who are not familiar with ceramic making, *gerabah* is considered different from *keramik* (ceramics). *Keramik* refers to the cleanly glazed and finished ceramic, usually made of high-fired porcelain or stoneware clay.

Riyanto was fascinated by the materials and firing technique associated with the tradition of *gerabah* mainly in Central Java. After finishing his study in Kyoto under the supervision of professor Kawasaki Chitaru, both of them came to Indonesia to help develop a group of indigenous potters in a pottery village called Bayat, 40 km from Riyanto's birthplace Yogyakarta in Central Java. The village is famously known

for their unique side-wheel throwing technique. Both of them had gained a significant amount of inspirations from this visit.

## 2. The incorporation and appropriation of 'ritual' process that exist in some of Indonesia pre-modern societies.

Hendrawan Riyanto had developed several works that show a really significant engagement with the tradition of gerabah. The best example is the work titled *Dine with Goddess Sri* which he completed in 2002. The work shows a life-size sculpture of a buffalo, an animal associated with traditional wet-rice plantation in Java. It was initially a collaborative effort with a local community in Merapi-Merbabu, Central Java, titled *Terracotta in Journey to Fertility Sign*, which involved a ritualistic happening act of constructing and firing the sculpture on site at the performance space.

His exploration in rituals and myths of pre-modern societies in Indonesian culminated in one of his major works, titled *Form Follows Myth*, which he completed in 2002 as a final project of his Post-graduate study at Faculty of Fine Art and Design ITB. His aim was to create a dialogue and revisit some aspects of Javanese folk religion and rituals called the *Kejawen*. *Kejawen* is a highly syncretic form of religion which is a mixture of animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.<sup>2</sup> His project was about reconnecting with his own distant past, with the way the pre-modern Indonesia society used to deal with various aspects in their life in a form of ritual practice. This paragraph quoted from his post-graduate thesis, explains his ideas behind the project:

The concepts are originated from the tracing of the way of thinking of the archaic Indonesian society assumed to be existing and developing in the present Indonesian culture. The traces can be observed from the fact that myths, shamans, and rites are still found in various aspects of life of the Indonesian people. To trace the way of thinking of the early Indonesian people, myths have been used as a means of uncovering the set of basic values forming the cultural mentality where the views are manifested. In addition, in uncovering the symbolic visual art, myths become the basic concept of the works of art.

(Hendrawan Riyanto, 2002, p. iii)

<sup>2</sup> Mark R. Woodward, "The Slametan: Textual Knowledge and Ritual Performance in Central Javanese Islam", The University of Chicago Press, History of Religions, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Aug., 1988), pp. 55, [http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062168?seq=2#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062168?seq=2#page_scan_tab_contents) (accessed: 08-01-2018)

Visually the work seems to resemble a structure of a house, a square shape with a circular rooftop and an opening on one side that function as an entrance. The wooden panels that covered four sides of the structure have paintings on both sides. There are several objects placed inside the structure, some are suspended from the roof and some are on the floor. He used this installation as some kind of a 'stage' set for his happening/performance that was staged mostly inside the installation.

The title of this project, *Form Follows Myth* seems to explain that the work was a form of critic towards the modernist principle "Form Follows Function" associated with modernist architecture and industrial design in the 20th century. The principle emphasizes on the idea that the shape of an object should be primarily based upon its intended function or purpose. Even though there were no ceramic objects included, this work represents the culmination of his thinking process and his spiritual and artistic exploration. There are so many elements involved in this work, from prints, painting, sculptural objects, installation and even music and performance, that have made it really difficult to reconstruct the installation today without the presence of the artist himself.

## Conclusion

Hendrawan Riyanto had consciously decided to use extensively, the low-fired earthenware as his main material, despite its association as a cheap material used in local handy-craft. Terracotta or earthenware has been used for centuries in Indonesia. It is a significant part of the daily life of Indonesian people. Riyanto's work is an example of how contemporary art practice can be used as a platform to explore subject related to the study of material culture in Indonesia and also South East Asia.

His creative explorations are not just important for the development of Indonesian Contemporary Ceramic Art but also for the study of Indonesian Contemporary Art since the 1980's. He addressed the issue of religion and spirituality through something that is very concrete, expressing ideas about impermanence through permanence. Although still critical, his position in addressing the issue of religion and tradition in Indonesia is never to oppose them, but instead to synthesize and to find balance between modernity and tradition, between what is considered rational and irrational and between materiality and immateriality. This was something that he was able to do through his ceramic art practice.

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## Internet Resources

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