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Semsar still stirs thought with his 'Liberation Art'

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The late Semsar Siahaan

For some Indonesians the three decades of development under New Order rule were the best of times, for others the worst. For Semsar Siahaan, the activist, those years, particularly the 1980s and 1990s, were frustrating times; a difficult, heartbreaking and dangerous period of struggle against authoritarianism, nepotism, cronyism, greed and corruption.

For Semsar Siahaan, the artist, they were an unending source of inspiration and motivation, and not infrequently of disdain directed at the aesthetic stances taken by the art establishment.

Semsar, who was born on June 11, 1952, in Medan, North Sumatra, and who studied art in the United States and the Bandung Institute of Technology in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was above all a compassionate thinker who simply could not accept the sociopolitical and freedom-of-expression boundaries he perceived as arbitrarily imposed by the powers in place in both society as a whole and art education institutions in particular.

"I come with all my imperfections and wounds. I am here to reveal the extent of the very real suffering out there beyond the walls of this beautiful garden," Semsar once wrote in defense of his own art that stood in stark contrast to the aesthetic tendencies of the time, which generally advocated the introspective exploration of the decorative, introspective, personal, mystical-spiritual, and lyrical in visual art.

"Thus, I come into the garden of my Indonesia's contemporary art. I come here to break the rules, to attack and to cry out against ... mediocrity. I emerge from the reality of the many people who have lost their human dignity and rights. You won't find the old tradition of formalized beauty in my mind," he taunted contemporary artists and the newly rich art collectors among the New Order elite of the Soeharto period (1966-1998) during his 1988 exhibition of what he called "Liberation Art", echoing the precepts of earlier revolutionary period painter Sudjojono.

"I am no longer able to compromise with your aesthetic values ... and this is the jumping off place for the creation of my own art," he wrote.

Semsar's display of 250 ink-on-paper works with a smattering of colorfully painted canvases focused on the brutality, greed, and injustice crippling Indonesian society. These works, as would the many others he would create in his lifetime, sharply highlighted his compassion for the vast majority of Indonesians suffering the revocation of their basic human rights, intimidation, manipulation and exploitation at the hands of Indonesia's powerful political and economic elite.

His artworks would consistently record his empathy -- also expressed in his work as an activist involved in the efforts of several human rights and environmental non-governmental organizations -- for the poverty-stricken, marginalized elements of Indonesian society, who could not speak freely for themselves.

From the time Semsar, who would reiterate his disgust of his artistic contemporaries -- whom he felt had sold out to commercial interests -- throughout the coming decades before his untimely death at 52 in Bali in 2005, submitted his own mud-caked body as the fulfillment of an assignment to create a life-sized human figure in the Sculpture Department of the School of Art of the Bandung Institute of Technology in 1977, it was clear

that his view of what art could be extended far beyond the boundaries of tradition, whether it be of the East or the West.

Over the years, besides holding solo exhibitions, Semsar would occasionally involve himself in joint art displays, including the final exhibition of the Indonesian New Art Movement in 1979, the "Souvenirs from the Village II" exhibition of "Happening Art" in Bandung in 1981, the "Jakarta Painters Exhibition" at the Taman Ismail Marzuki At Center in 1983, the "Jakarta IX Biennial" in 1994, and the "Glimpse into the Future" exhibition of contemporary Southeast Asian art in Japan in 1997.

Among his most notable solo exhibitions were "Liberation Art" at Taman Ismail Marzuki in 1988, "Black Orchid" in Victoria, Canada in 1999, and "The Shade of the Northern Lights", at the National Gallery in Jakarta in 2004.

Although Semsar, whose works are currently being presented in a commemorative showing in Central Jakarta, is perhaps best known for his black-and-white social realism protest works that featured figures he called *manublis* (*manusia-binatang-iblis* or human-animal-demon -- the epitome of authoritarianism and its excesses), perhaps the two best examples of Semsar's merging of political and aesthetic stances are *Olympia*, *Identity with Mother and Child* (1987) and *G-8 Pizza*, both of which utilize color.

Olympia, *Identity with Mother and Child* refers directly back to the painting titled *Olympia* by Edouard Manet (1832-1883), one of the pioneering French impressionists, and the artistic traditions that Semsar felt enslaved so many of his fellow artists, while also encompassing a vast array of contemporary sociopolitical and economic concerns in Indonesia.

One of the most powerful things about this particular piece is its ability to allow space enough for the viewer to imagine and speculate on the symbols Semsar set out on the canvas. He poses to the viewers of his art these questions: "Who is Olympia, who are these people fawning before her, and who are the dark shadowy figures lurking in the periphery?" and "What is their significance to us in the here and now?"

The very nature of the political commentary that Semsar presented in almost all of his works provided a singular challenge for this artist, who, although he decried overemphasis on the aesthetic, was always consciously careful to never let his message outweigh the aesthetic vehicle of that message, which was his painterly concern for balance, composition, line and color.

G-8 Pizza, created a little over a decade later, is at once a bit more straightforward with its message of the contemporary force of technology and the capitalist, imperialist tendencies of those who dominate it, without even coming close to compromising the power of the aesthetic vehicle he uses to voice his concerns.

In this work, Semsar revives his *manublis* in a more international context, without ever specifically citing who they are; that is a question he leaves his viewers to ponder. These bizarre creatures, with their human figures, pig-like faces and demon-like voraciousness, are depicted on a series of cardboard triangles in the shape of a huge pizza, busily running the world with their machines in some diabolical scenario of potentially destructive significance; a futuristic fantasy that somehow seems to be a current living reality.

Thus, Semsar, who left us so suddenly and unexpectedly in 2005, continues to provoke and question and to poke at our collective human consciousness and conscience in the ongoing commemorative show being presented by the Siahaan family.

"Mengenang Semsar"
 (Remembering Semsar)
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