LEGACIES: Real and Imagined

An exhibition by Adam de Boer & Jumaldi Alfi
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6 February - 9 March 2018
World Trade Centre 2 Building, WTC Complex
“Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity or genuineness, but in the style in which they are imagined” – Benedict Anderson

EXHIBITION NOTES

Driven by the words of Benedict Anderson, this exhibition presents the work of two artists: Adam de Boer and Jumaldi Alfi. Born a decade and ocean apart, at first glance these individuals may appear to have had reasonably different life experiences. For example, de Boer, was raised in Southern California and educated in Santa Barbara and London. While Alfi, of Minangkabau descent, has established roots and made a name for himself as an artist in Yogyakarta, one of Indonesia’s primary centers of fine art production. Further, whereas de Boer’s current work is rooted in an investigation of Indonesian aesthetic and craft traditions, Alfi has for a number of years demonstrated an obsession with the nature of the work of art and the legacies created by artists who for the most part are members of a Western canon.

This juxtaposition calls to mind a divide between traditions and histories of east and west, albeit in reverse. That is, de Boer—an American artist—takes up Indonesian craft practices that Alfi—an Indonesian artist—seems to reject in his intense study of the materiality of “Western” painting. What is already an essentializing categorization (i.e. east vs. west) is further complicated by de Boer and Alfi’s challenge to expected cultural categories by their production of multi-layered compositions. Through an examination of these layers, coupled with an inquiry into how artists are made part of contemporary art communities and historical art traditions, this exhibition presents an opportunity to engage in a close-reading of what it means in the era of “global art” to stake claim to identities and create legacies that are both real and imagined.

Constructions of Self: Mapping Identity

I open this essay with reference to the biographical origins of the artists presented as the details of each artist’s life act as key reference for this exhibition’s central queries. In order to track these details in greater depth, I begin from the end so to speak. Namely, the context that ties these artists together: Yogyakarta.
It is a well-known fact that Yogyakarta is one of Indonesia’s only centers of fine art production. Because of this, for decades it has attracted aspiring artists from across the nation’s vast archipelago who wish to assert themselves as part of the national art scene. As a result of the vibrant nature of this city’s art community, it has gained notoriety as a cosmopolitan center of contemporary art worthy of the attention of the global art world. While Alfi has lived in Yogyakarta for almost three decades, like de Boer, he too is a pendatang or migrant. As such, the relationship of each to this art center, which has a legacy of its own, is noteworthy.

Born in West Sumatra, Alfi spent much of his childhood in the rantau. That is, outside of the lands considered central to Minangkabau culture. He first came to Yogyakarta in 1989 in order to enroll at Yogyakarta’s Fine Arts High School (known as SMSR – Sekolah Menangah Seni Rupa), an opportunity that afforded him an early start on his path to national recognition. However, when Alfi began university at Yogyakarta’s Arts Institute, it was not with his compatriots from SMSR Yogyakarta, but rather other students from West Sumatra, that Alfi formed a close bond. This bond was solidified through the formation of two communities including the Jendela Art Group and the Sakato Art Community that have both played an important part in the development of his identity, not only as an Indonesian or international artist, but also, as Minangkabau.

The Jendela Art Group was founded in 1993 by six artists all hailing from West Sumatra. In the late-1990s, Jendela gained recognition for their production of what was perceived to be apolitical art interested in material and form rather than what at that time was the dominant production of explicitly political art leading up to and after the end of the New Order. Following Indonesia’s mid-2000 art boom, in which the members of the Jendela Group were especially successful, their position, and subsequently their legacy, was solidified in both Indonesia’s contemporary art history and the global art market. The second community, Sakato, was founded in 1995 by and for Minangkabau art students and artists living in Yogyakarta. Today, Sakato is recognized as the largest art community active in Indonesia. Because almost all of its members hail from West Sumatra, Sakato’s cultural roots cannot be ignored. As an active member of this community, Alfi acknowledges his “local” Minangkabau identity. While this identity is not immediately visible in Alfi’s visual language, it is significant for it is a differentiating factor that both sets Alfi apart from other artists in Yogyakarta and allows him to stake claim to what is a distinct aesthetic history associated with Minangkabau artists specifically, rather than Indonesian artists generally.

In contrast, de Boer’s first experience as part of Yogyakarta’s art scene was in 2014 through a residency at Cemeti Art Space. Founded in 1988, today, Cemeti is one of the most well-regarded galleries in the city. No stranger to the global art world, Cemeti regularly hosts international resident artists like de Boer. By beginning his involvement in Yogyakarta’s art scene at Cemeti, de Boer, perhaps unintentionally, aligned himself with a globally recognized institution that for some no longer represents the local interests of this city’s art world. While the effect of this could have meant the continued development of an art practice rooted in de Boer’s Western-based arts education, albeit in a “non-Western” context, unlike many of the resident artists who pass through Cemeti’s gallery spaces, de Boer’s interest in Yogyakarta was not the result of its international reputation. Rather, it was a byproduct of his first trip to Yogyakarta in 2011, en route to Purwokerto, the Central Javanese town where his father was born to Dutch-Indonesian parents shortly after Indonesia’s declared independence from the Netherlands. Because of this, the chance to become a member of Yogyakarta’s art world functioned as an opportunity to further his
understanding of artistic methods like batik that are part of his own cultural heritage as a Dutch-Indonesian-American artist. I draw attention to these details because, unlike other international artist visitors to Yogyakarta that are seen as easily mesmerized by the exotic nature of Indonesian craft traditions like wayang kulit or batik, de Boer’s appropriation of such techniques in his own hybrid art practice, exemplified by the works that are part of this exhibition, is complicated by his cultural roots and thus necessitates an alternate framework for analysis.

For example, whereas some might categorize de Boer’s appropriation as exoticization no different than that of other artists who seek inspiration in the “other,” both de Boer and Alfi, through their choice of materials and subject, urge viewers to consider more carefully such simplistic conclusions. I suggest that we might ask, is de Boer’s appropriation of batik any different than Alfi’s use of Western painting techniques in the production of an art that he positions as neither eastern or western, but global? A position that is validated by the recognition that he has received through his participation in international art events and the global art market? Not easily answered, this dilemma acts as a transition to the focus of this essay’s next section, looking at the role that materiality combined with subject matter play in the construction of identity that is key to an artist’s legacy both real and as imagined throughout the process of producing a work of art.

Material as Subject, Subject as Material
In order to narrow this examination, I focus my analysis of the works presented as part of this exhibition on two pieces by each artist including: Adam de Boer’s Jendela Pagi and Jendela Malam and Jumaldi Alfi’s Een Prachting Landscape #4 (Postcard from My Past) and Melting Memories—Rereading Landscape, Mooi Indies #03. While this no doubt prevents commentary on the richness of each piece displayed, these works are significant as they recall a debate at the core of Indonesian modern art history that is rooted in the issue of appropriation—an act at the heart of our investigation. Here I refer to the rejection by nationalist artists of what is referred to as the Mooi Indie or “beautiful Indies” aesthetic, identical with S.Sudjojono’s “holy trinity” (i.e. the mountain, the coconut palm, and the rice field).

Looking first to de Boer we are confronted by a mirror image comprised of three layers. Working from the inside out, the first layer depicts an idyllic representation of Yogyakarta’s countryside. Barely visible in the paintings’ backgrounds, mountains serve as a backdrop for the palm tree and rice fields that occupy each foreground. One painted at mid-day and the other at night, de Boer evokes the ‘series paintings’ of French-impressionists, such as Monet’s Rouen Cathedral, albeit momentarily. For as one moves beyond the canvas’ borders, this association begins to crumble, the result of de Boer’s incorporation of materials that might be perceived as crude craft (i.e. representation of laid stone paired with woven bamboo) alongside those associated with high art (i.e. oil paint and canvas).

As is the case with all of de Boer’s works, the final product is the result of a process of building layers that are achieved by the literal scraping away of paint, as can be seen on each landscape’s surface and the sometimes-unlikely combination of materials like oil paint and bamboo. While de Boer succeeds in creating a distinct composition that diverges from the idealism of early 20th century Mooi Indie landscapes, the viewer is left wondering, what is de Boer’s intention? In the case of Jendela Pagi and Jendela Malam, does de Boer seek to reclaim an aesthetic both lauded and intensely hated by each side of his familial heritage (i.e. Dutch understanding of artistic methods like batik that are part of his own cultural heritage as a Dutch-Indonesian-American artist. I draw attention to these details because, unlike other international artist visitors to Yogyakarta that are seen as easily mesmerized by the exotic nature of Indonesian craft traditions like wayang kulit or batik, de Boer’s appropriation of such techniques in his own hybrid art practice, exemplified by the works that are part of this exhibition, is complicated by his cultural roots and thus necessitates an alternate framework for analysis.

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versus Indonesian)? Or through his (mis)appropriation of materials, does de Boer, not unlike the Dutch who brought plein air painting to the Dutch East Indies as a tool to help the colony brand and define itself, wish to create his own image of what he perceives to be the contemporary Beautiful Indies?

Turning to Alfi, like de Boer, layers are central to the way that each canvas functions. In En Prachting Landscape #4, Alfi begins the exploration of a technique that continues in Melting Memories. That is, the production of a painting within a painting. Where En Prachting Landscape #4 suggests a canvas set in an actual landscape, Melting Memories displays a more precise yet, unfinished landscape, taped to a blackboard that acts as the painting’s backdrop. Albeit similar, unlike de Boer’s works that function as a pair, each of Alfi’s landscapes were created at separate moments in his artistic development. The first in 2005 for a Sakato group exhibition at Nadi Gallery explicitly interested in the legacy of landscape painting in West Sumatra and the second in 2013 as part of Alfi’s “Blackboard Series.” When asked about his work, Alfi describes each canvas, almost always created as part of a series, as steeped in reference to his own personal history. Confronted by what appears to be an ongoing examination of landscape it is pertinent to ask, what then is Alfi’s relationship to this seemingly outdated decorative aesthetic?

As revealed in conversation, Alfi’s decision to take landscape as just one layer of a work, like Melting Memories, did not arise from his primordial Minangkabau roots. Rather, it was rooted in what is an ongoing desire to critique what he perceives to be a continued weakness of Indonesian art production, namely the reliance on and appropriation of Western styles, techniques, and value judgments, that begins with the arrival of Dutch landscape painting to the colony centuries ago. Here the success of Alfi’s work, like de Boer’s, arises from its multilayered nature interested in the materiality of a work of art. While one might be quick to read Alfi’s landscapes, that are themselves intended as a critique of the appropriation of Western aesthetics, as ironic, through the juxtaposition of contrasting materials (i.e. the canvas and the blackboard) Alfi engages in his own process of imaging an aesthetic that cannot be separated from Indonesian modern art history’s foundations and thus his own legacy as an artist.

**Whose Legacy?**

By way of conclusion I return to the questions posed in this essay’s introduction. Namely, how does an artist become part of a contemporary art community and how does an artist stake claim to historical art traditions? These questions are significant as they cannot be detached from this exhibition’s interest in the notion of legacies both real and imagined.

Throughout this essay I have relied heavily on the biographical details of each artist in order to allude to various communities of which these artists are a part, ranging from actual groups like Jendela and Sakato to more abstract configurations such as Yogyakarta’s art scene and a larger global art world. In addition, I have referenced factors like place of birth, education, and market success, which have always and continue today to play a part in the construction of an artist’s legacy. Finally, and perhaps more problematically, I have taken up the juxtaposition between what we perceive as east and west as a means to challenge how a work of art is read based on its materiality rather than the identity of the artist.

Considering the function of such labels, Alfi in particular is quick to dismiss their utility, stressing instead his desire for the works he
creates to challenge how the viewer comprehends a work based simply on the unencumbered act of seeing. In contrast, de Boer is more hesitant, recognizing his position as an American-born artist who, despite local roots, creates a certain type of art that would not have been possible if he had not once again had the opportunity to become a member of Yogyakarta’s art community, this time as a Fulbright scholar, a title that carries its own weighted legacy.

With this in mind I conclude with a final comment on de Boer’s practice that was in fact the initial impetus for this exhibition and which he will acknowledge has benefited in unexpected ways from a year spent alongside artists like Jumaldi Alfi, just one icon of Yogyakarta’s art world. In order to address the depth of de Boer’s practice and its development I refer to both works titled Narissis Matrijeron as well as Tegel no. 1. Like all of de Boer’s work, these pieces demonstrate the possibilities afforded by the unlikely synthesis of elements, that when combined, become a congruous art object.

The final works created during his Fulbright year, Narissis Mantrijeron no. 1 and Narissis Mantrijeron no. 2 each start from a batik canvas decorated by two separate motifs that run throughout de Boer’s most recent body of work. These include the geometric patterns on the borders of each work, reminiscent of what are known as Tegel tiles (brought to Indonesia by the Dutch, via Portugal in the 19th century) that are contrasted by the same organic stone motifs found in Jendela Pagi and Jendela Malam. Each batik is then divided by a carved wooden panel that references the more complex frame of de Boer’s Room Screen for Margio Bin Suyeb. Titled Narissis Mantrijeron, where Narissis is easily translated to Narcissus and Mantrijeron refers to the area where de Boer resided in Yogyakarta, we recognize that these works are in fact a kind of self-portrait, that as a pair, reference de Boer’s own status as a fraternal twin. In contrast to the earliest work created during his tenure as a Fulbright scholar—Tegel no. 1—I suggest that de Boer, through his reference to self, has embraced what was an uncertain imagined legacy now central to his work as a global artist, namely the materials associated with Java’s rich craft traditions.

In the context of Yogyakarta, now recognized for its position on the global map of contemporary art, both de Boer and Alfi’s art practices are especially valuable. Through each artist’s multi-layered compositions, we are reminded that tradition—whether from the perspective of aesthetics or material—remains relevant to an understanding of the continued development of visual cultures that must constantly be challenged. Be it from de Boer’s inclusion of materials viewed by some as banal or Alfi’s engagement with the possibilities of fine art’s most basic tools. It is through such a challenge to expected conventions that diverse processes of image-making take place and determine an artist’s place within a community or historical tradition’s legacy, be it one’s own or that which is adopted, thanks to life’s journeys.

Katherine Bruhn
Fulbright-Hays DDRA Fellow 2016
PhD Candidate - University of California, Berkeley
Adam de Boer graduated with a BA in Painting from the College of Creative Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara (2006) and an MA in Fine Arts from the Chelsea College of Art, London (2012).

In 2016, de Boer was awarded a Fulbright research fellowship in Indonesia. He is currently participating in a residency in ISI Jogjakarta.

For the past six years de Boer has travelled throughout Java investigating his Eurasian heritage. His recent works employ imagery and traditional crafts from the region as a way of connecting his own and his ancestors’ artistic practice. The visual and material influence of Javanese craft and culture are central to his work and spring forth from his hybrid identity as a Dutch-Indonesian-American.

Adam’s work is especially valuable for its assertion that tradition remains relevant to the understanding of the continued development of visual cultures, both for individuals and societies.
Room Screen for Margio Bin Suyeb (recto)  
2017  
Acrylic paint and oil paint on carved leather, polychrome carved teak, woven bamboo.  
192 x 250 x 35 cm
**Jungle Flame**
2017
Acrylic paint and oil paint on linen.
33 x 25 cm

**Jendela Pagi**
2017
Wax-resist acrylic ink, rabbit skin glue and oil paint on linen, woven bamboo.
75.5 x 70.5 x 3.5 cm

**Tegel no. 1**
2017
Wax-resist acrylic ink and rabbit skin glue on linen
100 x 80 cm

**Jendela Malam**
2017
Wax-resist acrylic ink, rabbit skin glue and oil paint on linen, woven bamboo.
75.5 x 70.5 x 3.5 cm
**Narsisis Mantrijeron no. 1**

2017

Wax-resist acrylic ink and rabbit skin glue on linen, polychrome carved wood.

183 x 103 x 5 cm

**Narsisis Mantrijeron no. 2**

2017

Wax-resist acrylic ink and rabbit skin glue on linen, polychrome carved wood.

183 x 103 x 5 cm
Perahu di Gerupuk
2017

Wax-resist acrylic ink, rabbit skin glue and oil paint on linen
100 x 240 cm
Jumaldi Alfi (b.1973) is a cofounder and member of Jendela Art Group - Indonesia’s most prominent contemporary art collective. In its early days in the mid-1990s, far from socio-political themes and technical sophistication, the group attracted attention with works displaying extreme simplicity, oscillating between meaningless doodles and the contrast of formalism, drawing exclusively on minimal visual elements of line, color and texture. In 2010, Alfi co-founded the artist collective Office for Contemporary Art International in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

Alfi is particularly known for his compelling personal iconography of visual signs, reflecting existential and spiritual experience in both, on an individual and collective level. In creating his comprehensive painting series such as Blackboard Paintings or, more recently, the series of Melting Memories, Alfi draws on a scope of references, from text to empirical objects of the natural world to Renaissance paintings as well as his own memories. This makes his work simultaneously mysterious and intimate.

Alfi studied at the Indonesian Institute of Arts in Yogyakarta until 1999. He has participated in several art fairs including Art Basel Hong Kong, Hong Kong International Art Fair, Art Stage Singapore and Shanghai Art Fair.
Melting Memories, Rereading Landscape, Mooi Indies #03
2013
Acrylic on Canvas
200 x 300 cm
Een Prachting Landscape #4 (Postcard from My Past)

2005

Acrylic on Canvas
135 x 135 cm

Read (Homage to Nightswimmer)

2007

Acrylic on Canvas
125 x 100 cm
Renewal #8
2010

Acrylic on Canvas
215 x 315 cm
No sir ..!
2007/2008
Acrylic on Canvas
197 x 315 cm

Colour Guide Series “Blur”
2007
Acrylic on Canvas
195 x 250 cm
Founded in 1973, Jakarta Land unites the global experience and capability of Hongkong Land, with the local knowledge and insights of CCM. The World Trade Centre (WTC) complex comprises 140,000 square meters of Grade A commercial office space across four buildings in the heart of Jakarta’s CBD, with a further 80,000 square meters under development. Home to some of the world’s leading multinational corporations and managed by a highly-trained team of professionals, WTC has long been seen as Jakarta’s benchmark for quality property management, attention to detail and long-term partnerships.

ISA Art Advisory is a Jakarta-based art consultancy established to advise and encourage art for corporate and individual lifestyles. Our corporate art program prioritizes the collaboration between the company’s vision, and bringing art to the work environment at all levels. ISA Art Advisory’s objective is to increase the public awareness and benefits of bringing art out of museums and galleries and into public spaces. ISA advises clients on selecting and acquiring artworks that meet their taste, style and budget. ISA Art Advisory provides customers the complete package of art management services like hanging systems, specialist lighting, insurance and restoration.

ISA Art Advisory is also managing indonesianluxury.com, a full service online resource of luxury furniture, art, architecture and property for sophisticated homeowners and art collectors seeking to acquire, build or decorate their homes.

The American Indonesian Exchange Foundation (AMINEF) is the binational Fulbright Commission for Indonesia. For 25 years AMINEF has carried forward the vision and mission of the Fulbright program in Indonesia, which in 2017 celebrated its 65th anniversary. AMINEF has played a significant role with funds provided through the US Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Exchange (ECA) for Fulbright and non-Fulbright ECA exchange programs and other activities administered by AMINEF.

AMINEF’s many programs for educational exchange have increased mutual understanding between the United States and Indonesia and strengthened the ties that unite the two countries. Since 1950, 2,815 Indonesians have participated in exchanges. Approximately 80 percent of the Indonesians received graduate degrees at the master’s or doctoral levels from American universities under Fulbright scholarships. The remaining 20 percent participated in non-degree exchanges administered by AMINEF. Meanwhile, for the past 65 years, Fulbright program has also supported 1,120 American scholars, researchers, students and artists to come to Indonesia for conducting research or teaching in various fields of study.
LEGACIES:
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Een Prachting Landscape #4
(Postcard from My Past),
Jumaldi Alfi

Perahu di Gerupuk, Adam de Boer

PRESENTED BY

Jakarta Land

CURATED BY

ISA Art Advisory

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AMI NEF
FULBRIGHT