

# JAKARTA

**Arahmaiani**  
**"The Past has not Passed (Masa Lalu Belumlah Berlalu)"**  
 Museum MACAN  
 17.11.2018 – 10.03.2019

While a student in Bandung, Indonesia, in the early 1980s, Arahmaiani conducted a series of germinative, socially-conscious street actions with the performance group Sumber Waras. In 1983, after publicly criticising President Suharto's militaristic New Order regime, she was arrested. Freed one month later only after signing a form that declared she was mentally disturbed, and banned from exhibiting, she decided to leave her country and continue her education in Australia and the Netherlands.

Embracing her status as a "global nomad", Arahmaiani, who now resides in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, was among a wave of Southeast Asian artists who gained the freedom to condemn the repressive policies of their home countries – as well as the imperialistic nature of capitalism as it destabilised and exploited the Global South – in the international art circuit of the 90s. *Nation for Sale* (1996), an installation and performance which debuted at the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, Australia, railed against the cheapening of Indonesia's cultural identity within the world marketplace. Courted by Suharto's belligerent anti-communism, western interventionism stimulated economic development during the Cold War, and after the fall of the Berlin Wall liberalisation incentivised new waves of foreign investors. Farmlands were thus supplanted by factories while tourism obliterated community values. Included amongst over seventy other works in this survey, *Nation for Sale* features more than twenty-five plinths displaying soldier figurines, pill jars, and toy guns – cutesified icons of dependency



– assembled in front of two light boxes: one an Indonesian flag upon which the words "FOR SALE" are written, the other a halal sign. In the original accompanying performance, the artist, sporting a Balinese dance costume with sunglasses and a plastic lightsabre, argued that tradition had been commodified and resignified as entertainment.

Also on view was *Do Not Prevent the Fertility of the Mind* (1997/2014/2018), an installation conceptualised while Arahmaiani lived in Thailand after her studies. The piece features a wall papered with disposable menstrual pads, in front of which an Erlenmeyer flask containing blood-like liquid sits upon a veiled stool. Two photographic portraits, each depicting Arahmaiani dressed as a nurse holding scissors and

Arahmaiani  
*Nation for Sale*, 1996  
 Wood, lamp, photograph, medicine, plastic toys, variable dimension  
 Exhibition view, Museum MACAN

an oversized intrauterine contraceptive device, symbolise the artist's desire for women to be independent. The installation references Indonesia's "two is enough" birth control policies and critiques the governance of reproduction. Though often framed as an empowering narrative of modernisation, the artist has likened this anti-natalism to a project of "colonis(ation) by the state". Radically, the work centres feminist agency in the Indonesian peoples' ongoing fight for freedom in the postcolonial context.

While Arahmaiani's early installations demanded, importantly and often controversially, that their viewer reject patriarchal conservatisms, newer works see the artist embrace the role of facilitator, and ebb towards community as an emancipatory framework for artmaking. For example, during *Flag Project* (2006–10), after emblazoning a flag with the Bahasa Indonesian word *akal* ("mind") in Jawi text, Arahmaiani led a series of discussions in Asia and Europe wherein she attempted to identify core concepts upon which collectivity is founded. The results, ranging from abstract ideas like "love", "resistance", and "happiness" to fizzy phrases like the Javanese expression *ojo dumeb* ("don't be cocky"), are rendered in different languages and colours on flags that are carried in parades and displayed in public spaces like museums. At MACAN, twenty-nine of these imperatives rippled from the ceiling near the exhibition's entrance.

*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, often translated as "unity in diversity", is Indonesia's official motto, and derives from the fourteenth-century Old Javanese poem "Kakawin Sutasoma". Enacting this principle, *Flag Project* mines a long-standing artistic conviction in the power of heterogeneity and empathy in the face of insularism and intolerance, suggesting, quite magically, that there are lessons we have yet to learn, but are yet to forget. The survey, with equal dynamism, historicised Arahmaiani's polemical contributions to Indonesian contemporary art, while emphasising the artist's refusal to understand history as static. Its title acknowledges that museums bring art into the present, not viewers into the past, but also infers that despite the *reformasi* demonstrations of 1998, which saw Suharto's dictatorship fail, much has yet to change.

**Harry Burke**

# VIEWS

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Arahmaiani, *Do not Prevent the Fertility of the Mind*, 1997–2014  
 Feminine napkins, fluorescent lights, wooden stool, glass vial, blood, photograph  
 Installation view, Museum MACAN



Arahmaiani, *Burning Country*, 1999–2018  
 Wood, matchstick, fabric, 120 x 240 x 250 cm  
 Installation view, Museum MACAN

# VIEWS