

PORTRAIT / UNTIL CHAN

BEYOND BORDERS

PAYAL UTTAM delves into the work of ENTANG WIHARSO, which urges viewers to explore cultural identity through artful interactions

THE FIRST TIME I heard about Entang Wiharso was from the renowned Belgian artist Wim Delvoye. It was in 2012 and he was taking me on an impromptu tour of what was then known as ART HK, now Art Basel Hong Kong. Of the hundreds of works on display, he pointed to the Indonesian artist's metal wall reliefs as his favorites. Delvoye went so far as to compare him to his friend Ai Weiwei, a giant of the contemporary art scene.

One of the most compelling artists to emerge from the sleepy Indonesian city of Yogyakarta, Wiharso is a name that's been on the tip of everyone's tongue of late. Known for his intricate aluminium installations rooted in Javanese traditions, Wiharso has gripped the art world since 2005 when he exhibited at the Venice Biennale. Since then, his work has been snapped up by art dealers worldwide, with Matthias Arndt taking him to Berlin, Ben Brown showing his work in London and Pearl Lam exhibiting him in Shanghai.

Now a fixture on the international art-fair circuit, Wiharso was in town for Art Basel Hong Kong on his way to the Venice Biennale, where he is representing Indonesia again this year. We meet in a corner of the fair's bustling VIP lounge. A slight man with a thick moustache and tinted round spectacles, Wiharso stands out in the crowd of conventionally dressed collectors. The 46-year-old artist wears tight black trousers, a patterned shirt and a thin red tie under a metallic jacket with black lapels. Fuzzy and unruly, his hair is pulled back in a plaited ponytail.

Raised in a rural community in Tegal on the north coast of Java, Wiharso has always been different. "I'm a black goat," he says with an impish grin. "The expression has two

associations for me, one as an artist and one as a person. To me, it's very positive because as an outsider you can see more clearly." Born into a family of farmers, the artist remembers growing up in basic conditions. "We didn't have a lot of toys, so I created dolls with clay from the rice field and played music using spoons and plates with my friends. Then I could play like a puppet master," he recalls. "I became quite obsessed with art. Every day after school I drew on the sand because paper was limited and very valuable."

Determined to pursue a career as an artist, Wiharso asked his mother if he could go to Yogyakarta to enrol in the Indonesian Art Institute, one of the country's leading universities. "It was surprising that she said yes because it was quite expensive," says Wiharso in his soft Indonesian accent. "She said, 'Don't get married quickly; you have to study seriously and do something.' So I took a chance and really studied hard."

Having dabbled in sculpture as a child, Wiharso joined the school's painting programme, unleashing his imagination onto large canvases for the first time. His work explored his own life and the everyday struggles of people around him. Raw, experimental and filled with emotion, the paintings were unlike anything his peers were producing. "Just living on this planet you have so much inspiration," he says. "Talking with friends, talking with a driver, you can get a lot. My work was not only about aesthetics, I wanted to dig for something more true."

By the mid-1990s, Wiharso had made a name for himself and was exhibiting across the country when he met his wife Christine Cocca, an American Fulbright scholar



CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW:
UNDECLARED LANDSCAPE - DON'T TOUCH ME; EXPANDED DREAM #2;
WIHARSO'S GATEWAY AT THE VENICE BIENNALE; FEAST TABLE;
UNDECLARED PERCEPTIONS; TEMPLE OF HOPE HIT BY A BUS



studying Indonesian art. The couple soon relocated to Rhode Island, where they now live with their two sons, though Wiharso maintains links with his homeland by keeping a studio in Yogyakarta.

Living between the United States and Indonesia, he takes inspiration from both cultures. While Wiharso began painting about his difficulties in adapting to America, he slowly became interested in sculpture and installation. Combining ideas from traditional Indonesian Wayang puppet theatre with references to contemporary culture, he made large installations bordering on the surreal. Among the most dramatic are his brass sculptures of supine bodies with aluminium dream clouds emerging from their heads and chests.

Wiharso also created cut-out metal wall reliefs depicting mystical worlds. Exploring everything from personal narratives to politics, he entangled bodies with plant tendrils, tongues, tails and intestines, symbols he invented to show connections between people. Embedded in these pieces are floating speech bubbles containing provocative phrases that Wiharso gathered from friends, family, television shows and newspaper articles. The text is idiosyncratic and often peppered with slight grammatical errors.

Although Wiharso initially asked his wife for help to perfect his writing, he quickly grew frustrated. Despite his efforts, he always felt something was missing when he communicated in English. "Now even

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if something is wrong I don't care because it's part of my identity. It's a reflection of my position," he explains.

Over the years, Wiharso has become increasingly preoccupied with issues of identity, particularly as he watches his sons grow up in the United States, a country that remains relatively foreign to him: "I didn't realise that before, but at some point they will have to choose to be Indonesian or to become American. I started to think, what does it mean to deal with those borders?"

In 2011, he created *Temple of Hope Hit By a Bus*, a massive shrine-like structure exploring religious, political and cultural boundaries that come between people. Cut into the walls of the temple is a menagerie of figures in various scenarios, ranging from being trapped to locked in tight embrace. Some bodies bow down submissively while others are armed with weapons.

"With globalisation, what happens is that some people have terrible experiences and develop a closed mindset. They become less tolerant of other cultures. They unconsciously build their own spaces, their own walls," he says. "[*Temple of Hope Hit By a Bus*] doesn't refer to a real accident. The bus represents a sudden change in the condition of these [people's minds] when it becomes scary, when some are even willing to die like terrorists."

To create the work, he spoke to several individuals, asking them to share their dreams and hopes for a future in which people are more tolerant. Woven into the work are



leading to an inner chamber. The monumental installation evokes the stone carvings of ancient Indonesian temples. Inside, a series of life-size sculptures depicting prominent political figures in the country's past, such as President Suharto, gather around a table. Wiharso describes it as an "Indonesian history tableau," commenting that "when people want to understand Indonesia, they have to start at some point." While the bodies look identical, their faces are indented and warped. The distortion is deliberate. It's a reflection of people's distorted views of the country and the deceptive nature of politics, he says. Bold statements such as "Your perception is not my reality" imprinted on the wall underscore this idea.

To fully experience the work, Wiharso invites viewers to run their hands across the installation. "With painting, people are not allowed to touch, but when you see this big wall you have to touch, you have to feel, because there is a lot of history and allegories in the work," he says. By staining their hands with graphite, he wants the work's ideas to rub off onto each person, triggering their own thought process. "We're all part of the larger story, but if you want to go deeper, you have to go digging in yourself." ■

phrases such as "empathy to everyone" and "real tolerance is compassion in disguise". Inspired by Indonesian shadow puppetry, he lit the temple-like form from within with a light shaped like the human heart. What resulted were intricate shadows, which are cast onto visitors when they approach the

work. Wiharso says that he wants them to leave an imprint on viewer's minds, and "mark you like a memory". Engaging deeply with audiences is at the crux of Wiharso's practice. For this year's Venice Biennale, he confronted viewers with a large graphite gateway 15 metres long,