

Freedom to Explore

Text

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A pair of eyes darts back and forth, peering out curiously from a red mailbox slot. Below, an envelope to Ray Tomlinson (the first person to send an email) is visible with a handwritten address that reads 'Anywhere you are'. Titled *Telepresence*, the animated sculpture by Indonesian artist Bandu Darmawan explores the transformation of technology and how, thanks to the Internet, we can now transport ourselves anywhere. This playfully insightful work is characteristic of a new generation of young artists from Indonesia. 'They have a witty tendency to read what seems to be usual as extraordinary, which makes their work outstanding,' says Alia Swastika, curator and director of Jogja Biennale Foundation. 'They challenge the audience to look at issues from different perspectives.'

Bandung-based Darmawan was among several new talents who drew attention at the newly revamped contemporary fair Art Jakarta. In recent years, the Indonesian art scene has exploded with a new crop of experimental artists emerging from creative hotspots like Yogyakarta and Bandung. Since the 1990s, when art from the archipelago first began gaining recognition overseas, there's been a silent expectation for artists to create work rooted in craft traditions or local politics. In fact, the art pouring out from studios is far more complex, nuanced and boundary-pushing.

For instance, in Fika Ria Santika's performance *Terkurung Hendak di Luar* ('Cooped (Desired to be Out)'), the artist clad herself in an otherworldly costume made of round mirrors and stood motionless — face and body

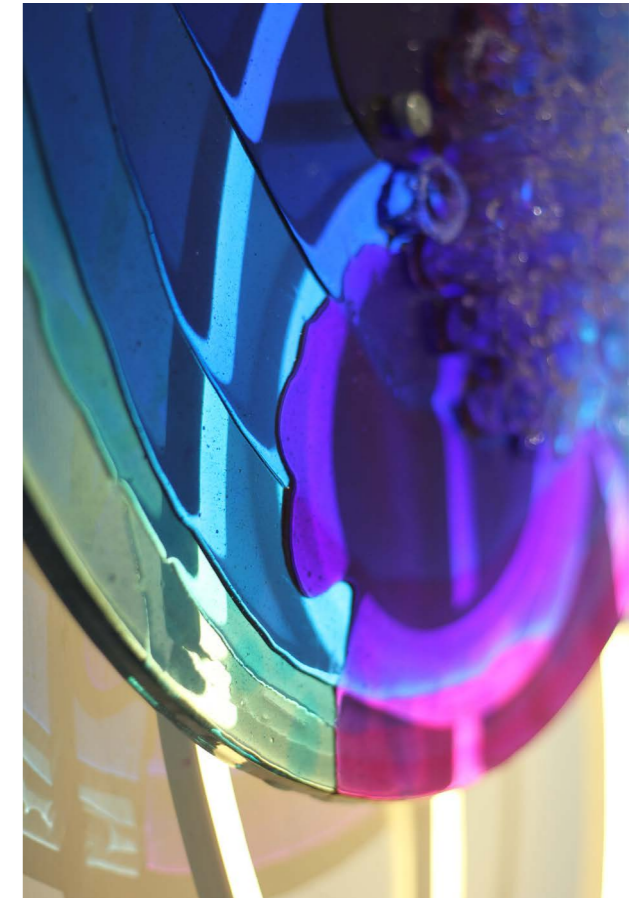
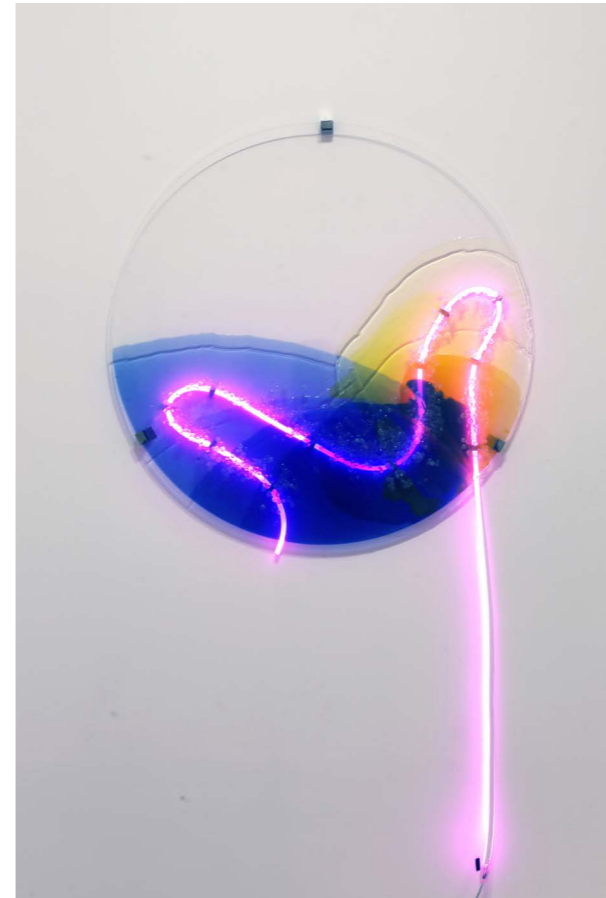
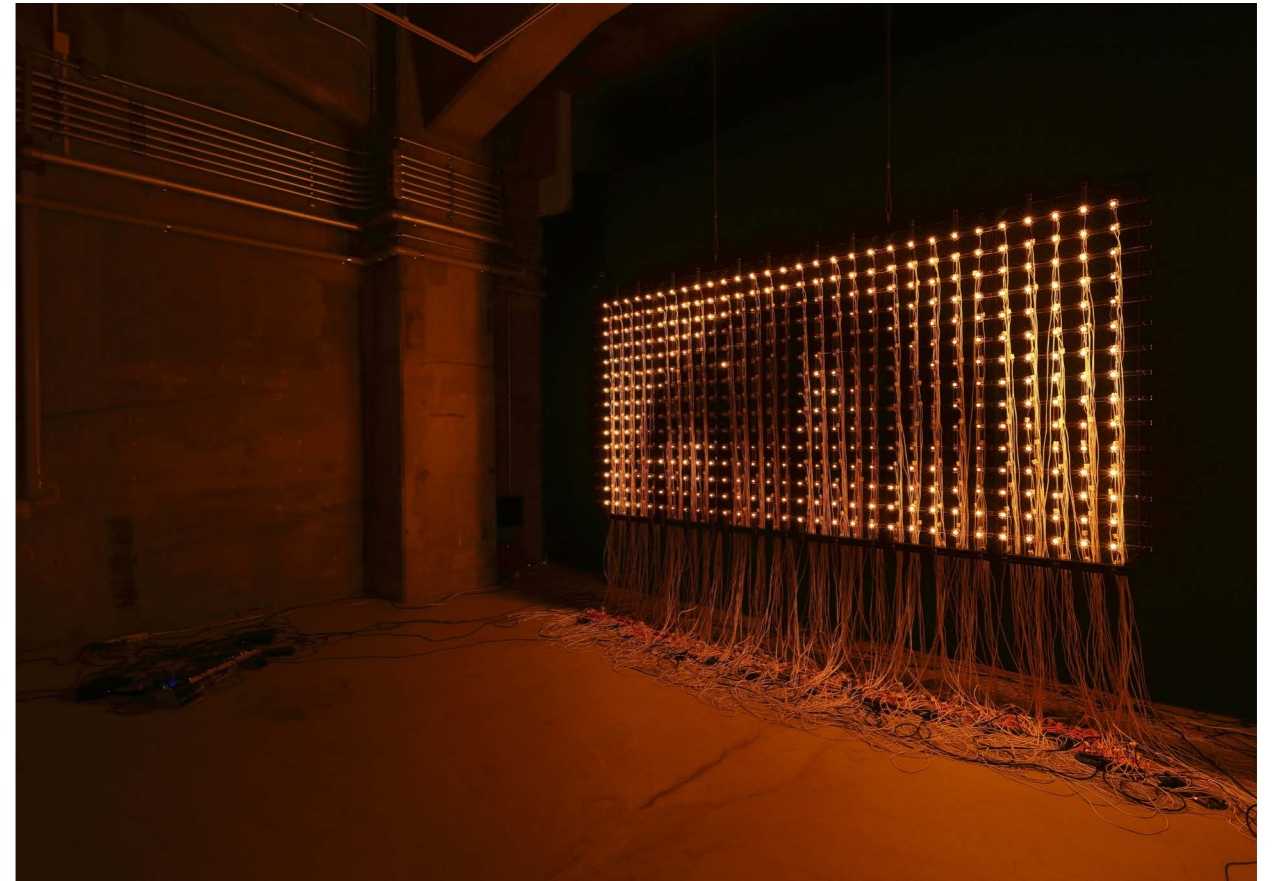
obscured — in a forest and then on busy city streets, attracting strange looks from passers-by. Though she's perhaps best known for her installations that invoke fleeting natural phenomena, in this performance she questions our relationship with each other as well as our impact on our surroundings. 'It also shows that women are free to choose their place in society,' the artist says. 'There's nothing to limit how women show their abilities and their independence.'

Bandung-based artist Syaiful Aulia Garibaldi also draws inspiration from the natural world, except his medium of choice is organic material like fungi and lichen, the latter appearing on objects found around his home city. The former agriculture student's work ranges from painted landscapes to immersive video and bio art installations. His installation *Balitsa Ehoor*, consisting of 150 vertical steel bars enveloped in lichen, was among the most talked-about works at the fair. 'For me, this living material represents the mutual relationship between humans and the environment, and a strategy for survival,' he says.

Garibaldi's project required the use of a 200-metre fence from a particular site, which necessitated negotiation with the government in order to secure the space. A few years ago, reaching out to the government for such a project would have been unthinkable. 'It's a good situation today because we have a civil government rather than the military state when Suharto was president,' explains veteran artist Heri Dono, known for his paintings that blend folk traditions with contemporary

Facing page, top
A new generation of artists is exploring Indonesia's history and complexities, and extending the limits of creative production in doing so. Among them is installation artist Bagus Pandega, whose 2018 work *A Pervasive Rhythm* is made up of 450 motorcycle indicator lights
Image by Keizo Kioku

Facing page, bottom
Fika Ria Santika's ethereal wall reliefs evoke fleeting natural phenomena, and many resemble floating, phosphorescent Petri dishes. Shown here are details of the *Tumpuk Lapis Tampak* series, in resin, acrylic sheet, acrylic rod, pigment, flexible LED and stainless steel
Images courtesy of Gajah Gallery



concerns. 'Today we can see an evolution. There's freedom of creativity and expression in Indonesia. Before we were only following senior artists, but now everybody can choose different directions.'

As Dono suggests, young Indonesian artists aren't afraid to cast a critical eye over their country. Yogyakarta-based Yudha Kusuma Putera, for instance, is part of Ruang MES 56, one of the city's most progressive artist collectives whose members use photography to grapple with social and political issues. In a series titled *Past, Present, Future Come Together*, Putera interrogates patriarchal family structures and Suharto's lingering ideals of a conventional family unit. He invited nine families closely associated with Ruang MES 56 to select a 'face' or 'head' of their family and create one single body using props, the results of which he photographed. When exhibiting the series, Putera also invites viewers to use props to create their own idiosyncratic family portraits.



Like Putera, many Indonesian artists have developed practices enmeshed in their daily lives and rooted in their environments. 'Indonesia's history and complexity has been a great inspiration for artists,' says Swastika. 'Artists have the freedom to compose works inspired by everyday life. The fact that the art ecosystem is quite open also means that the scene offers surprises.'

Today, an increasing number of young artists are making waves outside the country. Installation artist Bagus Pandega is one example. Among his most prominent works is a monumental outdoor installation — first shown at the Amsterdam Light Festival in 2017 — illuminating the famed slogan attributed to Gandhi 'Be the change that you wish to see in the world' in 1,000 floodlights. 'The work is about people daring to face their deepest fears or coming out from their comfort zones to become someone better,' Pandega says. 'Change is never easy, but for a better future, a better dream, it's worth trying, especially for the younger generations.' In many senses these potent words describe his own efforts and also those of his fellow artists who are taking Indonesian contemporary art to new heights.

This page
In this work from Yudha Kusuma Putera's 2017 series *Past, Present, Future Come Together*, a little boy flexes his muscles as he perches above his family, in an interrogation of the conventional patriarchal family unit
Image courtesy of the artist



Top
Installation view of Syaiful Aulia Garibaldi's *Porculen Microorganism* #16, at Mind Set Art Center, Taipei in 2018

Middle
Installation view of Garibaldi's *Tubifex Landscape*, at ARTJOG, Yogyakarta, 2017

Bottom
Among the most popular works at Art Jakarta was Garibaldi's lichen-covered installation *Balitsa Ehoor* (2019), made up of 150 found iron bars
All images courtesy of the artist