

# Dadang Christanto “They Give Evidence”



## **They give evidence**

Eles dão prova 1997 fibra de vidro, tijolo, argila [fiberglass, brick, clay]  
foto Tetsuro Ishida cortesia Museum of Contemporary Art, Tóquio

Sat 25 October 2003 - Sun 4 January 2004  
Asian gallery, Ground Level



This exhibition, the first in the temporary exhibitions space within the new Asian galleries, consists of the confronting and moving larger-than-life sculptures of human suffering by Dadang Christanto.

Christanto's works speak eloquently for the victims of oppression and social injustice. The sixteen male and female figures in this installation represent displaced victims, mutely carrying the bodies of innocent men, women and children who have been killed - testament to the inhumanity of man, a silent monument to communal grief.

Currently living in Darwin and working as a lecturer at the University of the Northern Territory, Christanto has a significant reputation internationally as well as in own country, Indonesia. His artistic oeuvre includes painting, drawing, performance, sculpture and installations.



Heds of seekers for independence

If every desire for freedom is always controlled, what is the meaning of independence?

Dadang Christanto  
September 1996

ANU  
School of Art Gallery  
Canberra

Dadang Christanto  
*Hujan merah (Red Rain)* 1998- 2000  
Prayer paper, ink, plastic and string

Born in 1957 in Tegal, Central Java, Indonesia, Dadang Christanto is a leading Indonesian artist, currently living and working in Darwin as a lecturer at the School of Art and Design, University of the Northern Territory. Christanto has a significant reputation internationally, as well as in his home country, where he has greatly influenced the direction of

contemporary Indonesian art. Since graduating from the Indonesian Art College, Yogyakarta in 1978, Christanto has exhibited in major exhibitions, including in Australia, Brazil, Cuba, Germany, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and the United States, and continues to exhibit regularly in Indonesia.

For the past decade Christanto's art practice has been concerned with exploring social and political issues in Indonesia and the world, incorporating a range of media such as painting, drawing, performance, sculpture and installation to this end. Best known are his combined installation and performance works, which have employed terracotta heads and papier-mâché figures to explore the themes of human rights, peace and social justice. Indeed Christanto's overall practice is deeply informed by an intense compassion and empathy for human suffering, especially for those victims of political repression and conflict. On the topic of freedom from suffering he has said, 'I want to initiate communication that liberates. Liberation from what? Liberation from the burden of history filled with wastelands of blood and tears. A history that is played out in the homeland of humankind.'

Christanto's art is a complex mix of human physicality and spirituality, able to speak to diverse cultural audiences. For this exhibition he will present two installations and undertake a performance at the National Gallery of Australia during the conference.



## **Dadang Christanto: a calling to account**

Allison Gray

The work of Dadang Christanto reaches beyond specific references and personal suffering to reflect on the universal. In *Count Project*, begun in 1999 and triggered by millennium celebrations, Christanto appeals to his audience for a more honest assessment of the past 1000 years.

Christanto, formerly from Yogyakarta, Indonesia, has lived in Darwin for 5 years since becoming a Lecturer at the Art School of the Northern Territory University. *Count Project* opened in early May at the NTU Gallery with a collaborative performance by local cellist Rebecca Harris. The exhibition featured large-scale works on paper with drawn, painterly and calligraphic marks in ink. These are new materials for the artist; a significant shift that he attributes to his passage from East to West in moving to Australia, experiencing an increased awareness of Orientalism and a new sense of his own identity. “Here I am Asian,” he says.

In Australia the principle theme of his work has been counting the victims. His work is testimony to systematic violence and challenges the enforced silence of all those who have been victimised throughout the 20th century. For Christanto, whose family lost a patriarch as a result of government orchestrated brutality, the rationale is intensely personal. There’s a sense of urgency in his mark-making, bolstered by a skilled play of positive and negative space. Everywhere gestures seem to scratch against the page and outline the heads of numerous victims. How many wounded humans in the 20th century are there to count—not the victims of plague or natural disaster or famine but those who’ve died because of systemic violence?

The artist’s process is evident everywhere in this exhibition. In part the work appears as a record of a performative, cathartic event. The heads of victims are rendered as if through semi-automated unconscious drawing. Christanto maintains control in the creative act in a deliberate attempt to distance the process and work from simplistic documentation or reproduction of violent acts. Intriguingly the marks are reminiscent of the energy of expert batik making, said to be a meditative act. Like many Javanese women of her background, Christanto’s mother traded cloth. As a young boy, his first awareness of art was in the batik textiles she sold.

Every work calls on a dynamic aesthetic that utilizes a limited palette of red, black and brown. A red or black line marks the head, the site of the body where memories are kept—Christanto refers to the memory of his father’s abduction as a darkness that he must carry in his head. In 1965 and 1966 countless suspected members and sympathizers of the PKI (Communist Party of Indonesia) were abducted and massacred in purges driven by the military. Their stories and those of their grieving families have been

systematically silenced, and people connected with them strategically stigmatised as enemies of society. Increasingly Christanto's artwork is driven by this historical event of which very few photographs exist.

Click, click, click. The sound of the military boot on hard ground holds a very particular resonance. It is the sound that comes before the abduction. In the Christanto family home the sound still creates a wave of anguish. In the artwork the military boot stamps dominant in the central field of the image. The boot carries with it a sea of disembodied heads. Images like these have become devices for preserving shared memories and honouring a collective history that lies beyond the scope of words. Christanto's work is driven by a confidence that visual art can heal social and personal wounds.

Dadang Christanto's work is showing at the School of Art Gallery, ANU, August 7-31; performance at The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, August 8. His major work, *They Give Evidence* (1996-97) recently acquired by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, will be the key exhibit in their new Asian Galleries opening October 25.

Count Project, Dadang Christanto, Northern Territory University Gallery May 6-16

Allison Gray is Assistant Curator, Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory, Darwin.

### **Count Project**



“We have always failed to stop violence, instead we have made more violence. September 11 2001, the War in Afghanistan, the Bali Bombing and the War in Iraq is actual global evidence that violence is becoming the solution to problems. This is a strong sign that we are living in the barbarian age.

“I started to make the ‘count project’ in December 1999 when the world was celebrating the twenty-first century or the third millennium. I feel worried about what has happened in the twentieth century. In the past century there have been massacres everywhere, bloodshed everywhere. Violence just to make people suffer.

“In this ongoing project I have been counting the number of victims of violence. The images of different sized heads or even the small dots in my drawings represent the victims. Each head of the victims has scratches of red and black in the brain as a record of the darkness and violence of the memories of these events. Human beings are not objects.” - Dadang Christanto, 2003