

THE
COLOR
OF
MONEY

BY
FREDERIK BALFOUR
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
RALPH MECKE

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MEET THE MILLION-DOLLAR PAINTER AT THE HEART OF



ASIA'S HOTTEST ART MARKET. (HINT: IT'S NOT CHINA.)

I NYOMAN MASRIADI

POURS TWO GLASSES FROM A BOTTLE OF 18-YEAR-OLD MACALLAN single-malt Scotch. He's sitting poolside at his 1,000-square-meter villa on the outskirts of Yogyakarta, Indonesia, the evening air rich with jasmine, frangipani and passion fruit, mingled with the sweet smoke from Masriadi's clove cigarette. A shiny, new, 1,700-cubic-centimeter Harley-Davidson motorcycle is parked at one end of his garden; a Balinese-style gazebo and shrine stand at the other. "Perhaps I have had success in my career," the 40-year-old artist says.

Masriadi is being modest. Fifteen years ago, he was hawking souvenir paintings to tourists in Bali for \$20 a pop. Today, his canvases sell at blue-chip galleries for \$250,000 to \$300,000, and he's the first living Southeast Asian artist whose work has topped \$1 million at auction. Hence the Harley, the pool and the expensive Scotch.

An obsessive and painstakingly slow painter, Masriadi turns out only eight to 10 canvases a year. His style is a cross between DC Comics (home to Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman), which he acknowledges as an inspiration, and the Colombian painter and sculptor Fernando Botero, whom he does not. Meticulously executed and ironic, his works feature preternaturally muscular figures with gleaming skin. His themes range from mobile phones and online gaming to political corruption and the pain of dieting. Deceptively simple at first glance, his works often evince trenchant political satire.

Nicholas Olney, director of New York's Paul Kasmin Gallery, recalls seeing an exhibition of the artist's work for the first time at the Singapore Art Museum in 2008. "The humor and biting wit came through immediately," he says. "This guy was speaking on a global level." When Kasmin held a one-man Masriadi show three years later, private collectors contributed four of the nine works, an unusually robust showing: Because of their rarity, most people encounter only one or two Masriadis at a time, when they come up for auction.

Masriadi has become the undisputed poster boy of the Indonesian art scene, which could well be the next big frontier for collectors of emerging contemporary art as the Chinese market cools. In contrast to the Chinese boom, which was driven largely by foreigners, the demand for Indonesian art has been a mostly homegrown affair. That's changing, now that collectors in Hong Kong, London and Berlin are training their sights on the country.

I glimpsed my first Masriadi at Christie's Hong Kong in 2007. *Juling* (*Cross-eyed*) showed a clutch of people staring at their mobile phones, cross-eyed with intensity. It had immediacy and humor and felt every bit as good as the competing contemporary Chinese art on offer, at a fraction of the price. Christie's

had given it a high estimate of \$12,000. When the hammer finally came down after a spate of frenzied bidding, however, *Juling* had fetched \$341,000—almost 30 times its estimated high.

In subsequent auctions, prices for Masriadi's work kept climbing. In May 2008, Christie's sold *Sudah Biasa Di Telanjangi* (*Used to Being Stripped*)—showing a bodybuilder with his pink bikini briefs around his ankles, covering himself with hands bound by rope—for \$540,000, then an auction record for contemporary Southeast Asian art. Five months later, on Oct. 4 at Sotheby's, *Sorry Hero, Saya Lupa* (*Sorry Hero, I Forgot*)—depicting Batman and Superman sitting in adjacent toilet stalls—set another record, at \$619,000. That benchmark was in turn surpassed two days later when Masriadi's boxing-themed





Previous spread and above: I Nyoman Masriadi in his studio in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.
The artist turns out just eight to 10 canvases a year, despite the worldwide demand for more.

triptych, *The Man From Bantul (The Final Round)*, sold to a prominent Indonesian collector for \$1.01 million.

I finally got to meet Masriadi in Hong Kong last May at an Asia Society dinner honoring him, along with China's top contemporary artist, Zeng Fanzhi, and South Korean painter and sculptor Lee Ufan. Shy, giggly and slight, Masriadi was a far cry from the pumped-up heroes of his paintings. After some cajoling, the socially awkward and notoriously media-wary artist agreed to an interview, but only if it transpired at his home in Yogyakarta.

Jogja, as the central Javanese city of 400,000 is known, is seeing a burst of creativity akin to the New York art scene of the 1980s (think Jean-Michel Basquiat and Julian Schnabel) and London in the 1990s (Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst),

only this time set in the tropics. Other artists of Masriadi's generation making waves on the international auction and art-fair circuit include Jumaldi Alfi, Rudi Mantofani, Handiwirman Saputra, Putu Sutawijaya and Yunizar (who, like many Indonesians, goes by just one name). Eko Nugroho, another local sensation, recently teamed up with Louis Vuitton to design limited-edition scarves.

Most came to Jogja to study at the Institut Seni Indonesia, or ISI, the country's top art school, and never left. It's easy to see why. Laid-back, inexpensive and tolerant, Jogja has largely been spared the messy urbanization that has turned the Indonesian capital of Jakarta into one big traffic jam. And unlike the island of Bali, it isn't overrun with tourists. "In Jogja, you can be naked and



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nobody cares,” says Edwin Rahardjo, of Edwin’s Gallery in Jakarta. “People will just say, ‘Ah, you must be an artist.’”

Located 430 kilometers (267 miles) east of the capital on the principal island of Java, Jogja has long been the country’s cultural and intellectual center, a legacy of the Yogyakarta Sultanate, which has been in power since 1755. (Hamengkubuwono X, the current sultan, lives in a handsome palace and serves as the city’s governor.) It’s just an hour’s drive to Borobudur, the world’s largest Buddhist monument, and only slightly farther to Mount Merapi, an active volcano that most recently erupted in 2010. Jogja is also within easy reach of the OHD Museum, owned by Djarum Group tobacco magnate Oei Hong Djien, whose 2,000-piece private collection of Indonesian contemporary and modern art is the most comprehensive in the world.

When I first arrive at Masriadi’s home, he’s seated at a huge teak desk in front of two laptops. Barefoot, wearing a black T-shirt and black athletic shorts, he looks even more adolescent than he did in Hong Kong. Engrossed in the video game *Defense of the Ancients*, he reluctantly takes a break to give me a tour.

His workspace is more frat-house party room than painter’s studio. There’s a bar stocked with Macallan scotch and Maker’s Mark bourbon whiskey. There’s a pool table, a foosball table, dumbbells and a punching bag with two pairs of gloves. A black, faux-leather sofa and flat-screen TV round out the decor.

The only evidence of his profession is a single, unfinished canvas propped against a bookshelf at the far end of the room, surrounded by a clutch of brushes and cans of paint. The central figure in the work bears a strong resemblance to the wrestler Hulk Hogan—apart from the green skin stretched over impossibly large muscles seemingly sculpted from jade. The character sports a bright-yellow tank top, revealing an enormous torso and arms covered in tattoos: a puppy, a black panther, an octopus about to entwine itself around a deep-sea diver and a miniature stencil of the wrestler in profile above the word *Puppet*. When I ask Masriadi what it all means, he replies, “He’s a wrestler, but he’s also a puppet.”

Masriadi continues on to the garage to show me his latest toy, a 2012 Dodge Challenger SRT8 392 Yellow Jacket, painted precisely the same color as the wrestler’s shirt. (There are also a red Mini Cooper and a maroon Honda CR-V.) We proceed through a courtyard to the pool area, where the Harley is parked. The dealer’s tag is still hanging from the handlebars, and I wonder aloud how someone Masriadi’s size—5 feet 6 inches and 143 pounds (1.68 meters and 65 kilograms)—manages to ride such a beast. The answer: He doesn’t. “Oh, I haven’t driven it,” he says. “I just like it for its aesthetics.”

Masriadi first moved to Jogja from Bali in 1993 to attend ISI. He enjoyed the atmosphere of the city, free from the Hindu rituals and festivals that regulate every aspect of life back home. After a few years, he began to weary of the school’s emphasis on formalism and abstract painting. Then, in 1997, he tried something entirely different—his first superhero. “It was really exciting to do a Batman,” he says. “I felt very happy. But I was worried to explore it and fall into the trap of doing more and more.”

Meanwhile, he’d become engaged to a Javanese woman named Ana and had decided to return home in 1997, just as the Asian financial crisis was erupting. Money was tight, so Masriadi remained on Bali for the next year and a half (during which time his son, Ganesha, was born), all the while churning out souvenir paintings of Balinese mythological figures at a rate of two a day. Even then, his innate talent showed through. “In the art market, I was quite popular, and dealers started coming to my house,” he says. Soon, his signed works were selling for about \$100 in Ubud galleries.

When he and his family returned to Jogja in 1998, Indonesia was undergoing a turbulent transition. President Suharto had been deposed after a 31-year dictatorship, ushering in the Reformasi (Reform) movement. It was a period of unprecedented productivity for Masriadi, who the following year executed more than 30 paintings. Those works addressed themes of corruption, social injustice and military abuse with a satirical eye and a powerful figurative style that set him apart. “Masriadi produced one of the most-amazing records of that time,” says his dealer, Jasdeep Sandhu of Singapore’s Gajah Gallery. “Those works are iconic.”

Consider 1999’s *Diet Sudah Berakhir* (*The Diet Ends*), showing a man slumped on a toilet, handcuffed to the pipes, his polka-dot boxers around his ankles. A waitress stands next to



Sorry Hero, Saya Lupa (Sorry Hero, I Forgot), opposite, set an auction record for Masriadi's work in October 2008, at \$619,000, before being bested two days later by *The Man From Bantul (The Final Round)*, at \$1.01 million. The wrestler Hulk Hogan meets Marvel Comics' Incredible Hulk in Masriadi's 2013 painting *Ape With a Mask*, above.

him under a speech bubble that reads, "Hey handsome, what's your order?" The painting can be read as a straight depiction of the futility of dieting or as an allegory of Indonesia's painful period of readjustment in the aftermath of the economic crisis.

Deddy Kusuma, a Jakarta-based property developer, picked up the painting for 10 million rupiah (about \$1,000). "I didn't know who this Masriadi was," he says. "I saw some pictures in an exhibition catalog in 1999, and I hadn't seen that style before. I wanted three or four, but there were only two available."

The second work, entitled *Masriadi the Winner*, showed the artist pitted against a boxer resembling Mike Tyson. The painting was executed entirely in black and white apart from Masriadi's eyes, which were rendered in red, evoking the monstrous effigies in the Balinese Nyepi festival. "It shows his big ambition," says Kusuma, whose collection, housed in a villa overlooking a golf course in South Jakarta, includes Boteros, a Rodin and a Zeng, as well as several Masriadis. "He might be physically small, but in his mind, he is thinking big."

The insular nature of the Indonesian art scene is preventing local artists from getting the international recognition they deserve, Kusuma says. "If you are a great artist, you should be known globally, like Picasso, Dali and Rembrandt," he says, while acknowledging that most Jogja artists don't share his

vision. "They are very humble and idealistic. They don't dream ambitious dreams; they are more content with creating."

That poses a challenge for overseas collectors trying to learn more about contemporary Indonesian artists. "Not many are ambitious," says Alfi. "They think, 'If I can smoke cigarettes and drink coffee, that's enough.' They don't care about the market."

Even those who have achieved international success tend to underplay it. Yunizar—whose works were exhibited in 2012 at New York gallery Marc Straus, as well as at Ben Brown Fine Arts in both Hong Kong and London—makes light of his expanding global reach. "It's not a factor in my mind that New York is the center," he says. "I didn't come back thinking, 'Wow!'"

As I sit with Yunizar, 42, under his teak gazebo on a Sunday morning, among mango and papaya trees, Manhattan certainly feels far away. His works sell for \$20,000 to \$30,000—enough to build himself a two-story villa and to breed rare birds.

Yunizar's sizable studio down the street is full of huge canvases that variously recall Jean Dubuffet, Keith Haring, Yayoi Kusama and Cy Twombly. Outside, the late-afternoon light is slanting through leaves of banana trees, and chickens peck at the dirt road. One work, in particular, stands out. It's a child-like drawing of a bird against a brown background with *100% Export Quality* painted in large white letters across its body.



Yogyakarta is seeing a burst of creativity akin to New York in the 1980s. Among the artists making waves are, from left, Putu Sutawijaya, Masriadi, Abdi Setiawan, Rudi Hendriatno and Yunizar.



“There’s this impression that the stuff for export is of inferior quality from poor countries,” he says. “That’s probably the same for art as well.”

Indonesia’s underdeveloped arts infrastructure, too, poses a challenge. The Indonesian Association of Art Galleries consists of only 18 dealers, and there are no public contemporary art museums in this country of 253 million. “There are strong artists and strong collectors, but you don’t have the structure,” says Lorenzo Rudolf, founder of Art Stage Singapore, the city-state’s annual art fair. “Their galleries need a kick to go in an international direction.”

The lack of formal institutions also explains why the auction market has played such a pivotal role in the development of Indonesian art. In 2000, for example, Masriadi was one of the first contemporary Indonesian artists to sell his work directly through an auction house (Larasati, in Jakarta) rather than through a gallery.

Masriadi’s disillusionment with unprofessional local dealers coincided with his discovery of online gaming—and a significant decline in his output. The virtual world was something he could relate to. “Masriadi considers that to be the source of his inspiration and his personal passion,” says Marc Bollansee, co-author of *Indonesian Contemporary Art Now*, a seminal work on the subject. Wang Zineng, Christie’s Southeast Asia specialist, agrees. “Gaming is totally vital for him,” Wang says. “Black and white, friends and enemies, villains and heroes, good and evil—video games encouraged this kind of vision.”

Which is fine, perhaps, if you’re a teenager, but not so fitting for a father of two. (Masriadi’s daughter, Pucuk Cemara, was born in 2000.) “I would take my 4-year-old son with me to the Internet cafe,” Masriadi recalls. “When I was craziest, I’d play from late afternoon to the small hours of the morning.”

Once Masriadi established a high-speed Internet connection at home, his addiction became even more serious. “I extended the Internet cable so that I could monitor the game and paint at the same time,” Masriadi says. Today, he plays with less frequency and duration than he did five years ago, though he’s still hooked. “Painting is therapy,” he says. “Gaming is also a kind of therapy.” And a form of escape. “Sometimes he confuses one reality for another,” says Alfi, who has known Masriadi since 1993. “He doesn’t want to grow up.”

Since setting the 2008 record, Masriadi’s prices have held firm, despite an overall cooling of the Asian contemporary art market. Partly, that’s a function of supply and demand. Masriadi works without assistants and at a stately pace, steadfastly refusing to increase his output, no matter the economic incentives. “He’s always working, although I think he spends as much, if not more, time looking at the work than painting it,” Gajah Gallery’s Sandhu says. “When international collectors come to visit, they expect to see seven or eight works in progress, like in a Chinese studio.” Instead, they might find him playing video games or sitting barefoot on the ground painting. “It’s a joke sometimes,” Sandhu says.

Oei, who started collecting Masriadis in 1999, says the artist’s social awkwardness goes with the territory. “These people are so talented, of course they aren’t 100 percent normal,” Oei says. “Masriadi is rather strange, but he’s also a real artist.”

GETTING AROUND

For a jump on tomorrow's art stars today, see the Indonesian scene for yourself.

In Jakarta, both Edwin's Gallery (edwingsgallery.com) and Nadi Gallery (nadigallery.com) have played a pivotal role in fostering artists early in their careers. Visit Mon Decor Gallery (mondecor.com) for works starting at \$1,500; the adjacent, affiliated Art:1 New Museum houses part of the Gunawan family's 2,500-piece collection.

An hour's flight east lies Yogyakarta, where most of the leading artists reside. Visit in July to catch the Art Jog fair (artfairjog-ja.com). The OHD Museum in Magelang (ohdmuseum.com), to the northwest of the city center, is a must. (Combine it with a trip to Borobudur, the world's largest Buddhist monument.) Book

a tour with the OHD's owner, tobacco baron Oei Hong Djien, the country's foremost collector of contemporary art and an ardent cultural ambassador. Arrange studio visits through the relevant galleries in advance—and bring a translator. Artists to seek out include:

Jumaldi Alfi often combines Jean-Michel Basquiat-type graffiti and primitive imagery in his blackboardlike paintings. His works have shown at both Primo Marella Gallery in Milan (primomarellagallery.com) and at Marc Straus in New York (marcstraus.com). Available through Nadi Gallery in Jakarta and Gajah Gallery in Singapore (gajahgallery.com).

One of the first contemporary Indonesian artists to attract the attention



of international collectors, **Heri Dono** references traditional Javanese Wayang puppet plays in his colorful, charged canvases. Available through Edwin's Gallery and Mon Decor Gallery in Jakarta and Rossi & Rossi in London (rossirossi.com).

Rudi Hendriatno and **Abdi Setiawan** share a tiny studio where they work in wood. Hendriatno produces kinetic sculptures that resemble contraptions from the pre-industrial era. The subjects of Setiawan's menacing painted sculptures include prostitutes, thugs and children.

Rudi Mantofani refashions everyday objects into something entirely new: for instance, nine electric guitars fused into one improbable instrument. His surrealist apple imagery has invited comparisons to Rene Magritte. Available through Arndt Singapore (arndtberlin.com).

Ichwan Noor made a big splash at this year's Art Basel Hong Kong with his

life-size sculptures of Volkswagen Beetles seemingly crushed into spheres. Available through Mon Decor Gallery.

J. Ariadhitya Pramuhendra works primarily in charcoal or pencil on dark, dramatic and photolike canvases heavily influenced by his Catholic upbringing. Available through Galerie Perrotin in Hong Kong (perrotin.com).

Art scholar Marc Bollandsee considers **Handiwirman Saputra** Indonesia's strongest living artist. His miniature objects using cotton, rubber bands, wire and human hair serve as the basis for enormous abstract paintings and sculptures of sublime beauty. Available through Nadi Gallery and Arndt Singapore.

A hit at this year's Venice Biennale, **Entang Wiharso** fashions unforgettable figurative paintings and aluminum-cast bas-reliefs that are reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch (*The Garden of Earthly Delights*). Available through Arndt Singapore and Hong Kong's Pearl Lam Galleries (pearllam.com). **F.B.**



Yogyakarta, Indonesia's cultural and intellectual capital, is just an hour's drive from Borobudur, the world's largest Buddhist monument.