

Ati Kijanto

CONTRIBUTOR/LONDON

A white-bearded man on a red rock amid a gloomy sky nestled unobtrusively at "Crouching Tigers and Hidden Dragons: the Development of Modern and Contemporary Indonesian Art" exhibit.

Contemporary artists and old masters meet in Mayfair

But the oil painting by Indonesian artist Raden Saleh titled *Hermit in a Mountainous Landscape*—despite being only 14.5 centimeters by 11.8 centimeters, was the highlight of the 24 outstanding works displayed in the exhibition at the ArtSpace Gallery in London's affluent Mayfair.

"Raden Saleh painted this interesting work of art in 1838 at the time when he was studying with the reputed Dutch painters Cornelis Kruseman and Andries Schelfhout," explained Viv Lawes who was co-curator of the exhibition.

Kruseman was known for his portraits and biblical subjects, and Schelfhout was a prominent landscape artist. "We can see in this particular painting how Raden Saleh learned and absorbed the western technique from the romantic period," she said.

Another prominent display is Astari's silver-colored bronze sculpture of an *Hermès bag* with a strand of praying beads and sunglasses dangling out of one side. Stuffed inside are a Koran and *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, both apparently important life guides and reading material for the bag's owner.

The exhibition was organized by OneEast Asia, a Singapore-based art management company. It comprises Indonesian artists' works from the late 19th-century Dutch colonial romantic era through the revolution, the Bandung and Yogyakarta schools' influence, to modern Indonesian art. An eclectic array of interesting art lovers attended the opening.

The exhibition brought together a palette of different nuances of Indonesian paintings. Hendra Gunawan's *Street Performer*; S. Sudjojono, the founding father of modern art criticizing the Soeharto regime in his 1977 painting with the presidential palace in the distance in *Tell Me Why*; Raden Roedyat Martadirdja's *Nude*, which combines cubism and abstraction; and Dede Eri Supria's *Street Sweepers*, representing chaotic urban growth.

The resistance theme continues in Heri Dono's wayang puppets criticizing the Indonesian government in his 2005 *Fermentation of the Mind*, while Yunizar's *Composition of Empty Bottles* represents freedom, but that fear is still deep in the hearts of Indonesians because of lingering political uncertainty. Tommy Wondra's *No. 14* work of Muslim calligraphy and the artist-singer Soni Irwanto's *Rose Together* prove that cities become faceless and works of art can belong to anyone.

Why exhibit Indonesian artwork in London and why now, in these uncertain economic times? Daniel Komala, chairman of OneEast Asia and the exhibition's other curator explained. "My first entrance to the European market was back in 2007 in Amsterdam," he said. "But London has always been on my mind. It is the capital city of art in Europe. One needs to take on London if one wants to make a real impact in Europe."

He continued: "In art, we are all parts of a big jigsaw puzzle. Try to

get to know Indonesia a bit more, its people and culture. It's a melting pot of East and Western cultures and the art reflects this clearly. Indonesia has historical connections with England. Once people can sense the link, the art becomes a lot more meaningful."

Charles Humfrey, British ambassador to Indonesia from 2004 to 2008, said at the opening, "Indonesia is understated, too little known in England. Not many people in England know about Indonesia, let alone its art. We forget that it has been as far back as Francis Drake's time that Indonesia has fascinated England."

Komala said after a short presentation on Indonesian art that he hoped people in the audience would have a better understanding of the coun-

try. He was impressed with the talk that coincided with his visit, although the Dutch roots of Dutch painter Willem Gerard Hofker, who found his "Tahiti" in Bali after World War II. Gabriel, a scientist and a painter, thought Hofker's oil and conte crayon drawing on paper of Ni Kenjoen was extraordinary. "Using blue on a skin color is unnatural, yet it came out outstandingly beautifully. Her pose is also 'un-Asian', which makes the painting more exotic," Hofker's drawing and etching of the young Balinese girl, bare-chested and leaning on her right hand, attracted many eyes that evening.

And Jung Chang, the author of the international best-selling *Wild Swans* told *The Jakarta Post* that she would like to have an Indonesian work of art in her house.

In his talk, Komala highlighted Indonesia's artistically rich diversity. "Indonesia's contemporary art started with Sukarno, who dared to be different with his collections," said Komala. Sukarno, Indonesia's first president, was a renowned orator and a legendary womanizer, as well as an avid art lover.

Komala was on the team that valued the art at the Indonesian National Palace during the presidency of Sukarno's eldest daughter, Megawati Soekarnoputri. Komala thinks that the palace's collections are probably the most valuable in Southeast Asia, even though most of the works are mudes.

As for whether art is for the eye or investment, Komala said, "You would know which to choose or should belong to you. It's like a song with a familiar tune that plays in your head because you feel connected to it and automatically it will keep on appearing subconsciously."

"Art investment is a long-term investment," he said. "Indonesian art is undervalued now. One has to be a well-informed buyer. There's no shortcuts. Hence insight, connections and expertise are the most important ingredients. And yes, we have secured some sales and hopefully more to come in the coming weeks."

The exhibition runs until Nov. 20

ArtSpace Gallery
18 Maddox Street
Mayfair, London



Maestro: *Hermit in a Mountainous Landscape* (14.5 cm x 11.8 cm) by Raden Saleh is the highlight of the 24 outstanding works displayed in an exhibition at the ArtSpace Gallery in London's affluent Mayfair.



By Ati Kijanto

Contemporary: Astari's *Read*, a silver-colored bronze sculpture of an *Hermès bag* with a strand of praying beads and sunglasses dangling out of one side and stuffed inside are a Koran and *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, is also a prominent display.

try's rich culture, and as a result the art would start to make more sense. Lawes added, "Art also has to be exhibited and seen by as many people as possible; the quality of the act of 'seeing' is down to the exhibition to tell a story. I hope that the chapter headings of that story have been successfully sketched out in this small but carefully chosen show."

It seemed to work, at least for Peter Diepeveen, a consultant who

REBELLIOUS ART

Ai Weiwei makes tax battle a 'social performance'

Gillian Wong

ASSOCIATED PRESS/BEIJING

Dissenting artist Ai Weiwei's latest provocative piece was handed to him by the Chinese government: a US\$2.4 million tax bill that he says is a trumped-up effort to silence him.

Though jarred after spending nearly three months in police detention this year, he turned the demand into performance art — posting official documents online, tallying loans from supporters and making a video of himself singing an anti-censorship song.

It opened a window on an opaque system, and showed that many in China share his desire for government accountability. Supporters donated more than \$5 million yuan (\$1.3 million) to him in just two weeks, some of it folded into paper airplanes or wrapped around fruit and thrown over his gate.

To Ai, who has created installations around the world but had been able to show little of his work domestically, it is all art — right down to the seething commentaries against him in the official *Global Times* newspaper. State media normally decline to acknowledge his existence.

"This has become a social performance and there are so many people involved. Even the *Global Times*. They are also playing a role in this," Ai said. "This has generated such energy which has never happened in the history of China. If they want to crush somebody, then normally, for that person, what's left there is just silence."

The thrust of the artist's approach is to give the public what he says the authoritarian government denies them — transparency.

When Beijing tax officials delivered the massive bill to him on Nov. 1, scanned versions appeared on his Google profile page within hours.



Subversive: A woman looks at an art installation titled *Forever Bicycles* by dissident Chinese artist Ai Weiwei during a media preview of the "Ai Weiwei Absent" exhibition in Taipei on Oct. 28.

Responses from his company's lawyers and tax office receipts are also posted, as is a daily tally of money that supporters have sent. Volunteers even post pictures of the cash donations that land in his yard.

"What [the authorities] are afraid of the most is transparency and openness and it's the most powerful tool, so we have to do everything in front of the people, so we put our information on the Internet so everybody can see it," he said.

A New York-based art critic with expertise on China says Ai's social media-driven political action of recent years is viewed by many in the West as art.

In 2008, Ai recruited volunteers on Twitter to compile the names of thousands of students who died in poorly built schools that toppled during a massive earthquake in Sichuan. He later made an installation piece out of 9,000 children's backpacks that covered the facade of a German museum and that formed the Chinese characters for: "She lived happily for seven years in this world."

"A lot of the work that Ai Weiwei's done with Twitter and his blog and all of that stuff that might look like just political protest in China, many curators in the West have called it social sculpture," said Barbara Pollack, author of *The Wild, Wild East: An American Art Critic's Adventures in China*. "It's very much about using your interaction with people to make an artistic statement."

Perhaps emboldened by the support, Ai has been creeping back into the public eye after keeping a low profile following his June release from detention. At first, he gave only interviews to print media. Then he appeared on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine.

On Wednesday, he spoke to TV reporters on camera while wearing a T-shirt with his picture in a missing person poster — an unmistakable reference to his detention —

and said a \$1.3 million guarantee he had just paid to the tax bureau felt like ransom money.

He has referred to the money he has received as loans, not donations, and said his supporters were casting votes with their cash.

By Monday, 30,000 loans amounting to \$1.4 million had been sent, including a symbolic €100 (\$137) donation from the German government's human rights commissioner.

Fang Zhixiong, a 39-year-old repairman in the southern city of Shenzhen, said he was one of Ai's "early debtors", sending him more than 100 yuan (\$15) and urging his friends to do the same.

"I really admire people like Ai who are fighting in their personal capacity to win rights or to seek freedom," Fang said by phone. "If they didn't do this type of work, they could be leading better lives, but they do this because of an ideal and the price they pay is very great."

Though the number of donors is small compared to China's population of more than 1.3 billion, it "is still extremely large when you consider the political threat," said Mo Zhiyu, a liberal-minded author.

Ai was the most high-profile target of a sweeping crackdown on activists that started in February in a bid to prevent protests similar to those in the Middle East and North Africa. Dozens of bloggers, writers, rights lawyers and other activists were detained, arrested or questioned. Many have been released but continue to face restrictions on whom they can see and talk to.

To thank his supporters, Ai made a video of himself singing along to a song composed by Chinese Web users about a fictional national known as a "grass mud horse" — so named because the Chinese characters are homonyms for a graphic slur. It gained popularity as a *syllus* to China's Internet censors.

The *Global Times* newspaper has said Ai's supporters do not represent the larger Chinese population, and that dissidents like him would be rendered obsolete by the tide of China's progress.

Ai's actions expose a divide between China and the West in how the audiences see political action and art, Pollack said.

"In the West, it's viewed as first of all heroic but second of all as an extremely good use of performance art or social sculpture art, bringing it onto a whole new level. But when I'm in China and I talk to people, it's often seen as egotistical and drawing attention to himself," she said. "I think Ai Weiwei is extremely conscious of playing to both audiences."

The donation campaign marks a turning point for Ai, who had been concerned about a lack of support in his own country, Pollack said. She noted that while Ai was in custody none of the country's leading artists spoke up for him.

"He was very dependent about that when I saw him in September, and now receiving this money means that he has won an audience in China," she said.

Ai and his company's lawyers have 60 days to challenge the tax bill. He said they plan to demand evidence from the authorities and to be allowed to see the firm's accountant and manager, who have been uncontactable.

But the possibility of being taken away by police again is always on the artist's mind. "I worry about my child, my mother and people around me, people who care," he said. "But at the same time, if I don't make this argument, the kind of terrible things, the dangerous conditions will remain there and can happen to anybody. I cannot bear this kind of responsibility."