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DADANG CHRISTANTO THEY GIVE EVIDENCE





DADANG CHRISTANTO
INDONESIA/AUSTRALIA B1957

THEY GIVE EVIDENCE 1996-97
16 standing figures; terracotta powder mixed with resin/fibreglass, cloth, resin
height 200cm (male), 190cm (female)
Purchased 2008
337.2003.a-11

Dadang Christanto was born in Tegal, Central Java, Indonesia, in 1957. Of Chinese heritage, he converted from Christianity to Islam as an adult. In the late 1970s Dadang studied at the Indonesian Art College in Yogyakarta and later joined the Bengkel Teater group led by the celebrated writer and poet WS Rendra. Here he started to explore social and political concerns through literature, music and performance. In 1987 Dadang joined the Indonesian New Art Movement, and by the 1990s Yogyakarta artists such as Dadang were gaining a reputation internationally as well as within Indonesia.

The give evidence reflects a traumatic incident from Dadang's childhood. In 1965 at the age of eight a number of soldiers came to his house and, while he and his family were asleep, took his father away. Dadang has not seen his father since then, and still does not know why he was taken away.¹ It is still something Dadang finds difficult to discuss with his mother.

The political situation in Indonesia at this time was volatile. An attempted but failed left-wing coup against the government sparked a physical assault on those involved, including many artists and intellectuals. Ethnic Chinese were also targeted as they were seen to have an association with Communism. It has been estimated that between 100 000 to 2 million people were killed in Indonesia during this period.²

The 1990s was once again a time of government upheaval and breakdown of law and order in Yogyakarta, and Dadang has also produced works which reflect on these events.³ The resignation of President Soeharto on 21 May 1998 and the fall of the New Order regime, which had been in power since 1966, brought new artistic freedoms in Indonesia. For example, previously exhibitions could be shut down at any time and artists and writers randomly arrested; now, formal government permission was not needed for such exhibitions. However, Dadang's experience with *They give evidence* reveals that another type of repression and censorship remained which no longer comes from the government, but from society itself.⁴

Making of *They give evidence*

This installation consists of 16 larger-than-life-size standing figures made from terracotta powder mixed with fibreglass resin, each holding pieces of clothing which are shaped into empty figures. The clothing is made of cloth and resin. Some are the clothes of adults, others, of children, with 23 pieces in all.

To make *They give evidence* Dadang formed clay models of a male and female figure, which he then cast in plaster. He did not include holes for the eyes or lips on the original clay models; these details were added individually to each figure once he had finished casting. Thus, each face has a slightly different expression.

The clothing shells are made of real, everyday clothes and are actually those worn by Dadang, his wife, their son and daughter, yet they represent those worn by people in general. To make the pieces, he first packed the garments with newspaper to give them shape, and then painted the fabric itself with a few coats of fibreglass resin. Dadang's wife once remarked that Dadang seemed to be running out of clothes to use in this work and had even taken one of her favourite skirts to display without her knowing!

Overall it took Dadang, with an assistant, six months to make this work. He was further helped by some villagers who were familiar

with the ground-brick mixture applied as they used it themselves on buildings.⁵

When installed, the figures rigidly stand in a grid formation, all facing the same direction, as though giving evidence at a tribunal. This formation also gives the opportunity – in fact welcomes – the viewer to walk among the figures and observe them close up, as individuals. This proximity enables viewers to experience a sense of compassion for what these figures represent and the sorrow which is imbued in them.

The original work was funded through a grant from the Japanese government and was shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, in 1997, and then in Hiroshima. It consisted of 20 figures, four of which were purchased by the museum in Tokyo (it was unable to buy the rest, due to storage restrictions). The work then appeared at the 24th Sao Paulo Biennale 1998, where only six figures were shown due to the cost of shipping. In Japan, many of the audience left flowers or offerings at the feet of the figures, which Dadang saw as an act of contrition for the occupation of Indonesia during World War II.⁶ However it should be noted that with much of Dadang's art, this same type of offering occurs, which may infer that many find other personal meanings in his works.⁷

The cover up

In July 2002 the work was first exhibited in Indonesia in the exhibition *Unspeakable horror*, held at an outdoor public space in the town of Palmerah, near Jakarta. However, two days before the exhibition's opening, the townspeople objected to the public showing of the figures, primarily because their nudity was seen to be pornographic. It was decided that the works would be covered in black cloth and red ribbon – the act itself creating a very different work yet at the same time enhancing the issues hidden within the old. Nonetheless the works were soon removed entirely, as religious leaders objected to their very existence.

The figures

These figures are silent. Their mouths are open but nothing is spoken. Are they trying to say something about what has occurred or does their oppression only silence them further? It is in such silence that the worst violence occurs. The figures represent the voiceless masses, although their plump bodies have the capacity to hold a large heart, and their strength and equality lie here. Yet the fact that they are made of clay lends to their fragility.

Dadang makes direct references to the 9th-century Indonesian Amitabha Buddha similar to the one in the AGNSW collection, in his use of materials (resembling the stone andesite) to the shape and form of the shoulders. He also tried to create in his figures a sense of the serenity and spirituality of the Buddha himself. The figures are not only a representation of the 'earth', but also of 'victims holding victims'; those who have disappeared and those who are left behind to grieve.

Dadang has noted that the clothes his figures hold are not the figures' own but represent those left by the body and soul of those who once wore them. Yet the flow and 'continuity between old and new violence', of people disappearing, brings another pervasive silence once they are gone.⁸

Black cloth

When Dadang came to exhibit this work in the AGNSW's new Asian galleries, he decided to do a performance piece, which was to unveil the work and give his figures a new life, presenting them in a context they had been deprived of in Indonesia. It should be remembered that Dadang is not just a visual artist in the traditional sense but also a performance artist, and while still in Indonesia belonged to a group of artists who did a mixture of installation and performance works, known as instalasi. This group critically addressed issues dealing with the natural and political environment but also examined the way society deals with such environmental issues and the consequences of this on humanity. Many of these issues continue to be addressed in Dadang Christanto's work at various levels.

At the AGNSW the figures were covered in black plastic and red string, similar to how they were covered in Indonesia. During the official opening of the Asian galleries in 2003, he uncovered them in a performance that was symbolic of allowing the figures to breathe again, to give life and expression. The covering was a symbol of the dual oppression they were facing: they were already silent figures, but being covered in black plastic silences them once again and forces them to physically disappear.

Dadang often talks of the idea of 'multiple readings'. If we were to walk in and just look at *They give evidence*, without knowing the historic or personal grief of the artist, we would still gain a feeling from the silence these figures emit: their mouths open; carrying the shells of clothes which could be the representation of death or a body disappeared; we can see that there are many figures, all following one another in a very organised, almost military manner; and we can understand something happened here, whether it be purely subjective and personal, coming from our own past experience, or more objective, from looking at the experience of others.

Non-violent society

The figures Dadang has produced are evidence of an injustice suffered, both physically and mentally, within a society tainted by power, poverty and oppression. He is a firm believer of non-violence and through the works he produces truly tries to convey an awareness of the importance of a peaceful society. Dadang moved to Australia in 1999 and currently lives with his wife and two children in Darwin, where he lectures at the Charles Darwin University. What accompanied this move to Australia was a sense of freedom to express his own suffering and question the decisions humanity makes for itself. *They give evidence* is dedicated to all the victims and survivors of the brutal military regime in Indonesia of 1966–98.

Natalie Seiz, assistant curator, AGNSW 2005

1 Clark 2003, p 52

2 Clark 2003, p 55. Clark notes that the generally accepted number killed was approximately 500 000

3 See Asia-Pacific Triennial 1999

4 Wiyanto 2003, p 47

5 Ingham 2003, p 22

6 Ingham 2003, p 22.

7 Clark 2003, p 55

8 Dadang quoted in Wiyanto 2003

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

- Clark, Christine. 'Dadang Christanto: Keeper of Memories' in Caroline Turner and Nancy Sever (eds), *Witnessing to silence: art and human rights*, ANU, Canberra 2003, pp 52-55
- Ingham, Sue. 'Witnesses from Indonesia', *TAASA Review*, vol 12, no 4, Dec 2003, pp 22-23
- Stretton, Andrea. 'Reading Dadang Christanto', *Art and Australia*, vol 42, no 2, Dec 2004 – Feb 2005, pp 271–73
- Turner, Caroline. 'Dadang Christanto', *Speaking for humanity: art and social justice* (exh cat), *Beyond the Future*, the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art; Queensland Art Gallery 1999, pp 200–01
- Van Langenberg, Carolyn. 'Global resonances', *Look*, AGNSW, Feb 2004, p 16
- Hendro Wiyanto. 'The big hearted art of Dadang Christanto'. *Latitudes*, vol 32, Sept 2003, pp 44–50

For further resources and information see also *They give evidence* by Dadang Christanto on the AGNSW website: Collection

Other works by Dadang Christanto in the Gallery's permanent collection:

Count series 1.1 2001–02

painting; ink and colours on rice paper
444.2003

ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Discuss why the artist has chosen to name this work *They give evidence*. Consider his personal journey and influences.

Taking into account the formal qualities of this work such as materials, process, arrangement of forms and scale, determine how the artist communicates his intentions.

Discuss the responses of Australian and international audiences. How do they differ? In what way does the viewer's personal experience enhance the meaning of the artwork.

Research both historical and contemporary artists who address social and political unrest in their art practice. Discuss the underlying forces that cause change in society. Compare the responses of these artists to Dadang Christanto's art practice.