

NOW IS THE TIME

Indonesia needs a flagship national art museum.

BY DEBORAH ISKANDAR

On 27th November 2015, the Singapore National Gallery officially opened their doors to the public. Over 10 years in the making, the National Gallery boasts of having the most comprehensive collection of Singaporean and Southeast Asian art in the world. Designed by the French architectural firm, Studio Milou Architecture, it encompasses the original City Hall (circa 1926) with the former Supreme Court Building (circa 1936). Like the I.M. Pei Louvre Pyramid in Paris, the Studio Milou incorporated vast expanses of glass and walkways to connect the two buildings and bring them forward to the 21st century.

The gallery is arranged chronically, starting from the 19th century up to cutting edge contemporary art. The highlight of the 19th century room is an enormous canvas by Raden Saleh, the father of Indonesian art. Continuing throughout, the collection is arranged chronologically, tracing the history of modern Southeast Asian paintings and sculptures. From the 19th century, you move to the “Mooie Indies” pictures, primarily the colonial artists pre-World War II. After World War II, and the beginning of independence throughout Southeast Asia, you encounter the revolutionary paintings of Hendra Gunawan and Sudjojono. Continuing to the 1950s are masterpieces by Affandi, up to an early installation by Heri Dono, Indonesian’s representative to this year’s Venice Biennale. The National Gallery provides a comprehensive view of Indonesian and Southeast Asian art history, so it should be high on the list of attractions in Singapore.

Walking through the gallery, I was struck by the potential for Indonesia. President Soekarno was one of the greatest art connoisseurs in Southeast Asia in the post WWII period. He collected on a massive scale, not only from Indonesian artists, but international artists as well. Soekarno had great plans for his collection; it was to be housed in a national museum. Fifty years later, the collection is still locked up in the confines of the Presidential palace, and not able to be viewed by the public.

While many would contend that government money should be used for infrastructure development, the creative industries could also be supported by public-private partnerships. Museums are an inspiration to its society, showcasing its cultural identity. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York is one of the best examples of this idea.

Conceptualized by influential and enlightened “society lady” art patrons—notably Miss Lillie P. Bliss, Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan, and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.—had a mission to bring MoMA into the 20th century with modern viewpoints and curatorial directions. For



Hendra Gunawan, *War and Peace*, c. 1950s, collection of the National Gallery Singapore.

financing, different floors of the National Gallery are sponsored by major banks such as DBS and UOB, which have “naming rights” for the gallery. Independent trustees can be appointed to the board in exchange for donations and or potential to lend and ultimately donate to the museum.

Indonesia has all the right elements: the colonial buildings in Kota Tua and the consortium to develop it and the art collection. For funding, the country has billionaire Indonesians and multinational corporations, both of whom would donate if given the right incentives. Even now, Bank Mandiri owns six buildings in Kota Tua including their own museum, yet much of the artwork gracing the walls of the National Gallery in Singapore is on loan from private collections in Indonesia. Collectors clearly have the appetite to support a major art museum to rival that of Singapore and turn Jakarta into a center for Southeast Asian art.

We only need one flame, to get the “fire” started in Kota Tua, and an international standard that would be the perfect alignment for public and private partnership. The major stumbling block is the government itself. As with many other projects in Indonesia, there is no legal framework to support public-private sponsorship.

But it must be done. To develop the creative industries and an enlightened public, the country needs a flagship national art museum, with an exquisite permanent collection that would fulfill Soekarno’s vision of a society enlightened by its art and culture. **FI**

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