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Sculptors unite in show to regain lost pride

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Yusuf Susilo Hartono, Contributor, Jakarta

In the glitz and glamor of contemporary fine arts, sculpture is always overshadowed by painting. Such a predicament has encouraged sculptors in Yogyakarta, Bandung, Jakarta, Padang, Surakarta and Bali to make a greater effort at improving the image of their artform by grouping themselves within the Indonesian Sculptors Association (API).

Entrusting its chairmanship to senior sculptor G. Sidharta Soegiyo for the 2000-2003 term, API is headquartered on Jl. Letjen S. Parman 55, Yogyakarta, instead of in Jakarta. Its 90 members from various cities in and outside Java are mostly graduates of art schools, including the Yogyakarta-based Indonesian Arts Institute (ISI) and the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB).

The association, officially established last year, was proposed during a discussion as part of the Sculpture of Freedom exhibition at Galeri Dirix in Yogyakarta. Painter Heri Kris, the gallery's curator, made the suggestion, which was warmly welcomed by participants including Sidharta Soegiyo, Anusapati, Kasman KA and Suwardi. On July 7, 2000, 32 sculptors met in Yogyakarta to announce the formation of API.

However, not all sculptors are willing to join the association. Noted sculptors Nyoman Nuarta of Bandung and Dolorosa Sinaga of Jakarta, for instance, have yet to register.

"We respect their right (to join). From the beginning we never had any intention of making API the only forum for Indonesian sculptors," said Sidharta. More importantly, API represents no particular ideology of artistic creation.

Some of the big names in API, in addition to Sidharta, are Amrus Natalsya, Bagong Kussudihardjo, Arsono, Rita Widagdo, Edhi Sunarso, Iriantine Karnaya and Sunaryo. Junior members now rising to fame are Anusapati, Hanung Mahadi, Altje Ully, Innes Indreswari, Rikrik Kusmara, Pamungkas Garjito and Herry Haryanto.

To announce its existence, API is presenting 117 sculptures selected from its 77 artists in the association's first grand exhibition at the Galeri Nasional in Jakarta, from Nov. 20 to Dec. 4, 2001.

Galeri Nasional head Wati Murany applauded the initiative and hopes that the association promotes the creativity of emerging artists and exhibitions, while encouraging senior members to exhibit their newest works.

As Sidharta pointed out, 80 percent of Indonesian sculptors remained silent and dormant before API's presence. Consequently, Indonesian people are not familiar with the nation's latest sculptures. Joint displays of paintings and sculptures have only included a small number of the latter, resulting in scarce articles and criticism relating to this field of the fine arts.

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API's challenge is to keep the previously dormant sculptors awake. Their active expression means the creation of images as an artistic process and cultural activity, instead of merely fulfilling orders. It holds the long-term mission of developing the art of sculpture as a cultural undertaking rather than merely an economic enterprise or other venture.

In Indonesia, the development of sculpture dates back to the prehistoric times, when statues became part of rituals and integrated with ancient architecture. Traces of the past icons can still be found among various tribes in the country, such as those of the Asmat, Nias and Dayak ethnic groups.

Modern images, including monuments, were also built to decorate public spaces during the eras of presidents Sukarno and Soeharto. Some of them include the Selamat Datang (Welcome) statue at the Hotel Indonesia roundabout, Monumen Proklamasi, National Monument (Monas), Tugu Pahlawan (Heroes' Monument) in Surabaya and Tugu Yogyakarta.

Sidharta said many orders received by sculptors would destroy their creativity. They no longer create sculptures based on their personal expression. He praised those who did not only produce works based on orders but also created individual works and exposed them to the public.

The API exhibition is expected to make the public aware of the existence of sculptures as revealed by artist Anusapati. Other positive things can also be exposed through the exhibition. Artist Asikin Hassan described the event as a medium to evaluate the latest sculpture developments. The discontinuation of triennials by the Jakarta Arts Council has caused the loss of assessment standards.

On the other hand, fine art critic and curator Jim Supangkat saw this exhibition as questioning the position of sculpture in contemporary fine art. Contemporary developments have shown that conventional expression is being abandoned, with the emergence of "new" forms like installation art, mixed media, video art, digital art and performance art works.

API has, nevertheless, stepped forward. Only time will tell whether the sculptors' association really has the ability to improve the standing of this artform or whether it is merely overwhelmed by fleeting enthusiasm, only to remain inert thereafter.

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