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Innes Indreswari Soekanto: Sculpting her own comeback

Ellen R Tunggono , Contributor, Bandung | Sat, 07/05/2008 12:21 PM | Lifestyle

For some time, not much has been said or heard about independent sculptor Innes Indreswari Soekanto. Some people have even gone as far as taking her name off the list of the country's sculptors, thinking she wouldn't be back.

However, time has proven them wrong. Innes is back, internationally, invited to take part in the upcoming 3rd Beijing International Art Biennale 2008, while one of her other works is currently competing in the final round of the Oita Sculpture Competition 2008 in Japan.

She has also been invited to participate in the Beijing Olympic Fine Art Exhibition, which will coincide with the Olympic Games this August.

Her fellow lecturers at the sculpture studio of the Bandung Technology Institute's (ITB) School of Fine Art reacted to these developments with amazement.

"How did you do it? Who's supporting you?" were among the many questions for Innes when she shared the good news.

Innes believes one cannot hide a good artist or a good person forever and that one day the true quality of the person will emerge.

Circumstances might have forced Innes to stay in the background, but did not stop her from working and creating while she continued lecturing, studying and taking care of her son.

"During my absence, many people forgot me. Many times, my name was deliberately scratched from both

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major national as well as international exhibitions that were held in the country. Of course it hurt, but it did not defeat me," Innes said.

"The truth is, here I am, I still exist".

Becoming an artist, what's more, a sculptor, had never been her intention. Her desire was to become a soldier or policewoman, but that changed when she discovered that in the military one has to take orders.

When she graduated from a Jakarta senior high school, Innes was accepted both at the University of Indonesia School of Criminology and the ITB School of Fine Art.

This surprised her high school teacher, as Innes had never been considered an industrious student.

After graduating from ITB in 1993, Innes continued her career as a sculptor and lecturer at the same institution.

In 1996, she received an arts fellowship from the Japan Foundation, to conduct a comparative study between the creation processes of traditional and modern Japanese sculpture at Toyama University in Japan.

She married the following year and for two years lived in Japan to further her studies and raise her family.

Upon her return to Indonesia in 2004, she attained her master's degree in architecture from ITB and is currently writing her doctoral thesis.

In getting where she is today, Innes gives credit to her former lecturers:- Rita Widagdo, Soenaryo and the late G. Sidharta Soegijo. These three renowned sculptors equipped Innes with a deep, rounded understanding of concept, art, philosophy and life itself.

As a lecturer, Innes is known to be a hard working and disciplined. She is often hard on her students because she wants them to understand what they're doing and what they should do when they graduate.

Looking at her work, one can recognize some Japanese influences.

In 1995, when taking part in the Inami International Wooden Sculpture Workshop, where she learned about creating public art, one of the Japanese sculptors said something that struck a chord in her consciousness.

The Japanese sculptor said, "How come an Asian doesn't understand how to deal with nature?"

The sculptor was referring to Innes's Westernized understanding of handling wood. Asians see wood as part of nature.

This experience made Innes realize she needed to look at her native cultural roots instead of following Western ways.

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For her undergraduate final project, Innes, who already had a passion for her traditional cultural heritage, created stone carvings she called "Contrast".

The artwork was inspired by the philosophy of the *wayang* shadow puppet, which is embedded in the contrast between the colorful *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) and its black shadow.

Innes saw the contrast not as a contradiction, but as an experience leading to the discovery of harmony or a new strength.

To understand and appreciate Innes's work, one might need to spend some time thinking, as most of her work carries a deep philosophical meaning behind it.

"I'd rather someone collect my work because they understand and agree with my thoughts, compared to someone who buys my work just to decorate their home," Innes said.

German-born sculptor Rita Widagdo said Innes's work carried traditional values and would therefore be appreciated internationally, rather than locally, and advised Innes to go international.

"I work with metal, wood and sometimes stone," Innes said. "I generally use real copper or bronze. It is more expensive and heavy, but you can feel the massiveness of the material. Besides, I don't want to disappoint collectors of my work."

In the past, Innes tried using polyester resin with electro plating, but the results were disappointing. Ever since then, she promised herself to only use genuine metal or wood.

During her 15 years as a lecturer, Innes has assisted many of her students in reaching success. Among her students are up-and-coming young artists like Budi Adi Nugroho, Wiyoga Muhandanto, Octora, Cecilia Patrice and Leodiansyah.

Innes owes her former students for supporting her comeback. Toward the end of last year, she emailed her former students and asked them to comment on what they had gained from her teachings and what they expected from her.

"Most of them were glad that I forced them to think and be responsible for their choices," she said.

"They are my pride and joy. They have taught me a lot and given me the courage and strength to keep on creating. One of my former students, Budi Nugroho, even suggested that I exhibit my works," she added, breaking into tears.

Innes has posted all of her student's comments on her website.

It was with this support that she entered her artwork in the Beijing International Art Biennale 2008.

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She recalled that she was overjoyed when the letter arrived informing that her work, "The Key of Perfection is Love", had been chosen to be exhibited in the Biennale.

She will also be speaking at the Biennale three-day seminar on July 7-11 2008.

Innes said the spirit of the Beijing Olympics inspired her to create the chosen work, which centers on love among people living in a world divided into many cubicles -- where each person demands their own privacy while living in their own private space. Yet, each private room is actually part of a big room, and the key to entering each room is love.

Though busy preparing for the various exhibitions and competitions, Innes is also currently preparing her first international solo exhibition at the Arthoholic Gallery in Singapore in October this year.

"The theme of this exhibition is choice," she said, "which relates to various choices people have to make in different stages of their lives."

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