

SEMSAR SIAHAAN

(b. 1952, Medan, Indonesia – d. 2005, Indonesia)

Semsar Siahaan was a pivotal figure in Indonesia's progressive art movement. A fervent humanitarian and political activist, his work was deeply intertwined with the socio-political upheavals of his time. Siahaan's incisive social commentary, conveyed through his paintings, drawings, and installations, played an integral role in the anti-dictatorship and pro-democracy movements of the 1990s. His art directly confronted human rights abuses, often incorporating banners bearing demands for justice or text that heightened the irony and urgency of his imagery.

In 1978, Siahaan joined Group '78, a student-led movement opposing the re-election of then-President Suharto. His defiance of state control over artistic and cultural expression culminated in a notorious protest in 1981, during which he burned a sculpture by one of his teachers at the *Institut Teknologi Bandung* (The Bandung Institute of Technology) in Bandung, Indonesia, denouncing the military government's influence over the arts. This act led to his expulsion, yet he continued to fight for artistic freedom, leading a student strike at the institute. Consequently, he was barred from holding a solo exhibition there in 1983.

Relocating to the Netherlands, Siahaan became active among Indonesian political dissidents, publishing the bulletin *For the Sake of Democracy and Human Rights in Indonesia*. In 1994, he received critical acclaim for his installation *Redigging the Mass Grave*, which he described as a symbol of Indonesia's long history of human rights violations. Despite initially being selected for the São Paulo Biennale, Suharto's government withdrew his participation due to the political nature of his work.

Though invited to exhibit in Germany and offered an artist residency in Kazakhstan, Siahaan declined, remaining in Indonesia amid escalating political unrest. In 1998, he played a key role in organising the Indonesian Pro-Democracy Action, a coalition of NGOs that staged a massive three-day peace demonstration. His activism, however, made him a target of state violence. During the peaceful protest in Jakarta, he was shot and brutally beaten by soldiers. While hospitalised with a broken leg, he was subjected to severe torture, leaving him permanently disabled. This traumatic experience forced him into exile, leading to relocations across the Netherlands, Canada, and Singapore.

In 1999, Siahaan arrived in Canada as a visiting artist and speaker at the University of Victoria. His work expanded beyond Indonesian politics, critiquing global capitalism with sharp satire, as seen in *The Global Trader* (2001). His rapid success in Canada, marked by several significant exhibitions, attested to his artistic calibre and the universality of his political concerns.

A master of artistic appropriation, Siahaan reinterpreted canonical works to expose Indonesia's subjugation to Western economic and cultural dominance. In *Olympia, Identity with Mother and Child* (1988), he reimagined Manet's iconic *Olympia* to critique the country's subservience to Western capitalism while simultaneously challenging the hegemony of Western art. A postcolonial artist with a keen postmodern awareness, he transcended artistic and geographical boundaries with a bold, unrelenting vision.

Siahaan's activism was not solely political—it was deeply personal. The loss of his only son

profoundly shaped his work, forging his empathy for parents who suffered the preventable deaths of their children due to poverty, disease, and systemic neglect.

Surprisingly, upon his return to Indonesia in 2003, he was honoured with a solo exhibition at the National Gallery. For over a decade, his large-scale, often monumental canvases had gained recognition in Indonesia, Japan, and Australia, exposing the greed and hypocrisy of political and business elites. His art bore witness to events that could not be openly discussed, solidifying his role as one of Indonesia's most significant voices of dissent.

Despite the profound impact of his work and activism, Siahaan remained an outsider—eschewing both political and artistic establishments. His legacy, though widely acknowledged, has yet to be fully recognised within the pantheon of great Indonesian artists.

EDUCATION

- 1977 Sculpture, Bandung Institute of Technology, Bandung, Indonesia
- 1975 Painting, San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI), San Francisco, United States

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2022 *New Beginnings: Grand Opening of Gajah Gallery Jakarta*, Jakarta, Indonesia
- 2021 *TWENTYFIVE Yogyakarta*, Gajah Gallery Yogyakarta, Indonesia
TWENTYFIVE, Gajah Gallery Singapore
- 2020 *GENSET*, Gajah Gallery, Singapore
- 2019 *Monumenta: In Lightness*, Gajah Gallery, Singapore
- 2017 *Semsar Siahaan: Art, Liberation*, Gajah Gallery, Singapore
Jakarta Biennale *JIVA*, Jakarta, Indonesia
- 2016 *Semsar Siahaan: Points of View*, Gajah Gallery, Indonesia, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
- 2005 *The Shade of Northern Lights*, National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia
- 1999 *Black Orchid*, Maltwood Gallery, Victoria, Canada
- 1998 *The Eco Seeds Action*, Cemeti Gallery, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
- 1997 *Glimpse Into The Future: Some Aspects of Contemporary Southeast Asian Art*, Tokyo
Museum of Contemporary Art and Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan
- 1996 Asia Pacific Triennale, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia
- 1995 *Modernity and Beyond*, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
- 1994 Jakarta Biennale IX, Taman Ismail Marzuki, Jakarta, Indonesia
- 1986 Jakarta Triennale I, Jakarta, Indonesia
Exhibition of Contemporary Sculpture Competition Indonesia, Cultural Centre, Jakarta, Indonesia
- 1981 Art Happening, Art ITB Bandung, Jakarta, Indonesia
- 1979 Indonesian Exhibition of Young Artists, Jakarta Cultural Centre, Jakarta, Indonesia
Living Statue Experiment, Art ITB Bandung, Jakarta, Indonesia

AWARDS

1994 Received the Best in Show award at the Jakarta Biennale IX

SELECTED BIOGRAPHY

1952 Born in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia

1965-1968 Took art lessons in Belgrade, Yugoslavia

1975 Graduated from high school
Began to study painting at the San Francisco Art Institute (SAFI), United States, under the guidance of American painters Bruce McGraw and Ursula Schneider

1977-1981 Returned to Indonesia and studied sculpture at the Bandung Institute of Technology, West Java, Indonesia

1979 Held exhibitions in Bandung, Jakarta, and Australia
Conflicts with Indonesian cultural and political authorities
Moved to the Netherlands
Active with Indonesian political dissidents
Published a bulletin called *For the Sake of Democracy and Human Rights in Indonesia*

1984 Returned to Indonesia

1990 Went to Australia for a six-city tour of his exhibition and lecture series

1994 Exhibited at the Jakarta Biennale IX
Organised an alliance of Indonesian NGOs into the Indonesian Pro-Democracy Action

1995 Exhibited at the inauguration of the Singapore Art Museum
Put up shows in Australia and Japan

1997 Escaped to Singapore after military squads in Indonesia started kidnapping pro-democracy activists

1999 Migrated to Canada

1999-2004 Painted and exhibited works in Canada
Solo shows in Victoria, Canada

2005 Solo exhibition at the National Gallery in Jakarta