

# FRESH VISION

[COMPLEX HUMOUR](#) CURATED BY RICHARD HASSEL

## **You're an artist yourself – tell us a bit about your background in the arts?**

I was an obsessive artist since a very young age, and continued for the next 50 years! I studied both art and architecture, but finally graduated in architecture. I have always maintained a twin practice: while architecture is obviously a very demanding collaborative process, I have really enjoyed art as something I can do by myself, just for the joy of it.

## **Do you have a main philosophy or belief that guides your decisions as an architect, artist, collector and curator?**

Yes, I do, but what is interesting is that this philosophy was at first purely instinctive. As I followed some interesting research and gained more knowledge, I began to understand it in a more cohesive framework. It is in the field of systems thinking, about how systems have properties that can't be predicted if you examine the parts. It's about relationships and cycles, and how connected complex assemblages can create virtuous cycles and value. So whether it's my own art, which is about the visual and representational possibilities of complex geometries; our architecture, which is about social, environmental and economic systems working together to create supportive environments; or my interest in Indonesian and Tribal art, which embodies older cultures that were deeply embedded in their physical and spiritual environments, they are all different aspects of the same big ideas.

## **Can you share with us how your architectural work affects your exploration in visual art (as an artist and/or as a collector) and vice versa?**

Architecture is very much a collaborative process and about finding the most pleasing consensus. It's slow and difficult and expensive, so you need a lot of patience, and you need to be at ease with something taking six to ten years to complete. Every decision gets interrogated from multiple viewpoints, so you could say it is hyper rational even when it is artistic, as you are asked to justify what you are doing over and over again to many different stakeholders.

Where I thought my art was a break from this, I have realized it is taking place within exactly the same methodology. I have created the same situation for myself, which is interesting.

I think the work we do shapes our thought processes, so it is not surprising that I have applied the same creative process that I mapped from architecture back to art. My art is a kind of puzzle where I create many criteria for what I want it to do, and then work very hard to solve the puzzle that satisfies all these criteria. I can justify every artistic decision, just like with architecture, under design, construction, technical, representational and perceptual categories.

As a collector, the architectural thinking does affect my decision to own pieces. Some is about research; I like to buy pieces that offer solutions to problems I am thinking about. Some is about authenticity; they are by artists or movements that I have long studied and enjoyed, so to own a real piece by the artist or from the movement ignites a direct connection with something from my own educational history. I thus have a mixed bag of pieces that have meaning for me, such as a Vriedeman de Vries perspective etching, a Piranesi Carceri etching, a Haeckel lithograph, and a Hiroshige sketch for a woodblock for instance.

I do have a collection of contemporary Indonesian work, but that also came out of research for projects in Indonesia, starting with commissioning a large collection of Balinese works for a hotel. I then got interested in what was happening in Jogja's vibrant art scene. I liked the way the Indonesian artists were working through their rich visual culture, much as our resort work had to deal with the architectural history, connect to it, but also be contemporary.

**What are you drawn to – your personal artistic tastes and style?**

**Who are your top inspirations, whether in the arts, design, or other fields?**

I am drawn to complexity, the human element, and an awareness of culture and history. The more I learn about something, the more I enjoy it. I also like excellence, so I am also interested in having the best of an affordable category rather than a poor version of something I wish I could afford!

**What is the title and/or theme for this curated showcase?**

**How and why did you decide on this?**

My title for this curated showcase is Complex Humour. Both artists attracted me first by their gentle humour, and then by the way this comedic surface overlaid much more difficult themes. It is like taking bitter medicine with some honey!

**Which artists have you selected to showcase? Why have you chosen these artists?**

My selected artists are Yunizar and I GAK Murniasih. I have chosen these artists as I have become familiar with their work over the last 10 years. First, I was attracted to them visually, then as I did more research into them and saw more work, I found them also intellectually

interesting. They are Indonesian artists, which is a field I am now more familiar with compared to other regional art scenes. While there are other artists that I find visually very appealing, for instance in the Philippines, I just can't summon the time to become more of an expert on their work.

**Can you share with us the first time you encountered the works of Yunizar and/or Murniasih and what it is that moved you to follow their practice since that first encounter?**

I encountered Murniasih's work in Bali at Tony Raka gallery in Ubud, when I was commissioning work for our extension to the Alila hotel project in around 2013. I was looking for artists that worked within their tradition but were also doing something new. Her work was amazingly fresh within the Balinese tradition: the subject matter was not village life or cremations or tourism, but deeply personal psychological and sexual matters. It was a female perspective too, which was rare in Balinese art. I already liked the art of her mentor Mokoh, so it was intriguing to see what she did with his gentle style and how she applied it to shocking themes. I found her very like Frida Kahlo, with her own set of symbols that represented her pain and illness and sexuality. She had died around 7 years before this, so her tragically early death also gave her work an additional melancholy. I bought a couple of small works at auction, and then have some larger ones that I bought a few years later. I am fascinated by how the combination of sweet colours and gentle, surreal forms contrast the violence of the subject matter.

I first saw Yunizar's work at Art Stage Singapore and OHD Museum. Then I visited his studio in Jogja, and was impressed by how he was unfazed by visitors and so focused on producing his work. He could not wait for us to leave and get back to work. There were some huge paintings in his studio based on family trees that appealed to my interest in fractal structures, while his graffiti approach and childlike drawing creates an activated and lively flat planar surface, which is quite architectural.

**Why have you selected these works to represent them? What do you know of each artists' practice? How do you interpret these works?**

For Murni, I have selected *Thumb*, and *Tali Kbku di Caplok ikan dalam mimpi* (A Fish is Pinching my Birth Control Device in a Dream).

*Thumb* is unusually a soft sculptural work, not a painting, but it is really interesting the way it again takes soft, feminine elements and then makes something quite monstrous out of them. The soft fabric inscribed with delicate patterns and signatures is stitched together like Frankenstein's monster. It is just a bit too large for human scale, which gives it a sense of horror, and has disturbing appendages and distortions in the body.

*Tali Kbku di Caplok ikan dalam mimpi*, (A Fish is Pinching my Birth Control Device in a Dream) is a classic disturbing Murni painting, where a distorted and partial body, with floppy and weightless parts, is subject to a disturbing probing or hooking, while the whole thing is very pretty and delicate and feminine, with arabesque lines and candy colours.

For Yunizar, I am choosing two sculptures, *Big Boss from the East*, and *Kucing*. While Yunizar is known as a painter, I really like his sculptural work. As a collector of tribal art, his pieces remind me of wooden ancestor figures or totemic animals, but they have a humour and crudeness that work very well against the gravitas of precious bronze, which is traditionally used for western figures of gods and luminaries.

*Big Boss from the East* makes me wonder if the subject is a new Chinese investor who had come to Indonesia or a businessman from Java, which is east of Sumatra where Yunizar comes from, or even from Surabaya versus Jogja, where he works. I like the way it reverses the colonial situation, where the big boss came from the West. The rounded arms remind me of metalwork figures from Timur in Eastern Indonesia and even Papuan Boiken figures. The graphic details on the coat, the stubble on the head, and buttons on the boots are all very appealing. The drawing of the boss on the back of the coat is interesting: is the real man inside much smaller than his formal costume makes him look? The drawing connects it back to the paintings too—this is one of Yunizar’s childlike figures come to life.

Similarly, *Kucing* is a cat that has a very mild face but a very formal, fierce posture. It is like a Chinese lion outside a temple or a businessman’s house. The texture of the coat is abstract and finely worked, but the cat is comically inelegant with a pot belly and a flat face on a long neck. It also reminds me of the cats in a book of cat comics by Sine, a French cartoonist from midcentury, which I was very fond of as a child.

Having met Yunizar in his studio in 2013, it was interesting to see this inscrutable character and mild puzzlement in the faces of the sculptures – they seem surprised, but accepting of the situation in which they find themselves: I saw this in the artist himself!

**Why are these works by Yunizar and Murniasih important to highlight particularly at this moment in time to you? What message would you like to convey?**

Indonesia is a very interesting country, with diverse cultures and a complex, difficult history. I really like the way these two artists grapple with their own personal stories and situation, and also are in communication with their own culture within Indonesia, with modernism and modern Indonesia, and with the legacy of colonialism and the positioning of Indonesian art within global art. There is a humour and an acceptance of the complexity of life in Murni and Yunizar’s works, without making strident statements. The works have a visual delight, built over some very difficult and sad situations caused by history, by luck or by abuse.

**Who was your audience in mind when you were working on this exhibition?**

**What kind of conversation / response did you hope to spark among this audience?**

I would like to share my enthusiasm for Indonesian art. I hope to spark more interest in what is happening in the Indonesian art scene, as there is not yet a robust culture of academic study and analysis and institutional support, but there are really interesting artists working there and grappling with the big issues of our time in very creative ways. This is starting to change, but I think it's an art scene worth getting interested in and investing in, because it is still relatively affordable to get really great pieces by artists who will become more important as the national story gets told.

**How did it feel putting on a curator's hat for this project – did you notice any overlaps with your process or concerns as an architect and/or artist? Did you come across any challenges or surprises in the process?**

I enjoyed it very much. I learned that I am more interested in the material aspects of a work—I have to really first like it with my eyes, before my brain gets interested, and that probably relates to my interest in making places, buildings and objects. Some people are more interested in the stories first, and then the artwork is a placeholder for the story. But I prefer the object itself to have a power: that even if you buried it for 500 years, then dug it up, it would speak of itself without the need for a lengthy explanation. My tribal art collection is like that – I don't really understand even 10% of what its creator intended, but the objects have their own visual and material power that I enjoy – you pick up the conviction and belief of the artist in their work even without the intent.

**With all the historic events happening in the world today, how can art and design contribute significantly to humanity to you?**

Art and design can reassure us that the important things in life will survive somehow, even through major shifts in our relationships with each other, with nations, with nature and with beliefs. Our basic humanity shines through good art, sidestepping language and the complicated details of our time. You can look at the cave paintings that date back thousands of years and feel a kindred spirit with those long-gone people. Both Murni and Yunizar speak to me through their art, even if we grew up in separate continents, speak different languages and have vastly different experiences. Their gentle humour and playful delight in the face of complex situations give me hope.