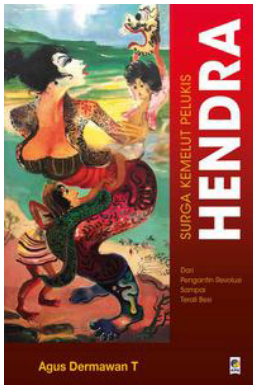


BOOK REVIEW



***Surga Kemelut Pelukis Hendra:
Dari Pengantin Revolusi Sampai Terali Besi***

Author: Agus Dermawan T.

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Dhania Putri Sarahatika

English Program, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

Email: sarhtikadhania@gmail.com

Remembering the “People’s Painter”

There are only a small handful of books on Indonesian visual arts available, let alone biographies of artists. Published last year, Agus Dermawan T.’s “Surga Kemelut Pelukis Hendra: Dari Pengantin Revolusi Sampai Terali Besi” (“Hendra’s Heavenly Chaos: From Revolutionary Groom to Time Behind Bars”)¹ was both a breath of fresh air and a long-awaited one, considering Hendra Gunawan—the subject of the book—is one of the country’s legendary artists most famously known for creating “Pengantin Revolusi” (1955). The book was released in July, at the same time a double bill held by Ciputra Artpreneur was announced: one retrospective exhibition of Hendra’s paintings and the other a tribute exhibition by younger, living artists to him. Given that our appreciation and documentation toward artists is lacking, the book and exhibitions were a perfect way of honoring Hendra’s contribution to Indonesia’s art sphere.

The author himself is no stranger to writing artists’ biographies. Before this, the 67-year-old curator and art critic has written about realist painter Basoeki Abdullah and Dutch-Indonesian artist Adrianus Wilhelmus “Arie” Smit. Agus also knew Hendra, having interviewed him on several occasions, not to mention that he was the curator for last year’s exhibitions along with Aminuddin Siregar. Previously, he also co-wrote “Hendra Gunawan, A Great Modern Indonesian Painter” (2001) with Astri Wright. In addition, he has received awards for his contribution to culture by the Education and Culture Ministry in 1998, Jakarta Museum Agency (Dinas Permuseuman) in 2004, and Visual Arts Award by Visual Arts Magazine in 2011. Therefore, if anyone had sufficient portfolio to write about Hendra, it would be Agus.

The book begins with an eloquently put answer to the question: “Why does Hendra Gunawan deserve to be remembered in a biography?” Hendra is among the big leagues along with Raden Saleh, Sudjojono, Affandi, and Basoeki Abdullah. Agus argues that Raden and Basoeki focused on romantic, photographic images while Sudjojono and Affandi were known for being unorthodox with their styles. Where does that leave Hendra? Hendra, according to Agus, managed to “show traditional Indonesian-ness in modern-style works” (Dermawan T., 2018, ix). Hendra’s subjects are dominated by common people—dominated by women—in humble settings, such as mothers and kids getting playing together as they wait for the fathers to come home from work—hence the moniker “the people’s painter.”

The first of eight chapters in the book talks about Hendra’s childhood. It turned out that his background was not as humble as his paintings. Born in 1918 in Bandung (West Java), Hendra came from a Sundanese blue-blood family. His father was a respected civil servant and his grandfather from the mother’s side worked as a School Toezichter (school inspector) and had participated in organizing the first Boedi Oetomo congress in 1928. Hendra is described to have had a flair for exploring his surroundings and love for the nature, which influenced his subjects later on. Upon noticing that Hendra had some artistic talents, his father told him not to become an artist because he would end up poor for not being able to compete with Dutch artists. However, Hendra and his rebellious streak insisted on being an artist, learning from the likes of Abdullah Suriosubroto and Wahdi Sumanta. He built his network and even established a group name “Kelompok Lima” with Affandi, Barli, Wahdi, and Sudarso. More importantly, he was willing to leave his

comfortable, financially secure life behind for a life of a starving artist (Dermawan T., 2018, 20-25).

Perhaps the most intriguing parts are the second and third chapters, which depict Hendra's political affiliations, contribution to the academia, and how he was imprisoned for 12 years later on despite his patriotism and contribution to both the nation's independence and the sustainability of the art world. Hendra helped statesmen and troops during the post-Independence revolution years, both in fighting and painting the battle scenes. Moreover, he was one of the founding fathers of Sanggar Pelukis Rakyat and Indonesian Fine Arts Academy (ASRI) in Yogyakarta—now Indonesian Arts Institute (ISI) Yogyakarta—showing his will to empower other, younger artists. However, just because of his involvement in Institute of People's Culture (Lekra), Indonesian Communist Party's (PKI) cultural arm, which he joined not exactly out of support to the party, but to be with like-minded artists, he was jailed without trial for over 12 years. Of course, there was no way he could stop painting even behind bars.

Hendra's reputation as an artist is further emphasized in chapters four and five, from the way his works are often forged up to how much property tycoon Ciputra remained a loyal collector. This book contains the letters exchanged between Hendra and Ciputra (Dermawan T., 2018, 144-155). After Hendra's release from prison, he had trouble convincing collectors to buy his art due to his stained reputation, but Ciputra bought many of his paintings and even assisted him when he was moving to Bali. As a form of gratitude, Hendra painted "Keluarga Ir. Ciputra dan Ali Sadikin" ("The Ciputras and the Sadikins"). This is a rare, intimate account of an artist and his patron, making it one of the most touching parts of the book aside from Hendra's funeral, which gathered artists who sent him prayers from various religions (Dermawan T., 2018, 116-117).

The last three chapters are no longer narratives, but additional details inviting readers to appreciate Hendra more. "Hendra in the Media" marks the sixth chapter, showing a slew of old news clippings discussing Hendra and his works. Of course, stories alone are not enough. In the seventh chapter, readers can have a look at Hendra's paintings in full color, allowing them to observe the ideas mentioned in the previous chapters, such as his affinity for drawing women; how his technique evolved over the years, such as the use of bolder lines and more diverse color palettes in later years; as well as how snippets of the nation's history fit among the myriad of natural landscapes. Finally, the last chapter summarizes his family background and important events in a chronological order.

Overall, the book gives a comprehensive, enjoyable description of Hendra's life. There is nothing special about the writing though, as like many biographies, the book focuses on cramming every little detail in the 200+ pages through the use of clear and concise writing. Since Agus knew Hendra (though he only admitted to have met Hendra several times in 1978-1979) and his family, there would have been no harm in adding more of his personal account of Hendra to make the book more intimate and moving. Such technique has been common among English arts journalists-turned-biographers, especially when describing sympathy-arousing events or conditions of the subject. In addition, an index page would have been useful considering this book is likely to be used in the academia.

Furthermore, the book also paves a way for further discussions. Though its extensive scope already covers not only Hendra's life and outlook, but also broader issues such as art forgery, there is a great potential for more specific and detailed discussions. Gender, particularly how Hendra views and portrays women in his paintings, is one of them. All in all, despite its limitations, the book is worth-reading for art enthusiasts as it successfully shows how underappreciated Hendra is for his talent, humanism, endless charity to the people and things he believed in, and most importantly, undying love for art.

ENDNOTE

1) Translation taken from Sarahtika, Dhania. (2018, July 23). "Hendra Gunawan's Retrospective Double Bill." *Jakarta Globe* Retrieved from <https://jakartaglobe.id/culture/hendra-gunawans-retrospective-double-bill/>.

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