



# Playing the Fool

Agus Suwage



Front Cover detail:

**Tuhan Tak Sampai (Beyond God's Reach)**

**2004**

**Oil on canvas**

**150 x 145 cm**

Exhibition dates:

**14th October – 6th November 2004**

*f i n e* **VALENTINE  
WILLIE  
ART**

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*Southeast Asian Paintings & Works of Art*

Opening hours: Monday – Friday: 12 noon – 8pm. Saturday 12 noon – 6pm.  
Closed on Sundays and public holidays.

## Pinning Down The Fool

The endless potential of portraiture, so malleable to interpretation and appropriation, is perhaps one of its most beguiling charms. As Malaysian painter Noor Mahnun Mohamed notes, “the challenge is not so much *why* portraiture but *how?*” Agus Suwage rarely allows Realism the privilege it enjoys in conventional portraiture. Using a series of ingenious visual ploys, he turns the loaded connotations of self-portraiture on their head, taking on the pervasive Southeast Asian themes of identity and displacement. Adopting the concept of the self-portrait as an image not as seen but as represented, Suwage cleverly fuses together elements from a wide range of media in constructing his various alter-egos. His references are eclectic and diverse; they range from pop icons to traditional motifs, from current affairs to photography, religion, music and more.

Suwage is usually reticent about the intentions behind the making of his art. As in real life, he rarely explains; he *shows*, smiles, and walks away. He shape-shifts and slides, slipping in and out of characters on canvas, playing the tortured, the oppressor, the revered, the jester, the fool, the glut, the masochist. Framed within the image of the artist in his myriad guises are layers of socio-political commentary and a critique of human nature. Meanings are multi-faceted and difficult to pin down, new associations and possibilities are produced at each turn. His quiet statements often deliver stealthy blows, calculated moves designed to hit different notes on the emotional and intellectual scale. The personality behind each painting provides an insight into the artist's personality and inner thoughts, at times brazen, introspective or sharp with social satire. His work brims with irony, angst and humour – *happiness is a warm gun, bang-bang...shoot shoot!*

Suwage's inquiries into the contradictions of human nature arise out of the peculiarity of his cultural context. Born in Purworejo in Central Java in 1959, of Chinese descent, his understanding of cultural identity have been profoundly shaped by major turning points in Indonesia's history. While he may be biologically Chinese, his cultural consciousness is essentially Javanese. He is comfortable with displacement and paradox, the outcome of the convergences of his surroundings. His decisions are often unexpected, driven by the need to *do things the other way*. He deliberately chose rival school, Institute of Technology Bandung (ITB) over the geographically closer Art Institute of Indonesia (ISI) in Yogyakarta and while he has always been passionate about painting, he chose to train in Graphic Design, maintaining close contact with members of the Fine Art faculty.

***Playing The Fool*** introduces a number of works made specifically for the Malaysian context. No two countries share such tremendous similarities in cultural origin and traditions as Indonesia and Malaysia. While we may be of “the same kind”, *serumpun*, we are also distinguished by our differences. ***Holy Beer*** is one such work made especially to test the waters of our cultural divide. Fusing the crescent moon and a crucifix



to form the “Holy Beer” logo on an empty beer glass, the artist is consciously treading on sensitive ground. The pun is in the logo as well as in the way this sentence reads, an oxymoron in Muslim faith. He stands in this empty glass in place of the beer, smiling mischievously, his head cocked to one side, ready to burn in the fires of hell. It would appear that Suwage is poking fun at himself. He also holds up a mirror to cosmopolitan Kuala Lumpur, reflecting some of the realities of this urban environment. Donning a pig mask in ***Paradiso-Inferno PP #2***, the artist represents both the porky angel and devil. The pig mask is one of the recurring motifs in Suwage's paintings, used as a metaphor suggesting corruption or greed, but in the case of Muslim Malaysia it is a form of taboo. “PP” is short for “*Pulang-Pergi*”, (to go) there and back, like a bus ride – taking a ride from Paradise to Hell and back is as simple as purchasing a ticket. In the troubling image, ***Madonna Baru***, the subject's identity remains unclear from her robe and wrapped head. She is painted in negative, her features ambiguous, bathed in glaring light. Given the polemics in religion and current affairs, has the sacred Christian Mother been replaced by the new holy jilbab-clad woman?

***Selingkuh Tak Sampai (The Affair That Never Was)*** explores the relationship between a pair of lovers or possibly a married couple. The colour pink is used to suggest the female character, while the male is rendered in black, white and grey. This painting is perhaps one of the more lighthearted and humorous in the series. As the title suggests, we see the man in the act of being punished for his promiscuity. In another painting dealing with relationships, we see a pair of hands suffocating the central male character with a plastic bag. Its title reads, ***Sekadar Memperagakan Apa Yang Sedang Dilakukan Oleh Si Dia (An Example Of What She's Doing To Me)***. The plastic bag pulled over his head is painted with a McDonald's logo. Is this man a willing victim? His face is concealed; his reaction forever a mystery. Who is the pink figure in the background, and what is her relationship with him? Obviously cast in the role of the oppressor, is she a metaphor for the evils of Western capitalism – a critique of global consumerism perhaps? Or is this a more general comment about power in a relationship?

The epic ***Self Portrait As Banaspati***, is a contemporary interpretation of traditional Javanese *wayang*. In the tales of Mahabharata, Banaspati is one of the eight subordinates of Bathari Durga, an all-powerful evil lord. He is a sage born in giant form, a *raksasa* or ogre, a demon spirit who turns into flame. Both a protector and destroyer, the progression of this metamorphosis is depicted in a series of five canvases. Drawing from traditional stylized flames popularized by *wayang kulit* (shadow puppets), in the shape of *gunungan* (mountains), this flame motif is also widely used in traditional batik and architecture.

While Agus Suwage may be widely known for his paintings, he has also worked with installations and performance. More recently he has also been making objects. ***Toys "S" US*** is a body of work which explores the pun between "plaything" and "playing", an object and an action, the tension between "player" and "audience".<sup>1</sup> Driven by the notion of play and toys as symbols of childhood, reminders of the simple pleasures of our past, Suwage's toys hold bizarre twists. In this video documentation, the artist appears in the form of toys, grinning from ear to ear. Engineered from simple mechanisms, the act of playing, manually operating these toys, no longer appears as innocent. His presence lends a sinister cast to the warm memories of our protected childhood. They are barbed with disturbing suggestions, a simple act of pleasure has been transformed into one of torture. As we are made conscious of the underlying implications, the artist asks, can we still enjoy a toy as an adult?

On a lighter note, ***Across The Universe*** pays tribute to the Beatles. A huge Beatles fan and a member of *The Lonely Hearts Club* band in Yogyakarta, Suwage reinterprets the iconic image of this legendary band with a local flavour. Four miniature canvases depicting each Beatle member crossing Abbey Road are placed in four miniature replicas of the ubiquitous *becak* (trishaw) of Yogyakarta, lined up in a row side by side, as though waiting. Another arrangement of four *becak* propping up a chess board, ***Playing The Fool 3*** offers an ironic turn to the game of chess. In a game which now includes four players, each chess piece no longer moves as expected, the game appears to have arrived at an impasse. The metaphor of a chess game is used to suggest struggle or power play, a case of too many cooks spoiling the broth?

Suwage's work is a response to the perversions of our times, everyday living and the complexities of our histories. He challenges viewpoints and traditional paradigms of authority by irreverently combining extreme polarities, the sacred and the taboo, the banal and the classical, and gleefully exposes the brutal truths of our surroundings and contrary nature. The artist's world is charged with polemics where the macabre, the absurd and the scandalous are at play, baring their dysfunctions and eccentricities with candour. The artist's recurring silent smile offers no easy answers or clues to his stance, leaving us to wonder who the real Agus Suwage is behind his alter-egos.

Adeline Ooi  
Curator, September 2004



I Smell Therefore I Am

2004

Oil on canvas

150 x 145 cm





I Suck Therefore I Am  
2004  
Oil on canvas  
150 x 145 cm



Holy Beer  
2004  
Oil on canvas  
145 x 80 cm





Madonna Baru (New Madonna)

2004

Oil on canvas

145 x 80 cm



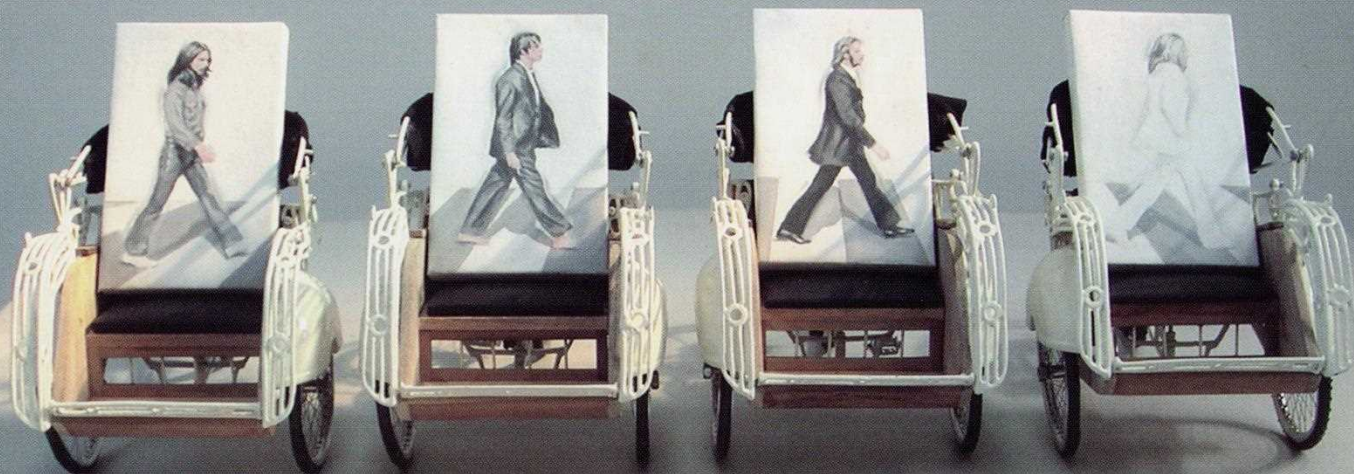


Across The Universe

2004

Painted brass, oil on canvas and wood

33 x 17 x 15 cm (x4)





Playing The Fool 3

2004

Chrome, aluminium, wood, vinyl and magnetic chess set

15 x 90 x 90 cm

Kuala Lumpur 13-10'04

Agnes Suruge





Sol & Luna Series (i – vi)

2004

Oil on wood

i – iii: 16.5 x 29.5 cm

iv – vi: 18.5 x 29.5 cm



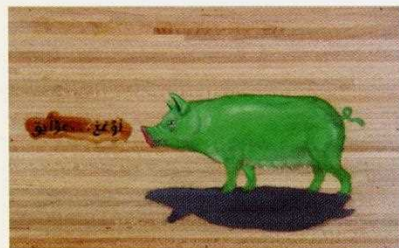
i



ii



iii



iv



v



vi



Sol & Luna Series (vii – xii)

2004

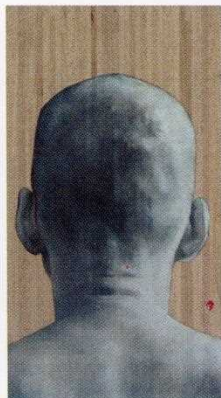
Oil on wood

vii, ix, x: 29.5 x 16.5 cm

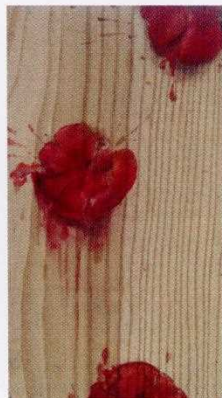
viii, xi, xii: 29.5 x 18.5 cm



vii



viii



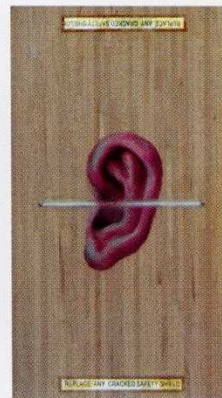
ix



x



xi



xii

Rule of The Game, Ha... Ha

2004

Oil on canvas

150 x 145 cm





An Example of What She's Doing To Me  
2004  
Oil on canvas  
150 x 145 cm





Self Portrait As Banaspati

2004

Oil on canvas

145 x 80 cm (x5)







**Agus Suwage**

Born 1959 in Purworejo, Central Java, Indonesia

**Education**

1979 – 1986

Graphic Design at Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB), Faculty of Fine Art and Design, Bandung Indonesia

**Solo Exhibitions**

2004

*Fabulous Fable*

Art Singapore. The Contemporary Asian Art Fair, Suntec City, Singapore

*Toys "S" US (touring exhibition)*

CP-Asian Art Space, Jakarta; Selasar Soenaryo, Bandung; Emmitan Gallery, Surabaya; Gaya Fusion of Sense, Bali; Bentara Budaya, Yogyakarta

*Playing The Fool*

Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

2003

*Ough...Nguik!!*

National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia

2002

*Channel of Desire*

Nadi Galeri, Jakarta, Indonesia

Atelier Frank and Lee, Singapore

2001

*I&I&I*

Nadi Gallery, Jakarta, Indonesia

*Beautify*

Cemeti Art House, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

2000

*Sai-no-kuni*

Artist in residence exhibition, Gen Gallery & Public Center Koshigaya, Saitama, Japan

*Eksotika dotkom*

Gallery Soemardja, Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB), Bandung, Indonesia

1999

Millennium Gallery, Jakarta, Indonesia

1998

Cemeti Contemporary Art Gallery, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Galeri Padi, Bandung, Indonesia

1997

Lontar Art Gallery, Jakarta, Indonesia

1996

H Block Gallery, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

1995

Cemeti Contemporary Art Gallery, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

**Selected Group Exhibitions (2000-2004)**

2004

*Passion: Etno-Identity*

Galeri Canna, Jakarta, Indonesia

*Wings of Words Wings of Color*

Langgeng Gallery, Magelang, Indonesia

*Artscope*

Selasar Soenaryo, Bandung, Indonesia

*Lima Ruang*

Puri Art Space, Malang, Indonesia

*Indonesia – China Exhibition (touring exhibition organized by LOFT Gallery)*

Paris, France; Barcelona, Spain, Hongkong; Pakubowono Residence Hall, Jakarta, Indonesia

*Reformasi: Contemporary Indonesian Art post 1998*

Sculpture Square, Singapore

*Art Summit 2004*

National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia

2003

*All We Need is Love*

Nadi Gallery, Jakarta, Indonesia

*In Between Perupa Dalam Rotasi Media*

Andi Gallery, Jakarta, Indonesia

*Bazart-Festival Kesenian Yogyakarta*

Benteng Vredeburg, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

*Countrybution: Biennale Yogyakarta VII*

Taman Budaya Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

*Borobudur Agitatif*

Langgeng Gallery, Magelang, Indonesia

2002

*Dimensi Raden Saleh*

Galeri Semarang, Semarang, Indonesia

Taman Kyia Langgeng, Magelang, Indonesia

*Alpha Omega Alpha*

Air Art House, Jakarta, Indonesia

*Not I Am I*

CP Gallery, Washington DC, United State of America

*Mata Hati Demokrasi*

STSI, Surakarta, Indonesia

2001

*Figurare*

Gaya Gallery, Sayan Ubud Bali

*Membaca Frida Kahlo*

Nadi Gallery, Jakarta, Indonesia

*Buka Mata*

Valentine Willie Fine Art, Chedi Ubud, Bali

*Pink Project*

Nadi Gallery, Jakarta, Indonesia

*Not Just the Political*

Museum Widayat, Magelang, Indonesia

2000

*Man + Space*

3rd Gwangju Biennial 2000, Gwangju, Korea

*Invisible Boundary, Metamorphosed ASIA Art*

The Niigata Prefectural Civic Center Gallery, Niigata & Utsonomiya Museum Art, Nangao-cho, Utsonomiya City Tochigi, Japan

*Five Continent and One City*

The Historical Center, Palacio de Los Condes de Santiago de Calimaya, Museo de la Ciudad de Mexico, Museum of Mexico, Mexico City, Mexico

**Residencies & Workshops**

1996

Artist in Residence in Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, Australia

1999 – 2000

Artist in Residence in "Sai-no-kuni" Saitama, the Museum of Modern Art, Koshigaya-shi Saitama, Japan

2003

"Brito International Artists Workshop" Tepantor, Dhaka, Bangladesh

**Public Collection**

Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

Cemeti Contemporary Art Gallery, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Nadi Gallery, Jakarta, Indonesia

Edwin Gallery, Jakarta, Indonesia

Canvas World Art, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, Japan

Singapore Art Museum, Singapore

Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan

Saitama Modern Art Museum, Japan

Koshigaya City Office, Koshigaya City, Saitama, Japan

CP Art Space, Washington DC, United State of America



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ISBN 983-9389-10-6



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