

ArtReview Asia

Maryanto



Nature, culture and politics in Indonesia

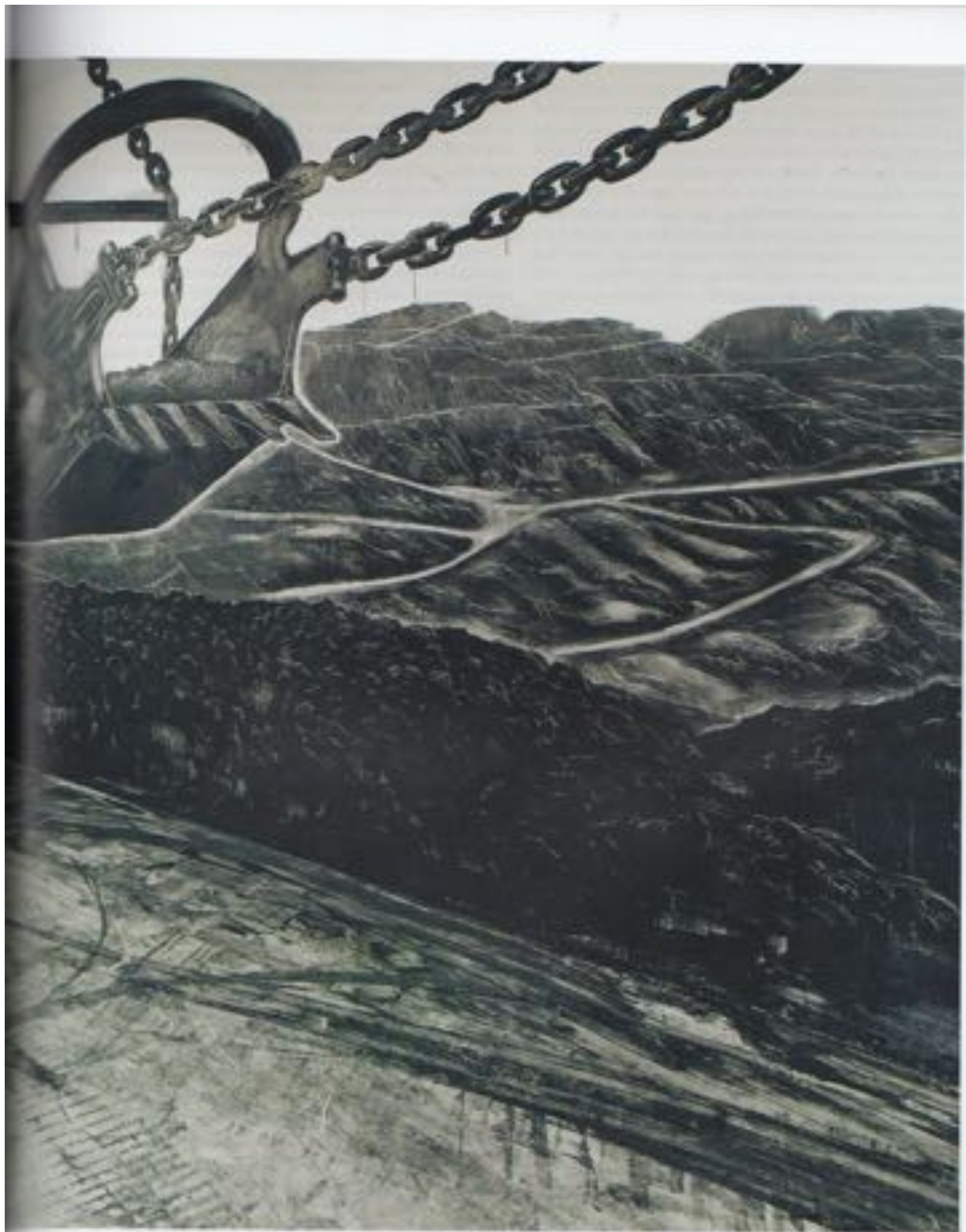


Maryanto

Landscape, artifice
and the communicative act

by Anna Lee





Maryanto's *Brimming in Wewoole* (2015) was first shown at the Jakarta Biennale 2015. The installation comprises a panoramic wallpainting of a landscape populated by oil derricks and, placed in front of it, a collection of oil drums rhythmically spouting crude oil and the smell that comes with it. Located in East Java, Wewoole is a region in which *Derechtsche Petroleum Maatschappij*, the Dutch-owned pioneer of Indonesia's oil-mining industry, began drilling in 1893. After Indonesia won independence in 1949, local and foreign investors started to manage, disputably, approximately 500 old oil-wells, and since then, immeasurable environmental damage and related instances of political corruption have occurred. The landscape of the region has been dramatically altered. The text that accompanies the entry on *Brimming in Wewoole* in the biennial catalogue provides a political interpretation of the work: 'These objects illustrate how Indonesia's mineral resources have been greatly exploited by foreign parties, and how it has a direct impact on people's economic and social situation.' That is one reading. From my perspective, *Brimming...* and many other of the artist's works, also offer a powerful image of the world and how we live in it.

Within the compartmentalised setting system of contemporary art, it is easy to categorise Maryanto's art as 'environmentalist' and 'ecological', and to say that it is evidence of a 'research-based methodology'. And indeed these tags are all very useful for describing and understanding his practice. But such definitive categorisations fail to recognise Maryanto's more fundamental pursuit of powerful images, particularly those that capture double-sided realities – the overlapping realities of the international contemporary world, and postcolonial, recently neoliberal Indonesia, as well as its localised figurative-art and craftsmanship-dominated art scene – by using his fine-art training, personal reflections and resources. As such, Maryanto's art needs to be examined in the multiple contexts of his skills and instincts as a painter, his experience as a social worker and his contemporary Indonesian background.

Born in Jakarta, Maryanto went to Yogyakarta to study printmaking at the Indonesian Institute of the Arts and has lived and worked in the Javanese city ever since. After finishing his studies, and following a short-term residency in Spain, he spent a few years doing social work: first organising charity donations and offering his house as a volunteer camp in the wake of the 2006 Yogyakarta earthquake, then working with *Anak Wayang Indonesia*, a NGO devoted to the protection and education of children. These experiences embedded a deep understanding of the society around him and of what social engagement might mean to an artistic practice. Perhaps even – although he has never described this in public – he formed a critical opinion about the systems and structures surrounding social work. Whatever the case, when he returned to a more purely artistic practice, there was a recognisable, if nevertheless subtle, adjustment in his art: instead of a foregrounding of social-engagement elements, it is imagery with a strong visual character that stands at its core.

In light of this, one might simply say that Maryanto created his bold installation for the Jakarta Biennale to depict a landscape that was once rainforest, then destroyed and polluted by disputed oil mining in

East Java. In 2012 and 2013, during a residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, Maryanto made *Pondok's Box* (2013), depicting the landscape of a coalmining site drawn directly onto the walls of his studio in charcoal and carbon powder. In 2015, for Biennale Jogja XIII, after a research trip in Africa, he cocreated, with Victor Ekhuzammon, *West Coast, Black Gold* (2015), a multi-story painting on wood in which he captured an explosive moment that is often seen at oil-drilling sites in Nigeria. In his drawings and paintings, he persistently uses black pigment and a special scratch technique to create highly contrasted white or light hues. These result in an impressive painterly style that also employs techniques derived from his experience of printmaking and illustration. His sensitivity to the materiality of pigments – from

His sensitivity to the materiality of pigments and their economic value has produced a unique visual language

the density of the monochrome colour (normally black) to their texture to their scents (of oil in *Brimming in Wewoole*, and of coal and charcoal in *Pondok's Box*) – and comprehension of their economic value has produced a visual language that exploits these aspects as much as it does any aesthetic qualities.

The results of all this – first drawn landscape imagery, more recently a complex setting of painting, drawing, installation, sculpture and performance – might best be termed 'artificial landscapes', inasmuch as they are the product of the joint action of nature and humans, both in and of themselves, and in terms of what they represent. Today's mainstream narrative takes nature as the provider of economic resources and humanity's collection, appropriation – or, from a 'rights-of-nature' perspective, plundering – of them as altering nature in a negative way. But from a modernist, anthropocentric perspective, the changing of nature – often described as its destruction or pollution – is just the price to pay for economic development and progress: a side effect, if you like. Nature (or the world) as an objective entity is just what it is, but when translated into a landscape – into a visual representation – it is sorted and constructed from a human perspective according to social, economic and cultural values, or a package of knowledge and ideology that could be called landscape theory. In short, the notion of landscape is a human construction – there is no landscape that is not artificial. And inasmuch as it is a human construction, a landscape can be used as a critical weapon, in Maryanto's case, as interpreted by the Biennale's curators, addressing this nature/human binary. But perhaps more importantly

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to Maryanto, to paint a landscape is also to recognise a form of the world around him, regardless of the division between nature and human, and then to visualise it through his artistic language.

Another example of this practice could be seen in *Spore of Eruption*, his 2015 solo exhibition at Yeo Workshop, Singapore. Its centrepiece was a set of almost monochrome works on paper (using ink, graphite, watercolour, acrylic and charcoal) that recorded the aftermath, in terms of its effect on nature, of the 2006 and 2010 earthquakes in Yogyakarta. Through his quiet, meditative observation, Maryanto discovered and created his own postearthquake landscapes: they consist of trees that are sleeping or dead, minerals with economic value (*Brownies*, 2014); artificial objects such as loudspeakers and electrical transformer equipment left in the forest (*Adaptive*, 2014); a wooden structure that creates an architectural space in the now uninhabited forest (*We Were There Before*, 2014); and small details such as new



above *Strawing in Shimada, 2012* (installation view,
Jakarta Biennale 2012), mixed media

opposite page *Fordere's Box, 2012* (installation view,
Kijikokukoen, Amsterdam),
cheesecloth, carbon powder on the wall, woodblock



Jungsik Min, *Black Gold*, 2019 (installation view).
Jungsik Min and Jungsik Min, *Black Gold*, acrylic on board

buds and thick branches from the trees indicating the ecosystem's revival (Observation Series, 2014). In addition to the paintings, Maryanto created a healing space in the gallery by setting up a symbolic blue tent, of the type commonly used as a temporary space for food distribution and dwelling in post-earthquake Yogyakarta. With these landscapes, and a space for people to rest, read and meditate, Maryanto created a theatrical space of exception (a term that riffs on the theories of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben concerning the actions of power in times of crisis, whose normal laws no longer apply) that dissolves the nature/human binary.

This type of theatrical approach to landscape painting could also be seen in his 2011 show *One Upon a Time in Kawalelatu*, at Galeri Semarang in Jakarta, where he created the fictional village of Kawalelatu through a stage set. The same-titled work featured a series of paintings telling the story of Kawalelatu and the changes in the village and its inhabitants' lives as a result of the process of urbanisation. The series seems to be an assertion of what Homi K. Bhabha calls 'the right to narrate'. In Bhabha's view, narrative in art practice is a co-terminative act in which 'you renew your very senses of personhood and perspective, and understand something profound about yourself, about your historical moment, about what gives value to a life lived in a particular town, at a particular time, in particular social and political conditions'. It fits *One Upon a Time in Kawalelatu* perfectly.

Maryanto's most recent project, *Mineral Dentr* (2016), was shown at this year's Art Basel Hong Kong. It continued along the path of exploring narrative strategies – woven through two-dimensional canvases and an installation. The canvas presents a classical landscape with mining equipment in the foreground (one might describe it as Romantic-Apocalyptic). The installation presents cabinets of mineral curiosities. By juxtaposing the forms and various life stages of minerals (from nature to cultural and economic fetish object), Maryanto realises a sort of material landscape in which the minerals (and the nature they originally represent) are seen as transforming and being transformed by human society.

Maryanto recounts how, when he decided to research coalmining during his residency at the Rijksakademie, he was warned by a senior artist that this idea was 'out of fashion'. However, for an artist from Indonesia – a nation that was forced to enter the modern age and global market as a consequence of its valuable natural resources (if we agree to take colonialism as an early stage of globalisation) – isn't it natural to confront the social, economic, political and personal realities that shape your existence? Even in Europe and North America, that (alongside the consequences of our exploitation of natural resources) is surely not an outdated topic. ■■

Work by Maryanto will be on show at The Workshop at Senoart Art Jakarta, 25–28 August



Mineral Dentr (detail), 2016, mixed media
all image: Courtesy the artist and The Workshop, Singapore