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Exhibition Explores Family Secrets Through Photography



'Stories Left Untold' is curated by Budi N.D. Dharmawan. (Photo courtesy of Rangga Purbaya)

Yogyakarta. Personal identity is irrevocably connected to the history and past of one's family – in order find out who we are, we need to understand where our parents, grandparents and their ancestors came from.

Two young photographers, whose personal histories have not been easy ones, have set out to uncover the stories behind their families' past: the results will be presented in the "Stories Left Untold" exhibition at iCan Gallery in Yogyakarta this October.

Curated by Budi N.D. Dharmawan, the exhibition shows the works of Nora Scheidler from Germany and Rangga Purbaya from Indonesia.

The German part of the exhibition chronicles the story of former political prisoners of the German Democratic Republic who were detained at the infamous Hohenschoenhausen prison in East Berlin – including Nora's own father – while the Indonesian part documents the life story of Rangga's grandfather Boentardjo Amaroen Kartowinoto, who died in the massacres following the coup d'état in Indonesia in 1965. Rangga himself only found out about his grandfather's fate after the fall of Soeharto's regime in 1998.

"The exhibition brings together two personal stories of the photographers. Both stories intertwine with larger historical events during a political shift in Indonesia and Germany," Budi says, adding that he didn't know at first that Nora is a photographer, but he was keen on showing her works in Yogyakarta as soon as he found out.

"That simple idea evolved as we arranged the exhibition to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall," he says.

"It grew bigger as we thought to include the Indonesian side of the story, as we are also commemorating the 50th anniversary of the 1965 events. We started to plan this almost a year ago, so personally I am glad that this exhibition is finally materialized."

"Stories Left Untold" is part of the German Season, an Indonesian-German festival that celebrates the friendship between the two countries.

Organized by the German Embassy Jakarta, the Goethe-Institut Indonesien and EKONID, the German Season runs until early December in several cities across Indonesia, including in Yogyakarta, where many cultural, political and economical events, such as this exhibition, are being held.

Nora and Rangga feel that their journey – which was similar in many ways as they both dealt with victims of repressive rule – was very emotional.

"This project became very personal for me since I tried to investigate about my grandfather through his photos, documents, archives and interviewing his sons and daughters, and also his relatives and close friends," Rangga explains.

"The stories that I heard were mostly very sad and emotional, and it was like opening old wounds. Some of the [people I interviewed] were worried about their safety if they are openly involved in this project. So I tried to interview his grandchildren, people of my generation who have nothing to do with the communist party and who have never experienced this kind of trauma. I collected their statements about their grandfather and their family history from their own perspective and knowledge."

For Nora, delving into the past of her father was painful, but at the same time also relieving and ultimately rewarding.

"In the beginning it was pretty hard to see all these spooky places with a history full of suffering and no justice," she recalls.

"The first time I saw these dark chambers I started crying imagining anyone had to stay there locked up for weeks or months. But over two years, I visited the prison many times. The former prisoners who have become guides there are like a big family, and me and my father are part of it. After a while it became easier to work there and I was really eager on finding out more."

Nora who first came to Indonesia as a backpacker in 2001 has been living on and has been living on and off in Yogyakarta for several years now says that working with Budi and Rangga has given her valuable insight on how Indonesian artists and curators work.

"I saw Rangga dealing with his past and his bravery with a topic much more dangerous than mine," she says. "And as in general in Indonesia, I learned to stay calm no matter how worried or stressed we were."

The exchange between the artists and curator was a fruitful one. According to Rangga, it was the first time for him to work together with a German artist, and he appreciated the sharing of knowledge – the same goes for Budi.

"I learned to see big historical events from another perspective, through the first-hand experiences of those involved," Budi explains. "I have read about the events of 1965 in Indonesia, but I haven't really seen it from this point of view. I have also heard about about the Berlin Wall, but I haven't really known what happened to the people."

As the curator, Budi says there were some challenges that needed to be overcome in order to realize "Stories Left Untold."

"Rangga and Nora have different approaches to photography and different subjects to photograph, though both followed a similar theme," he explains. "Another challenge was that Nora's work was already completed in 2010 while Rangga's series was made for this exhibition, so the editing process went really differently."

On another level, he adds, there was also a conceptual challenge regarding the larger narrative.

"In Germany, the government and the people have acknowledged their historiography, so they can openly discuss it," Budi says.

"Here, we are still struggling to uphold justice for the victims, survivors, and their families, as many facts surrounding the events of 1965 are still denied and ignored, even by the government. Many people are still afraid to even speak about it. So I think this is really something for us to reflect upon."

Rangga echoes Budi's wish for Indonesia to deal more openly with its past.

"I see the opposite political situation between Germany and Indonesia now as working on this kind of issue we are facing threats from the right wing radical groups and pressure from the government here in Indonesia," he says.

"But in Germany it is very different: since the fall of the Berlin Wall, people are free to talk and discuss about their political history. I think Indonesia has to learn more about its history and stop stigmatizing the victims of the 1965 tragedy and their families."

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"Stories Left Untold" Oct. 2 to 28 iCan Gallery Jalan Suryodiningratan No. 39
Yogyakarta Open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., closed on Mondays