

## Eko Nugroho – a description

“Yes, I am a tram, going around, always ringing when I start to go. Beautiful to look around on bicycle and tram. ‘Amsterdam is a tram’. They have rules, also they always have fun. Watch the traffic and don’t forget your ticket.” Typical Eko Nugroho: a telling observation from a young artist leaving the wings of his Indonesian homeland for the first time to tread the stage of a major Western city. This quote, along with many other such observations, comes from his book *The Tram*, in which, against the backdrop of his first Dutch graphic works, he describes his staged wanderings through Amsterdam. It was my first introduction to the work of Eko Nugroho and I was immediately struck by the necessity of its creation.

2004: Eko Nugroho, still wet behind the ears and loaded down with his Indonesian artistic and intellectual baggage, arrives in Holland. Thanks to the intercession of the Cemeti Art House in Yogyakarta, he has been invited by the *Amsterdams Grafisch Atelier*. Then 26 years old and still an art student at the *ISI (Institute Seni Indonesia)* in Yogyakarta, Eko Nugroho was a member of the new wave of Indonesian artists who grew up and thrived during the Indonesian Reformation. Before then, the Indonesian government had ruled over every aspect of society which is why the *older* generation of artists had declared that the narrow-minded government was its ultimate enemy. Among the artists of that generation, Heri Dono, FX. Harsono, Agung Kurniawan, Eddie Hara and Agus Suwage were its leaders. However, during the Reformation, this agitation against the government reduced significantly, chiefly because the freedom of speech was less strictly policed. Artists no longer felt a duty to direct their fire at the government so were free to look more closely at their own position or at more general important social issues. This *new* generation of young artists grew up in a global and multi-dimensional world where traditional norms and values were often in conflict or blurring at the edges. These artists were distinguished by their curiosity and drive in a world of shaky moral certainties and ambiguities.

The city of Yogyakarta was, in the 1990’s, the centre of the Indonesian underground comics-scene: satirical caricatures and comic-strips poking fun at social and political circumstances and the behaviour of people involved therein. A lively art-scene developed at the Institute Seni Indonesia where a group of young and politically aware artists were born. For example, there was the artist’s collective *Apotik Komik* that reacted to political and social life with their comics in the form of posters, murals and street-art. Eko Nugroho, born and bred in this Javanese city, took a central position in this alternative art-scene. He was the most important initiator and figurehead of *Daging Tumbuh*, a group of artists who did not need a gallery to display their art, preferring to independently produce and publish their own comics. Through these, Eko Nugroho developed his skills as a comic-book artist. His work is rooted in Javanese culture and it is from this perspective that Eko views art and passes comment on it in a creative way. The quintessence of his work is its political and social engagement in which such topics as faith, power and status, corruption and politics, war and (hidden) violence, pollution, wealth and poverty are treated with irony and parody. From the very start, his work was distinguished by a startling originality and unorthodoxy. With a strong sense of humour, he places his characters and objects in surreal, burlesque settings. It is not surprising that such artists as Keith Haring and René Magritte are sources of inspiration to him.

In Eko Nugroho's images, countless different *actors* are featured with the most unusual body parts and objects ranging from plants, animals or fruit to painted or decorated space-helmets, crab-like shapes with pincers, robot-like figures, houses or tape-recorders. But one image recurs constantly: a figure with a mask in the form of a smoking chimney of which only the eyes are visible. The chimney represents the industrialised world which is, to Eko Nugroho, an artificial world. All his characters are traceable to the artist himself and his environment. The chimney-man (or woman?) also depicts people's natural inclination to hide themselves in order to fit into their roles in the everyday theatre of life. It points to Indonesia's Islamic culture where veiled women are only allowed to see without being allowed to comment on what they see. Every character or object (or combination of the two) that the artist uses in his painted visions can take on any form he wishes. He has a rich repertoire which reveals his lively imagination and his impressive, multi-faceted talent that ranges over a wide variety of artistic disciplines: comics, paintings, drawings, animation, embroideries and murals.

Closer examination of the fantasy world of Eko Nugroho gives the inescapable impression that one is dealing with fragments that have been carefully constructed around what art means to Eko Nugroho. This appears to contradict the methods by which the murals, in particular, are created, which seem to be the result of physical and intellectual explosions. In his murals, but also in his embroidered work and paintings, the artist lays claim to an increasingly large area. It is the stage upon which the visual actions take place and we are able to watch him perform in the spotlight. He stands before the empty canvas, wall or open space for a moment before drawing the first lines in black, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. But then the objects and figures desired for that particular scene appear with dynamic speed. Typically, the motifs and objects are transformed in an associative manner – impulsively and instinctively. Every brushstroke naturally leads to new associations and new or already used forms that gain new accents. Just as in the traditional Javanese Wajang theatre, his paintings are founded upon a common narrative style built upon a series of scenes.

What ideas does he have in mind? His artistic skill is important. The composition of the work is barely planned beforehand, but forms itself during the act of painting. Hand and eye are united by his imagination and the creative concepts seem to form themselves. One could imagine that he has already invented a story, but this is not always the case. Of course, he must have some idea beforehand and familiar images recur, but much is based upon his wide knowledge and the depth of his experience. This is almost unique in what I would describe as a young artist. My impression is that Eko's paintings are only fully realised during their creation and their composition emerges along the way. He is able to trust his intuition to bring the work to a satisfactory conclusion. The consistency and power of Eko Nugroho's work lies in the fruitful combination of forms through which he tells his story and delivers his commentary on contemporary and universal themes. One could expect that such a talented young artist might lose himself in capricious and reckless adventures, but I think that Eko Nugroho has been careful, in his relatively short career, to steadily work on his development and has, thereby, made his work unmistakably his own. Of course, his diverse work refers to themes familiar the world over, but he has retained a strong identity through which his specific Indonesian background shines through.

Eko Nugroho has forged a close bond with Holland, despite there being a traditional discomfort between it and Indonesia. A year after his initial working period in Amsterdam, he chose to stay, this time at the invitation of the arts-centre *Artoteek* in The Hague, as Artist-in-Residence for more than three months. The *Artoteek* changed its name in 2007 to *Heden, kunst van nu (Now, Art of today)*. This arts-centre had been exploring the Indonesian contemporary art scene, particularly in Yogyakarta, since the early 1990's. In 1995 it found an important partner, Cemeti Art House, with which it set up a substantial arts programme that offered Indonesian artists a platform in Holland. The Hague has a reputation as being the Indonesian capital in Holland because so many former colonists settled there in the post-colonial period. The direct motivation for Eko becoming an Artist-in-Residence was the *Indonesian Summer Festival* in 2005 which was organised by a number of The Hague's artistic bodies. It showcased a diverse programme of theatre, film and art exhibitions, combining both modern and historical elements from Indonesian cultural heritage. During his stay in The Hague, Eko was asked to depict his experiences in the form of a comic-strip which would then be presented at an exhibition. The arts-centre *Heden* hoped hereby to add a contemporary component to an extraordinary meeting of two cultures that has left an important imprint on the Dutch cultural heritage.

An essential element of Eko Nugroho's programme was his daily interaction with Dutch artists. But it seems that Eko, as exponent of his country's new wave of young and socially aware artists, is not burdened by the political and historical past that links Holland with its former colonies in the Indonesian Archipelago. The historical events that still have not been properly come to terms with by Holland are only a minor source of inspiration to him and certainly not a reason for expression or reaction. It is only in 2006 that a number of Eko's works reflect upon those turbulent colonial times and only then as the result of a commission. In The Hague, Eko Nugroho has been chiefly occupied with his own unique art. The drawings and text pieces appearing in the publication *Mooi Weer* are the most direct and sometimes even intimate depictions of his experiences and meetings with the people in his Hague surroundings. A beautiful and thought-provoking example is the drawing *Keep in touch ok?* which shows the farewell between two people who have obviously built up a strong friendship. Against a blue background, the chimney-man gives his friend, a torso, more than a substantial handshake; he actually lifts him above his head. It is an acrobatic scene about the weight of friendship. Such images reveal a lot about the imagination of artist and story-teller, Eko Nugroho. Not only that: they also give us a glimpse into the not always peaceful emotional life of his time working in the culture of a Western country. In the *Mooi Weer* drawings, he makes a clear connection between the peculiarities and details of his stay in Holland and his art. The scraps of text that are integrated into the drawings are, here and there, touching, emotional or sharp-witted. Furthermore, the texts in Eko Nugroho's art reinforce his own performance and the narrative structure of his work, forming a surprising trademark. It is often the case that the text actually comes first, acting as the inspiration for the subsequently invented images.

The closing exhibition for Eko Nugroho's second stay in Holland, also entitled *Mooi Weer*, was his first solo-show in Europe. It took place in The Hague, of course; a city that, according to Eko is "not too wild in art-discours, but with a steady and strong

pace". Other important European exhibitions followed: In Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin (2006), Kiasma in Helsinki, *Wind from the East* (2007), as well as contributing to the Biennale in Lyon, France (2009). However, he still managed to participate in Dutch projects like *The mask as an intermediary* at Heden (2008) and the prestigious exhibition in Utrecht, *Beyond the Dutch* (2009). In this latter show, well-established artists such as Agus Suwage, Agung Kurniawan, Eddie Hara and Heri Dono were represented alongside young Indonesian artists like Handi Wirman, Indieguerillas, Jompot Kuswidananto, Prilla Tania, Tintin Wulia and Wiyoga Muhardanto. Eko Nugroho has since visited many different countries, each one confronting him with new experiences and insights that only serve to develop his art further, creating seeds that will grow into his future work.

Eko Nugroho's art, his paintings in particular, exist as the result of pure actions – a form of action-painting. He has become an essential ingredient of his own exhibitions. Through his playfulness and sense of humour, his work is also, to put it irreverently, fun! The artist himself is fun too; his broad grin, his twinkling eyes betray his deep love for Art. And, finally, an important aspect of his work is its accessibility, also in the literal sense of the word; it is to be found everywhere, open to everyone. Drawings and embroidered works are reproduced in large numbers and his murals grace many a public space. In fact, it is difficult to avoid his exuberant, cartoonesque work.

Translation from Dutch to English by Chris Mitchell