

ROH

ZIGGURAT

JUN TIRTADJI
14 MAY 2024

11 Now the whole earth had one language and one speech. ²And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there. ³Then they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. ⁴ And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth."

⁵ But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. ⁶ And the LORD said, "Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. ⁷Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."

⁸ So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. ⁹

Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Genesis 11: 1-9
(Holy Bible NKJV)

ROH is pleased to present *Ziggurat*, the gallery's first solo exhibition of one of South East Asia's most celebrated contemporary artists Agus Suwage (b. 1959, Purworejo, Indonesia) who works through many different mediums to investigate the many notions of identity from the unique vantage point of his own multifaceted upbringing. Suwage's practice is marked by a constant sense

of self-interrogation, probing the myths and symbols that frame the complexity of human existence, elaborating upon its brightest ideals as well as its darkest corruptions. His work references art history, philosophy, religion, music, and politics, identifying similar approaches and artistic and conceptual linkages to other artists who have come before him. A staunchly humanist critic against intolerance, Suwage has developed a consistent approach of artmaking that incorporates satire, illustrations of violence, and appropriation to speak about his own perspective related to societal circumstances surrounding him.

In *Ziggurat*, Agus Suwage presents as the foundation of the exhibition, *Monumen Ego (Monument to Ego)* a towering 5.5 meter high monolithic sculptural installation built through constructing rectangular structures made with zinc panels, which he has been accustomed to utilizing for many of his works in the past. The sculpture is accompanied by a number of accompanying studies, 12 works on paper that depict the artist's self-portrait in scale and relation to the sculpture itself in various permutations. A golden emulsion of sorts seems to be flowing upon *Monumen Ego (Monument to Ego)* dripping down below, further accentuated by the illumination of a single fluorescent lamp in front as well as behind the installation. This gold pigment is made to then appear as if breaching the confines of the installation itself and acts thereafter as a base material for Suwage to then develop a new body of luminous works—also on paper— that interweave his familiar tobacco juice with gold leaf.

Appearing in form devoid of any particular architectural reference per se, *Monumen Ego (Monument to Ego)*, initially appears to be both colossal, as well as very sturdy in nature, but as the viewer comes closer to the work and begins to observe it from different perspectives, it becomes highly evident that the each zinc rectangular structure the installation is built out of is actually very thin, and therefore may collapse at any moment. The story of the Tower of Babel, referred to in its original Biblical verses as an introduction to *Ziggurat*'s exhibition text, has its roots in ancient Mesopotamian culture, where it is believed to be inspired by massive structures, or ziggurats, that were built with the intention of reaching towards the heavens. In the Book of Genesis, the Tower of Babel is described as a grand project initiated by humanity to build a city and a tower with its top in the skies. This act of collective ambition was viewed as an attempt to assert independence from divine authority,

leading God to confuse their languages and scatter them across the earth. This narrative explains the diversity of languages and serves as a lesson on the limits of human ambition when it contradicts divine will.

In other religious traditions, stretching between Asia, Africa, and South of America, the Tower of Babel is also referenced in various contexts, emphasizing the consequences of human arrogance and disobedience to divine will. The scattering of languages and the resulting dispersion of people is seen as a divine act to humble humanity and promote humility and obedience to God. Other scholars, on the other hand, consider the story as a fable that speaks about how cultures began to become more and more diverse as time progressed through human civilization. Nevertheless, these stories reflect the challenges of communication and cooperation across different languages and the cultural importance of recognizing and respecting of divine or natural limits to human endeavors.

Considering his previous inclinations towards utilizing symbols familiar religious reference points, can Agus Suwage's *Monumen Ego (Monument to Ego)* be therefore considered to be a ziggurat of sorts? As a certain altar built towards the purpose of celebrating Suwage's own desire and ambition, which Suwage himself perhaps also intends to henceforth destroy as an act of defiance against the very basic human desire of erecting structures to one's own pride? In an interview with the artist, Suwage has expressed his interest in the utilization of gold as a symbol of "glorification", or at least the ornamentation of a certain feature the artist intends to accentuate. The artist also sees gold like a "fire, or a wound", and this allows the viewer to understand the dripping golden pigment on upper surface of the installation as dripping blood. Could it be speculated that the installation is itself being considered by Suwage as metaphor for the wounding of this monument, and therefore his own image of "self"? In *Surga Meleleh (Melting Heaven)* a work the artist made between 2014-2018, Suwage seems to pour golden pigment on a collage of 49 panels of paper works. What is this notion of "heaven" and its flow upon the daily happenings expressed in each composition?

In Agus Suwage's major 30-year retrospective exhibition, *The Theater of Me* held in Museum MACAN in 2022 and curated by Aaron Seeto, the viewer is introduced to the exhibition by a floating sculpture of a human figure with wings instead of arms, and tips of

golden fire signaling what appears to be its upcoming fall and demise. Part of a series of works that Suwage has made in different mediums and permutations, the sculpture references the Greek myth of Icarus, a story that revolves around the themes of ambition and hubris. In this story a boy, Icarus, is given a pair of wings made out of feathers and wax by his father in order to escape some kind of imprisonment. Before his flight, his father had warned Icarus not to fly too high, as the sun's heat would melt the wax, nor too low, where the sea's dampness would weigh down the wings. Overcome by the thrill of flight, however, Icarus ignored his father's advice and soared ever higher. As Icarus ascended closer to the sun, the wax in his wings began to melt, causing the feathers to fall away. Unable to maintain his flight, Icarus plummeted into the sea and drowned. The myth of Icarus serves as a timeless cautionary tale about the dangers of overreaching ambition and the importance of heeding wise counsel. It underscores the delicate balance between human aspiration and the natural limits it contains.

Beyond his body of works surrounding Icarus, Agus Suwage has been developing a consistent visual language that considers gold as metaphor for "fire" or "wound" also in other ways. In the melting of this monument towards his own ego, gold thereafter seems to be utilized for an entirely different purpose. Where initially for the purpose of the sculptural installation there might have appeared to be a more negative connotation, the utilization of gold leaf in the new works on paper are then taken to speak about multifaceted ideas that are not so easily distinguishable in terms of attitude.

Whereas initially gold was utilized in the sculptural installation as symbol of hubris and pride and therefore to be avoided, the works on paper that contain tobacco juice and gold leaf seem to consider the idea of gold in a different light altogether. This series of compositions seem to investigate lines, gradations, in contrast with shimmering gold leaf in order to create startling appositions of imagery at once luminous in terms of its rumination on meditation and transcendence, as well as references to the art historical canon Suwage finds himself very much influenced by. Gold is now a symbol for tolerance, to speak towards the artist's own support towards feminism, exemplified through Frida Kahlo's personal journey against physiological and physical pain in her longstanding relationship to Diego Riviera, or the stigmata, or bodily wounds taken once again from Christian references

corresponding to the crucifixion, that we all experience in life in more ways than one. Gold acts also as a bridge between the artist and Joseph Beuys, stirring the notion that "every human being is an artist", afforded their correspondingly equal dignity and value, as well as creative potential. Gold is as well a metaphor for the transcendental—in the work *Moksa*—as providing a bridge by which one may float away from the ground in death onto a higher state of being. Gold also becomes pertinent to meditation in being cognitively as well as emotionally affective to one's own universe.

In *Ziggurat*, Suwage once again confounds the viewer with a multifarious consideration of human existence. He does not see things perhaps from the perspective of black and white, but perhaps rather from the perspective of gold. Gold is a delicate entity. In its excess or misunderstanding it can lead to fire, and wounding. In its appropriate context it can also be grounding, protection, or inspiration. On one end, Gold can be part of the tip of the needle, an apparatus designed to puncture or pierce. On the other end of what appears to be a needle could also be a blooming flower.

AGUS SUWAGE

B. 1959, Purworejo, Indonesia
Lives and works in Yogyakarta,
Indonesia

Agus Suwage is one of Indonesia's – and South East Asia's – most celebrated artists who works through many different mediums to investigate the many notions of identity, whether from the point of view of the sociopolitical, the national, or the religious, from the unique vantage point of his own multifaceted upbringing. Suwage's own mixed Chinese-Javanese heritage, and his experience as a Christian convert to Islam, have informed his approach to cultural pluralism and religious syncretism. The specter of violence recurs in many of his works, creating a somber mood that is leavened by humor and an irreverent spirit of self-mockery and irony. Suwage is uncannily adept at utilizing watercolor in combination with tobacco juice on paper to delicately showcase a sensitivity to the medium, balancing color, line, and drawing, to create startling juxtapositions of images that are at once bright and almost satirical, with insinuations of much darker, multilayered meaning that resonates more universally.

Agus Suwage has participated in exhibitions in various notable exhibitions and institutions around the globe. His most recent exhibition was a mid-career survey, *The Theater of Me at Museum MACAN*, Jakarta, Indonesia (2022). Selected solo exhibitions include *Room of Mine* at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, USA (2017); ◀◀ || ▶▶ at Nadi Gallery, Jakarta, Indonesia (2014); *Cycle No. 3* at ARNDT Contemporary Art, Berlin Germany (2013); *CIRCL3* at Singapore Tyler Print Institute Gallery, Singapore (2009); *Beauty in the Dark* at Avanthay Contemporary Gallery, Zurich, Switzerland (2008); *Pause / Re-play* at Soemardja Gallery, Bandung Institute of Technology, Bandung, Indonesia (2005); *Playing the Fool* at Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (2004); and *Ough...Nguik!!* at the National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia (2003). Selected group exhibitions include *SUNSHOWER: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now* at Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, Kaohsiung Taiwan (2019) and National

Art Center and Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan (2017); +63 +62 at Silverlens Gallery, Manila, Philippines (2019); *Terra Incognita* at Hilger Brotkunsthalle, Vienna, Austria (2017); *After Utopia* at the Singapore Art Museum, Singapore (2015); #FAMILYFRIENDS at ROH Projects, Jakarta, Indonesia (2015); *SIP! Indonesian Art Today* at ARNDT, Singapore and ARNDT, Berlin, Germany (2013); *The Golden Age* at Ark Galerie, Jakarta (2009), Indonesia; *Neo-Nation* at Biennale Yogyakarta IX at Jogja National Museum, Yogyakarta, Indonesia (2007); *Thermocline of Art* at New Asian Waves, ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany (2007); *Masa Lalu Masa Lupa* at Cemeti Art House, Yogyakarta, Indonesia (2006); *Urban/Culture* at the 2nd CP Biennale, Bank Indonesia Museum, Jakarta, Indonesia; and the 3rd Gwangju Biennale: *Man and Space*, Gwangju, South Korea (2000).

THANK YOU

TIM ROH
TITARUBI
JAZARI