

ROH

Bù Yào Wàng Jì (Sri Wahyuni, Marsinah, Udin, Munir, Trubus, Widji Tukul)

EXQUISITE CORPSE
30 July 2025

ROH is honored to present *Whoever Stays Until The End Will Tell The Story*, Agung Kurniawan's (b. 1968, Jember, Indonesia) first solo exhibition at the gallery, presenting long term projects the artist has been working on for more than a decade, in dialogue with a number of new works for the exhibition, including trellis wall reliefs, drawings on paper, kinetic installation, performance, and paintings. The exhibition emphasizes various aspects of Kurniawan's practice—his continual innovation with the interaction between drawing and performance as a form of memory exercise, his frequent return to sacred allegories as schema for decoding the moral ambiguities that shape collective life—and work in unison as devices to guide memorisation of the enduring relevance of these parables of faith, betrayal, hope, and sacrifice.

The exhibition's chapter form is a spatial analogue to the movements of Kurniawan's practice, which progresses much like the form of a novel in which each chapter gives voice to a different protagonist. The artist references *My Name is Red* by Orhan Pamuk, a tale of sixteenth-century Ottoman miniaturists entangled between tradition and the encroaching influence of Western perspective. Each chapter of Pamuk's novel offers a distinctive voice: a miniaturist, Death, a gold coin, and even the colour Red itself. In much the same way, Kurniawan's practice may be understood through the lens of an overarching narrative in which Indonesia's histories are told and untold through chapters spoken by the living as well as the inanimate.

The prologue of the exhibition begins in the gallery's front yard, with a number

of trellis wall reliefs spread around its gray cement exterior. These metal outlines, resembling drawings, leave behind ever-changing imprints of shadows: during daytime, they almost disappear like camouflage, but as dusk approaches, natural light is replaced with spotlights which interact with the works to create double or triple images. One of the reliefs contain a depiction of Kurniawan's own brother who disappeared while he was going on an unidentified adventure around Indonesia. Other images or mirages: an anonymous man on a motorcycle, a fictional female motorcycle gang leader with sword in hand, kids on a tricycle in tow. What is seen, what is not seen, how things can be seen, why certain things are shown or not shown, are posed as questions before the audience formally enters the gallery space.

In Gallery Apple, *Whoever Stays Until The End Will Tell The Story* begins its first movement: the artist's longest memory project, which features five permutations of a set of 65 drawings, or a total of 325 drawings, entitled *Sri Serie* (2015–2024). In *Sri Serie*, drawings function not only as portraits but also as living archives to be activated through collaborative audience interaction. In performing each series, 65 participants hold a single drawing and feel each memory in their own hands, and through this action holds together responsibility to enunciate a single word hidden behind the image and verbalize it according to volume, rhythm, and intonation conducted by Kurniawan, individual fragmentary utterances that gradually form a constellation of meaning across time and space. Developed over several years through trial and misstep (activated through performance at Museum MACAN, Jakarta in 2017, ArtJOG, Jogjakarta in 2022, S.E.A. Focus, Singapore in 2023, Art Sonje Center, Seoul in 2023, ROH, Jakarta in 2024, Galeri Soemardja, Bandung in 2024, and Nonfrasa, Ubud, in 2024), this participatory structure emerged from Kurniawan's frustration with the format of a seminar or public forum, where an imperative to speak often serves to consolidate a preconceived opinion and position rather than actually sharing opinions egalitarianistically. In contrast, *Sri Serie* offers a model of collective address in which speech is redistributed and softened by image, and image is softened by vocal participation, easing participants' reluctance or fear to participate in a performance, and more largely in a project of remembrance for Agung's dear friend, Sri Wahyuni. Presented in the form of a symmetrical grid, each portrait feels simultaneously light, containing rainbow colors that

belie the more complex imagery contained in each silhouette.

Sri Serie is confronted with *Pontius Pilatus Syndrome* (2012–2025), an assemblage of wall relief sculptures made out of soap in various hues that were initially formed in the shape of five figures who Kurniawan read about and saw in newspapers as part of his own upbringing in relation to a continuously shape-shifting government reform after 1965. Throughout this more than a decade-long process of developing the work, the sculptures have either decayed, been surrounded by sheaths of fungi, or eaten by insects and mice. This is the first vital incorporation of a sacred text as a narrative device in the exhibition which departs from the biblical scene of Pontius Pilate in the Book of Matthew, the Roman governor of Judea during the time of Jesus, symbolically washing his hands in front of a crowd to signify detachment from his decision to crucify Christ. The sculptures contain an inherent paradox given the nature of its degradation—a contradiction of materials between soap as a cleaning material, with fungi as a decomposing material digesting away as its antithesis.

These works disperse and steep across from Gallery Apple, faces that watch over a participatory installation positioned at the room's center, a table inviting visitors to be seated and to engage with several copies of a story book called *The Guest*, illustrated by the artist though with empty lines left unwritten in anticipation of storytelling by many. Recurring characters appear: a hooded bear, a child, and a monster who enters and gorges on their goods. The installation further provides space for a coloring activity, in which the audience is invited to imagine the color of dining with monsters and beasts, and in Kurniawan's paintings that follow we also find the central role of colour and its symbolism in conjuring implicit atmospheres and narrative in the artist's practice.

In the interstitial space between Gallery Apple and Gallery Orange, Kurniawan includes *The Last Dance*, a kinetic sculpture that stitches together clothes left behind by survivors of the 1965 tragedy in fabrics of technicolor hues and textures, rotating slowly in a clockwise form. The colorful facade of Kurniawan's palette belie an emotional nostalgia relating to the materials that form this sculpture. A feeling of loss is made more apparent as one begins to notice the details and layers of material construction in each item of clothing: in their scale and relationship to each body; in the sense of style and

eclecticism of their wardrobes; in the imagination of the folding and storage of each piece; and for Kurniawan to then revisit these memories in an artwork that deals with their remembrance. The installation is accompanied by a musical composition that contains the voice of Sri Wahyuni. *The Last Dance* brings to mind a series of biblical parables reiterated in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in which a person's reaching out towards a sacred garment worn by Christ is thereafter healed of their ailments and diseases in light of their faith. Similarly, *The Last Dance* may act as a source of a "miracle" of sorts, in the sense of invoking belief in a memory that stands outside of the viewer's own experience, a belief that is analogous to or most closely resembles the concept of faith.

A sub-chapter of miniature paintings surrounds *The Last Dance*. These paintings expose the raw linen background of each canvas, and feel materially more like drawings, or studies, that focus on more specific aspect ratios and vantage points of a character or scene. The paintings in this space feel like in-between hybrid forms transitioning between paper and canvas, like painterly drawings, or drawingly paintings. These include a new blue painting, *Pohon Hidup (Tree of Life)*, a painting made by the artist in situ while hanging the exhibition, a painting that portrays a stack of climbing figures forming a monolith of sorts, echoing the circular staircase of which it is placed in front.

In the exhibition's final chapter, paintings and collages by Kurniawan invoke Pamuk's world through a conceptual lens of an anxiety of depiction and what it means to represent the world too faithfully. That same red of Pamuk's novel that represents the clash of encroaching aesthetic ideas with the old tinges Kurniawan's palette in an alchemic encounter between charcoal and pastel. What is made apparent is Kurniawan's interest that extends beyond image-making, and in the artist's position as a figure caught between power and memory, tasked with bearing witness in a world that no longer trusts its images. In Kurniawan's own words, "Choosing to be an artist is a political decision in and of itself."

What remains consistent in Gallery Orange is the artist's repeated return to sacred allegory, a structure through which the images and utterances of Indonesia's historical figures are compacted into layered theological and moral narratives. As Mira Asriningtyas explains in greater depth in her essay for the exhibition, Kurniawan's use of

allegory is both playful and exacting, a means of charting how forgetting takes place in layers of half-legible signs. His characters are often staged in a kind of delirious architecture of bodies and shelters where the human form folds into structure. Corrugated roofs become shoulder blades, latrine doors open into the torso of a man. It is impossible to say what time or world that these figures inhabit, but there is a sense that, in the world that Kurniawan is conjuring, the human form must be disassembled and retooled for a life that requires allegorical theatrics, where the political is inscribed on the body as costume, performing on a stage overwhelmingly stained in red.

In The Origin of German Tragic Drama (1925), Walter Benjamin reconceptualizes allegory as a site where meaning is undone, a form that arises when history can no longer be read through coherent narrative, and when the symbolic order fails to account for catastrophe. Allegory, in this view, does not restore continuity but reveals meaning only through fracture and juxtaposition. Across Kurniawan's exhibition, such allegories proliferate: a soap installation that references Pontius Pilate washing away guilt; a Judas-like embrace marked by stigmata (*Laki-Laki yang Bangkit dari Kubur*, 2025). His return to the sacred parable is a deliberate reactivation of allegory as a mode of remembrance. And if the memory of our world has already been made disjointed and unresolved, Kurniawan's advocacy for the return of allegorical confronts the aesthetic labour of representing a collective memory fabricated out of fragments and mistruths. To recuperate these fragments, as his chosen materials suggest, requires a consistent, participatory process in which the haze of historical omission may only clear by illuminating those who have stayed until the end.

In Mandarin, *Bù Yào Wàng Jì* 不要忘记 means "Do Not Forget"—a phrase that is stitched into Kurniawan's newest chapter of textile works. During the exhibition's opening, two professional dancers dance on top of a circular pedestal covered by a patchwork of contrasting textiles. They dance to a series of iconic Indonesian songs created in the 1970s that either resonate with an audience of a specific generation, or act as a new discovery for the other, expressing a particular modernist mentality that both aspires towards an idea of the future while maintaining its roots in tradition. They dance to songs in the genre of "cha-cha" that are sonorously happy, and yet feel inextricably sad with their pleas to memory and longing. They

dance while their footsteps press upon a wood-block print that creates a live process of image-making. They dance as a representation of an artmaking practice that refuses to concede to the amnesia of a collective forgetting. They dance against the slippery slope of bargaining for reality in the Misinformation Age. They dance as if resisting forgetting necessitates a kinetic form of recollection. They dance as a reanimation that continues throughout the duration of the exhibition in the form of trellis wall reliefs, drawings on paper, kinetic installation, performance, and paintings.