

"a tiger's leap into the past": Allegory and Infrastructure in Bagus Pandega and Kei Imazu's "Wet"

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An anthropomorphic tiger with skeletal paws circles the gallery. Behind it is a triptych, mechanically spattered with water from six *galon* bottles mounted in fruit-themed ceramic dispensers. A copper nautilus, a fossil-like mollusk that has evolved little over the last 500 million years, lies on the floor, emitting blunt, clunking mining sounds. The upturned stalks of a taro plant are propelled across an adjacent room, washed in green light.

"Wet," Bagus Pandega and Kei Imazu's first collaborative exhibition, features four artworks that stem from their research into colonial histories and environmental politics. The artists, who share a studio in Bandung, have intersecting interests: Imazu's digitally-sketched oil paintings and sculptures sift through the mythologies of Indonesia and her native Japan, while Pandega's kinetic installations tease apart Indonesia's contradictions. The artworks in "Wet" fuse their practices, exploring how images are tested by the capacity of automated machines to move and manipulate them.

Tyger (all works 2026) draws upon a history of automated art. Its head is modeled after Tipu's Tiger (1780s or 1790s), a well-known wooden

automaton depicting a life-sized Bengal tiger mauling a red-coated British infantryman. Inside the tiger's body is an organ that, when played, causes the redcoat's arm to flail and mocks the sound of his dying moans. The artwork was commissioned by Tipu Sultan (1751–99), who ruled Mysore in southern India from 1782–99.¹ For nearly two decades, Tipu repelled the East India Company army's advances into India, aided by innovations like iron-cased rockets. His man-eating tiger shows us that his court supported artists, as well as weapons designers, who experimented with technology.

Walter Benjamin thought of the tiger when he was writing his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940). In these essayistic fragments, Benjamin draws an analogy between fashion and revolution, likening both to "a tiger's leap into the past."² For Benjamin, the image of the pouncing tiger dramatizes the way in which fashion mines earlier eras to create new, or apparently new, ideas. Revolutions, he proposes, do similarly, reawakening—or blasting open—history in order to recover the promise of freedom.³

"Wet" features many leaps into the past. *Waterfall* is a digital print overlaid with white hydrochromic paint that turns transparent when it is exposed to water, revealing a collage of images beneath. We see scenes of labor, fossils, soldiers, tiger skeletons, *wayang* puppets, a ship, an orangutan, and streams of molten nickel. There are art historical references, including digitally-manipulated details from Tipu's Tiger; Raden Saleh's oil painting *Boschbrand* (*Forest Fire*) (1849), which depicts two tigers leaping off a cliff as they flee a hissing forest fire; and Dutch East Indies landscapes; as well as the opening lines from William Blake's visionary poem "The Tyger" (1794). In the central section, mines slice through the jungle like dusty, lifeless scars.

The collage calls to mind art critic Craig Owens's insights into the role of allegory in contemporary art. Owens, building on Benjamin's writings on the subject, distinguishes symbols from allegories. A symbol, as Owens sees it, relies upon a correlation—a "supposedly indissoluble

unity"—between an object and its meaning.⁴ Yet in allegories, objects and their meanings "are conceived as clearly distinct entities," as Karen Lang puts it; the allegorical image signifies something other than what it depicts.⁵ Owens positions allegory as a defining trait of the postmodern art that, at the time he was writing, was dissolving modernist boundaries between art and life through new approaches to artmaking, namely appropriation, site specificity, impermanence, accumulation, discursivity, and hybridization.

Waterfall uses allegory to track the relationship between war and resource extraction in Indonesia. Although the Dutch opened mines in Sumatra in the seventeenth century, their mineral explorations expanded in the nineteenth century after Dutch East India Company administration was replaced by government rule. Their mines were made possible by military occupation—a condition that, in parts of Indonesia, remains true today, over eighty years after Sukarno's proclamation of independence. Following Benjamin, Owens argues that allegory enables ideas to be retrieved from history—in his view, allegory can "rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear."⁶ A deft medley of fragmented images, *Waterfall* brings lingering colonial legacies to light. In an ironic turn, the composition is alternately obscured by hydrochromic paint and revealed again by spurts of water, in an oscillating process that speaks to the fragility of historical memory.

We encounter a similar logic in *Tyger*. This mechanical puppet wears an Imperial Japanese Army uniform from World War Two, an era when Imazu's grandfather served in the Japanese military. On one sleeve is Indonesia's Siliwangi army division's tiger emblem.⁷ The Siliwangi division takes its name from Prabu Siliwangi, a legendary Sundanese king who, after a period of asceticism, transformed into a white tiger. Tigers have long been associated with bravery and courage—and thus war—in Asian history: Tipu's soldiers wore uniforms emblazoned with tiger stripes, while soldiers in tiger hoods appear in Chinese art from at least the Sui dynasty (581–618). While honoring

¹ Known as Sher-e-Mysore (the Tiger of Mysore), Tipu's use of the tiger emblem, in the words of scholar Kate Brittlebank, "almost bordered on the obsessive"—his throne reportedly featured a gold tiger's head with crystal teeth, and he wore clothes adorned with this symbol. Before he was killed by the British in battle, he allegedly exclaimed, "[b]etter to live one day as a tiger than a thousand years as a sheep!" Kate Brittlebank, 258–59

² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (Schocken Books, 2007), 261.

³ The French Revolution, Benjamin writes, "evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past." *ibid.*

⁴ Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October* 12 (Spring, 1980): 81.

⁵ Karen Lang, "Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Craig Owens: The Ends of Allegory in Postmodernism," *Selva: A Journal of the History of Art* 6 (Spring 2025): 127.

⁶ Owens, *op. cit.*, 68.

⁷ The Siliwangi logo is derived from a painting by Bandung-based realist painter Barli Sasmitawinata (1921–2007). In the 1930s, Barli was one of Bandung's *kelompok lima* (group of five), who are recognized as some of Indonesia's first modern painters. The other members were Affandi (1907–90), Hendra Gunawan (1918–83), Sudarso (1914–2006) and Wahdi Sumanta (1917–96).

these associations, Pandega and Imazu's artwork meditates on the tiger's present endangerment. Tigers thrive in uncultivated forests, yet Indonesia's forests are being rapidly converted into plantations and urban sprawl. Because of this, fewer than four hundred Sumatran tigers are thought to still exist, while Javan and Bali tigers have been pushed to extinction.

Even as Pandega and Imazu use allegory to comment on Indonesia's political uncertainties, they animate and distort their imagery through technical ingenuity. Their prowling tiger, for instance, its path illuminated by vintage lamps, has been exiled from the environments that its survival depends on, but is given another lease of life by automation. To Benjamin, allegory was a means of contending with the devastation of war and the rise of fascism in Europe. Owens, writing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was digesting postmodernism's social and technological ruptures. Today's world, shaped by renewed fascisms, climate breakdown, and the transformative impact of AI, marries the anxieties of each of these moments. To make sense of the current conjuncture, Pandega and Imazu retool the allegorical strategies of postmodern conceptualism, staging an encounter between image and infrastructure.

As the 3D-printed *Talas* is thrust through the air, it spins. The taro, one of the world's oldest crops, is a staple in many parts of Indonesia. *Talas* depicts this ancient root vegetable, planted and harvested by hand for generations, reoriented by automation. The late theorist Marina Vishmidt defined infrastructural critique as her attempt to develop a materialist theory of the "conditions" of contemporary art.⁸ Pandega and Imazu direct their infrastructural critique toward the plantation economy, exposing it as one of contemporary art's conditions of possibility.

The element that flows between the artworks in this exhibition, and clarifies their political commitments, is water. Water drenches the surface of *Waterfall*, revealing the imagery underneath. The nautilus lives in water, while taros—and tigers—need water to grow. Water, as Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg author Leanne Betasamosake Simpson reminds us, encompasses all life on the planet.⁹ It does the opposite to the plantation regime, which divides life. As fires rage around us, water asks us to think beyond ourselves, and to see ourselves in intimate association with

all beings. Water is an allegory and an infrastructure of survival.

⁸ Marina Vishmidt, "Infrastructural Critique: Between Reproduction and Abolition," *e-flux* 155 (June 2025). Accessed online: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/155/675808/infrastructural-critique-between-reproduction-and-abolition>.

⁹ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Theory of Water: Nishnaabe Maps to the Times Ahead* (Haymarket Books, 2025), 98.