



## DADANG CHRISTANTO

**For several decades, the work of internationally recognized Indonesian-born Dadang Christanto has drawn from the Indonesian atrocities of 1965 to which his father fell victim. He uses this deeply personal event as a means of exploring broader issues of human rights that touch each of our lives. Dadang is looking forward to developing a project that brings together members of the Indonesian community in the Lismore region and the village of Grevillea where he lives and works.**

I was born on 12 May 1957 in Tegal in Central Java, Indonesia. I am number four child – I have an older sister, two older brothers and one younger brother. My parents had a little shop in a little village ten kilometres from Tegal – at that time ten kilometres was a long way – the roads were bad and it was difficult to get to by car. We used to travel to Tegal either by truck or horse carriage or bicycle – there was no public transport, and we had no electricity until I was a teenager.

We went to a local school, and then to the school in Tegal by pushbike every day. Only three of us from my village – all boys – completed their secondary school in Tegal. Most other children would complete their elementary school in the village and then they would help working on the farm. In terms of the village, my family were relatively wealthy.

September 30, 1965 marks the beginning of the coup

d'état by the Indonesian military. I try to remember the event that changed my life and I can only recall details – I can remember that it was early in the morning – the Military Operation was already employed right across Indonesia; so somewhere between October and November 1965 the Indonesian military took my father. It was during the raining season. My Mum had just asked him, what do you want to bring with you if the military take you away? And he answered – “A raincoat”.

I can remember some of the trucks departing from the streets of my village – they were civilian trucks, but they would wait there to capture people during the day to take them away in. I can remember those trucks. My father was taken away in one of those trucks. After that we never saw him again.

After the military took my father in 1965 the family



were split up because of financial difficulties. My aunty took me to Bandung in West Java, but between the age of eight and nine I didn't go to school: I wasn't allowed to. My aunty wasn't recognised as a citizen because she was Chinese, so she didn't have the authority to send me to school. During the Suharto military regime the Chinese schools had all been closed, so all of her own nine children were unable to go to school either. When my Mum heard about, she brought me back to Tegal to live with my grandparents. This was very hard time for me, but I still remember a teacher called Miss Murni who held me and protected me from school bullies. For a few weeks after that I refused to go to school, but my family insisted I return.

I always loved drawing. I spent a lot of time drawing hammer and sickle emblems, though, because I can remember my father used to tell me stories about the campaigns; and the streets of my village were always filled with those flags. It was more a kind of fantasy for me as a child, and it seemed as though I could be part of a team with that emblem.

In the years towards the end of middle school my teacher encouraged me to apply for entrance to a specialised art high school in Jogjakarta. My mum ran a batik shop in Tegal. The neighbour, who was like my ersatz auntie, had no children, and they gave the kids in our family a great deal of support. The neighbour had also been a member of the communist party, and had spent about seven or eight years in jail because of those affiliations. When my father disappeared, they became part of our extended family. With their support I was able to rent a room while I studied at art school. It was a fantastic time. Schools of art like that don't exist anymore; the syllabus differed from other schools in Indonesia. Every class had about thirty students, so there was only about two hundred students in total, but over the course of two years, only twenty graduated. It was a 'free school' in the sense that there was no prescribed uniform, we could smoke in the school if we wanted, and it was up to us whether we went to school or not. The teaching was fantastic – it aimed to create artists, and most of the twenty in my batch did go on to become artists. Nowadays the curriculum is completely different.

It was such a huge change for me there – especially moving from a small village to living in a school with no reports – it was more like working in an atelier. My marks weren't fantastic, but I was keen to move on to university. I completed the four-year teaching course at the school, after which you could choose an academic or a vocational pathway. I applied to enter the Indonesian Institute of Art in Jogjakarta where I was accepted to study for six years full-time. I majored in the painting department. Throughout my studies I received some financial support from my Mum, and I

made some money helping make monuments during the school break.

When I completed University I worked with a Catholic Non-Government Organisation in Jogjakarta delivering communication services. The priest who lead the NGO had been trained in liberation theology in Latin America. I worked there for five years, delivering tutorials. I painted a little, but it wasn't until 1990 that the Dean of Indonesian Studies at Flinders University invited me to participate at the conference called Indonesian Update held in Adelaide, Australia. I had been in touch with Australian Keith Poulter, an expert on left wing literature in Indonesia with whom I had worked for some time.

I asked him whether it might be possible to organise an opportunity for me to have a solo exhibition in Australia, and I was offered a residency at Underdale University, Adelaide in 1990, where I had my first solo exhibition ever. Two of the works were purchased by the Fukuoka Museum of Modern Art in Fukuoka Japan, and the exhibition received a lot of positive reviews – I was referred to as "A Contemporary Indonesian Artist" which was a big deal at the time, because virtually no-one in Australia thought there was such a thing – an Indonesian artist who was also contemporary! I extended my stay when I was offered to tour my exhibition to the School of Art in Melbourne, and after that I returned to Indonesia. The trip had made me confident to call myself an artist, so I rented a studio in Jogjakarta and received funding through sales and through public art projects through NGO commissions.

In 1993 I was invited by Dr. Caroline Turner to produce an installation for the first Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane. I returned with much more confidence, and during that time I received a number of invitations to countries across the world for exhibitions and residencies. Thai writer, curator and critic Apinan Poshyananda included my work as part of a group show to the Asia Society in New York in 1997, and during this time I visited New York for the first time.

I moved to Australia in 1999, first living in Darwin where I was teaching in the studio department at Charles Darwin University for five years. Since then I have continued to work as a full-time artist except for one or two short residencies at universities. For six or seven years I lived in Brisbane, and I moved to Grevillea five years ago.

I was on a road trip around rural Australia when I stopped at the local Grevillea café where I spoke to some of the locals. I ended up staying! Fred and Colin offered me space to live and work in return for doing odd-jobs around their property until I could afford to buy the old buildings of the former local school, where I



now live and work. Grevillea is about forty-five minutes from Lismore. I make almost all my work here, except that I return to Jogjakarta to make large sculptural works and transport them back to Australia in shipping crates.

I love the environment. I love everything about it but the pollens; every summer I'm weighed down by pollen allergies. I don't keep in touch with many other artists – mostly I just work in my studio alone. I have an exhibition in Gallery Smith in Melbourne every two years and I also exhibit with Nancy Sever Gallery in Canberra. The Roxy Gallery, a community initiative supported by the local council in Kyogle have contacted me, and I'm looking forward to having a local exhibition there. I'm also looking forward to exhibiting in the Lismore Regional Gallery.

I spend a lot of time traveling. I've just returned from Siem Reap and Phnom Penh in Cambodia, but it's good to come home to Grevillea. I need space to think and work, and Grevillia gave me that space.

---

© Images and text copyright of the artists and *The Partnership Project*. Profile image: TORSTEN BLACKWOOD/AFP/Getty Images. Background image: Lisa Garland *Mr Irby's Boat* (detail), 2017.

