



ARIS PRABAWA

Prior to moving Australia seventeen years ago Aris was well known as a key member of *Taring Padi*, a cultural activist group of artists who have fought to foster community voice against oppression in Indonesia. He is also acclaimed as the leader of *Black Boots*, the longest running punk band in Indonesia. He now lives in Lismore where he continues to make art and music, and travels regularly between Lismore and Jogjakarta. In 2019 he returned on the invitation of the Director of the Yogya National Museum, Yogyakarta to celebrate a solo exhibition of his work, and has maintained a career of exhibiting as an artist in Australia and Indonesia. His band *Black Boots* has enjoyed successful Australian tours, and he continues to write and perform with them.

Aris Prabawa arrived in Australia in 2002. As an artist who was part of the *Taring Padi* group, he was involved with the group's exhibition that year at the Adelaide Art Festival, where they erected an enormous painted banner (approx. 8 x 9 metres) in one of the main streets.

Aris was born in Solo, and moved to Jogja in 1994 to work in a screen-printing business as a draughtsman and designer. During that time, he began the process of applying for a degree at the Indonesian Institute of Art in Yogyakarta. Aris is the youngest of five brothers, and as a child was always interested in drawing, guided and encouraged by his uncle. When he was young, a children's television series hosted and driven by local comic book artist Tino Sidin was a strong influence on

his development. As part of this program, Tino Sidin worked with children to finish off their squiggles, much like the Australian icon, Mr. Squiggle, working with Miss Pat.

Throughout his high school years, Aris became increasingly aware of the works of Indonesian modernists that included the likes of Indonesian artist heroes like Affandi and Radin Saleh as well as European 'greats'. In Solo, an artist named Dullah, a contemporary of Affandi, ran an art shop, a place that was part of Aris' local beat. Yet at the time he was unaware of the importance of Dullah's contribution to Indonesian modernism. Looking back, Aris reflects on the fact that his dream was to study in the art school with the 'greats', when some of them were already living



alongside him in his own home town.

Throughout this time, music was also a strong influence, and during high school he learned to play guitar. Jazz, local pop and *dangdut* – a form of Indian popular music with a strong sense of percussion that runs through the music of many cultures – were early influences in his musical education.

At art school, he majored in printmaking, although he also enrolled in painting and sculpture classes, but he left after three years before completing the course. During that time, Aris had formed a punk band called Black Boots with three art school friends. The band steadily grew in popularity. There was a strong punk scene in the communities that surrounded the art school, but Black Boots was becoming increasingly identified as part of the pro-democracy movement protesting against corruption, militarism and violence. The performances were not just about playing music; the three-piece band formed the core of a broader agenda where audience members were encouraged to speak up and speak out against the violence and corruption that characterised the Suharto regime. Aris recalls the front-line energy of these times, where the band and the collectives that formed around it were involved in a multiplicity of street actions. They used the stage to speak out from, not in terms of provocation for provocations' sake, but as a way of joining the community together in a sense of a supportive connecting spirit.

Throughout his candidature, Aris had also continued to support himself through his employment as designer with the printmaking business, and gradually, the demands of work and of the band made it impossible to give his visual art studio subjects the attention he thought they deserved. Although he was already holding his own professional exhibitions at this stage, his sense of responsibility to the work he produced contributed to his decision to leave the course, even though his lecturers were encouraging him to continue.

In 1998, when the government announced that it was moving the location of the Art School to another location within Yogyakarta, students and alumni and musicians and interdisciplinary performers and supporters who cared so much of the history of the building and its central role as a gathering point for communication and collaboration, gathered together to protest. They occupied the rooms and began a process of squatting that lasted a full five years. *Taring Padi* was born during that time, when a group of squatting art school students and their friends and audience members decided that they wanted to contribute to the democracy movement against Suharto through their art and activism that made such a contribution to the reformation movement. *Taring Padi* was mostly comprised of visual artists, but writers, poets,

musicians, performers and activists came together through a shared commitment to social change through art and street action.

The group formed organically – they used the evacuated buildings to make massive banners and huge street puppets that were at times also used as weapons against the violence of the police and army. Many of the street posters were produced collaboratively by massive woodcuts; driven by the collective energy to make demands for change. But as Aris describes, the movement had its detractors. He says,

“We were also attacked by artists who didn’t agree that art should be involved in politics. It was a divided scene in Jogja, where sceptics compared us with the communist LEKRA movement from the 1950S and 60S, the People’s Cultural Organisation that had argued artists should concern themselves with political struggle. But we weren’t like that– we just wanted to speak up about human rights.”

“We were successful in bringing art into the community in terms of teaching technical art-making skills and also teaching them the collective skills of protest through consultation. It was driven by collaboration and consultation; we worked with a range of groups including farming communities where we used art and music to create positive mediums through which people could raise issues in relation to their own problems.”

“I was an active member of *Taring Padi* for around four years; the entire squatting process in the old art buildings lasted five years, but by 2003, when they finally were kicked out by the government (who owned the building) and the Sultan (who owned the land), I was already in Australia.”

“When I arrived in Adelaide with the other two artists from *Taring Padi*, I had already met my partner Jade, who had been studying art and language in Jogja in 2001. We met during the squat, and over the course of that year Jade invited me to live and work with her in Australia. At the time I had a cultural visa that enabled me to stay for an entire year – something that no longer exists. Jade had begun a course in naturopathy at Southern Cross University, and when my two pals went home after two months I decided I would stay in Australia to explore the possibilities, so we moved together to the Northern Rivers.”

“During that time I worked in a range of jobs while I continued to make art and work on my music. I also played solo while I continued to write songs for my band Black Boots, which is still playing after twenty years. It’s the longest running punk band in Indonesia; we have three albums, and toured Australia in 2016”.

In 2018 Aris returned to his former squat and art school in its current iteration as the Jogjakarta National Museum. One of the rooms still has an ink mural he produced in 1999 during the squatting years of a chaotic family birthday during the Suharto. Aris arrived on the invitation of Heri Pemad, the Director of Artjog, the annual festival in Jogjakarta, and the creator of Art Bali, an annual arts festival in Bali. For many years Heri had been suggesting a solo exhibition, and so together they decided on a retrospective including works from over a period of twenty years, a total of eighty-eight works. A preview video of the exhibition is available on Youtube. It was a wonderful thing for Aris to return to a building that had provided the memories and born the scars of so many aspects and phases of his life. He remembers how the lack of funding did nothing to stop the spirit of those days – of how fund-raising and collective spirit meant that the work itself became stronger. He recalls with particular pleasure how so many people were surprised when the mural of the work he'd produced all those years ago was revealed from behind the board that had been laid over the top of the original work, and of how even the Gallery Director was surprised about the scale and impact of the work, even after all these years."

Aris and Jade now have two children – Django (11) and Loretta (7) and Aris continues to move between Lismore and Jogjakarta on an annual basis. When he returns home, he makes contact with his Indonesian family, his band and his friends, and he is currently working on developing another album with his band. He quit *Taring Padi* five years ago when he felt his ideas and activities were moving in differing directions. Aris says that now his sense of 'home' lies in both Lismore and Jogjakarta, where his spiritual energy lies.

Aris believes that although media makes a difference to how we communicate, it is the nature of particular locales that lie at the fundamental core of how we relate to the world around us. In Indonesia, he is drawn to the identification of local spirits in the particular places he lives. And when he connected with Aboriginal Australians here, in Australia, he was able to better understand the spirits and energies that keep this place alive. It's not too different from the sense of connection he feels in Jogja. "I'm not comfortable living in the city, but when I go into places of nature I feel connected" he says.

For this exhibition Aris' work about newcomers to a country draws from his personal experiences of living in a new place. It's about the feeling of being welcomed by a community – a land with a big heart capable of welcoming and supporting those who are coming here. "It's an expression of my own life here as I get more knowledge of local cultures. Even though racism and suspicions of security might abound here, they don't

scare me. I live here peacefully, and I feel like I am part of a community of newcomers who become stronger through their sense of support for each other. I use art as a positive way of protesting, exploring and speaking out about where I am and who I am becoming."

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