



thoughts on
yunizar's
sculptures

I

Yunizar (1971-) has been featured frequently and prominently in exhibitions by this gallery. His appearances signal his significance in its representation of contemporary artists from Indonesia in Singapore and internationally; artists who are relatively unknown, even peripheral and yet are regarded as prospectively appealing in and for the art market; and artists whose works stimulate some critical commentary. His association with this gallery began in 1995.

Yunizar's works are exhibited in solo, group and festive shows, and as part of a collaborative enterprise known as Kelompang Seni Rupa Jendela (Jendela Art Group, hereafter Jendela). I will not be exaggerating when saying this gallery has catapulted Yunizar (and, for that matter, his artistic kinsmen) into the public arena more insistently than any other agency. It has done so, firstly and primarily, by assertively advertising and securing sales for this artist's works as worthy commodities and delectable objects. It has done so, secondly and quite consistently, by proposing critical frames for seeing Yunizar and Jendela, and publishing them.

In this connection I recall the following: Yunizar: biasa aja (Yunizar: The Usual Only, 2006), Coretan. Recent Works by Yunizar (co-organised by NUS Museum, Singapore, 2007) and Jogja Psychedelia. Flowers From Yunizar, jointly organised by Galeri Soemadja, Faculty of Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology, Bandung, 2010). Additionally and propelled by this gallery, he was shown in Jendela: a play of the ordinary, an exposition co-organised by NUS Museum in 2005.

This is not a detailed list of exhibitions in which Yunizar was featured, singly and in the company of other artists. I have mentioned expositions that demonstrate the adroit positioning (by this gallery) of an artist such as Yunizar so that he is seen co-located in sites that are conventionally and sufficiently set apart – i.e. sites identified as commercial domains and sites representing the worlds of academia and the public.

Yunizar is by no means the first or the only artist who appears in multiple, divergent spheres. The public and the commercial have intersected variously in art's histories, and with varying consequences. In considering Yunizar in these situations we may highlight matters that point to wide, extensive implications. These are some I have in mind.

The impact or affect of one sphere on another (the commercial on academia and the public, and vice versa) in shaping the worlds of art in the region of Southeast Asia and in determining the conduct of sectors that constitute these art worlds in this region, has been noted, anxiously and with disquiet. In truth the situation has not been scrutinized and examined. This is not an occasion for undertaking such enquiries – which require overlapping, multi-disciplinary studies.

What may be said here is that exhibitions such as those mentioned above provide fertile grounds for initiating such inquiries. For instance, we may ask how art works are altered, by way of presentation and reception, when they migrate from one site to another, across and within artworlds? Are there curatorial or expositional strategies that are sufficiently site-specific? Do ethical principles matter when representing artists and art, and are they

recognizably registered and demonstrated, in dealings in the worlds of art in Southeast Asia? How are transfers from the commercial to the public or academic spheres, from the private and corporate to the public domains, undertaken; and how do the ensuing, altered destinations affect the status of art works and the esteem of artists? And so on. When answering questions such as these, fresh premises for analyzing and interpreting the worlds of art have to be proposed, premises that enable appraising art expansively and not only for its aesthetic or intrinsic values.

II

I leave these issues and direct attention to interests prevailing on this occasion. On display are a number of three-dimensional works cast in bronze and produced over the past two years. For those who are familiar with Yunizar's practice, seeing sculptures standing upright on pedestals may be surprising, especially when they are weighted against his primary, enduring preoccupations. Which have to do with composing pictures. Yunizar's artistic world is and has been, exclusively, pictorial; in cultivating it he is set apart from his comrades in Jendela.

When we read publications issued in conjunction with the exhibitions named earlier, we encounter writers drawing attention to Yunizar's obsession with painting. On two occasions when seeing this artist comparatively and on his own, Enin Supriyanto implies that unlike his compatriots in Jendela, Yunizar's ground is defined by the stretched canvas or an improvised planar surface. "He often", says Supriyanto, "fills his canvas solely with elements, and not with forms". When he is seen along another perspective,

Supriyanto says: "his painting is actually formed by an entry into the world of mantra, repetitive gestures that evolve into a trance". That is to say, Yunizar's paintings are transcendent; they have attributes and properties that are capable of hoisting viewers, when seeing them, onto metaphysical realms.

Yunizar's singular preoccupation with painting is contrasted with Rudi Mantofani's "paintings, objects or sculptures"; it is set apart from "some objects, installations and recent paintings by Handiwirman" and distinguished from "a strategy of allusion applied by Yasura Martunus in his objects", and so on. Supriyanto appraises artists in Jendela not only on account of their preference for a medium or their prodigious use of genres and materials, but also by interpreting the symbolic content and psychological impact of their art works, discriminately.

Even when Supriyanto reviews Yunizar individually and on his own, he forwards this artist's uniqueness along a comparative tenor, and with the Jendela group in mind. In citing him in this vein, I offer the second occasion when Supriyanto comments on Yunizar. "Compared to the other members of this group", he notes, "Yunizar appears to be the only one who truly believes in constantly challenging the idea of the artist holding a singular aesthetic axiom". Needless to say the "singular aesthetic axiom" is exemplified in and by painting.

Supriyanto rounds off his review by re-inscribing this axiom with critical and historical resonance: "every canvas has a chance of giving birth to either a new aesthetic norm or of testing the axiom itself"; "Yunizar's recent paintings over the past several years underlie this conviction". These

remarks neatly and forcefully direct attention to that which is salient in his art. Yunizar's art is defined by his practice of painting.

III

I have taken time for setting up a frame for seeing Yunizar's sculptures. They make up a distinctly visible component and are the impetus for writing this account. They herald a new, recent interest that is modestly represented. That is to say, sculptural productions do not proliferate in his oeuvre; neither do they supplant painting and they are not pursued to extents when they are seen as vying with painting. Painting is dominant in his practice, and retains its axiomatic stature (recalling Supriyanto's claim).

Why has Yunizar turned to dealing with sculpture? Why is he involved with methods of making art that entail manipulating material physically and directly, and utilizing procedures that are technologically driven? Why has he embraced a mode of production that is publicly collaborative and requiring technical assistance? I pose these questions to direct attention to foundational differences separating sculpture from painting – the latter conceived and realized largely as a practice that is intensely private, self-directed and self-corrective and stimulated by inner perceptual and imaginative experiences. Exiting from one creative domain in order to enter the other is not a natural movement and easy; it is painstaking, entailing scrupulous, even arduous adjustments to methods of work. When we consider his present creative output, which is modest, Yunizar appears intent in furthering his involvement in sculpture.



>> Fig 14. Red Table, 2010, resin

Yunizar is drawn to sculpture not by a single encounter and vision or by an instantaneous surge propelling him to unearth a new creative vein. We do not detect a dramatic, revelatory moment, marking its appearance. His interest in sculpture emerges tentatively, sporadically and matter-of-factly; it materializes sixteen years after the first public showing of his painting. His engagement is registered fitfully; when we examine his recent sculptural representations, their origins in his painting are clear. For all this, the beginnings of his sculptural ventures are surprising.

Red Table (Fig 14), produced in 2010, is the earliest three-dimensional work by Yunizar. It appears unprecedentedly. It was exhibited thereby signaling the artist's regard for it. Its material and formal make up strike us forcefully, somewhat blatantly; it asserts its object-like status, its thing-ness even, directly and unflinchingly.

Red Table features a rectangular table; a tablecloth is laid out diagonally so that it covers the table's surface partially, leaving its corners bare and visible. In doing so, the corners of the tablecloth are suspended prominently, weightily over the table's sides, muting its sturdy, measured rectilinear form. A teapot, a mug, a saucer containing a stemmed fruit are gathered closely and placed in the middle.

The table, tablecloth and utensils are modeled in clay, separately; they are then cast in resin and fired in order to appear as a consolidated, unified configuration. In developing each of these stages, Yunizar has been assisted by modelers and fabricators who are skilled in producing objects according to specifications (i.e. the table) and able also to create forms such as the tablecloth and utensils.

Red Table is a three-dimensional still life; this is one way of interpreting it. In doing so we nudge it's seeing towards registering kinship with the world of painting. Still life is a pictorial genre; it is consolidated and esteemed in a number of artistic traditions. It is rarely rendered sculpturally, as a stand-alone topic in three-dimensions. And in this instance, it is a one-off production.

Still life is featured prominently in Yunizar's painting; entire compositions are devoted to it. Even so it is improbable that Red Table has come about by merely and literally transferring a still life arrangement from one of his pictures into three-dimensions and into actual space; its has not walked out of picture into space. Yunizar grapples with forms and surfaces in space, concretely and tangibly. Even though the representation is descriptive and factual, we discern creative interests that are recognizably sculptural.

Red Table draws attention to seeing materials transformed into palpable forms. The substance and shapes of the work are fixed; yet when we look at them intently our visual attention is quickened; our bodily reactions are enlivened. Surfaces, textures, objects, contact points are perceived as changing, ever so slightly. Red Table claims space as location. When we acknowledge attributes such as these, we also recognize a work that is preponderantly sculptural.

I have taken time to deal with Red Table at some length in order to (a) propose criteria for appraising sculpture, (b) highlight differences between painting and three-dimensional representations generally and as they pertain to this artist's practice, (c) appraise his treatment of aspects of sculpture which materialize here rudimentarily. In these respects Red Table marks a beginning in Yunizar's sculptural venture.

It is not a venture that pans out continuously and smoothly. Three years later he produces his second sculptural work. It is a full-length sculptural representation of a human figure (Figure 15). In fabricating it, Yunizar follows procedures used for the still life sculpture in 2010, assisted by craftsmen who are adept at modeling, pouring and firing.

There is a marked difference between this figure and the earlier work; its surface is brushed with bronze patina, simulating a luster emitted by objects entirely cast in bronze. In sculpting this



>> Fig 15. Tall Man, 2010, resin

figure, Yunizar signals his affiliation with the primary topic in sculpture as such, namely: the human body. It is a trait that has endured until the present.

The figure stands as an attenuated form on a small, uneven surface. Its neck is elongated and its head is tiny; its torso is lengthened, as are its legs. It holds its arms akimbo, thereby striking a commanding, assertive pose. Such an impact is at variance with the physique of the figure, which appears as insubstantial and frail. When we examine its body closely though, we apprehend a sturdy, even an obdurate entity. Yes the torso, arms and legs are skeletal, bony; yet they are firm, boldly raised in relief and tough looking.

Although its facial features are not clearly discernible (I am describing it from photographic images), they are sufficiently visible. So much so its visage is seen as alert, watchful; the elongated neck may well serve as a device for enhancing this attitude, enabling the figure to rise in space authoritatively and register itself as a presence for surveillance. It assumes a dominant, vigilant bearing.

IV

In 2013 Yunizar produced two bust-length figures; they are cast in bronze. Each figure is conceived and executed differently.

Village Gangster (Fig 16) bears kinship with the standing, sentinel-like figure discussed earlier. Here tool arms are held akimbo; the pose imparts authority, somewhat



>> Fig 16. Preman Kampungan (Village Gangster), 2013, , cast bronze, 72 x 27 x 65cm

overbearingly. Whereas the standing figure is apprehended as tapering and slipping out of sight, the bust-length format of Village Gangster thrusts the body into view as a close-up; its facial features are starkly amplified. Not surprisingly its presence is registered forcefully and with telling effects. Consider the following: the bared teeth, the enlarged eyes with dilated pupils, the bulbous nose, the flaring ears, the inflated cheeks, the skull and cross bones and a preening rooster inscribed as logos on the jacket.

Cumulatively their impact is oppressive and menacing. We encounter a figure that is characterized as a despot and a bully.



>> Fig 16. Back of Preman Kampungan (Village Gangster)

We see these features and motifs on the frontal plane of this figure. When we turn our attention to its rear, we encounter different interests. We do not transit from one viewpoint to another – i.e. from the front to the back and vice versa – gradually, along connecting, sculptural passages. We exit from one and enter another, abruptly. This situation is highlighted when we examine Village Gangster in profile (Fig 4a). What do we see? Two planes

that are abutted against one another; there are no links connecting or relating one to another. Indeed, the front vanishes from sight when the figure is seen in profile.

Whereas the frontal view maintains the flatness of its plane consistently, the rear view yields some interest in

volume. Hence, the plane delineating the back of the head curves outwards, convexly; its bulges into space. Its surface is streaked with raised ridges that indicate its slicked-back hair. The back of the torso reveals a depression in the middle, signifying the figure's back bone.

On the back of the figure's torso there appears a configuration of significance; when we identify it and go on to consider its import, we hoist seeing Village Gangster onto an expansive symbolic register. What is this figuration? It is a winged creature displaying affiliations with the Garuda (Fig 4b), a bird of immense historical, mythological and national importance in Indonesia and in many areas in Southeast Asia. It is shown with a number of its customary attributes and stance. Yunizar presents it with its wings outspread, its legs apart, its beak flaring; it rears rampantly (stands upright and tall). It appears triumphant and victorious.

In its recent manifestation, the Garuda appears as the presiding motif in the national emblem of Indonesia, where it is hailed and venerated as the Garuda Pancasila. Yunizar does not replicate that emblem; on the contrary, he appropriates it selectively, thereby impressing it with other meanings. In this instance he attaches a shield bearing a star on the bird's chest; this is a radical abbreviation of what appears in the Garuda Pancasila where a shield is emblazoned with five signs (a banyan tree, a bull's head, stalks of rice and cotton, a chain), including a star that is positioned in the middle. Whereas in the national emblem the bird grips a ribbon-like scroll inscribed with the words *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which is revered as a motto for the nation (loosely translated as Unity in Diversity), Yunizar's Garuda grasps in its talons a scroll-like feature consisting of skulls.

Yunizar inserts a bird as a dominant motif in two paintings (Figs 7 and 9). In one it is posed as a rampant garuda holding in its talons a scroll adorned with skulls, as in *Village Gangster*. In the other, it is shown in profile with an extended, outspread tail, preening like a rooster.

Yunizar's representations bear kinship with the bird seen in *Garuda Pancasila*; there is little doubt that affiliations are intended. But he does not regurgitate or replicate it. There are important differences between what he depicts and what is fixed in the official crest or insignia. It is in attending to such departures that the significance of encountering the garuda in *Village Gangster*, and in the two untitled paintings, may be gauged.

Firstly and obviously in seeing the winged motifs in these works, we associate them with the *Garuda Pancasila*. This marks an initial, interpretive advancement. We do not, however, mistake one for the other and view them as though they are similar. Hence the bird motif that is inscribed on the back of *Village Gangster* is not the *Garuda Pancasila* per se.

Secondly, it is by recognizing differences that we discern extents to which this motif is coaxed into yielding new appearances and unexpected outcomes; not only by its treatment and design, but also the milieu in which it is featured. Consequently, its significance is far removed from and even opposed to beliefs that are affirmed when beholding the *Garuda Pancasila*, beliefs that reinforce envisioning the nation as a coherent, unified yet strident or dynamic entity.

My interest here is in the *Village Gangster*. Earlier I remarked that the stance and visage of this bust-length figure mark a presence that is overbearing and ominous. I said that it could be seen as symbolizing a bully and a despot. When the figuration of the garuda, which is tattooed on the jacket on the back of the figure, is woven into such a web of interpretation, we apprehend the figure along heightened, complicated registers. The garuda is associable with the national emblem; it is also seen as entangled with logos adorning the front of the figure (i.e. skull and cross bones and the preening rooster which may well augur cult affiliations). The *Village Gangster* is not any one entity; it bears mixed or multiple identities – alternately or concurrently a thug, a despot and an enforcer!

2013 was a productive year for Yunizar, especially for furthering his involvement with sculpture. In addition to *Village Gangster* there appeared *Pose* (Fig 17), cast in bronze and fabricated in an edition of three images. Here too, he employs a bust-length format and positions the figure frontally; the effect of encountering it close-up is underscored by the magnification of the head and facial features. A familiar scheme re-appears. The eyes are enlarged, the nose is inflated bulbously, teeth are slightly bared and its ears are flared. The figure wears a tight-fitting, tightly buttoned, collarless jacket that encases the torso and the arms, which are not visible. The demeanour, here, though is completely different from what we observed in *Village Gangster*.



>> Fig 17. *Pose*, 2013, cast bronze, 55 x 15 x 65 cm

It is aloof, detached and haughty. The tightly buttoned jacket cuts it off from contact with any other. The figure appears as mustering itself to strike an attitude or pose.

There is another visage in this representation. When we move to its rear so to speak, we encounter a bust-length figure that appears as a mirror image of what we have just seen and described. In truth they are different, especially in the detailed depiction of facial features and in registering facial expression. Contrasted with the distanced, removed attitudes discerned earlier, here we come face to face with a bland, unregistering, somewhat comical countenance. There is a motif that makes an interesting and unexpected appearance, though. Below the figure's chin we note a skull and cross bones inscribed on the lapel of the jacket. Could it serve as a device for relating this figure with Village Gangster, even as the two strike very different poses?

In these respects, Pose and Village Gangster yield interesting, interpretive outcomes, spurred largely by the symbolic weight and pertinence we attach to a number of motifs. I have drawn attention to them, as they are important for ascertaining the significance of these works. I have drawn attention to them so that they may act as antidotes to repeated assessments whereby Yunizar's art (and that of the Jendela artists) is judged as devoid of significant content and that it merely displays formal, even decorative prowess. This is quite absurd; it is an attitude that springs from inattentive looking. Be that as it may, I move on to briefly look at sculptural properties or attributes in these works.

In Village Gangster and Pose, Yunizar employs techniques that are identifiable with a particular method

in sculptural practice, known as relief. How may we recognize his?

Relief emerges as part of a surface that is continuous, and is formed by interacting with that surface. That is to say, forms are raised from or incised into this surface. Yunizar employs planar surfaces for denoting forms; hence each of these figures is made up of two planes, placed back-to-back to one another. Each plane is enlivened with motifs and shapes that are raised from or inscribed into its surface, thereby providing it with particular representational appearances.

In Village Gangster, for instance, we see a bust-length representation of a body with a front and a rear. This conforms to a convention in sculpture where the head is installed as an autonomous, formal and symbolic entity. In such instances, the head is generally conceived as a portrait in which the face is esteemed as envisaging the persona, or character or identity of a depicted subject. Hence we tend to order our viewing of a bust-length figure along a hierarchical sequence; its face and frontal viewpoint take precedence over any other orientation.

When we approach Pose..... with these customary anticipations, we are immediately startled by its strangeness, its otherness even (Fig 18). It is made up of two faces, one on each side of the planes that make up the work; it is a double-faced head. The faces are set apart by particular, descriptive and expressive features. The planes bearing the faces are pressed close to one another, without any bodily or formal traits intervening between them; so much so, when seeing one, the other vanishes from sight completely leaving no visual traces. Such outcomes

stress the double-ness of this work, highlighting its formal demands and complicating its psychological impact. When we view Pose along a dual track such as I have outlined, we encounter a doppelganger image, a figure with double-goer propensities!



>> Fig 18. Pose, 2014, Cast Bronze, 105 x 30 x 163 cm

V

While introducing Village Gangster and Pose, I remarked that 2013 was a productive year for Yunizar's involvement with sculpture. An impetus that may be regarded as nudging him towards dealing with three-dimensional practice, attentively, springs partially from the establishment of a facility by this gallery in Yogyakarta. Known as the Yog Art Lab (YAL), it was set up in 1912 to, initially, research into and manufacture paper that could be creatively used by artists (in Indonesia), as material and medium, distinctly. It subsequently changed its course of operations in 2013; it now enables fabricating and producing three-dimensional works in a range of metals, including bronze casting. The YAL

is sited on land that belongs to Yunizar and is situated close by his residence – where he has his studio for painting.

Yunizar is known to visit the YAL, observing work undertaken by persons skilled in a range of professional activities; he is known to look at and handle material, tentatively shaping and gouging balls of clay. For that matter, he is directly involved in the making of his sculptural works, attending to each and every stage of their fabrication and creation.

Of course proximity of such a facility, in and of itself, need not stimulate engagements in new, different kinds of art activities. Interest, curiosity, eagerness in wanting to step into another dimension for extending capacities for thinking on and making art are important well springs for spurring an artist towards exploring untried pathways.

There is another facet that needs mention and attention. The world of sculpture is not unknown, unrepresented in Yunizar's art world. His contemporaries in Jendela are prodigiously versatile, as noted by Enin Supriyanto. Yunizar is constantly encountering three-dimensional productions within the Jendela circuit of expositions.

Earlier in this account I posed a number of questions directed at uncovering motivations or incentives for discerning Yunizar's embrace of sculpture in his practice. The matters that are recounted above are offered as answers to some of these questions. Others may be forthcoming as we deepen our thinking on and appreciation of Yunizar's art generally and our observations of the unfolding of his practice of sculpture.

VI

I round off this essay by briefly discussing two recent works titled Plebian Gangster (Fig 19) and Playboy Rooster Pose (Fig 20), dated 2014, and cast in bronze. Each is finished with a distinctly toned and constituted, lustrous patina.

They are life-size, standing figures; each holds itself upright, rising firmly and resolutely from a rectangular shaped base.

When we examine them we note affinities with sculptures produced earlier. For instance, as with Pose, here too we encounter double-faced representations. Whereas in the 2013 work, the doubling entailed a bust-length figure, in these productions we see full-bodied, frontal viewpoints joined one to another, back-to-back. Formally and symbolically, these figures are defined entirely by their double-ness. The effects are felt doubly, too.



>> Fig 19. Preman Kampung (Plebeian Gangster, cast bronze, 105 x 30 x 163cm

The postures assumed by these two standing figures remind us of attitudes that we described when examining Village Gangster. Here too, arms are held akimbo, facial features are amplified and loom prominently, and bodies are inscribed with signs, shapes, numbers and words signaling cryptic affiliations and humorous messages.

The elevation and lateral expansion of the bodies in Plebian Gangster and Playboy Rooster Pose exert command over space, forcefully; the double-ness of their gaze and posture assert command over our bodies as well. Psychologically they

claim potent presences. The double-ness is also marked by subtle yet sustained, deprecating humour

Formally and symbolically these two works point to Yunizar's deepening commitment to representing the figure, sculpturally. He has advanced appreciably over the past two years. We look towards ways by which he continues his three-dimensional practice in the forthcoming years.

TK SABAPATHY

Art Historian



>> Fig 20. Boedjang Ajam (Playboy Rooster), 2014, cast bronze, 102 x 30 x 166cm