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"Naughty but Nice"

PROFILES

# Naughty but Nice

Indonesian collective Tromarama's mission is to make art more fun. PAYAL UTTAM explores how the mischievous trio inspires viewers to rethink everyday life



A SELECTION OF IMAGES FROM TROMARAMA'S *PRIVATE RIOTS* INSTALLATION



A STILL FROM TROMARAMA'S STOP-MOTION FILM *WATT?*

The first time I came across a work by Tromarama was in the middle of a torrential thunderstorm in Yogyakarta three years ago. I was stepping inside Cemeti Art House, a small artist-run space, when I noticed something in the rain-soaked ground. Pushing aside a pile of leaves, I was surprised to see words carved into tiles: "I don't know what I'm doing and why I keep doing it."

The Indonesian artists' collective Tromarama, consisting of Febie Babyrose, Herbert Hans and Ruddy Hatumena, created that installation during an artists' residency. "We put that text there because it reflected our situation at the time," explains Babyrose. Coming to sleepy Yogyakarta, they were perplexed to find themselves in a traditional culture that strongly adhered to myths. "In one part of the city, for example, the king can't pass through a certain street because they believe if he does he'll die," she says. Their work was a way of raising questions about

such beliefs and provoking the viewer to reconsider social conventions.

It was a simple enough statement, but the words stuck in my head. Tromarama's works tend to have that effect. Bursting through the veneer of quotidian life, their installations and videos inspire viewers to rethink their surroundings. In the past few years the trio has transformed from unassuming art students working quietly in their Bandung studio into internationally recognised names lauded for their exuberant stop-motion animation works rooted in traditional art practices. This month they've been invited to Art Basel in Hong Kong, where they'll exhibit a large work in the fair's much-anticipated Encounters section.

Babyrose confesses that they never thought they'd end up here. When the three met in an extracurricular video workshop at the Bandung Institute of Technology, they had entirely different ambitions. "At that time we wanted to become music-video directors for MTV,"

she recalls with a laugh. Babyrose was learning printmaking, while Hatumena and Hans, old high-school friends, were studying design. For their first collaboration, they used woodcuts to create a four-minute animated music video for the Indonesian heavy-metal band Serigala Malam. They carved 450 pieces of plywood and brought the roughly carved surfaces to life with flickering movement and pounding beats. "We worked from 4pm till midnight every day for four and a half months," she exclaims. "That's why we became so traumatised." This inspired the playful name "Tromarama".

Living together in an apartment in Bandung, Babyrose began dating Hans shortly after they made their first work, and the trio began to draw inspiration from their daily lives. "We were really interested in domestic objects at first. We wanted to give them characters and 'play God' and give them a soul, and after that we started to build a story." Among their experiments

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were pieces like *Wattt?!*, a 2010 video portraying a bunch of mischievous lamps taking on a life of their own, carousing around an apartment. "Sometimes we felt our electricity bill became very high, so we thought maybe all the lamps in here were having a party at night," she explains.

What set the trio apart from other video artists was the tactile, raw and deliberately low-tech nature of their stop-motion animations, as well as the way they raise questions about technology while reviving local craft traditions. "At that time, to have a really high-tech computer in Indonesia was very expensive. The first stop-motion we executed was with a digital camera. We're more a DIY generation."

In *Extraneous* (2010), for instance, they used traditional batik technique to dye fabric and create images of the human eye using binary code as a pattern. The work was an exploration of social media and how virtual relationships and interactions contrast starkly with face-to-face contact. "There's a history in batik," she says. "The ladies who did batik preserved a pattern to talk about history at that time. We want to preserve our own history in this digital era."

When they started out in 2006, they struggled to convince collectors that animation was a legitimate art form. "It was difficult," she recalls, "because when people dealt with video they never thought



A STILL FROM *SERIGALA MILITIA*

it was a medium for art. They only knew sculpture or painting. Of course we were worried." But things began changing quickly. "The boom market in China affected the market in Indonesia, so every curator and every gallery was racing to show something new. It helped video artists like us."

The trio's first major show outside Indonesia was a big step. A curator spotted their work in a group exhibition and invited them to show at the 2008 Singapore Biennale. "After that we got invited everywhere," she says. Perhaps their biggest moment to date was their first museum show in Europe, last year at

Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum.

The opportunity to show at Art Basel in Hong Kong this month will no doubt raise their profile further. They are exhibiting *Private Riots* (2014), a monumental spiralling chandelier made of protest banners dangling from the ceiling. Below the colourful installation is a plywood stage on which viewers can view video footage. The audience is confronted with a barrage of pop-like images from protest banners such as a clock (representing time), feet (marching) and mouths (speeches) flashing across the screens. The work is rooted in the artists' observations of Asia's ever-changing cultural environment. "It's not talking about political movement; it's more about our dilemma as humans," says Babyrose. "There's no balance any more when humans are pursuing progress and they don't care about nature."

Questions about our relationship with our environment and the age we live in are at the core of Tromarama's work. Asked what's next, she explains that they're pushing their work in a new direction following their recent exhibition at Hong Kong's Edouard Malingue Gallery, in which they eschewed stop-motion animation. Instead they created single-channel videos to explore more conceptual themes. Among the works was *Intercourse* (2015), a clever piece in which



LEFT: A STILL FROM *TING\**; RIGHT: TROMARAMA'S INSTALLATION OUTSIDE CEMETI ART HOUSE IN YOGYAKARTA



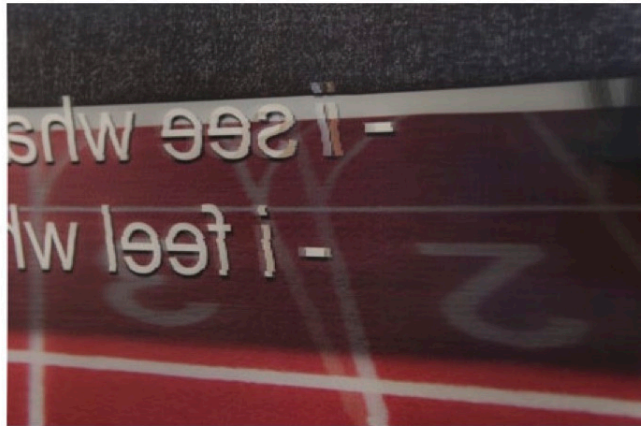


ABOVE AND LEFT: TROMARAMAS WORK ON DISPLAY AT EDOUARD MALINGUE GALLERY IN HONG KONG

two screens faced each other. One showed a static whirring fan while the other screen displayed everyday objects such as cups and towels being blown about as if the fan were real. The show poked holes in our perception of images on screen as being real. "We're looking into how video, reality and the Internet merge and how they come up with a new reality in our life," explains Babyrose.

Things have changed for Tromarama since their post-graduation days, when they lived together in a house that also served as their studio. Babyrose married Hans last year and they've moved out on their own, but some things never change: "After 10 years of being together, the three of us fight every day," she admits. "But after all, it's still exciting. Discussion is really important. Otherwise we'd be working alone in a group, and that doesn't make sense."

Asked if she ever wonders what life would be like had they become music-video directors, she muses, "MTV [music



videos] disappeared around 2007, so I think we buried that kind of dream. But if [it did happen], for sure we wouldn't live in Bandung. Maybe Jakarta. We would do commercial jobs. Every day it would be like a template with a new client each time, trying to deal with our ideas while doing promotion. There would be less freedom."

It's hard to imagine the trio working within restraints. Their calling card has always been their free-spirited nature and impish approach to making art, as

works like *Ting\** (2008) aptly illustrate. The video tells the story of three porcelain mugs and a mini-army of tableware on an escape mission outdoors, dancing to a comical soundtrack of rhythmic chinking. The mugs represent the artists and their yearning for freedom.

"We want to play in our daily life, but then after your playtime you must go back to sitting in the cupboard and behave like tableware should. We function like that," she says. "But we want to make art more fun."