

## AUSTRALIA

## Canberra

Dadang Christanto  
at Drill Hall Gallery,  
Australian National  
University

Superbly curated by Caroline Turner, *Wounds in Our Heart* was the largest presentation of Dadang Christanto's work in Australia since he moved here in 1999. Despite its stunning presentation, the obscure university location at Canberra's Drill Hall Gallery meant that it was missed by many people.

It is widely agreed that Dadang has become one of the most significant contemporary artists practicing in this region, a voice that emerged from Indonesia's long political turmoil. While this exhibition was not political *per se*, it charted Dadang's concerns through paintings and drawings that stretched the past 15 years and, most notably, offered a rare survey of his documented performances from 1998 to 2009.

Rounding out this history were two new series: batik patterns that pushed the medium's traditional patterns and colors overlaid with Dadang's iconic calligraphic gestures in a new scroll format, and figurative paintings with a stylized pixilation in the series *Behind the Veil* (2010). Despite its title these transcend the constraints of religion and culture and, like much of Dadang's art, were located within a more 'universal ideology for human rights.'

The core of *Wounds in our Heart*, however, centered largely around Dadang's *River Series* (2009) and his *Count Project* (1999), its significance to this exhibition two-fold: it marked his turn to painting and signature motifs; but it was also the start of his Australian engagement. Working out from this moment, Turner has curated a deeply considered and subtle exhibition that connected viewers across time and space, metaphorically and literally.



Dadang Christanto, *Floating I (River Series)*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 136 x 168 cm. Courtesy the Artist, Jan Manton Art Brisbane, and Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra.

The main gallery was anchored by scale. Dadang's painting *Such a beautiful morning, the sun stabs in the back* (2005), stretching over seven meters and commemorating the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami victims, commanded a stillness. It reached across the gallery to six stunning paintings from Dadang's *River Series* (2009), evocations of an earlier history of watery loss during the Killing Times (1965–1966) of the Suharto Regime. The styles are quiet

different; the Aceh piece was freed from figuration while the later ghostly figures are decidedly lighter, floated on textured grounds. However, both series have a haunting silence and sense of witness passed onto the viewer.

A second work of scale held the impact wall of the Drill Hall Gallery, *I found your face on the street* (2007). In it Dadang's stylized heads drawn on individual cardboard tiles are stacked in rows, their repetition and gold ornamentation

alluding to Asian concepts of enlightenment. It linked the exhibition across adjacent galleries, where a similar cardboard work, *Never Ending Stories* (2008), sat heaped on the floor. Again the use of abstraction, gesture, and repetition describes the silent counting of victims of violence in this installation—discarded like cardboard.

This smaller gallery had a different mood, more intimate and one that reinforced the magnitude of loss and, yet, by affording viewers the very personal space of perusing Dadang's hand-written diaries and notes—material never before shown—they become witness to the sincerity of his art-making and prolonged quest for justice. Furthermore, it underlined his ability to construct poetic metaphor that remains at once arresting, ambiguous, and compelling in its felt understanding.

As a result, one walks away from this exhibition with lightness. It is a curious outcome given the intense suffering that lies behind these works. It has to do with the way Turner has paced this exhibition, allowing the viewer to arrive at their own connection with the work of Dadang Christanto—an absolute credit to both artist and curator.

Gina Fairley



Installation view of *Never ending stories*, 2008, at Count Project Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra. Image: Courtesy Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra.

and time in terms of the coherency of Gladwell's practice, is the underlying axis of this exhibition.

Similarly, two new works that extend Gladwell's former performance works are *Track and Trials* (2011), pairing trick-bike riders on facing projections, one climbing sea rocks and the other balanced in stasis below a freeway; and *Sagittarius/Domain + Prelude* (2011), the pairing of a figure moving toboggan-like through Sydney's Domain travelator with a figure in an abandoned mine shaft captured on infrared camera. These performed landscapes, as Gladwell calls them, casts man against nature, where again the viewer is caught between opposing screens as spectator and passive performer.

The show's weakest link is *Endoscopic Vanitas (No Veins Version)* (2011), Gladwell's reworked *Venice Biennale* piece using human skulls, endoscopic cameras, and a mist screen. The conceptual premise and its delivery do not come together. When you compare it to *Tangara*, which delivers so eloquently, one wonders whether it is a condition of the commissioned project to overwork scales of grandeur? Given this is a commissioned exhibition it begs the question: How does Gladwell resolve that, along with his constant drive for more technically challenging work? Critically, these new works are inconsistent in their resolve. From a viewing experience, however, *Stereo Sequences* delivers a varied and engaging visit that seduces audiences into a performance role and rewards them with an altered visual understanding.

Gina Fairley



## Sydney

Laurens Tan  
at Art Atrium

**N**etherlands-born to Chinese-Indonesian parents, Laurens Tan perfectly fits today's celebrated



Lauren Tan, *Deguoqieguo [whatever]*, 2011, 3D-modeled photomedia, editioned archival inkjet print. Image courtesy the Artist and Art Atrium

tag of transnationality, one further layered by his long academic career in Australia and, more recently, working in Beijing. This exhibition turns to that last chapter—China—and superbly captures its contemporary confluence of language, design, and technology.

Squeezed into Art Atrium, a modest Sydney gallery, Tan pounds our senses with a high-chroma exhibition bouncing between media and kitsch vernacular. Tan's design roots have translated well to China. The exhibition's title work is case in point; *Happy Toy: Jin & Jin* takes its cue from the over-decorated non-functional corner store gift, which Tan reproduces as a room-sized installation complete with wall decals of palm trees, DVD-animation and boy/girl sculptures, his ambassadors of new China. Collectively it parallels China's baroque intensity of objects, signage, congestion and pace, more aptly, its visual noise.

Despite their commercial roots, Tan's characters *Jin & Jin* are presented as fine art sculptures across the exhibition, cast in fiberglass and finished with automotive enamels atop clear acrylic tube pedestals. In an Australian context, they resonate with China's opportunity for slick production.

While their Chinese roles are ambiguous by traditional definitions, they are unmistakably Asian, not unlike the *Hello Kitty* phenomenon.

Their most erudite manifestation is a two-screen animation that continues Tan's interest in language since the early 1990s. Tan's characters recite words *aka* a language education program, the Chinese character and English translation flashed onscreen with the ping of recognition and yet are confused as Tan plays off similar sounding words. Language for Tan is a way of tracking change in urban China and its ever-increasing homogeneity is the subject of many of his Beijing works.

Similarly, Tan has turned to *sanlunche*, the three-wheel utility automobile, fusing its form with text as sculptures. While this exhibition includes small examples of these, what is perhaps more interesting for one who has followed Tan's career is a suite of new digital prints that visually intersect notions of cultural erosion and cultural fabrication using *Chengyu* [four-character idioms] as its point of departure. In them there is an echo of Tan's constructed Las Vegas interiors, his *Aesthetics of Risk* series (1995–2005). Vegas presents as a curious parallel.

*Chengyu* are a traditional

convention used to reflect on how we conduct our lives. By applying these like a chop hovering over skylines with the aspirational weight of new China, Tan's constructed environments are wisdom in their own making. *Deguoqieguo (whatever)* (2011), translated as 'Blindly follow a path' or its contemporary colloquialism 'whatever,' for example, captures the flux that is Beijing's shifting landscape with its cost, when considered, a non-committal 'whatever.'

Core to Tan's *Chengyu* skylines, happy toys and the *sanlunche* is this sense of mapping the national psyche's aspirational future set against the actual landscape. And while traditional visual identity, language, and customs are deconstructed through Tan's artworks, his embrace of the locally specific object, and its production industries, argues there is a residual intonation that is withheld from this process of synthesis. This exhibition, *Happy Toy*, is an embodiment of that richness and an alert and intelligent take on China and its wash of fabricated derivatives.

Gina Fairley



## CHINA

### Beijing

*A First Life Residency Project in Landscape at Xin Dong Cheng Space for Contemporary Art*

**A**fter a long and somewhat hazardous gestation, *A First Life Residency Project in Landscape* finally opened in May. Conceived by Darwin's 24HR Art Director Steve Eland, it had all the bells and whistles to ensure its relevance—a cross-cultural, cross-dialogue, exhibition-and-residency project that traversed top-end Australia and far West China, respected and successful artists, three from Australia (Benjamin Armstrong, Sam Leach, and Tony Lloyd) and