

Richmond Art Gallery's exhibition *Cultural Conflation* brings together two bodies of work by Diyan Achjadi and Shawn Hunt. Included are Achjadi's multimedia prints, drawings and animations and carved and assembled figures by Hunt. Though the works appear vastly different, they have in common the artists' explorations into their respective histories, both tracing narratives of colonial enterprise and conquest in the country they were born. The following are interviews with each artist.

## *Interview with Diyan Achjadi*

***In 2009 you exhibited a body of work from your The Further Adventures of Girl series at Richmond Art Gallery. Seven years later your works in this current exhibition are a marked departure. What took you in this direction?***

I've always been interested in the perceived value of labour in artwork - hand-labour versus machine-labour, the value placed on said labour, and how it informs the way a work might be read or understood. In undergrad I took a wide range of courses, but always returned to printmaking and photography, both mediums that require technology and machinery of some sort and both that have (art-historically) been employed in critiques of authorship and artistic labour.

For instance, my early works combined appropriated illustrations printed onto fabric embellished with hand-embroidery and framed with hand-engraved glass. The work in the *Girl* series began initially as a narrative, web-based project (in 2002), which I then expanded into a series of digital prints on silk with embroidered details. Later on I became interested in the relationship of digital technology to traditional printmaking and in embracing all forms of digital output as valid forms of printmaking practice. This is what led to my earliest video and animation explorations and in experimenting with various types of "outputs" from digital files.

As the *Girl* series developed, it became evident to me that the work needed to look as machine-made and mass-produced as possible, with no trace of the hand. I wanted the work to speak of propaganda and mass-media, and how much these forms of address are imbued with authority while seemingly authorless. This led me to work purely with digital forms and flat prints, and remove as much as I could of the trace of my own hand in the work.

While I was working almost exclusively on the computer for *Girl*, in the studio I still made drawings; I also still engaged with traditional printmaking processes through my teaching and during artist residencies. But none of this work seemed to make sense with the *Girl* project, so for the most part, they remained in the studio or as side projects.

As I was beginning to feel that the *Girl* project was coming to a close, I wanted to reconsider my relationship to drawing and materiality; to process and making; to figure out ways to minimize working on the computer and shift my focus back to a materially-engaged practice. I was (and am) still interested in questions around nationalism and national identities; around the ways that the circulation of printed images creates narratives; and in questions of representation. But I wanted to find other types of images that might still address these questions. I started looking more pointedly through a range of materials in my archive: textile books, classic Indonesian comic books, photographs I'd taken over the years from Europe and Indonesia, folktales from West Java (where my father is from), to see what I could make of them. That's where these most recent drawings began.

***Your work is laden with references to Indonesian patterns. How are they relevant to your work?***

In this work, I have primarily been referring to patterns from batik cloths from Java. These cloths, and the patterns associated with them, are ubiquitous in Java, and so have always been part of my context.

There are hand-drawn, exquisitely crafted "batik tulis" cloths and hand-stamped "batik cap" that are created with copper stamping that resist patterns in wax. There are also mass-produced prints on cheap fabric, some mimicking traditional patterns and others with contemporary pop-cultural adaptations.

Batik patterns are also part of school uniforms and civil service uniforms, with each institution designing their own patterns. Batiks are worn for special occasions, and used in ceremony, but also worn and used in daily life. Batik patterns adorn stationery, buildings, souvenir objects, housewares, linens - they are literally everywhere. My Indonesian grandmother wore traditional kain-kebaya (a batik wrap "skirt" with a cotton blouse) every day, I never once saw her in "Western" dress (she died in 1986).

I think at the heart of my work is a desire to better understand what "Indonesia" might mean. Looking at these patterns, which are so prevalent, was one way to do that. Thinking about these patterns in relation to other representations and pictures was a way to begin to consider how batik patterns contribute to the narrative of "Indonesia". Copying these patterns by hand - in pen and ink or brush and paint, in paper, and in different scales - became a way for me to think about my own relationship to these patterns, and paying homage to them. Learning more about the patterns allowed me to see the history of trade, influence, and appropriation that was reflected in them.

I should also mention that my mother is a textile anthropologist, so one could say that I was pre-disposed to feel an affinity to textiles. She loves cloths and studies them deeply, has written and lectured extensively on them. I certainly owe my love of history, stories and craft to her. And that one of the cloud motifs that I draw repeatedly is from the area that some of my father's family is from; he passed away a few years ago, and drawing these clouds is both a way of remembering as well as an attempt to connect with a town that I've never been to.

***Your depiction of various kinds of animals brings to mind a history of exploitation by explorers and hunters for their exotic appeal or economic gain. Animals feature importantly in Javanese myths and legends. You have also created imaginary, even bizarre hybrid animals. How does their significance play out in your work?***

When I began this work in 2011-2012, I was searching for ways to suggest narratives without depicting a human character (such as I had been doing with *Girl*), and to consider the kinds of narrative spaces that can exist beyond the earthly and the human. Along with batiks, I was looking at European wallpapers, painted and printed ceramic objects and tiles, historical prints, and illustrated books. I was also thinking about speculative fiction, the role of "alien" and non-human characters in stories, and how they are anthropomorphized. I thought about the way that some animals are exoticized, prized as game, or used as national emblems.

I began to re-read some of the legends that I grew up with. I found myself fascinated by tales and depictions of hybrid creatures – such as centaurs, dragon-fish, kinara – as well as by depictions of animals and landscapes that were clearly fashioned from hearsay and imagination (rather than from actual observation, evident in many European depictions of Asian environments). I started to focus on objects and images where one could see different cultural forces meet, merge, and re-emerge. Some of my drawings focused on pre-existing hybrid forms; others were part-human; and others were forced mash-ups of various animals (like *Unfashioned Creature*). These creatures that I was drawing became emblematic to me of spaces that are speculative, existing between worlds and across time.

I looked for imaginings of animals, how people might represent some of these animals that they'd never seen before, and how they might arrive at these representations. That is what initiated my exploration of Dürer's rhinoceros – its history, its influence, and thinking of its story as emblematic of a particular period of colonial history. That then led me to the book *Venationes* (1578), which illustrates various forms of hunting games, including everything from hunting elephants to hunting unicorns and dragons; I spent a few days with the *Venationes* book in a library in Antwerp, during an artist residency at the Frans Masereel Print Centre near there. At the same time I was reading *The Medici Giraffe* by Marina Belozerskaya (2006), a series of essays on the history of human obsession with exotic animals.

Studying these two books simultaneously led to the work in this exhibition that focuses on tusks and tusked animals, to considering the valuation of some animal parts more than others, and the violence that may be implicit in the impulse to collect the exotic.

### ***How did you decide on the images in the work, Java Toile?***

In my working process, I often respond to pictures or objects, and to the absurdities that I perceive in these things. Every time I have an opportunity to travel, I make time to visit museums. I find museums fascinating, as they are often such flawed and problematic spaces with histories of colonialism, empire, power, and capital enmeshed into the building and the acquisition of their collections. What is selected for display, how it is contextualized, and the material history of the object presented. Not to mention how objects are acquired, historically often illicitly and without consent. I also spend a lot of time looking online in image archives and on sites such as eBay for representations and misrepresentations of Java.

I started the drawings for *Java Toile* in 2014. After making *A Series of Impositions*, which took several months, I needed to take a break from the labour of the large drawings and work on smaller projects that I could finish in one sitting. So I started these small 9"x12" black and white pen and ink drawings. I had always intended these small drawings to be collated and arranged into a wall covering of some sort, and drew them with that in mind.

Wallpaper has always interested me as a form that exists in the background, as a setting for action. I began to look more closely at toile patterns in particular. The images in these types of patterns are highly detailed, usually rendered through the use of copperplate printing on fabric, with similar line effects as pen-and-ink drawings. It often depicts illustrative and representational images, such as pastoral scenes, hunting scenes, travel scenes, industrial scenes, chinoiserie, and so on.

In Paris, at the Decorative Arts Museum, I had come across a series of allegorical ornate ceramic candelabras of "the Continents." Each featured a woman sitting on an animal that was supposed to represent a continent, sometimes wearing another animal on her head or body. These became the starting point for the first set of drawings for *Java Toile*. Thinking about some of the representations of Java that I had encountered, I drew animals that are now endangered or near extinction such as the elephant, the tiger, the leopard and the rhino. At one point there were species of these animals that roamed wild in Java, a

landscape that I can't imagine, given the densely populated and urban context of the Java that I know. I drew from my own photographs from Indonesia as well as found images.

From there I thought about hunting and the collecting of animals, and the implications. I also considered the forces that might contribute to the decline of animal populations, such as deforestation for plantations, and urban growth. And I wanted the past to coexist with the present in some way. I did find one historical image of a European hunter with a baby Javan rhinoceros and a contemporary picture of a dead elephant in Sumatra near a palm plantation. These were combined with pictures of a mall security guard station, a banyan tree with deer, imagined "ruin" landscapes like those often fetishized in toile wallpapers, a bird-woman (kinara) often found in stone temples in Java, and small towers of tusks.

### ***What prompted you toward animating your work?***

With most of my animations, I think less about creating linear narratives and more about small gestures or movements, of taking a drawing and expanding it in time.

I like to consider the pace of how one might look at work within a gallery setting, and how one might move through a space. In an animation, the time given to any one picture has been predetermined in the sequence of images; in a single-frame drawing, one might spend a second or an hour looking at one picture or a small area of that picture. Requiring both types of looking in a single space allows for shifts in visual perception and in the experience of the images.

Oftentimes, the process of making a hand-drawing might lead me to think of how the same picture might produce a different reading if it were extended over time. Working on *Java Toile* and *Unfashioned Creature*, I was looking at all these pictures of tusked animals, drawing tusks by hand and on the computer, and thinking about piles of disembodied tusks and de-tusked bodies over centuries, and the inherent violence in these objects. This led me to making *Falling*, where drawings of tusks repeatedly fall and pile up, until the screen is overwhelmed by a dense mass of lines.

### ***Your work is extremely labour intensive – from your highly detailed ink and gouache drawings and the numerous processes necessary in printmaking to the combined processes of drawing and animation technologies. You seem to come from the "more is more" school of thought. How do the various processes and mediums convey your ideas?***

One thing I appreciate about working slowly is that it gives me more time to meditate and think about the pictures that I am using, and consider their meanings and implications. It is so easy now to copy and paste or forward and share that pictures get distributed in an instant without much thought, easily misattributed and misappropriated. The slowing down — the labour involved in copying by hand of patterns and pre-existing images — is extremely important to me in relation to the intentionality of the act.

Copying by hand can be seen as a way of learning about an image and trying to understand it better. Using a drawing material like ink with a dip pen forces me to be decisive and deliberate about my actions as there is no going back, whereas in much of printmaking endless revisions and variations are possible. Because of this, I often use printmaking as a way to work through some ideas that I am still quite vague on and experiment with ways of working with the imagery. I simultaneously work on a single picture in multiple formats and media and redraw the same thing over and over again until I feel that I am getting closer to understanding it. With many of the drawings I deliberately try to make some areas look "printed" and others reveal more of the hand, as a way to think about how we might value one gesture over another.

And yes, more is more! In the sense that I want to visually complicate things with an excess of information and sources and colour and pictures, to not make something that is easy to grasp in one go, to make something that could hopefully also offer a slowing-down for the viewer.

Another reason that I move between drawing and printmaking and animation is that I hope to never get too comfortable with my working process. For instance, I am less adept in animation and in thinking through time than I am in drawing a single image on paper; taking a project from one medium to another forces me to work differently and not rely on known habits. In the studio I try to put myself in a somewhat unfamiliar space every now and then in order to continue to be present in the work.

*This interview with Diyan Achjadi is from an email exchange between the artist and curator Nan Capogna following a studio visit on August 9, 2016.*

## Biography

Vancouver based Achjadi holds a BFA from the Cooper Union School of Art in New York and a MFA from Concordia University in Montreal. She has exhibited widely at galleries and film festivals nationally and internationally. She is an Associate Professor of Visual Arts and Material Practice at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Born in Jakarta, Achjadi is of Indonesian and Canadian parentage; she grew up moving between Jakarta, Hong Kong, London, and Washington DC.

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## Interview with Shawn Hunt

***This new body of work links directly to your 2014 exhibition Artifake at Macaulay & Co. Fine Art. You are known for your earlier carving and jewelry work in the Northwest Coast tradition as well as your paintings that came later. You learned to carve from your father, J. Bradley Hunt. You attended the University of British Columbia, which you acknowledge as having influenced the way you approach your work conceptually. Would you highlight some background to these experiences?***

I grew up in a household where making art was a part of our daily life. My dad is an artist, but also importantly my mother didn't allow my brother and me to watch T.V. or play video games. We were encouraged to use our imaginations. So I started making art at a very young age, mostly drawings. In elementary school and high school I rarely took notes in class, when the teacher was speaking: instead, I would listen and I would draw. My mother tells this story of how on a few occasions my teachers would come to her and tell her that I was not concentrating and that I was spending the whole time drawing or daydreaming. My mother's response to the teachers was important to me. She told them that she was fine with it and that it didn't matter to her that all I did was draw. She encouraged it. When I first went to art school, I applied to Capilano College. I failed in my first attempt. In hindsight, I really didn't put much effort into my portfolio. I decided to reapply the next year. My dad was working on a totem pole at the time so I decided to go back home and work on it with him and use that as part of my portfolio. That was my first real effort to make Heiltsuk art. Capilano College was a great school for the hands-on making of things. It was a lot of fun really. I just went to school every day and made all different kinds of art. I got to explore many different mediums. After I completed my diploma at Capilano College, there were a few places I considered applying and settled on UBC because I figured that it would be more theory-based and a nice balance to my previous training. I didn't enjoy my time at UBC: it's not that it was a bad school or anything, it's just that I wanted to make art, not talk about it. It was a real challenge. When I look back from where I am now though, I realize

that it was one of the most important parts of my education. To put it simply, it taught me to infuse the works that I was making with meaning and deep thought.

***Around 2008 you began to paint, featuring elements and motifs from the Northwest Coast tradition and incorporating Surrealist techniques and devices. How did this come about?***

I would say that I've always been a Surrealist - ever since I was a child. Even when I look back at my childhood drawings they are very surreal. I remember when I discovered [Salvador] Dali I was impressed with how the connection between his mind and hand was so strong. It's as if his thoughts poured directly on to the canvas. It was very inspiring to me. When I was at UBC I really got into this idea of using an image and subverting its intention. I didn't go to school for painting. I was always focused on drawing and sculpture. I began painting when my body started to break down a bit from carving jewelry and I was looking for another medium to replace it that wasn't so hard on my body. However, when I began painting I found it to be an even more powerful medium for me to turn my drawings into art. The scale just allowed me to do so much more. I also found that I was painting like a sculptor as well. I was using my knowledge of sculpture, and carving in particular, to make paintings that looked like they were sculptures.

***These new sculptural works traverse issues of colonization and appropriation. In the early 20th century the Modernists appropriated art forms of artists from colonized countries and lands, including those of First Nations. In your work you turn the tables, so to speak.***

The Modernists and Surrealists took concepts and forms from our work, appropriated them and used it in their work. I can do the same thing to their work. It's interesting because within their work is our work, and so you're getting this, "you're mirroring us and I'm mirroring you, and also mirroring the both of us again".

***Your father is of the Heiltsuk Nation and your mother is Canadian of Scottish descent. You are drawing from a deep well in your work that is complicated with many possible readings.***

I like that. I like it when things get complicated. People are complicated creatures. These works are an expression of those two cultures. There is this coming together of the two cultures. It feels natural for me to do this.

***It seems that you are at a significant juncture in your artistic development. You have resolved many concerns and have worked through the influences of your mentors and your personal history.***

Yes, I feel the same sort of energy that you're talking about. I've been working as a professional artist for fifteen years. I have done a lot of exploration over that time. I've always done what I wanted to do. Nothing has been calculated; I really just follow my heart. I feel like I'm really getting to a point now where I'm starting to build, to articulate my feelings more with confidence and maybe that has something to do with the fact that I've done a lot of investigation into myself. It has taken a lot of personal experience to get to this point. I'm 41 years old now, I'm not the same person that I was 15 years ago and I'm not the same person I was even a year ago. This journey is as much about bettering myself as a person as it is about making art.

***When you consider how you first began working - traditionally with carving, then jewellery, moving into painting and now these works in the exhibition, it's quite an evolution. You appear fearless.***

"Fearlessness" is something I was talking about the other day with my dad actually. He said that you really have to be confident to put yourself out there. He told me that I seemed fearless in my art making. I am not fearless though, far from it. I'm just more afraid of not doing something and the regret of not doing it. There is always a fear in doing something new or for the first time. You don't know what the result will be, what kind of reaction you will receive. Will you fail, or will you succeed? I'm not fearless, but in conquering fear I think you can move forward. Push the art form and yourself forward. Evolution is the unknown and if there isn't some fear in that, then I feel like I'm probably not doing it.

***Odalisque is a pivotal sculptural work in terms of your direction leading to this current body of work. What were its origins?***

When I was working on *Odalisque*, I was preparing for the exhibition *Artifake* [at Macaulay & Co. Fine Art]. For that exhibition, I was engaging mainly with the totem pole. I felt like it had become a symbol, and as a symbol, I felt as if it had been co-opted. You see totem poles by the hundreds in Vancouver gift shops made of plastic. You can start to feel like you, as a First Nations artist, has lost control of its intended purposes. That show was a kind of attempt on my part to take it back, at least personally. *Odalisque* was the last piece that I created for that show. I was working in my dad's studio, where there were a lot of half-finished things that were works in progress. I started putting these works together in my mind. I started seeing totem poles as legs and arms, and then when I actually started putting it together, I created this figure. At the time I had been painting almost exclusively for three years. People started asking me "When are you going to carve again?" When I was deep into the painting I wasn't even thinking about carving. Being asked about it did get me thinking though. I thought if I'm going to carve again, I want to do it differently. I had carved quite a few things and I was feeling like now I needed to push it forward, I needed to make it new again. Carving is a subtractive process. You're starting with a block of wood and you carve into it and create something from it by removing material. So I'm still doing that. I'm carving into it and creating these totem poles and these pieces for the masks, etc. The newness is that I am taking those carvings and assembling them together to make a new work of art. An assemblage. I went from strictly a subtractive process to an additive process: combining the two actually. It was a really important moment because it began a new way of carving for me. Not completing it fully either, this idea of leaving it half carved, leaving the pencil marks, leaving that energy of creation still on the surface. That felt new. Before that, when I was carving, I was making it clean and immaculate, nicely finished, trying to make it as perfect as possible, symmetrical and everything. This was a departure from that engrained way of thinking.

***You share a studio with your father and brother, Dean, also a carver. Some of your father's carvings are incorporated into your figures for this exhibition. How did that work?***

For *Odalisque* a lot of the pieces were from around the studio. Sometimes when you carve something, you put it aside and start something else. In some cases you don't pick it up again. Sometimes you move beyond it and you never go back to it. The inspiration leaves and you're onto something else, or you step right over that part of the evolutionary process. We had several pieces like that in the studio. Some I had carved, some my brother had carved, and some were my dad's. Some of my dad's carvings were thirty years old. With these new ones the

process is a bit different. There are a finite number of unfinished pieces around the studio unfortunately. Most of these pieces got used up in the *Odalisque*. I had to create works that were for this project, but I didn't want to create them intentionally, "this is going to be an arm, this is going to be a leg" because I still wanted them to have the feeling of coming together magically instead of purposefully. This was a big project, with lots of carving. I started in October of last year. My dad helped me by carving some of the elements, which helped me with my timeline, as well as it maintained some of the spirit of the first piece. I couldn't manage the process too much. I purposely told him to carve whatever he felt like. I didn't want to tell him what I wanted, because much of the process for me was to work with what I had. I feel lucky to be working in this studio. We have a really good dynamic in that we'll work on each other's pieces; we'll help each other with designing. It's very supportive and creative environment, just the three of us in there – we all feed off and work off of each other. I would have loved to have incorporated some of my brother's works too, but he was busy on his own projects and didn't have the time to do anything for these. Hopefully, I can use some of his works in the future.

***When you first considered cutting up a totem pole, how did that affect the form and the narrative?***

Well, totem poles can mean a lot of different things. They can tell a story and that is quite often what they're used for: recording history. The first time I started cutting up totem poles, my dad and my brother were pretty nervous and were looking at me [thinking] "What are you doing?" I had to cut them up though, to create the forms - a leg will be bent at the knee and so forth. But I had seen totem poles cut up before though many years ago and it had left an impression on me at the time. At MOA [Museum of Anthropology], there's a totem pole that was cut into three sections when it was taken from Haida Gwaii. It was done to make it easier to transport to the museum. It's at MOA right now, as these three columns, but it's all from the one pole - they were never reassembled. It's just three columns sort of lined up. So the idea wasn't a totally new one to me. In fact it was something that I played with conceptually before as well, in my grad piece at UBC. I saw it as a metaphor for what had been done to our people. Our stories have been cut up. Our history has been cut up. Our culture has been cut up. This process of cutting up my culture and reassembling it to look more European, which was the mandate of the colonizer... to me it mirrored what was being done by the government, the church and the powerful elites of Europe...the monarchy.

*This interview with Shawn Hunt is the culmination of an exchange of emails and a conversation held in his Sechelt studio on September 7, 2016 between the artist and curator Nan Capogna.*

## **Biography**

Shawn Hunt received a diploma in studio art from Capilano College and holds a BFA from the University of British Columbia where he majored in sculpture and drawing. Hunt comes from a family of artists; his father is J. Bradley Hunt, a prominent Heiltsuk artist with whom Shawn apprenticed for five years, learning wood and jewelry carving as well as traditional design. He has exhibited nationally and internationally and is represented by the Macaulay & Co. Fine Art in Vancouver. He was born in Vancouver, BC and is of Heiltsuk and Canadian Scottish ancestry.

**Diyan Achjadi, Shawn Hunt**  
**Cultural Conflation**  
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