



Art Radar

Contemporary art trends and news from Asia and beyond

“Ravaged”: Malaysian artist Nadiah Bamadhaj at Chambers Fine Art, New York

Capturing the everyday lives of Yogyakarta’s LGBTIQ community, Nadiah Bamadhaj’s latest exhibition at Chambers Fine Art makes a firm stand.

Art Radar looks at her exhibition “Ravaged”, running until 17 August 2018.



Nadiah Bamadhaj, ‘Ravaged I’, 2018, charcoal on paper and digital print, 68 x 184 cm. Image courtesy of Richard Koh Fine Art and Nadiah Bamadhaj.

Malaysia-born, Indonesian-based artist Nadiah Bamadhaj is no stranger to the margins of society. Having worked at a shelter for trans- and cis-gender people in Indonesia since 2016, her experiences with the community have inspired her to make a new body of work. Combining collage drawings with photographic images, the artist challenges her adopted society’s rejection of the LGBTIQ community, shedding light on the issues that still confront them today.

Born to a Malaysian father and a New Zealander mother, Bamadhaj studied sculpture at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. Becoming a full-time artist in 2000, her practice now encompasses drawing, sculpture, installation and digital media. Often investigating ideas of place, space and identity, Bamadhaj’s works explore the wider social and political fabric that make up the society of Southeast Asian countries. Primarily focusing on Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia – which are, as well, countries that she has lived in – Bamadhaj translates her experiences into works that are personal, but also very relatable.



Nadiah Bamadhaj , 'Ravaged II', 2018, charcoal on paper and digital print, 68 x 184 cm. Image courtesy Richard Koh Fine Art and Nadiah Bamadhaj.

Nadiah Bamadhaj (b. 1968, Malaysia) earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand. In 2002, she was awarded the Nippon Foundation's Asian Public Intellectual Fellowship in 2002, electing to spend her fellowship period in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, where she currently lives with her husband and son. Bamadhaj has exhibited widely across Asia and Europe, including venues such as the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore; Singapore Art Museum; National Gallery of Indonesia, and the Gwangju Biennale. She was also the recipient of several awards, such as the Asian Public Intellectual Follow-Up Grant, Asian Public Intellectual Fellowship funded by the Nippon Foundation, and the Juror's Choice, Philip Morris Malaysia Art Awards.



Nadiah Bamadhaj, 'Ravaged VII', 2018, charcoal on paper and digital print, 60 x 149 cm. Image courtesy Richard Koh Fine Art and Nadiah Bamadhaj.

Some of her previous works include *Not talking to a brick wall* (2005), which showed contemporary video footage alongside historical photographs of her childhood home in Singapore. Unfurling the role of women in her family, and their complex relationship to the patriarch of the family, Bamadhaj's single channel video reflects the artist's engagement with her own family's history, highlighting the broader emotional overtones that accompanies that undertaking. In *Landlocked*, a series comprising collaged drawings from charcoal, Bamadhaj draws on her own experiences living in the suburbs of Kuala Lumpur. Investigating the politics of the planned re-design of the Klang Valley housing suburbs, Bamadhaj draws on the theory that architecture can act as a means of surveillance, and ultimately as a

means of disciplining members of the society through controlling the body and its movements. Such themes that parse the social, political and cultural forces that make Southeast Asian societies what they are today are a key part of Bamadhaj's practice.



Nadiah Bamadhaj, 'Ravaged III', 2018, charcoal on paper and digital print, 60 x 149 cm. Image courtesy Richard Koh Fine Art and Nadiah Bamadhaj.

In "Ravaged", Bamadhaj focuses on Indonesia, the country that she continues to live in since 2002. Held at Chambers Fine Art, New York, Bamadhaj notes that "Ravaged"

responds directly to a political phenomenon in Indonesia. At the moment, there is an opposition movement trying to destabilize the current ruling government by politicizing LGBTIQ issues in Indonesia.

In 2017, Indonesia's Aceh province publicly flogged two men on the grounds of sexual immorality, after having been reported by neighbours who had been spying on them for weeks. Indonesia has had a poor human rights track record, especially in their treatment of LGBTIQ members of society. Hate speech, raids, arbitrary arrests and attacks on both them and human rights defenders have left the society divided on the issue of equality. Earlier this year, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussien, urged Indonesia's government to scrap clauses in a new draft criminal code that entailed discrimination against LGBTIQ-identifying people.

Bamadhaj perceives the hate against the LGBTIQ community as fuelled by political elements, stating that as

the majority of the country is Muslim, one particularly effective method has been to use Islam as an 'unchallengeable' doctrine to create institutionalized fear and hatred towards LGBTIQ communities.

Vernacular and casual dislike, misunderstanding and suspicion is slowly turning into institutional discrimination, as Bamadhaj notes:

There is also a bill currently being debated in parliament to criminalize LGBTIQ activities and organizations [...]. The result of this political movement is an increase in rape, assault, and economic crisis within LGBTIQ communities. It is estimated that in the run up toward the presidential election in 2019, this situation will get worse before it gets better.



Nadiah Bamadhaj 'Ravaged V', 2018, charcoal on paper and digital print, 60 x 149 cm. Image courtesy Richard Koh Fine Art and Nadiah Bamadhaj

Trying to highlight these current strains of turmoil in the LGBTIQ community in Indonesia, Bamadhaj's series looks at the people that she had encountered in the shelter. Wrestling with their emotional burden and sense of shame, brought on as a result of being marginalised by a conservative society, the people of the shelter became the subject of Bamadhaj's series. Using the motif of the Medusa, Bamadhaj superimposes charcoal drawings of the mythological Greek figure on digital print photographs that reveal everyday moments of her subjects' lives.

The figure of Medusa appears repeatedly in Bamadhaj's work. Employed as a symbol that represents injustice wrought by a higher authority, Bamadhaj draws on the story that Medusa had been turned into a monster to be shunned by the goddess Athena. Bamadhaj draws the comparison between Medusa's fate with that of the LGBTIQ community in Indonesia; suppressed by rule of law and forced onto the sidelines of society, the LGBTIQ community struggle to find acceptance within their own society. Her images reveal photo frames, the inside of their living interiors, and young girls celebrating on the streets. Weaving together a narrative that tells of the overarching fears, hopes and aspirations of the community that she engages with, "Ravaged" is a touching composite sketch of the internal sentiments of the community. Revealing and insightful, Bamadhaj's work goes beyond the politics of society, and focuses instead on the truth of the bare, lived experiences of the individuals that she has come into contact with.

Junni Chen

"Ravaged" by Nadiah Bamadhaj is on view from 7 June to 17 August 2018 at Chambers Fine Art, 522 West 19th Street, New York, NY 10011.