



Monyet Gila: Episode One
Shaun Gladwell
Adri Valery Wens

11 March - 23 April

Monyet Gila: Episode One is the first iteration of an ongoing exhibition project by London-based Australian artist Shaun Gladwell and Indonesian-Australian artist Adri Valery Wens. Artistically excavating and reappraising the ancient Sanskrit epic poems the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, alongside the Ming dynasty Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, Gladwell and Wens return to the narratives that played a formative role in the development of their identities. Inserting themselves within these allegorical stories by means of physical transformation through costume, disguise and theatricality, the artists have brought to life the characters that fill these melodramatic *mise-en-scène*.

For 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art both Gladwell and Wens have reconstructed the fantasy spaces presented in these epics for contemporary audiences. These narratives, recited as bedtime stories or witnessed upon blinking television screens of their youth, are reimagined as performative gestures that reconnect artist and subject through time. *Monyet Gila*, or *Crazy Monkey*, reflects both artists' idiosyncratic obsessions. Gladwell's *Monkey Magic Manifestations* (2016), commissioned by 4A, testifies to the artist's insatiable need to watch and re-watch *Monkey*, a 1978-80 televised serial based on Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West*. In *Monkey* the central character has the ability to summons clouds with a simple gesture. In Gladwell's dramaturgical immersive installation we are invited to mimic this gesture, extending the artist's obsession beyond the screen.

Similarly, Adri Valery Wens dons the guise of the monkey figure of Hanoman from the epics of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. For Wens the performative devises of the mask and costume represent an avenue in which he can amplify aspects of Hanoman, conjuring the monkey's powers into the artist's everyday life. Building on these theatrical performances *Kurusetra/Argasoka* (2016), commissioned by 4A, explores the transformative role of the costumed headdress. Arranged in formation on the first floor gallery, these headdresses are configured mid-battle with Hanoman remaining triumphant. For Wens this central subject is in turn employed as an artistic strategy that allows him to reveal and mask his identity at once.

Natalie King & Mikala Tai
Curators



Conversation

Contemporary theory, politics and sociology continue to be underpinned and informed by the tradition of the epic narrative. Religious texts of the Qur'an, the Bible, the *Mahabharata* and works of Homer, Shakespeare and Confucius provide didactic narratives told to us as children that accompany us into old age providing direction, comfort and a means in which to understand the world. The act of telling and re-telling remains a fundamental part of the human condition; we find contentment in the familiarity of tradition. For both Shaun Gladwell and Adri Valery Wens the epic narratives they encountered in their youth have become critical informants of their contemporary artistic practice.

Curators: *When stepping into the exhibition the viewer is enveloped into the mise-en-scene of Monkey and is immediately reminded of the fantastical adventures of Tripitaka, Monkey, Sandy, Pigsy and Horse. The mere act of viewing the exhibition is a visceral experience. Shaun what drew you to Monkey and compelled you to reconstruct this imagined world?*

Shaun Gladwell: *I watched it as a child and, like many filmic experiences at that age, you wanted to take them into your body and perform them. You do that with other five or six year olds on your street or in your bedroom with your brothers and suddenly you have a shared alternate reality. For me this theatrical world that was so far from the Australian suburban landscape I was growing up in was so powerful and intoxicating and then to be able to enact it and bring it into the body heightened the experience. It became a whole logic of performance - a gestural grammar - and it was a very powerful thing. It was like you were editing new episodes of Monkey as soon as you switched the TV off and I loved that.*

Curators: *The figure of Tripitaka plays a central role in this reappraisal of Monkey and you treat the character with immense tenderness and deference. What is it about this character, one that you loved so much in childhood, that continues to remain so compelling to you in adulthood?*

SG: *I think that because all the other characters were deities and became part of a system of animism Tripitaka, as the boy monk, was harder to place and in turn she stood out. Even for me to say she, the character was a he, and the actress a she so there was this wonderful genderless state of Tripitaka. I think it was also this mystery to Tripitaka that attracted me. She was underpinned by this prepubescent desire and this growing understanding of tenderness and compassion which culminated when she appeared on a rocky mountain cradling Monkey when he was ailing. It all*

appeared to me as a very beautiful thing. I felt somewhere that I wanted to experience that and she represents a kind of awakening for me.

Curators: *Like Tripitaka Hanoman is a central figure within your work Val; you transport him from the pages of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and embed him within your photographs, videos and installations. He appears in staged portraits, symbolised by a headdress in combat and performing in a vacant theatre however, when you physically embody him in an everyday contemporary setting he ceases to become narrative and instead becomes a reality. Why make him a contemporary figure?*

Adri Valery Wens: *In Hindu-Javanese culture Hanoman is the most memorable character. Everyone knows him. Although not always a central figure he is always playful, naughty and good-natured. In current popular culture, he is similar to the mutant characters from famous Marvel comics and X Men, such as Mystique, Wolverine and the Beast. He shares characteristics of the 'outsider' as they do.*

My aim in this work was to bring the Hanoman character to one of the busiest streets in Jakarta, Jalan Senen. This was to demonstrate that the character remains relevant in a public sense, not merely to the context of Indonesian contemporary art, although that is important to me as well. I also wanted to celebrate Indonesian cultural diversity, where ancient Hindu-Javanese stories still exist and are loved in the most populist Muslim country in the world.

Curators: *While Hanoman is the heroic protagonist he also, uniquely, appears as a central Islamic and Hindu figure. His importance in Indonesia is heightened, as he remains vital to these two religions that converge in Java. Is he also a figure, then, of unity?*

AVW: *Arguably yes. It is complicated. Historically Hanoman is an inter-generational figure appearing in both the Ramayana and Mahabharata. When these epics travelled from India to Java this notion of Hanoman existing throughout the ages continued. When Islam was introduced to the Hindu population of Java by the Muslim scholar Sunan Kalijaga, the figure of Hanoman was adopted into Islam - Javanese culture. From then on Hanoman appeared in Islamic epics as a central character while remaining a Hindu figure. So he is a character of unity because he links two religions, exists across time and is for all people.*

Curators: *How did you come to share these very personal investigations of the epic narrative?*

AVW: *It was spontaneous. Shaun was in town for a project and, over breakfast, I began telling him about my performative exploration of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. He immediately began telling me about his love of the popular TV drama Monkey. These narratives emerged around the same time, in different religious texts but all featuring a playful monkey character. They also represented cross-cultural exchange during periods of tension, in Java between Hindu and Islam through trade routes and Monkey was a TV show based on an old Chinese epic but produced by a Japanese company in the years just after Mao's rule. Shaun proposed the idea of exploring these obsessions through a parallel project and it began from there.*

SG: *It was interesting to hear of Val's story as he had already started making work, it was already quite a well-formed, conceptually rendered. I had just shown an early version of the Tripitaka video in Paris and I knew from there that I wanted to make more work related to Monkey. I had been reworking some poems I had written about Tripitaka in boyhood and so when I had this conversation with Val it was like we had already started collaborating without even knowing it. In fact, it felt like we were involved in some weird parallel convergence and this was just the formalisation of it. I feel like we were always going to collide at some point.*

Shaun Gladwell (b. 1972 Sydney) is an Australian-born, London-based artist. He completed Associate Research at Goldsmiths College, London in 2001 and has since undertaken numerous international residencies and commissions. He has exhibited prodigiously in Europe, North and South America, and in the Asia Pacific Region. In 2011, Gladwell had major survey exhibitions at the SCHUNCK* museum in Heerlen, The Netherlands and at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Connecticut, USA as part of the Matrix Exhibition Series. His exhibition, *Shaun Gladwell: Stereo Sequences*, at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne was the first in a series of major commissions by the institution. He also held a solo exhibition, *Riding with Death: Redux* at Anna Schwartz Gallery, Sydney. His work featured in significant group exhibitions, including: *The Power of Doubt*, curated by Hou Hanru, Museo Colecciones ICO, Madrid, 2011; *Paradise Lost*, Istanbul Museum of Art, 2011; Southern Panoramas, 17th International Contemporary Art Festival SESC_Videobrasil, Sao Paulo, Brazil, 2011; and the John Kaldor Family Collection, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2011. Shaun Gladwell represented Australia at the 53rd Venice Biennale and travelled to Afghanistan as the official Australian War Artist in 2009. A two-part project was exhibited across two sites with Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation featuring a major new commission *The Lacrima Chair* and UNSW Galleries presenting *Collection+*: *Shaun Gladwell* in 2015. He exhibited in the group exhibition *Face to Face* at the Perth International Art Festival 2016. His work is held in significant public and private collections nationally and internationally, including: Wadsworth Atheneum, USA; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; the Progressive Art Collection, USA; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

Adri Valery Wens (b. 1974 Jakarta) is an Indonesian, Sydney-based artist. Wens completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts at Art and Design UNSW (previously COFA) in 2012. His first solo show was at MOP Projects in 2012, titled *Cinta Mati (Crazy Love)*. He was shortlisted in several Australian Art Prizes, including the Josephine Ulrich and Win Schubert Photography Award 2015 (acquired), Fisher's Ghost Art Award 2014, Redlands Konica Minolta Art Prize 2013 (highly commended), Josephine Ulrich and Win Schubert Photography Award 2012, Fisher's Ghost Art Prize 2009.

List of works:

Downstairs clockwise from window:

Shaun Gladwell & Adri Valery Wens
Drawing and Balancing (2016)
HD Video
14mins

Adri Valery Wens
The Siblings (Kumbakarna) (2016)
110x110cm
Pigment on silver rag paper

Shaun Gladwell
Monkey Magic Manifestations (2016)
Mixed medium (wood, canvas, acrylic)

Adri Valery Wens
The Wanara (Subali/Hanoman/Sugriwa) (2016)
Triptych 110x110cm each image
Pigment on silver rag paper

Shaun Gladwell
Summon a Cloud (2016)
4:50mins

Adri Valery Wens
Hanoman on heels 2 (2016)
175x125cm
Pigment on silver rag paper

Upstairs left to right:

Adri Valery Wens
Hanoman on heels 1 (2016)
110x110cm
Pigment on silver rag paper

Adri Valery Wens
Hanoman/TheGamelan/The Bacardi (2016)
110x110cm
Pigment on silver rag paper

Adri Valery Wens
Hanoman di atas loteng (2016)
110x110cm
Pigment on silver rag paper

Adri Valery Wens
Hanoman gelantungan (2016)
110x110cm
Pigment on silver rag paper

Adri Valery Wens
Hanoman di Jalan Kalililo No.15 - Senen (2016)
110x110cm
Pigment on silver rag paper

Adri Valery Wens
Rahwana di Jalan Kalililo No.15 - Senen (2016)
110x110cm
Pigment on silver rag paper

Adri Valery Wens
Sruti/Smriti (Argasoka) (2016)
Dimensions Variable
Mixed Medium (wool, wood, ink, leather)

Adri Valery Wens
Sruti/Smriti (Bharatayuda) (2016)
Dimensions Variable
Mixed Medium (wool, wood, ink, leather)

Adri Valery Wens
Subali / Gareng / Sueriwa (2016)
HD Video
8 mins

Shaun Gladwell
In a station of the metro (2006)
Two channel video on ipad minis
9:45mins

Shaun Gladwell
Tripitaka (2015-16)
Single-channel video, sound
9:45mins

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