



Ken Pattern

From Counter Culture Art to *Kampung* Scenes

Canadian artist Ken Pattern experienced his twenties in the Vancouver of the late 60's and 70's, an era infused with all the youthful idealism of hippydom and one which he describes as "magical".

Text ALISON PACE • Photo BASUKI NUGROHO



This mild mannered artist who 'fell into' Jakarta 'without a plan,' reflects back on his early artistic career in Canada with much nostalgia. Ken knew many of the founding members of Canadian environmental group Green Peace personally and as a member of a grassroots group himself, he volunteered to design a series of environmentally themed posters with his early self completely shunning the notion of working for money.

Some forty years later, having travelled extensively – travel being the second of his two passions in life, after art – Ken continues to observe and render Jakarta and Indonesia. From his striking depictions of a Jakarta very much in transition, to renderings like "Eviction Notice," which tells the sad story of Indonesia's orangutans, to his most recent art which focuses on the ancient trunks of Banyan trees in Bali, Ken's work always tells a story, usually very poignantly.

NOW! Jakarta caught up with Ken at his home to talk about his art, his inspirations and his native Canada.

People are perhaps most struck by your pen and ink drawings of Jakarta's kampungs. What drew you to this subject?

I arrived in Jakarta, the first time, at the end of 1988. In the early 90's, I started stumbling around *kampungs*, poking my nose in and taking hundreds of photographs. I thought I'd like to do a pen and ink drawing of a particular scene so I went back to the place to do "on the spot" sketching. When I went back, the building was gone.

I soon realised that with a lot of the photos I was taking, these scenes were disappearing rapidly. That's when I started looking at that juxtaposition between old and new, rich and poor... Jakarta is certainly a city of contrasts! I wanted to document all the things that were disappearing.

Some would describe these changes as "progress". How do you view them?

Change is inevitable. To be honest, I'm not even sure how I feel about the restoration of historical buildings. Take Angkor Wat temple in Siem Reap. What really interested me were not the parts which had been restored but those that were in decay and overgrown by nature because that's a perfect example of how the two opposite forces are interdependent. I think we should let nature take its course rather than try to maintain something.

The physical architecture of Jakarta is changing, but what about the people depicted in your artwork?

Originally my pen and ink drawings had no people in them because I wanted to show the *environment* and as soon as you include a figure, that becomes the focal point. But a few years ago I started to depict people; the *mbak jamu*, the *tukang* and so on. These people and scenes are what define this place not the world class shopping malls which could be in Buenos Aires, London or anywhere.

Some of us tend to see change in a negative light as it replaces our traditions and heritage. But many others believe that "everything old is bad and everything new is good". I like the old. In my neighbourhood, I used to sit at this little *warung*, there was only enough room for one person but they sold everything you would need. It doesn't exist anymore. Now we have Indomarets, Alphamarts and 7 Elevens. I think this takes away from what defines this place.

How were you received in the kampungs and what was the atmosphere there like?

When I come out of a *kampung* I look like a used dishrag! I'm sweating and tired but I always have the biggest smile on my face! There aren't many *bules* there so the locals are very curious. I never had one bad experience. I used to go a lot the Kampung Melayu area on the Ciliwung River. I was practically walking through people's living rooms to get from one point to another but was always welcomed. It's a different and very open view of privacy!



The government is now building high rise apartments for people along the Ciliwung River, which is positive in one sense but in another it's also disrupting their community. And there is a very strong sense of community there. This area is really badly affected whenever it floods, the people living here are the most vulnerable. I remember talking to a local woman a couple of years after the really bad floods of 2007; I thought they would probably stay for a year or so until they got a foothold and then move on. But this woman told me she'd been there for 35 years and had no desire to leave! Material wealth is not always a way of measuring progress.

What do you miss most about Canada?

In the summer, Vancouver is gorgeous. When I'm there I walk my buns off. There are walkways, parks, there is so much parkland in Vancouver. I take full advantage of that. So the number one thing is the air quality and enjoying the outdoors.

Mind you, I find the West so regulated. It drives me crazy. I think "Why do we put all these restrictions on ourselves?"

Any Canadian food that you crave?

There's a chain called WhiteSpot. They make one of the best hamburgers. Every time I go back, I have friends who traditionally pick me up from the airport and we go straight for a burger, no matter the time of day.

How would you describe the typical Canadian character?

We're basically Americans without the guns! (laughs). A typical Canadian scenario would be you stepping on my foot and me apologizing! (laughs). I am fortunate to have been born in Canada. It is a liberal multicultural democracy that understands and cares about climate change and supports excellent health care and education for its citizens. I am proud to say that Canada has always welcomed immigrants and provides a safe haven for refugees including the current refugees from Syria. Canada is a peace loving country and one of our former Prime Ministers was instrumental in starting the United Nations Peace Keeping forces.