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March 2023 Cover Story: Noorani Sukardi Soeprapto in Art and Fashion

BY REFA KOETIN | 08 MAR 2023

Nothing was more boring than art for 8-year-old Noorani Sukardi Soeprapto, who would sooner be in Disneyland than at an exhibition. She is now a full-time art enthusiast, promoter, and collector, organising shows from Shanghai to London all year round.

Throughout history, art and fashion have long been intertwined along the path of creative creation. More than a few fashion designers have been inspired by art movements in conceptualising their collections, just like artists often diversify their portfolios by aligning with fashion brands.

Enter Noorani Sukardi Soeprapto, an art collector and fashion enthusiast with prominent experience in both worlds. The combination defines her identity in the most authentic way — not an easy feat. Prestige Indonesia gets up close and personal with Noorani as she divulges her love affair with art and fashion, her noteworthy art collection, industry figures that inspire her, and her future plans.

THE ART AND FASHION PROTÉGÉ

Noorani owes it to her parents for her early art experiences growing up. But which comes first for her, one might wonder. “It must’ve been art first because my parents dragged me around the world to see art exhibitions and museum shows. At eight years old, I was bored and would much rather be in Disneyland than a museum exhibition, but that was how it started.”

Through this early experience, Noorani and her sisters gained valuable life experiences that many wouldn’t learn until much later. Since then, art has occupied a special place in the hearts of her and her siblings, who ended up being highly involved in the world of art.

Regarding which discipline she holds most dear, Noorani ponders, “It’s a bit hard. I do love fashion. I’ve written fashion as well as art columns. I do love couture. That is, in a way, art to me because it’s an expression of the designer. It’s not ready-to-wear, it’s more elaborate, and they feed off each other, inspire each other, and reference each other historically. It’s hard to separate them.”

As she grew up and gained a taste and personality of her own, Noorani started developing a keen sense of fashion. Growing up in The Big Apple, a churning melting pot of many cultures with a diverse offering of art and fashion, she witnessed both industries' height.

"Many artists go to fashion shows and are held in artist's studios or galleries with paintings in the backdrop. So, it's always just been around me, and they very much stimulate me," said Noorani.

“At eight years old, I was terribly bored and would much rather be in Disneyland than a museum exhibition, but that was how it started.”

While most people see fashion merely as fancy clothing to reaffirm social or digital status, Noorani sees something more, "I think fashion (like art) is more than that. It is a personal way to discuss our identity, culture, and values. In couture, for instance, it raises current issues while referencing literature or even music. Like how Didit Hediprasetyo brings songket and batik to his couture collections and how Daniel Rosebery (for Schiaparelli Spring/Summer 23 couture collection) referenced Dante's Inferno's hell where he found a creative parallel to the dilemmas found there."

Noorani explained how Schiaparelli was friends with Spanish surrealist Salvador Dali, French artist Henri-Robert-Marcel Duchamp and American visual artist Man Ray and that you will find Dali's works on her couture office walls. "Through the years, the surrealism movement greatly influenced her works and aesthetics because of these friendships. Yet another proven example of the possible harmony in the art-fashion duality," she adds.

ART FOR A CAUSE

Noorani is an accomplished art collector who has built a respectable collection of emerging and established local and international artists. As she describes the artwork she has acquired so far, we discover her penchant for the works of female artists.

"In general, I like to support women artists. Rita Widagdo is a historically important female artist in the country, and I absolutely love her work and her paintings, which are quite sculptural. Sinta Tantra has been making a lot of buzz as well. Her works are often a dialogue of her ancestral past and about Balinese culture."

Noorani also mentioned several other prominent female artists whose works comprise many of her acquisitions, such as Evi Pangestu, Melati Suryodarmo, Christine Ay Tjoe, and Syagini Ratna Wulan. Discussing the creation of Pamela Rosenkranz, featured recently in the Swiss Pavillion for her work on the female body and its ecosystem, Noorani says, "There's this interesting painting called 'The Viagra Painting,' which she painted after taking the pills, and it talks about the female body, human desires, and men and women in a fascinating dialogue."

"I'm very passionate about supporting women in the art world. It is a tough world for female artists. It is still a male-focused world," she adds. Before her endeavour to support female artists, poetry drew Noorani to art, much like Cy Twombly, who referenced a lot of poetry and literature in his work. Noorani also explained that she has a soft spot for dark artists, like Christine Ay Tjoe, because of the depth reflected in her work.

“I do have other artists that I’m very excited about, for example, Gary Hume, who is part of the Young British Artists alongside Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin. I’ve just acquired a photography work by Wolfgang Tillman as well. Also, Tromarama,” says Noorani, “I’ve never been so proud of a young group of artists before. Their works are intellectual, thought-provoking, and extremely relevant to our contemporary lives.”

THE WISH LIST

As any respectable collector would agree, art is more meaningful when it carries an emotional connection. For Noorani, the artwork she holds most dear is a small piece created on paper by the late Ashley Bickerton.

“It was given to me by a dear friend, Ashley, who recently passed away. When I was living in Shanghai, he came to visit and gave me this work on paper, and I thought it was so special, and it has been in my room until today. It’s small but close to my heart because I adore him.”

Noorani is always looking for more artwork to add to her prized collection. Revealing what’s currently on her wish list, the prolific art patron continues, “I would really like to acquire some Alighiero e Boetti. He creates works with words or phrases from poems. I’ve been eyeing some of Lucas Arruda’s paintings as well.”

“Rita Widagdo is an excellent artist but needs to gain more international exposure. And then there’s Yoshitomo Nara, a pioneering contemporary artist with a signature style of expressing children, and Klára Hosnedlová, who reimagines historical perspective through performance, sculpture, and embroidery. Lastly, I must mention my brother-in-law, Michael Armitage, whose paintings are impossible to get these days, but I shall remain hopeful. I hope he reads this interview. He is such a great painter.”

“I believe there’s still room for improvement in supporting and helping local artists earn global exposure.” that was how it started.”

INDONESIAN ART SCENE

Combining an undying passion for the works of local artists with her global art connections, Noorani has long been a strong patron of Indonesia’s art scene. She knows the industry inside and out and is actively working to support both up-and-coming and established Indonesian artists alike.

“Especially the female artists for me, like Syagini Ratna Wulan, Sinta Tantra, and Evi Pangestu. I’ve been watching Evi’s career and how she develops. Similarly, I’ve been following and supporting Sinta since we met at one of my London exhibitions long ago.”

Her hard work has not been in vain. Seeing Indonesia’s contemporary art scene’s positive evolution in recent years, Noorani is confident that a bright future lies ahead. “Since I started getting to know the community, there’s been much more support for young artists. People are reading more; they are more curious. The collectors and ecosystem are becoming more supportive, and it’s no longer a secondary market base where the artists don’t get anything out of it.”

“The Indonesian contemporary art scene has been more wholesome overall, but there is still room for improvement,” she adds.

She also pointed out that younger artists are making intelligent moves by taking residencies abroad, which enriches their artistic senses and exposes them to more materials essential for their growth.

Noorani hopes that, in the coming years, there will be more galleries that support artists and more residencies locally and abroad, “It’s great when a local artist can do an exhibition overseas. It’s very difficult to achieve, but once they do that, they get exposed to various institutions that might want to work with them, like museums. That would build their career. So, I believe there’s still room for improvement in helping the artists get out there.”

ON THE HORIZON

Constantly connected to the community, Noorani gives us a few things to look out for now and in the future. She highly recommends the Living Pictures: Photography in Southeast Asia exhibition until the end of March at the National Gallery, Singapore. The show features works of Kassian Cephas, Indonesia’s first- ever known photographer of 1920s Java, Bali, and even Vietnam.

Noorani is currently involved with the Art Assembly, which runs ARTSG. She is also organising an exhibition within Photofairs Shanghai from 20 – 23 April, Taipei Dangdai Art Fair from 12 – 14 May, the new art fair Tokyo Gendai on 6 – 9 July, the Sydney Contemporary from 7 – 10 September, and next year’s India Art Fair.

When not busy championing art and fashion causes, Noorani likes to kick back and spend quality time with her daughter. She shares how she manages to juggle her personal and professional time, “I never knew I could juggle everything AND be a mom at the same time, but it’s nice to have your children see you doing things you’re passionate about.”

When asked if she wanted her daughter Saja exposed to art early on and grow up to become an art and fashion enthusiast, she wisely replied with a warm, motherly smile, “Whatever she wants as long as she’s really into it and it makes her happy.”