

ARAHMAIANI

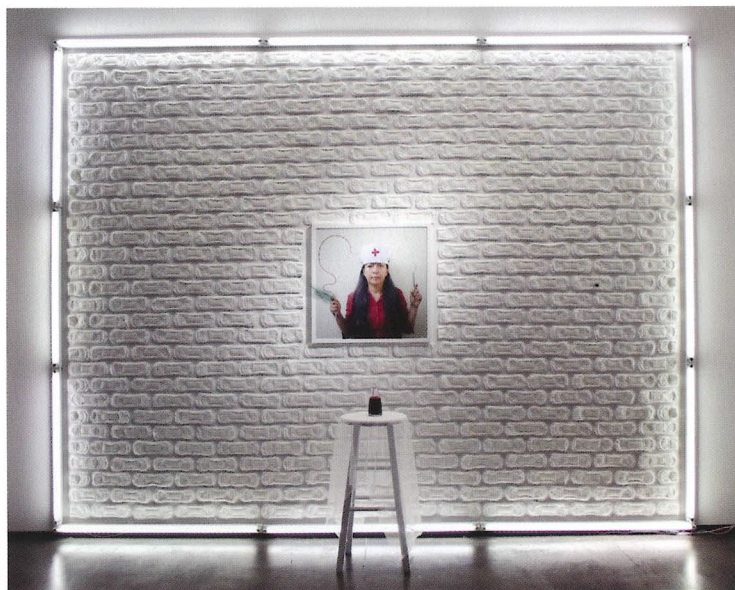
FERTILITY OF THE MIND

“Arahmaiani: Fertility of the Mind,” at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, was a small retrospective that spanned 34 years of the multidisciplinary Indonesian artist’s career. Although this was her first solo exhibition in New York, Arahmaiani is a well-established figure in the global art world, having shown throughout Asia, Australia and Europe. The exhibition included photographs, a performance video, three installation pieces, three large paintings and a printout of her recent reflections on the state of the world. An assortment of smaller objects from past performances was also laid out on a long shelf. Well-written curatorial labels, which sometimes included quotes by Arahmaiani, accompanied each artwork.

The exhibition’s title references one of the artist’s best-known installations, *Do Not Prevent the Fertility of the Mind* (1997–2014), which has gradually morphed over the years. In its 2014 version, the materials and overall layout remain the same—a small bottle sits atop a stool, and behind both is a wall made of sanitary pads on which hangs a portrait of Arahmaiani—but several alterations have pushed the tone of the work from more sinister to apparently (possibly sarcastically) more cheerful and efficient. The portrait in the original piece shows the artist clad in black and holding up a white IUD (a semipermanent female contraceptive), a scalpel and surgical scissors against a dark backdrop. In the new version, she is dressed in a red shirt and a white nurse’s cap, against a bright background, and the IUD is red. As with most of Arahmaiani’s work, the message and interpretive possibilities of *Do Not Prevent* are complex, inviting open-ended readings. “Trust me, I will help you prevent that unwanted life of the mind with this handy little gadget,” the female figure might be saying, or, “I got it out! Now nothing can keep your creativity and critical thinking from being conceived and growing to fullness!”

Written words are another key element of many of Arahmaiani’s works. She challenges the way language is abused by the media and governments to pit nations, religions and genders against each other. Some related works exhibited at the show included soft-sculpture works from 2006, made in collaboration with female Muslim silk-weavers in Thailand, which depict individual Arabic letters that can be combined into different words. Another seminal work, documented in photographs, is *Breaking Words* (2004–), in which Arahmaiani writes words (such as “money” or “freedom”) in black marker on white porcelain plates—often inviting viewers to participate in the writing—and then smashes them, one plate after another, against a wall.

One work stood out as different within Arahmaiani’s retrospective. *Confluence 1* (2010),



a large acrylic diptych rendered in gray hues, is not a reworking of an earlier piece. On the left canvas, a silhouette of Arahmaiani’s figure stands calm and still, knee-deep in a slow-flowing river. On the right canvas, darker tones express nonfigurative nuances of chaos. A single gestural line undulates across the divide between the two canvases. On the left, the line partitions the background into light and dark figurative forms; on the right, it nearly merges, dripping, into darker, abstract tonalities. The whole, as well as the details, quietly evoke both connection and difference. In *Confluence 1*, one gets the sense that the artist has reached a new point of serenity. Here, she is not the activist who fights for freedom and human rights—the artist is simply *being*, seeking deeper integration with nature and self within life’s ever-present dialectic.

The retrospective was elegantly curated and displayed, though without the inclusion of Arahmaiani’s live performances it was somewhat static. Furthermore, only one of her performances, *I Don’t Want to Be Part of Your Legend* (2004), was shown on video. As it would not have constituted a spatial challenge, one wonders why more performance documentation was not included in the exhibition. Nonetheless, “Fertility of the Mind” made a fine beginning to what will hopefully be a larger-scale and more performance-infused retrospective of Arahmaiani’s work in the future, perhaps with even stronger links made between her art and her ecology of mind, body, nature and community.

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