

## Shifting Gravity - Val Wens

Juggling precariously before a sulphuric, acrid Javanese landscape or a remote and ancient forest, Indonesian/Australian artist Val Wens performs a sequence of balancing actions: a potent metaphor for the human struggle within the vicissitudes of our contemporary condition.

For Wens, this also 'echoes my own personal struggles as a gay Javanese man and religious sceptic, brought up in both a conservative Islamic and Catholic household'. Wearing an ominously black protection mask within a noxious landscape, Wens' performative photographs enact a state of uncertainty as a live performance in a dystopian landscape where the artist balances vessels before the camera in an unfamiliar yet eerily beautiful 'natural' environment.

The artist has configured himself, face obscured, in the foreground in various stances while the background depicts a sulphur mine, *Kawah Ijen* (Ijen Crater) adjacent to turquoise water that is a lake of lethal acid. Drenched in heat and fumes, the smouldering landscape of craggy rocks and vaporous haze of toxins has workers in the background undertaking their dangerous tasks: miners exposed and unprotected who lug mammoth chunks of sulphur, ultimately used to manufacture products such as film, cosmetics, rubber, matches and insecticides – a perilous cycle to do with human suffering and desire.

*Banyuwangi* comprises a new suite of photographs, a two-channel video installation and a pair of paintings on Islamic prayer rugs. Moreover, *Banyuwangi* refers to a volcanic plateau and mountainous region in East Java, Indonesia, known as Blambangan Kingdom; the last Hindu Kingdom in Java in the sixteenth century. At the time of the fall of the Majapahit Kingdom, many fled to Banyuwangi (Blambangan Kingdom), Bali and Lombok to resist conversion to Islam. The indigenous community from Banyuwangi known as the Osing had been forced to convert to Islam in 1770. Despite the attempts to propagate Islam and Christianity, among the Osing people, many still keep their longstanding beliefs of Hindu-Buddhism.

Alas Purwo or Ancient Forest was also a site of pilgrimage for Javanese mystics and Wens also performs in this forest in his two-channel hypnotic video. Wens' exhibition alludes to the identity struggle among the minority Osing population within mainstream, Muslim Javanese culture.

At the nexus of acrobatics, performance and photography, Wens adopts the stance of artist-performer within taut scenes in which body, psyche, background and foreground are fused in precarious relationships. Wens learnt to juggle while working as a bartender at the Hard Rock Café in Jakarta: a "hiding place to cover my sexuality." Ultimately, this alienated and contaminated environment is a location for exploring Javanese myths, pilgrimages, queer identity and an expedition to elsewhere: the imagination.

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