

## My Right Foot

By *Uma Anyar*

Mohammad Asroel has a remarkable right foot.

It is not remarkable because his right foot and leg is the only fully formed limb on his body, or because he uses this appendage to dexterously hop across busy streets and rough yards on a single rubber sandal. It is not only remarkable but it is notable that he can maneuver uneven Balinese entrance steps with the grace of a feline, smoke filter- less cigarettes, eat nasi campur and SMS on his Nokia, all with the nimble toes on his right foot.

What is truly remarkable is that Asroel paints masterpieces with his right foot.

I have watched him do this with my own amazed eyes. True, they are copies of masterpieces. But masterpieces by Rembrandt, Archimbaldo, Van Eyck, Petrus Cristus and Frieda Kahlo are not to be taken lightly even by talented painters with two hands at their command. Asroel has painted copies of other famous historical paintings but these are the artists I have commissioned him to paint from photographic reproductions in art books. Other clients have gratefully walked off, grinning from ear to ear with a replica of their favorite painting tucked under their arms. Mohammed Asroel is a master copyist, not a forger in any sense. No deception is involved. He signs each painting with a big toe imprint.

Copies have enhanced our awareness and appreciation of original art works since the invention of photography. Try and imagine an art history class without projected slides lighting up students' minds. Reproductions have helped to both rarify and denigrate the original masterpieces. Museum Shops sell copies of famous paintings and sculptures in many forms, from postcards and posters to silk scarves and umbrella designs, not to mention high priced knick -knacks for the home or office. And, that much vaunted theory, postmodernism, scoffs at the validity of originality altogether as a viable construct for our disenchanting era.

There are some who talk about Asroel as handicapped. But, it would be in error. To say that or call him disabled is to not see what is before one's own eyes. A man more able than many. A notion of what those words means stands in our way. Not only the word, but also an emotion, be it compassion, pity, dread, discomfort or even admiration, gets in the way and becomes an impediment to understanding the remarkable power, ingenuity and faith can play in any human life.

I have committed this error.

A few months after I first met Asroel, I felt compelled to find an institution that would provide him with a pair of prosthetic arms and a prosthetic left leg and foot. I searched the Internet. I discussed various fund raising projects with friends involved with *yayasan* projects. When I finally approached Asroel with my ideas and suggestions I was politely told, "Please, Ibu I like my body this way, I no want change."

In that moment I grasped my blindness, my conventional assumptions of what constituted helping. Suddenly, I realized that all Asroel wanted was what any other artist would want from any client, and that was to just buy his paintings so that he could make a living for himself and his family. He did not require extraordinary help.

It was at this point that an invisible screen fell away and we were free to meet each other as curious individuals who had art in common. As a professional photographer and teacher I have had a long-standing interest in the process of art making. I think it is the best thing human beings do. So with the help of Gede, our mutual friend who kindly translated between Indonesian and English, I got to interview Asroel about his life, his painting and his aspirations for the future. We sat in his stark cement studio where a bright yellow curtain tinted the late afternoon incoming rays, a translucent gold. As we talked, I watched the gray walls, the piled up canvases, the sticky painting pallet and the right-footed painter, gradually merge into a beautifully composed image constructed entirely of light.

UA: How long have you been painting?

*Since 1998*

UA: How old were you when you started painting?

*Seventeen.*

UA: What pulled you to painting?

*Oh, I just liked pictures.*

UA: Who taught you to paint?

*In the beginning I taught myself but later when I lived in Yogyakarta some friends who were painters helped me, showed me some techniques and helped me get books to copy.*

UA: What was the subject of your first painting?

*Islamic calligraphy for our mosque. It was good and people liked it and I was able to sell my work.*

UA: I was under the impression that direct representation is frowned upon by Muslims. Is this true?

*I think art happens because of the deep humanity inside people, but also because of God too. Religion is in the heart; it is not just a set of rules. I feel strong in my religion and I think religion and art are very close. When I want to pray, I paint.*

UA: I notice that you can paint in a variety of styles. What is your preferred style for your own art works?

*I have tried many processes and styles. I like Surrealism the best because I myself am surreal! I try to practice positive thinking and positive actions.*

UA: Which painters do you admire?

*Oh many. Salvador Dali, Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Peter Paul Rubens, Vermeer and, of course, Magritte. He is my favorite surrealist painter.*

UA: Do you like anyone alive and currently working?

*Yes, Hendra Buana from Padang in Sumatra.*

UA: Do you think you would be a painter if you had been born with hands and arms?

*Yes, of course. My painting, my talent and my need to paint are much deeper than my disability. It is more than my body. It is about my feeling, not about my body.*

UA: The last time we talked you told me that your birth defects may be the result of your mother working on a chemically sprayed coffee field while she was pregnant with you. Can you expand on that?

*My mother worked on a coffee plantation in Java. The fields were heavily sprayed with some kind of chemical fertilizer. We think this affected her pregnancy. I remember my mother was always very tired when I was a child. There are four children in my family but I am the only one who was born as I was. I was the fourth child.*

UA: What was your childhood like?

*I was treated equally, the same as the other children. My father would say, "Asroel you are a boy, come with me to the garden to work." I helped as I could. My father did not pity me or treat me differently than my sister or brothers. My mother loved me a lot and supported me. She always told me that I would be all right. I would have a good life.*

UA: Where were you born?

*I was born in Gondang, Java in 1979 but I left my village because there was no work and went to Yogyakarta. In the beginning I made jewelry, earrings, belts, necklaces and sold them on the street. My friends and I sold the jewelry to tourists. One time, an American man bought over a hundred pieces and then sold them in America.*

UA: How old were you when you left home?

*Eighteen.*

UA: Who did you go with?

*No one. . I went alone. I have been to Kalimantan, Sumatra, and Jakarta alone.*

UA: How were you able to do this?

*I made jewelry and sold it on the street. In 2003, I came to Bali because I wanted to just paint. I wanted to make my living painting if possible. I lived in Jimbaran at first but then friends*

*told me to go to Ubud because I was a painter. Many friends helped me get established. Senang Hati foundation is like my family. Sometimes I exhibit with them in group shows.*

UA: When did you start making replicas of other paintings?

*Three years ago. A lady brought me a book of paintings of the King of Klungkung pictures. I made small copies for sale, postcards, and tourist pictures. At that time I would do anything and everything to make money, now I just paint. I like that.*

UA: What do you hope for in the next ten years?

*Of course, I want success with my paintings. I hope they will inspire others to live better. I want to be able to make enough for my family and I to live. This is my life process, everybody has a life path, painting is mine. I hope my paintings will inspire my son, I want him to know my life process.*

UA: Do you mean you want your son to be strong in life spirit?

*I know that the art life it is not an easy way. It is a difficult path. I want my son to have his own process I will not choose his life for him. I want him to find something he is passionate about in his life. Many people do not have this. I am a lucky man. I focus on my abilities, not my disabilities. I thank God for my life as it is.*

At this point a three year-old boy appeared in the doorway of Asroel's studio. The painter's face lit up with joy. I put away the tape recorder. The interview was over but the friendship was just beginning.

(Anyone is interested in commissioning a painting by Mohammad Asroel should contact him by calling 081358317968.)