

Moving stories from Tino Van Dijk's family portraits

By Farah Wardani Source: The Jakarta Post, Thursday, October 16, 2003

Between 1973 and 1983, a child exodus occurred in Indonesia, whereby a great number of Indonesian babies and children were taken by adoptive parents from foreign countries, mostly the Netherlands. These children were given away by their biological parents for many reasons, from escaping social and cultural restrictions for having an illegitimate child, to purely economic motives.

This phenomenon became such a serious problem, resembling the export of Indonesian workers to foreign countries, that the government eventually stopped it officially in 1983. That little piece of this country's history then slowly faded from memory, concealing questions on what then happened to the children afterwards, and what sort of life they might have led.

Valentijn (Tino) Van Dijk, alias Tino Djumini, was one of the given-away children. He was adopted in 1978 by a Dutch family that was first shown a photograph of three-year-old Tino with the words "Nice Boy" written on the back. From then on, Tino grew up to become a part of his Dutch family as well as a Dutch citizen.

He undertook studies in art and currently works as a freelance photographer in the Netherlands. He then returned to Indonesia to trace his biological mother, whom he eventually found and met.

From such beginnings we can already expect that Tino Van Dijk has a compelling story in store for us. We can also see an intriguing path that shows how photos have become a significant element in his biography -- the way the major change in his life started early on with a simple photograph and then how he became a photographer when he grew up.

Inevitably, photography is what he has chosen as the medium to tell us his story. His exhibition is at Galeri Soemardja at the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB), Bandung. The exhibition presents a compilation of black-and-white family portraits taken in Indonesia and the Netherlands.

Entitled Nice Boy, like that picture of him back in 1978 and just as his exhibition curator, Rifky Effendy, says in the catalog, it was like presenting "photography of fate."

This can be seen vividly in two photos that are displayed alongside each other, which portray Van Dijk with each of his two families, one with his middle-class Dutch adoptive parents in the Netherlands, the other with his biological mother's humble family in Indonesia.

The two pictures reflect Van Dijk's double unbelonging, his displacement in both of his families, how he differs physically and racially from his Dutch parents, and how the aura that emanates from his stare, character and mannerisms that resulted from his Dutch upbringing mark him out from his Indonesian family and its surroundings.

Furthermore, Van Dijk also invites us to join him in engaging with the stories of the others, in portrayals of various Indonesian and Dutch families that he met through personal or coincidental encounters, and also by research.

The Indonesian series presents portraits of "ordinary" Indonesian families from a broad range of social classes. The Dutch series presents various middle-class Dutch families with their adopted children from Indonesia, with an exception of one that presents a young married couple with their son, in which the husband was an adopted child from Colombia and the wife Indonesian-born, who had moved to the Netherlands.

All the photographs are captured in the utmost simplicity, portraying the families in common family portrait poses, mostly in their homes, accompanied by short texts explaining the background of each.

Yet, it is intriguing to see how the Indonesian and Dutch scenes are juxtaposed one with another, the way they display images of "proper" families and other versions of families with one or more "displaced" members within them, the ones that stand out for being "the others."

They make us look back to our own family portraits, how they identify ourselves, signifying our sense of shelter, a place in this world for us to claim and to return to. In another way, it is also an institution in itself.

Van Dijk sorts out his series of images like throwing cards on the table for the audience, giving them the space to go beyond the smiling faces on the pictures, excavating the stories beneath as well as exploring the possibilities that might have happened along the way. Being one of the subjects of his own work, his personal engagement intensifies the depth of all the narrations he has collected and encapsulated, both visually, in his photography, and also textually in his writing in the exhibition catalog, which could serve as an autonomous narrative project in itself.

The exhibition as a whole is thought-provoking, stimulating us to rethink our concepts of family in relation to various aspects such as norms, sociocultural constructions, kinship, legacy, history and memory. Moreover, it also can lead us to think how we perceive ourselves within this increasingly globalized world, which is endlessly transforming, along with values and notions of identity itself.

Nice Boy, exhibition of photos by Valentijn (Tino) Van Dijk at Galeri Soemardja ITB, Jl. Ganesha No. 10, Bandung, until Oct. 20, 2003.