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A dramatic painting depicting a volcanic eruption. In the background, a volcano erupts with thick, dark smoke and bright orange and yellow flames. The sky is filled with these fiery colors. In the foreground, several people are shown in various states of distress and action. A man in the lower left looks up with a concerned expression. A woman in the center, wearing a red garment, is being held or supported by others. To the right, a person is lying down, seemingly unconscious or dead. The overall scene conveys a sense of the overwhelming power of nature and the vulnerability of humanity.

# FORCE OF NATURE



# Entang Wiharso

BY ASHLEY BICKERTON



ArtAsiaPacific's editors have been looking forward to this moment: the arrival of Ashley Bickerton's rollicking, probing interview with his contemporary Entang Wiharso. Bickerton is known both for his artistic and intellectual participation in the art scene of 1980s New York—particularly his inclusion in the Neo-Geo group centered around the Sonnabend Gallery—and for his self-banishment to Bali in the early 1990s. Bickerton's practice has thrived since then, drawing on exoticized stereotypes and indigenous traditions of the Indonesian island. Bickerton remains very much in touch with the art scenes in Yogyakarta, Jakarta and Hong Kong, as well as in New York.

Bickerton's interlocutor, Entang Wiharso, was born in Tegal, Central Java, in 1967, and graduated from the Indonesian Institute of Arts in Yogyakarta in 1987. He first exhibited abroad in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1997, and his international career has taken off since then, with solo exhibitions at museums and galleries in Europe, Asia and the United States in the past decade. He was among those chosen to represent Indonesia at the country's first national pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013, and is one of the most acclaimed artists in Indonesia today.

What links these artists is more than just an outlandish visual style that draws on colorful archetypes and scenarios from popular culture and ancient mythology, hybridizing them to create caricatures of contemporary life. As this wide-ranging conversation about Wiharso's practice and Indonesian art reveals, the two artists are kindred spirits, with a critical awareness of the vitality of the country's artistic communities, yet still in thrall to the higher mysteries of artistic creation itself.

— The Editors

**Entang Wiharso is a force of nature, a seemingly unstoppable potency of polymorphous cultural and psychic expression.** One of the most visible and visibly distinct artists in this suddenly very visible generation of Indonesian artists, he seems to be everywhere at once, speaking with urgency through any cogent channel that fits his immediate need, be it painting, sculpture, video, installation or performance.

His are artworks that seamlessly exist with both the labyrinthine mythologies of a centuries-old animist past, and the hell-bent boom-boom lifestyle of a high-speed, hyper-connected 21st century. Indeed, Wiharso is a figure whose life and works straddle two cultures. Keeping studios and homes in both Java and the US, his life and immediate family are bicultural, biracial and the inheritors of a wide swath of diverse religious and spiritual legacies. Wiharso is an artist with a burning need to harness the torrent that pumps through his personal psychic landscape and who possesses the sober determination to marshal this molten upwelling into elegant visual structures that speak with distinction and a beguiling clarity to the world at large.

While Wiharso's visual language is utterly modern and leans hard into an uncharted new century, it nevertheless exhibits a clearly defined lineage that originates in the rich cultural history of Central Java. He is at once jester, psychic cartographer, *Zap Comix*-inspired hippie mystic, shaman and postmodern provocateur. He deploys imagery in an extravagantly coded system of references, symbols and ciphers that enact a tangled dance of sexuality and power that snakes across the often-sprawling surfaces of canvas or industrial-grade aluminum. Themes of personal, political and sexual struggle are reenacted inexorably, identity is fluid and always in question,

and the very structure of the imagery seems to be built upon an unsound bedrock of magma, swirling intestines and phalluses that simultaneously strangle and engender new life.

Wiharso is an artist of formidable natural resources, and it is with enormous pleasure that I finally had the privilege to square off and dig a bit into his mind and background. While I conducted this interview as a conversation between two artists about the changing place of Indonesian art in the world, I focused it specifically through the prism of Wiharso's own work and perceptions.

**Bickerton:** As an artist myself, I often dread probing symbolic meanings of recurring motifs in another artist's work. I hold very definite truck with Oscar Wilde's idea that, "The moment you think you understand a great work of art, it's dead for you." Artists largely operate and dance in the half-light of intuitions, and we are generally loath to suffocate the fluidity of our thinking under the harsh neon glare of the laboratory. I prefer to remain in that space of wonder, where things are untethered, unlabeled and ultimately just beyond reach.

So while deeming it generally unnecessary and even undesirable to analyze the components of an artist's work, I also believe that certain artworks and oeuvres call for some understanding and interpretation of their symbology, language and visual tropes, to fully realize their impact. Your work deploys a very precise but extensive arsenal of recurring motifs.

Please talk about some of these: the black goats, the tendril-like tongues and roots that slither around your surfaces, the often abject and confused superheroes, the emphatic walls, the steadfast tables, the omnipresent knives and the landscapes that sing so specifically about their locales. Why are these motifs important in describing where you come from, what you want to say, and ultimately, where you are going?

**Wiharso:** I know some artists can be hesitant about discussing their work, but generally I don't mind. The danger of speaking explicitly is that people think that it starts and ends with those words. Both you and Oscar Wilde are right; an artwork has so many layers of meaning, and we cannot communicate everything in words. Even when I describe my work, it always feels incomplete. The symbols I use—for example, knives, walls and tables—contain commonly held linguistic and representational meanings. I want a familiarity to exist for viewers, a history of ideas that they engage with. The relationships and contexts within the work create new, sometimes unsettling or humorous scenarios. Andres Serrano said, "Getting to the truth necessitates violating decorum, rules of propriety, and the expectation that art must please the senses." That is why I use exaggeration, drama, absurdity and distortion in my work.

My recent installation, *Crush Me* (2012–13), is a good work in which to explore the issues raised in your question. It is a large, three-dimensional wall, 6.5 meters in length, made of graphite powder and resin over a cast-metal structure. The imagery in this work reflects colliding and conflicting experiences by examining systems of thought, ideology, politics and morality. Essentially about borders that are designed to protect and yet at the same time divide, the work's surface is embedded with autobiographical material. The tongues and knives, the policeman, the intestines, the table, the husband and wife, the architectural elements, the black goat, the dog, and also the distortion, are all present. Together they create a fragmented narrative that highlights the role of perception in day-to-day life.

The figures in *Crush Me*—both the human and the animal forms—are agents and receptacles of action. The black goat is a form of self-portrait I embraced many years ago to investigate the position of being both an outsider and a scapegoat. The superhero is a portrait of an everyman, a composite figure that must manage moral ambiguity and ambition, ego and the desire for perfection. The superhero

(Previous spread)

**SECOND SKIN AND SECOND LANDSCAPE** (detail), 2011, oil on canvas, 277 x 480 cm. Courtesy Arndt, Berlin.

(Top)

**UNTOLD STORY: FLOATING ISLAND**, 2012, acrylic and oil on canvas, triptych, 300 x 600 cm. Courtesy Arndt, Berlin.

represents the human condition, how we become fragile even as we gain power. I find that superheroes have many weaknesses. The fact that they are strong creates vulnerabilities. I use my superheroes in two ways. One is to show human fallibility and the frustration and pain we feel when we are lost. But superheroes, in my works, may also represent corrupt leaders who are adored by the people around them who crave the benefits of their power.

Particular objects play a secondary role in conveying human agency. The weapons in *Crush Me* are tools, but in the wrong hands they can engender danger or violence. Human and animal tongues and organs—intestines and phalluses—refer to desire and self-control, and symbolize libido, power, gossip, access and indoctrination. The tables in my work are sites of meeting and negotiation, and function as a stage where a drama is played out.

The landscape in *Crush Me* acts as a means to both claim and personalize. The Dutch colonizers were very aware of how to claim ownership of the land. They photographed and painted the Indonesian landscape and sent the images around the world: “This is ours, we own this.” When I saw such images—exotic depictions of a harmonious, idealized tropical landscape, dotted with villages and fauna—I wanted to take it back and make it Indonesian again. This tendency in my work began with murals and paintings such as *Love Me or Die* (2010), *Untold Story: Floating Island* (2012) and *Upside Down Temple* (2010), but is present in my sculptures and installations as well.

The potency of the signs and symbols that recur frequently are intended to test viewers’ sensitivity, to encourage them to inquire about, analyze and discover the meaning in the work and in their own lives.

**Among your contemporaries, there seems to be a battle at the heart of Indonesian art as to whether or not it needs to manifest an inherent “Indonesian-ness.” For some, the fact that an artwork is made by an Indonesian artist is enough, regardless of its stylistic or ontological roots. For others, an innate genetic thread or vernacular distinction must tie the work to the generations and history that preceded it. I would put you in this latter group. The pulses and rhythms that twist through your work cast shadows of various precursors, from Heri Dono and Djoko Pekik, more recently, back through the writhing majesty of Hendra Gunawan’s canvases, and further back to Javanese and Sumatran animistic metal work, and the potent graphic optics of traditional batik. What are your feelings about this issue, and how do you reconcile an inherently Indonesian voice with the desire you have spoken about in the past, not to be “exoticized”?**

I like your question. It is sharp and incisive like a knife. The expanse and richness of tradition still invoke our desire to reperform it. But when the act of performing tradition becomes decadent and exoticized, it can become—for artists especially—a kind of deadly poison, making us feel bloated. I am aware that exploring tradition can be an interesting way of seeking the creative roots of our work and can also be a way of adding something to the world with our interpretation, but tradition can also be a heavy burden for Indonesian artists.

Artistic practice in Indonesia responds to tradition in three ways: first, to continue forms of cultural heritage—tradition without conditions—as seen in archaeological facilities, disguised as a form of preservation; second, taking something that exists in the world and adopting it, whether in a raw or altered form or as an embodiment; and third, to use tradition as the foundation for new artworks, where the forms and concepts of tradition undergo additional transformation and evolution. All three approaches use local politics and global issues as a narrative background and occasionally explore aesthetic issues. Art, for me, is a tool for dissecting and even shattering something that has taken on

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I think the presence of work that still has a root identity, an “Indonesian-ness,” is crucial as a form of resistance to the same-ness of foreign materials. So the issue of Indonesian-ness, or Javanese-ness, is not a construction to make it appear as if there are identity issues or to create a sense of local-ness, or a negotiation with the market; it is a dissection of the issue of history and tradition through a new investigation, a new survey. I do not need to act out my Javanese-ness or Indonesian-ness with my art because it exists inside me.

In my own work, I want to apply history and tradition through a new conception of history and tradition. I resist the ways tradition and history are normally perceived, explained and used to frame my identity and ideology. I think you have done something similar in your work. I see your American-ness, with Indonesian content. You are an artist who, in eliminating and destroying borders, is relevant to the practice of artists in Indonesia today.

**It is a growing belief among artists in the West that serious art criticism has become irrelevant. The powerful market forces that govern the global machine have steadily marginalized the need for the intervention of true scholarship. Art journalism seems to be nothing more than filling space. Gallery countertops need something solid for people to hold. Some writers, most notably *The Economist*’s estimable Sarah Thornton, have quit writing about the art market entirely. She felt that her role had been reduced to a public anointer of potential blue-chip properties for “tightknit cabals of dealers and speculative collectors.” With some obvious market games**

**being played with certain artists’ careers (both in Indonesia and in Asia in general), what are your feelings about the historical role and current relevance of art criticism in the Indonesian art orbit?**

Success in Indonesia—the art world included—is often defined as material success, and this has created a dilemma. The dilemma in the art world stems from the collusion, nepotism and corruption that defined the Suharto regime [1966–98]. People were pragmatic—which encouraged them to take shortcuts and avoid the normal channels. As a result, money was often seen as dirty and dark. Because of this history, success in the art world was often viewed negatively, even though such success—as a reward for artistic accomplishment—should have been a source of inspiration, demonstrating how art could create opportunities. The situation reminds me of a comment by the U2 musician Bono, comparing the different attitudes toward success in Ireland and the US: “In the United States, you look at the guy that lives in the mansion on the hill, and you think, one day, if I work really hard, I could live in that mansion. In Ireland, people look up at the guy in the mansion on the hill and go, one day, I’m going to get that bastard. It’s a different mind-set.” Over time, in the Indonesian art world, these attitudes have changed and people who were antisuccess have embraced the capitalistic side of art, sometimes to the detriment of their artistic practice.

The art boom in Indonesia has had some negative impacts. Belief in the value of historical analysis, scholarly art criticism and the role of scholars, art schools and museums, all no longer enjoy the respect they once did. Artistic practice is not as deep, with some artists rushing out work and experimenting less. But despite the market wave, there are strong individuals, groups and institutions that remain critical and deeply focused on creating meaningful artwork, knowledge and a lively art discourse, providing an alternative path for serious art practice.



**CRUSH ME #2**, 2012–13, aluminum, resin, pigment and thread, 340 x 650 x 88 cm. Courtesy Pearl Lam Galleries, Hong Kong.

**I just watched Joshua Oppenheimer's sensational documentary *The Act of Killing* (2012) [featuring the leaders of death squads that operated in North Sumatra in 1965–66 reenacting many of their worst crimes] in New York. As I was thinking about your work for this interview, I realized how much crossover the content and narrative of the film had with issues that you are addressing: the dynamics of power as acted out in a reconstituted and otherworldly burlesque of traditional Wayan Kulit/Golek theater, grotesque and stylized Hollywood-esque and comic-book driven constructions of self, of the "Other," et cetera. The film also conflates our understanding of history, practical reality, the surreal and the fantastic, achieving a confluence of these normally separate perceptions with disconcerting ease. That particular conflation is something I see your work accomplishing masterfully. Have you seen the film, and what are your thoughts in regard to the similarities and differences in your approach and outcome?**

I saw the film, but I found it difficult to watch until the end. It was too painful. Old wounds and traumas surfaced and I remembered over and over again the stories my parents told. Like smelling the blood of innocent people. Empathy doesn't permit me to defend one side only, rather it makes me lament human frailty in the face of greed. The dark history of human violence shows up in the early religious and territorial wars, as well as in the wars of ideology that continue today as terrorism.

My childhood was very dramatic. I observed and experienced many events and changes. I lived in a small village during the major campaign initiated by Suharto to increase agricultural production by using toxic chemicals in agrarian communities. It poisoned us and the environment. Suharto wanted change, fast; people looked at profits with no concern about the impact of their policies.

I experienced another dramatic change when my parents moved to Jakarta and I first encountered urban life. I questioned the function of the artist and wondered how to represent the complex ideas that were my reality. I wanted to use art to reinterpret that reality and to create a new reality that showed all aspects of the situation. Through my art I am able to speak out and to resist the things I disagree with—conventional thinking, the abuse of power and other injustices. I see that as a big theater production, like the

puppet shows I watched as a child. I became fascinated with the roots of power and the connections between the leaders and the people, and how leaders create structures to control every aspect of life.

A trauma remains after a long period of colonization, manifesting itself in so many different ways, the primary one being lingering violence. That's why my parents told me about the Japanese occupation, about the Dutch postwar aggression and also about Gerakan 30 SPKI [the September 30 Movement, a failed military coup d'état in 1965 that led to Suharto's rule and a violent purge of suspected communists throughout the country]. This is what my work is about, and I think that's why you see connections with Oppenheimer's film. I present our experiences and our history. In my installation *Temple of Hope Hit by Bus* (2011), for example, I created a house-shaped work that is like a stage that displays elements of history, fanaticism, tradition and art, along with ideas in the form of quotes from the media, books, my family and friends. This is the way I create and build new meaning, by investigating disparate things that already exist and are connected.

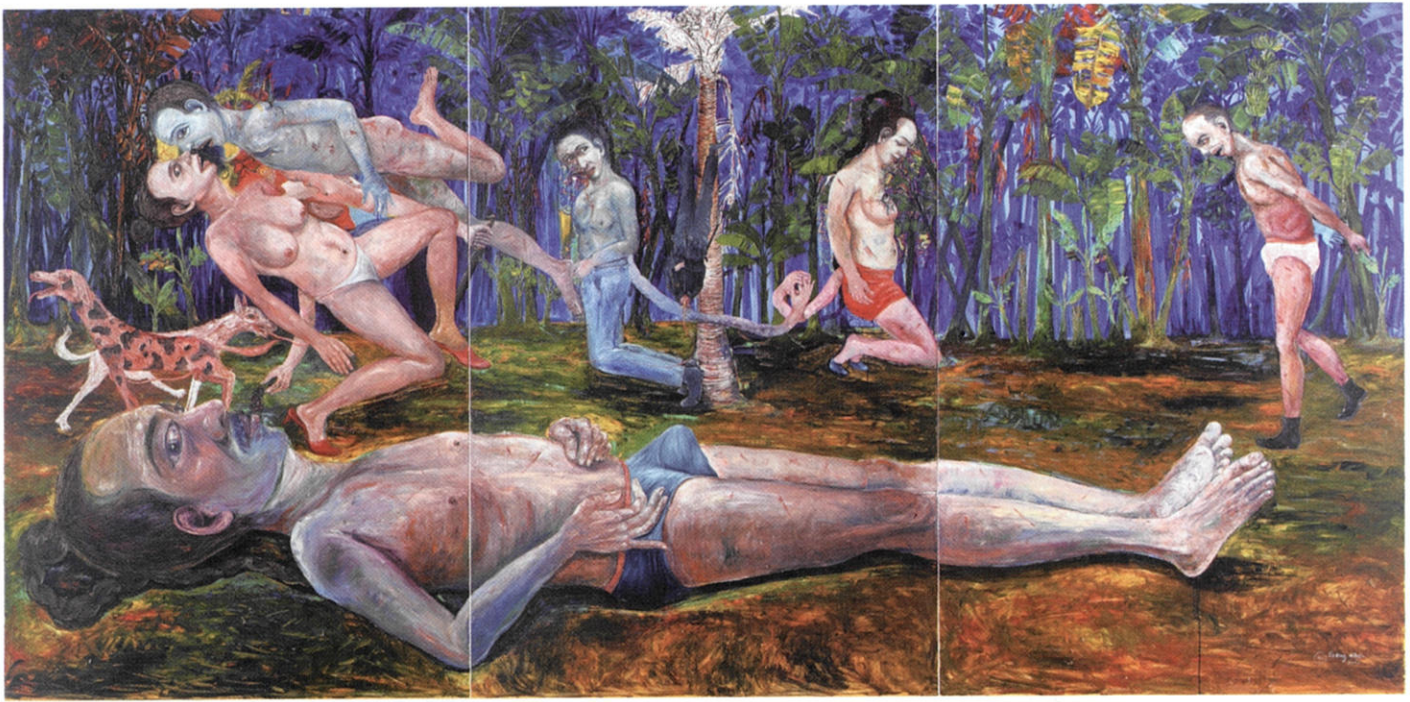
**When I first moved to Indonesia about 20 years ago, it seemed some scarred history of activist political commitment and opposition to the autocratic regime was an absolutely necessary component of any artist worthy of the name. Indeed, it seemed that all noteworthy artists of the period, whatever their stylistic proclivities, be they conceptual or expressionist, shared the thread of a politically dissident, and often persecuted, path. Like many of the Chinese artists who left the motherland to escape a repressive system, a number of Indonesian artists felt compelled to follow suit—for example, Eddie Hara finding creative solace in Belgium, while Dadang Christanto ended up in Australia. Today, it seems this political background has been dropped as an indispensable component of a serious artist's résumé. Aside from the obvious—the end of Suharto's 32-year regime in 1998, and the subsequent explosion of international art fairs and the unbridled laissez-faire capitalism in this country that came with it—can you discuss how political activism among Indonesian artists has changed? Is it relevant today? And if so, how does political involvement continue to change as Indonesia transforms?**



(This page)  
**BORDERLESS: FLOATING ISLAND**, 2011–12,  
graphite, resin, steel, brass, pigment and thread,  
350 x 750 x 140 cm. Courtesy Arndt, Berlin.

(Opposite page, top)  
**GEO-SELF PORTRAIT**, 2012–13,  
oil on linen, triptych, 300 x 600 cm.  
Courtesy Pearl Lam Galleries, Hong Kong.

(Opposite page, bottom)  
**COALITION: BORDERLESS**, 2012,  
brass, resin, pigment and thread,  
175 x 100 cm. Courtesy Arndt, Berlin.



The practice of art is always changing as a result of stimulation from existing social conditions—for example: politics, identity, tradition and history, as well as market forces. Artists respond to stimulation in a variety of ways. Some accept conditions as they exist and try to maintain the status quo, while others refuse or resist, and still others analyze and ask questions, choosing to explore the “gray areas” and provide new perspectives. Indonesian artists associated with activism, including important historical figures such as Sudjojono, Hendra Gunawan and Affandi, were fascinated by politics and power. These issues remain salient in Indonesian contemporary art practices, not only because they offer fertile ground for exploration, but also because the market and funding to local organizations from foreign institutions encourage it. I guess this happens elsewhere, for example in China.

The Indonesian contemporary art discourse at the end of Suharto’s rule encouraged an artist-as-activist paradigm, although some artists bent to political pressure and made innocuous art. There was great diversity within political art, but there was also strong pressure to define contemporary art through particular aesthetics that were comprehensible to non-Indonesians and which fitted into an oversimplified oppressor/oppressed model. The foreign institutions willing to engage with the Indonesian art scene at that time were looking for political art with a particular message. The need to be recognized, understood and embraced overseas pushed many artists to work in a visual language that was global and comprehensible. Unfortunately, a lot of important work was marginalized because it didn’t conform to the rules of contemporary art. I worked “in between,” because I do not like judgmental art. I want to make work that offers various perspectives. Propaganda art only feeds people specific ideas that lead to a one-sided response.

The relevance of art practices that are antipower and anticapitalism—a component of the art activist’s arsenal in Indonesia—have become less important now, not because politics has improved, but because some of the artists who first championed this approach have changed their tune and embraced the market. This shift cannot be criticized because it also reflects social change and an openness to experimentation, with a less rigid understanding of what is possible through art.





While Indonesia has an opulent cultural history, and continues to give birth to a boggling array of expressions and artistic forms, it is not clear how the current political, social and economic infrastructure supports and nurtures the arts. Compare the world of sports. In professional surfing, for example, Indonesian riders are widely regarded as being on the extreme end of the incandescently talented, yet in spite of this, not one has been able to crack the elite ranks of the professional tour with all its big marquee sponsors and high-profile visibility. Many of the surfers themselves will say that Indonesia lacks the infrastructure and commitment to build a rigorous farm system to nurture and develop its natural young talent pools so they are competitive on a world-class level. Many will also add that the nature of the system is an issue, that it has not yet weaned itself from the mire of corruption that is the legacy of the dictatorship. The system cannibalizes itself for short-term profits.

Much has been said about how this internal malady pertains to the support and cultivation of the arts. Like surfing, the Indonesian art world has been criticized for lacking such infrastructure as nonprofit galleries, kunsthalls, public grants, study programs, scholarships and residencies, as well as supportive galleries. In spite of this, Indonesian art, driven by a deeply rooted and pervasive underground, and fueled by a fierce spirit of identity, has managed in recent years to take hold of some prime real estate in the global consciousness, and begin making a serious mark. Can you talk about the internal machine that is the Indonesian art world, from the artists to the overall framework that fosters them: the galleries and collectors, and the government's role, or lack of it?

Artistic practice often involves taking an alternative, opposing position, as the "Other." Artists often search for what is overlooked when viewing the world. Does this reflect artistic practice in Indonesia? I'm not certain that Indonesia has a mind-set like that. Does this reflect the subconscious world that accentuates the needs of society over the individual? Or is it a reflection of the feelings of safety that come with being in a group as opposed to being an individual in a country where there is no consistent guarantee of the protection of individual rights or of free expression? But group-centered tendencies usually end in instability, since it is the nature of groups to focus on territory. In groups, individuals who possess charisma, authority and power emerge as leaders. Such conditions facilitated Suharto's success, which lasted over 30 years. But chronic conditions such as corruption remain unresolved. These conditions create an overly materialistic "shortcut" culture in all fields, including the arts. The Indonesian art market clearly reflects this reality; it's something that is difficult to correct. The art world doesn't function optimally as a result, despite our awareness that society needs art as a form of knowledge. Of course art speculation is encouraged in this environment: the value of an artwork can be manipulated since there are so few institutional standards—which come in the form of nonprofit galleries, museums, public grants, scholarships, et cetera—with which to measure value beyond the market. In response, Indonesian artists have created organizations—artist initiatives, art spaces, galleries, residencies, workshops and archives—to fill the gap, roles not filled by the government or by foundations. Of course the result is not ideal for creating an objective, healthy art history.

**Thanks Entang, this has been a pleasure I have been looking forward to, and hopefully it is only the beginning of a long and rewarding dialogue. 🍷**

(Opposite page)  
**I LOVE YOU TOO MUCH: INVISIBLE  
THREAT SERIES #1**, oil on linen, 179 x 145 cm.  
Courtesy Pearl Lam Galleries, Hong Kong.

(This page, top)  
**COALITION - WHY ARE YOU SO  
HARD TO LOVE**, 2009, aluminum plate,  
200 x 100 cm. Courtesy Arndt, Berlin.

(This page, bottom)  
**UNDERMINED: CAN WE STAY TOGETHER?**  
(detail), 2012, aluminum, brass, resin, pigment  
and thread, 106 x 55 cm. Courtesy Arndt, Berlin.

