

Curating: A Way through Grief
Elegi Buih at Art Agenda, Jakarta Art Hub
By Stella Wenny

When people say that there are five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, I feel the need to counter by saying I think there are, at least, a thousand stages of grief.

There is the stage when you are inconsolable and paralysed, there is the stage when you manage to smile in spite of it all. Every day you wake up, you enter a brand new stage. Another day of navigating the river of grief that meanders and branches out to many different streams, sometimes taking a roundabout route and going back to where it came from. Another day of grappling with the reality that they are gone and you will not see them again.

On the brink of death, my mother requested for her body to be cremated and the ashes scattered at sea. Thus, when we want to remember her years later, she said, we could visit any ocean in the whole world and be connected to her once again. Since her funeral, I cannot look at a vast body of water the same way anymore. I see it now as the place where our beloved rest, where our memories of them flow and churn, even though they are no longer here.



Installation view of 'Elegi Buih'. Image courtesy of Art Agenda.

The ensuing stages of grief are what prompted me to make my curatorial debut with this exhibition. I am sure I am not alone. I believe many of us have been there, losing someone and being forced to let the indifferent, ever rolling waves wash them away. Through diverse mediums and unique approaches, I hope the works on display will resonate with many. I want the exhibition to be a solemn but cathartic space to embrace grief instead of burying it within us. We can mourn for our losses together. Then, we hold fast to what we still have: the people around us, and the memories of those who have passed.

Pull quote: "We can mourn for our losses together. Then, we hold fast to what we still have: the people around us, and the memories of those who have passed."

Alexandra Karyn's performance art piece 'Memory is a flowering ripple in the water' (2023) is an antiphon to the ritual of scattering ashes at the sea. Five exhibiting artists in 'Elegi Buih' and I participated in it. Working with local fishermen and inhabitants, we took a small boat and headed to the sea from Kamal Muara Beach in North Jakarta. To perform the work, Karyn asked us to bring a story of absence and a small container of water from our home to be poured into the sea. Acting as the caretaker of our souls, Karyn gathered all our stories and, together with the water, released them to the sea. There, floating on a small insignificant boat, we pervaded the sea with our presence and recollections, the living amongst the remnants of the dead. From the experience, the artists returned home with ideas for the works that they wanted to produce. I worked closely with them to refine their concepts, and to realise the artworks.



Installation view of 'Elegi Buih'. Image courtesy of Art Agenda.

To the left of Karyn's video, occupying the same nook, are 'Falling, Softly' (2023) and 'Last Living Word' (2023) by Kurt D. Peterson, with five pieces of etched glass forming two vertical rows. They are framed with engraved wood mimicking the surface of the sea. As it is not easy to make out the words, visitors are encouraged to use the flashlight on their phones to shine on the glass, projecting the words as shadows on the wall. This gesture reminds us that there is a stage of grief when we cannot see ahead of us and need to ask for help.

Both poems in the works came from his memories of childhood, walking the liminal space between the transitory nature of life and the permanence of death. They question what it means to stay relentlessly alive while things are falling apart around us, as indicated in this line: *"And still, / I'm beating a drum / in a blind rain, / catching a cold and / calling it 'song'."*

The works are accompanied with a composed field recording by Kurt, titled 'Summonings'. It is an atmospheric mix of ambient sounds that brings alive the imagery in the poems. In the centre, an antique lamp Kurt received from his godmother to light every year on her wedding

anniversary binds together all the small moments Kurt wants to perpetuate. A used candle alludes to the fact that it has been used for a summoning ritual.

There is one small artwork in the corner titled 'Selamat & Sukses' (2023) by Kurt. It is an artwork that represents the Indonesian practice of having *bunga papan*, or flower board, at funerals and big events. Which function does it serve now? The funeral of moments in the past or the exhibition itself? Or does it play a completely different role hung in a gallery space?



Rega Ayundya Putri 'Flumutations', 2023, Yohan Liliyani 'Essence of Memories', 2023, installation view of 'Elegi Buih'. Image courtesy of Art Agenda.

To the right of the centre wall is 'Essence of Memories' (2023) by Yohan Liliyani. It is adorned with hanging wavy acrylic sheets that bend spotlights into gleaming threadlike rays akin to the surface of the ocean. The resulting whimsical effect invites viewers to step into Yohan's memories imprinted on the four different-sized photographs. They depict the tangible texture of scenes she once saw, held and felt. The illusion of undulating water distorts the UV prints the same way time distorts our memories of the past. It might be impossible to keep them fully intact, but the essence remains, illuminating a path that shows who we are through what we have lost. For me, this work symbolises the stage of grief where we try to remember events in the past yet only manage to get a few fleeting glimpses.

And to the left is 'Flumutations' (2023) by Rega Ayundya Putri. It is a series of six acrylic spherical aquariums wherein the artist illustrates imaginary mutating species of fishes that are endangered and threatened in Ciliwung River and Citarum River due to the high levels of pollution. The work's title is a blend of *flumine* meaning river, and mutation. Her speculation of dystopian animals evolving from toxic rivers challenges us to imagine a future where the catfish and the cockroach merge into an unsettling species as seen in 'Flumutations: Periplaneta hexanema' (2023). Visitors can pour their own water into the aquariums as a reminder that any small action we take as individuals in a society will go towards making a better habitat for all living beings. Death is inevitable but extinction is preventable. This work is a development in Rega's 'Mirageology' project while taking residency with Yayasan Lokus, which aims to blur the boundary between art and science.

The next work is 'Amerta' (2023) by Wanti Amelia. Two circular canvases pose as a reminder that life and death are within the same cycle. When a person dies, another is born at the same time. This is identical to the water cycle where rain falls into the sea only to evaporate back to the sky. The word *amerta* is from Sanskrit, and means immortality. This is often seen in ancient texts as an elixir of life. Juxtaposing the abstraction of the sea and jagged rough texture of silver, she plays with the notions of eternity and prosperity as obsessions that humans strive to achieve.



Irene Febry, 'Did You Find Your Path in the Water?', 2023. Image courtesy of Art Agenda and the artist.

Beside the two canvases, we see a series of 8 works by Irene Febry, who uses joss paper to weave the ritual of honouring the dead in Chinese culture into her collage works. Burning joss paper symbolises our endeavour to provide those departed with material possessions in the afterlife. The repetitive strips might seem compulsive at first, but they are also meditative. They tell us how grief first compels us to cry endlessly until we move past the cathartic process and begin to make peace with it. While dealing with the loss of four loved ones over the last three years, Irene created the first set of works on the left when her emotions were still volatile. The second set was created when she had processed her grief, letting the collages console her into solace.



Mutiara Riswari 'Fog Shrouded', 2023. Image courtesy of Art Agenda and the artist.

At the end of a short hallway, 'Black Waves' (2023) by Mutiara Riswari is the visualisation of the tumultuous clash happening inside ourselves when we face loss and separation. Here, the colour black does not only represent lament, but also the robustness that comes from weathering it. Like the ocean separating Mutiara from her father, who moved to a different continent, it also still connects her to the tender memories of joy. This dichotomy is another stage of grief where one is supposed to move on but does not want to let go of the past. Eventually, 'Fog Shrouded' (2023) is her way of coming to terms with an uncertain future. We can wish and plan all we want, but there is still an unpredictable darkness that looms at the top of the hill. She goes on to portray her own turbulent self intimately in meditative charcoal and pastel smudges in 'Silent Harmony' (2023).



Olen Riyanto 'Live, Die, Double Happiness', 2023. Image courtesy of Art Agenda.

Across Mutiara's works, Olen Riyanto has constructed 'Live, Die, Double Happiness' (2023), a soft sculpture made with Cap Gajah bolsters which feature the motif 囍囍, or *shuang xi*, which stands for double happiness in Chinese. She has hand sewn them together with wires, making them stand tall and hanging from the ceiling. The archway she has created between the sculpture and the wall it leans on is a representation of the gate between life and death. It transitions into waves and pours out like solid liquid onto the wooden floor of the gallery.

The daring act of using 囍囍 in a work about grieving imposes the message to cherish happy memories before death eventually comes. The total number of the bolsters is 39, plus one lone bolster at the corner of the space. Olen instinctively wants to avoid the number 40 because 4 is a number associated with death in Chinese culture. It is present, but not stitched with the rest.

The gaps between the bolsters are hollow spaces when things fall through, similar to how we overlook bad things of the people we lost because we are expected to forgive all of their mistakes. She invites the audience to walk on the soft sculpture and feel the wobbly insecurity of the many stages of grief, peek through the narrow gaps between the bolsters to see a future where death is imminent, or lay down and embrace the stage where one lets go the tense emotion and is lulled by the waves. The smell of kapok, or cotton, fills the air. It is a scent that many would associate with comfort and sleep.

Curating this exhibition has been both a challenging journey and a therapeutic undertaking for me. As a new curator, I overcame some obstacles as I navigated the unfamiliar role. At the same time, it was therapeutic because I was in touch with my grief—which had become familiar after living with it for years.

Curating became a way through grief for me, or perhaps, another stage of reconciling with my mother's absence. With the company of the eight artists, each nursing their own grief, we completed this stage together. This exhibition is not the final stage, rather, an invitation, welcoming visitors to confront grief and begin their own journey.

About the writer

Stella Wenny is Gallery Manager and Indonesia Liaison at Art Agenda, JKT. She aims to bridge the gap between the art market that revolves around clients and the creative imagination of the artists. Her bachelor's degree in Visual Communication Design at Binus University helps her to capture meanings from art and convey them in words. She is also Founder of Stella Bookish Art, an online shop selling products inspired by literature.