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The Art of the Drag Race: Bagus Pandega's Speculative Motorbikes

In shows at Kunsthalle Basel and Swiss Institute, New York, the artist celebrates the material ingenuity of Indonesia's urban working class



There is a wonderful word in Hindi, *jugaad*: the everyday art of do-it-yourself problem-solving, often implying a frugal and imaginative retooling of consumer commodities and technologies to meet custom needs. The spontaneous engineering in, say, installing a four-seater sofa in the back of a rickshaw, or fashioning a multiplug outlet from of a discarded cooking oil bottle, results in delightful dialectical images that speak poetically to the irreverent and highly idiosyncratic ways that working-class consumers make local sense of global commodity streams, particularly by mechanically extending the lifespans of objects (or repurposing their function entirely). While the Indonesian language lacks a similar word, artist Bagus Pandega nods approvingly at the term over a Zoom call from Bandung, and offers *ngulik* – an intense and studious form of tinkering – as a linguistic ally. For Indonesia is no stranger to the art of *jugaad*, its streets characteristically filled with mom-and-pop repair shops and garages that offer all kinds of savvy, needs-based customization – of motorbikes in particular, Indonesians’ absolute vehicle of choice. The artist inaugurates me in the local *Jamet* subculture, a slang abbreviation of Jawa metal or ‘Javanese metalhead’. These grunge-looking, street-styled youths congregate around bike culture and even stage grandiose drag races where the most structurally modified zombie-bikes take the prize. ‘The bikes they make are highly speculative objects,’ Pandega comments. ‘Aesthetics are *really* important.’



Bagus Pandega, *Putar Petir Racing Team*, 2025. Courtesy: the artist

Pandega's engineered environments and modular installations – examples of which were included in the 2024 Bangkok Art Biennale and the 2022 edition of documenta – are homages to the material ingenuity of Indonesia's urban working class. Sometimes, these works even participate in it. His forthcoming two-part solo show, realized between Kunsthalle Basel ('Sumber Alam') and Swiss Institute ('Daya Benda') in New York, will open this autumn, marking his first institutional solo presentations outside of Asia. For the occasion, he devised a fully operational electric motorbike using spare Kawasaki and Suzuki parts, complete with custom airbrushed chrome in hues of purple, pink and gold. (The artist soft-launched the bike at a drag race he organized in Cimahi, West Java in June 2025.) *Putar Petir Racing Team* (2025), as the work is officially titled, complements *Hyperpnea Green* (2024), a large-scale installation housing a collection of houseplants (*Sansevieria*), lights (addressable LED pixels) and some of Indonesia's most exported commodities such as minerals (*Garnierite*). When on display, the latter artwork will react to audience's exhales by pumping oxygen into its surroundings, a self-devised kind of exhibitionary biofeedback.

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BAGUS PANDEGA

Pandega's work engages with quotidian cultural practices and art historical ones alike. Art history's back catalogue sports its own proud lineage of makeshift gadgetry (minus competitive motorbike drag shows, regrettably). Kinetic art, a fixture of the 20th-century canon, shares Pandega's laboratory-style approach to sculpture, where active mechanical processes are concocted in front of an audience and presented as a makeshift mess of hardware, screens and cables. The genre, which was popularized in the 1950s, spatialized an aesthetic vocabulary of mechanical engineering, so often entirely tucked away from the end user. The hope, for some artists, is that they might attune audiences to an increasingly spectacular cybernetic experience of the present – precisely by emphasizing its improvised, provisional nature. Kinetic art is also distinct for its global genealogy, advanced equally by Jean Tinguely's self-destructing automatons in France and New York as much as David Medalla's ephemeral foam machines in Manila. Pandega – who studied sculpture but is an autodidact in the field of mechanical engineering – shares these artists' amateur approach, rendering the process of prototyping a highly social one, and the kinetic engagement with the spectator essential. 'A lot of the work lies in making things work,' Pandega admits.



Bagus Pandega, *Putar Petir Racing Team*, 2025. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Luna Project

But if mid-century kinetic art reveled in the trashy (if poetic) spectacle of an increasingly cybernetic age, Pandega's contemporary take offers a distinctively materialist subset of concerns – namely, the global politics of resource extraction. Consider *Anim Wraksa* (2025), Old Javanese for 'the spirit of the tree', which realizes the continuous nickel plating of a clove tree branch by trapping it within an acrylic container filled with an electrolyte solution. Over the course of the Swiss Institute exhibition, a live feed will record and screen the gradual realization of the sculpture, calling attention to its literal source material. Indonesia currently sits on the biggest nickel reserve in the world, a mineral that has become increasingly sought after in the mass production of batteries for the world's 'low carbon' revolution. Consequently, the nation's government set the ambitious goal of ranking among the top three producers

of electric vehicle batteries worldwide by 2027 – a plan that involves the vast clearing of rainforest as well as the repurposing of land formerly devoted to the nation’s golden crop, palm oil. Pandega explored the latter his 2024 collaboration with artist Kei Imazu, *Artificial Green by Nature Green 4.0*. This continuously self-generating and self-erasing ink painting is made up of two machines: one that produces a painting based on a drawing, and another that erases the work in response to biofeedback from a living oil palm tree.



Work in progress for 'Sumber Alam' at Kunsthalle Basel, 2025. Courtesy: the artist and ROH, Jakarta; photograph: Maruto Ardi

In the last two decades, global contemporary art has seen its share of works about resource extraction, but such work tends to focus on the politics of its production, not its miscellaneous consumerist endpoints – the 'social life' of things, as postcolonial scholar Arjun Appadurai would call it. For nickel is not just a global commodity but a resource with countless local use values and, by extension, cultural, social and aesthetic implications. In Indonesia's repair shops, nature, technology, art and capital are always already entangled, which may explain the local enthusiasm for Pandega's makeshift installations: like jugaad, they monumentalize systemic conundrums that are lived and deeply known. As we discuss his foray into Indonesia's Jamet culture, the artist predicts that it will eventually go electric, a symptom of yet another revolution in the country's small urban-industrial and natural landscape. However, when Pandega submitted his custom electric bike to race, it lost out to a gasoline counterpart – upon completion of the match, he was kindly advised to source a Chinese battery instead.

Bagus Pandega's 'Sumber Alam' is on view at Kunsthalle Basel from 28 August to 15 November 2025; 'Daya Benda' is on view at Swiss Institute, New York from 30 September 2025 to 4 January 2026

Main image: Bagus Pandega in his studio in 2025. Courtesy: the artist and ROH, Jakarta; photograph: Maruto Ardi