Ben Hagari

Hide and Shade

Gutman Museum, Tel Aviv

March – July 2025

Ben Hagari's solo exhibition *Hide and Shade* is a fascinating journey into the world of shadows and their origins. A two-channel video installation, it centers on two ancient Indonesian traditions, deeply intertwined with the lives of the local population: shadow theater (*Wayang Kulit*) and the pre-Islamic sacrificial ritual (*Nadran*). This unique theater, blending religious ritual, educational values, and popular entertainment, is often performed to honor festive occasions and spiritual ceremonies, much like the Nadran ritual practiced in fishing communities. The ceremony spans three days and features, among other elements, the sacrifice of a male buffalo, whose head is severed, made up, and sent on a small boat with offerings to the sea as a tribute to the gods.

In this new work, Hagari creates a contemporary shadow theater adapted to the cinematic medium, integrating ancient and contemporary customs and fusing ideas from classical epics with documentary video clips he shot during a research trip to Indonesia. As in many of his previous pieces, *Hide and Shade* delves into myths of creation and the cyclical nature of human existence: birth, transformation, and death. The research and videos were made in close collaboration with puppeteer and scholar Matthew Cohen, who also performs in the piece. At the same time, the work also highlights the aesthetic and poetic qualities of the buffalo-hide puppets. Through basic mechanical acts, Hagari explores the potential for movement and expression in these puppets, revealing their intrinsic beauty and the meticulous, delicate craftsmanship involved in their creation.

The video installation follows the formal structure of shadow theater, borrowing dramatic elements, iconography, and characters from its repertoire. Hagari incorporates puppets from early 20th-century royal collections alongside new puppets, combining traditional techniques with elements of contemporary popular culture.

Reality and fantasy, ancient myths and archetypes, merge into a performance seemingly conjured from the realms of the unconscious. The real appears animated, and the shadows take on human form. The film follows the perspective of a child who strokes the buffalo's head and observes the puppets closely, gaining insight into the intricate reality concealed in their details. Unlike Indonesian theater, which is text-driven, Hagari's video features silent episodes, with the clown-servant Petruk puppet reappearing throughout the work as a curious observer of the world, the show, and the relationships between different characters.

Hide and Shade reveals the intimate, interdependent relationship between the puppeteer and the shadow-puppets. The former has the power to perform the magic and breathe life into the latter. Their relationship echoes the Jungian archetype of the "shadow," which pertains to repression of the darker aspects of the human psyche. The complementary connection formed between the puppeteer and the shadow-puppets offers a reconciliation between areas of darkness (shadow) and light—both on the theater screen and in the human soul.

Sally Haftel Naveh, curator of the exhibition

Indonesian Shadow Theater

The Indonesian shadow theater, *Wayang Kulit* (*wayang* = shadow; *kulit* = skin, hide), begins after sunset and often continues into the early hours of the morning. Through a stretched cotton screen, illuminated by a coconut oil lamp, scores of shadow puppets come to life, manipulated by the *dalang*—a single puppeteer who also acts as the narrator. The *dalang* gives the puppets voice and movement, while concurrently playing a percussion instrument with his foot to set the rhythm and conducting the *gamelan* orchestra. On account of his high spiritual status, the community believes his performance has the power to mediate a transcendental reality to the audience. The nocturnal show is complemented by a daytime event of a more spiritual nature, where the puppet show is paired with the reading and recitation of sacred texts.

The puppets mostly embody mythical figures, dramatizing classical tales and legends from the Hindu epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. While the sacred

nature of these stories is respected, the *dalang* has the artistic freedom to improvise, adding unique encounters between characters. Human society is depicted as part of the larger cosmos, with great emphasis on the social order. The narratives explore profound themes such as ethical dilemmas, moral and spiritual struggles, love affairs, and political intrigues, interspersed with comic interludes from local folklore, delivered by clowns.

The art of shadow puppetry follows ancient tradition and strict rules, with origins dating back to as early as the 10th century. The range of puppets introduces an iconography widely understood within the community. One key character is the *Kayon*, a leaf-shaped puppet, embodying various phenomena, objects, and places such as the tree of life, sea, forest, mountain, and palace. It can also represent the five elements: air, wind, fire, water, and earth. Due to its elevated symbolic status, the *Kayon* opens and concludes the performance, and marks transitions between scenes. It is accompanied by a cast of supporting characters—nobles, human and monstrous creatures, devils, gods, etc.—serving a dual role as both silhouettes and puppets, visible from either side of the cotton screen.

Credits:

Directed and edited by Ben Hagari

Puppeteer: Matthew Isaac Cohen

Cinematographer: Boaz Freund

Videography (Indonesia): Ben Hagari

Original music: Matt Bauder

Gamelan music: Embie C. Noer and the Gamelan Sinar Surya Orchestra, Cirebon, Java

Color correction: Benjamin Murray

Installation construction: Naaran Barzilay, Arts Terminal

Programming and projection equipment: Doron Computer & Video Projections

Video production assistant: Aram Pundak

The work was filmed at the Yale University Art Gallery Collection Studies Center, 2025, and features Indonesian shadow puppets from the Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angest Collection, Yale University Art Gallery: shadow puppets from the royal set Kyai Drajat (yasan PB X), Surakarta, Java, 1910; a shadow puppet set from Cirebon, Java, 1950; shadow puppets from the Wayang Planet set designed by Ki Enthus Susmono (1966–2018)

The installation features the Kayon Cosmology shadow puppet – design: Dalang Ki Enthus Susmono, maker: Rommy Hendrawan, Yogyakarta, Java, 2018/2024; Kayon Flame shadow puppet – maker: I Ketut Sudiana, Bali; Rama shadow puppet – maker: Sagio dan Ir. Samsugi, Yogyakarta, Java; Ben Hagari shadow puppet – maker: Toroo Widayanto, Yogyakarta, Java, 2024

The Nadran ritual was filmed in Cirebon, Java in 2024 and was first shown as part of Matthew Isaac Cohen's *Sea Offerings* puppet lecture performance, with video by Ben Hagari

Supported by:

The Foundation for Independent Artists, Israel Ministry of Culture and Sports, Artport residency program