

Heading: ‘Mulyana: Modular Utopia’ explores the intricacies of man in nature.

Dek: Through knit underwater scenes, artist Mulyana comments on the relationship between people and nature.

Social cap: The new exhibition at Fisher Museum is “Mulyana: Modular Utopia,” a unique and beautiful commentary on pollution and underwater habitats.

By Tingyo Chang

Marking Indonesian artist Mulyana’s first solo show in Los Angeles is the newest exhibition at the USC Fisher Museum of Art. “Mulyana: Modular Utopia” centers around climate change and the relationship between human beings and nature. Mulyana uniquely conveys his take on how human beings have affected the natural world around them through the contrasting galleries included in his exhibition.

Through his mode of art, knitting, Mulyana creates knit modules of underwater scenes that both bring to life the beauty he sees in nature and the harm he has witnessed human pollution do to these underwater habits. His work attempts to reconcile how human beings can peacefully coexist with the beauty the natural world provides without damaging it.

When viewers first walk into the exhibition, two massive installations of gray crocheted coral reefs directly face the entrance, forcing viewers to immediately grapple with the detrimental effects human pollution has already had on nature, such as turning vibrant coral reefs into graying habitats. Flanking either side of the gray coral reefs are some of Mulyana’s much more colorful and vibrant costume artworks. On one side sits “Si Koneng” (2022), a bright yellow knitted costume that represents Mulyana’s belief that life is “articulated through movement.” On the other side, is another costume artwork, “Adikara” (2020). Composed of vibrant greens, yellows, blues and pinks, the costume takes inspiration from coral reefs and is meant to signify “the singular human ability to choose between good and evil.”

While these costumes are intricate and impressive, the true crux of Mulyana’s message on balancing environmentalism and humanitarianism is best presented by the two opposing galleries that are hidden deeper within the exhibition: “Satu” and “Ocean Wonderland.” These two galleries are meant to be immersive art installations, allowing viewers to engage in two contrasting experiences.

As viewers wander deeper into the left side of the exhibition, they enter the world of “Satu,” a title meaning “one” or “fullness” in Mulyana’s native language, Indonesian. The installation consists of a sea of white knitted jellyfish suspended from the ceiling, which drift overhead a white 30-foot-long 3D-printed whale skeleton. Inspired by the way coral reefs turn white under stress, Mulyana uses the all-white landscape and skeleton to call attention to the threat human carelessness poses to nature’s vibrancy and life. Standing underneath the fall of white jellyfish

and faced with the imposing skeleton, viewers are asked to make peace with the damage that has already been done to underwater habitats and asked to do better.

As is written in the opening statement for the “Satu” gallery, “Mulyana desires the viewer to experience a sense of calm while surrounded by white moguses, jellyfish and coral islands.”

On the other side of the exhibition is Mulyana’s second gallery: “Ocean Wonderland.” In stark contrast from “Satu,” “Ocean Wonderland” is overwhelming in its vibrancy, its energy, and the life it showcases. “Ocean Wonderland” features a school of bright yellow fish suspended from the ceiling, as if serving as a foil to Satu’s sea of colorless jellyfish. Arranged underneath the yellow fish are various colorful knitted corals and reefs. A life-sized stuffed black whale sculpture that viewers can sit on overlooks the scene, posing another sharp contrast to the whale skeleton presented in Satu.

Included in “Ocean Wonderland” is the work “Modular Monster,” which allows audiences to interact with a mirror with various stuffed and knitted segments to create their own sea creatures in the reflection. In “Ocean Wonderland,” an immersive experience of vibrant colors and scenes and where viewers are asked to interact with the artwork, viewers are transitioned away from the colorless scene of “Satu.” They are presented with a brighter and more colorful scene that implores viewers to consider a better future for both themselves and their surroundings.

Climate change can be hard to grapple with — news headlines about the changing weather patterns and new natural disasters are frightening — and when so much damage has already been done to natural habitats, changing our lifestyles seems almost unnecessary. However, Mulyana takes it upon himself in “Modular Utopia” to implore viewers to seek better solutions in a much more optimistic and welcoming way. By placing the “Satu” and “Ocean Wonderland” galleries side by side, viewers are guided to simultaneously acknowledge the damage that has already been done and look onward toward a more hopeful future of cherishing and fostering the vibrancy and life that underwater habitats can provide.

As Mulyana writes, “rather than appeal to our fear of impending doom ... he desires to incite a proactive response to the realities of our contemporary world.”

*Mulyana: Modular Utopia is on display at Fisher Museum until April 13.*