



UNIVERSITY  
OF TASMANIA

# **Defining Experiences: Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia**

by

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Sections of this thesis have been presented at the 2008 Asian Studies Association of Australia Conference in Melbourne, the 2008 Women in Asia Conference in Queensland, and the 2010 European Southeast Asian Studies Conference in Gothenburg, Sweden.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the relationship between feminisms and visual arts in Indonesia. Focusing on works by Indonesian women artists produced from the 1940s until the present day, it provides a new understanding of the history of Indonesian modern and contemporary art from a feminist perspective. Its main aim is not only to analyze the actual works of Indonesian women artists historically and today, but also to illuminate the socio-cultural and political contexts in which the artists worked through feminist reading.

Feminisms are often regarded as a purely Western concept that is irrelevant to the Indonesian context, but during a brief period of time after 1998, there was a surge in the Indonesian mainstream consciousness about gender issues. Feminist scholars, activists and cultural workers successfully created a discursive space in the mainstream media to discuss issues which were previously taboo, such as the politics of the female body, domestic violence, sexual abuse and more. Women artists such as Arahmaiani and Titarubi made significant contributions to this discourse, for example through their critical installation and performance art pieces.

The thesis sets out to explore the works of these and other women artists, employing multiple methodological approaches from psychoanalysis to semiotics in order to construct a framework for an active re-reading and re-visioning of Indonesian art discourses. Strategies of correction and interrogation are applied to both critically assess the patriarchal structure of the Indonesian art world and revise the existing readings of works by women artists.

By looking beyond the labeling but not rejecting the term itself, the thesis highlights a trajectory of change in the way feminisms operates in Indonesian visual arts. As important drivers of this process of change, Indonesian women artists neither resist patriarchy in a 'politically correct' way nor revel in eroticism, but steer a course between these two positions. Furthermore, the thesis demonstrates how works by Indonesian women artists can include difference and absorb ambiguity within their frame of reference, thus avoiding the totalising and exclusionary practices sometimes associated with feminisms.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>List of figures</b>	<b>xii</b>
<b>Glossary and abbreviations</b>	<b>xvi</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction: Defining Experiences</b>	<b>1</b>
“Intimate Distance” as background	3
Unnatural partnership: Women, political activism and feminism/s in Indonesia	6
The female body, art and censorship in Indonesia	7
Definitions and distinctions: Feminisms or Gender?	12
Methodology	17
Selection of artists	21
Thesis structure	23
<b>Chapter 2 Exploring Theories: Search for analytical framework/s</b>	<b>30</b>
Art history and feminisms	32
Your Body is a Battleground: the female body in art	35
<i>Écriture Féminine</i> and its use in the Indonesian context	37
Gender critique in Indonesian visual arts discourses	41
Reading personal history from the canvas	45
Searching for the feminine in Indonesian visual arts	49
Interventions in art history	51

Body Politics/Politics of the Body	54
Abjection and the monstrous feminine	58
Concluding remarks	61
<b>Chapter 3 Firing the Cannon: Indonesian Art Canons as myth and masculine ideal</b>	<b>62</b>
Postcolonial masculinity, canon-making and Indonesian modern art	64
Truth and Beauty: the early years of modern art in Indonesia	67
“Representing Indonesian Modernity” as canon-making	81
<i>Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru</i>	88
The Legacies of GSRB	94
Gender and avant-gardism in GSRB	96
Differencing the Canons: Concluding remarks	101
<b>Chapter 4 Haunting in the Archipelago: Emiria Sunassa and Mia Bustam</b>	<b>104</b>
The dark archipelago: the narratives of Emiria Sunassa	106
Reading the primitive	110
Tracing the feminine: Emiria’s nudes and native landscape	121
The Primitive and the Feminine: Nationalism’s internal Others	127
Painting Ghosts: the narratives of Mia Bustam	130
Mia Bustam’s timeline	133
<i>Sudjojono dan Aku: Becoming an artist</i>	135
<i>Dari Kamp ke Kamp: Arts and politics</i>	147
Imprisonment years	149

Emiria and Mia: Exceptional women	153
<b>Chapter 5 Female Desire and the Monstrous-Feminine in the Works of IGAK Murniasih</b>	<b>159</b>
Murniasih's timeline	162
The monstrous-feminine in Murniasih's works	165
Displacing desire: Sex and humor in Murniasih's works	175
Women and desire in Bali	176
Reading Murniasih: Framing desire	183
Murniasih as an outsider artist?	185
<b>Chapter 6 Searching for the Feminine: Motherhood and Maternal Subjectivity</b>	<b>192</b>
The changing representation of motherhood in Indonesian visual arts	194
The Maternal Nude: Laksmi Shitaesmi	198
Titarubi: Herstory in art	208
Women, motherhood and political participation: Voice of the Concerned Mothers	209
Political motherhood in the works of Titarubi	212
Maternal Subjectivity: Women reading women	227
Conclusion	231
<b>Chapter 7 Performing Feminism/s: Performance Art and Politics in the Works of Kelompok PEREK and Arahmaiani</b>	<b>234</b>
Feminist art and performance art in the West	235
The role of documentation in performance art	237
Performance art in Indonesia	239

<i>Kelompok PEREK: Kelompok Perempuan Eksperimental (1998 - )</i>	240
Challenging the Status Quo: the performances of Arahmaiani	246
Global feminisms and Arahmaiani's politics of the body	260
Religion and Spirituality	266
Performing feminism/s in Indonesian visual arts	273
Concluding remarks	276
<b>Chapter 8 Conclusion</b>	<b>279</b>
Strategies of correction: Interventions in art history	281
Strategies of interrogation: Searching for the feminine	284
Reading feminism/s in post-New Order Indonesia	287
Rearticulating feminine spaces in Indonesian art world	289
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>292</b>
<b>List of interviews</b>	<b>310</b>

## List of Figures

Fig. 1 Lelyana Kurniawati “A..but..her..fly” (2009, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 120 cm (tryptich), collection of the artist).	<b>56</b>
Fig.2 Abdullah Suriosubroto “Pemandangan di Sekitar Gunung Merapi” (Scenery around Mount Merapi, ca. 1900-1930, oil on canvas, 59 x 95 cm, collection of Ir Sukarno family).	<b>69</b>
Fig.3 S. Sudjojono “Di Depan Kelambu Terbuka” (In front of the open mosquito net, 1939, oil on canvas, 66 x 86 cm, collection of Ir Sukarno family).	<b>78</b>
Fig. 4 FX Harsono “Paling Top” (Most Top, 1975, mixed media, 196.5 x 99.5 x 50 cm, collection of the National Art Gallery Singapore) –part of GSRB exhibition.	<b>89</b>
Fig.5 Pasaraya Dunia Fantasi: 1 (Exhibition view, 1987).	<b>93</b>
Fig. 6 Jim Supangkat “Ken Dedes” (1975, mixed media, 61 x 44 x 27 cm, collection of Singapore Art Museum).	<b>101</b>
Fig. 7 Emiria Sunassa in 1942 (photographed in her home/studio).	<b>107</b>
Fig. 8 Emiria Sunassa “Penganten Dayak” (Dayak Wedding (reproduction), date unknown, oil on canvas, 68 x 54 cm, collection of the Museum of Fine Art and Ceramics).	<b>113</b>
Fig. 9 Nasyah Jamin “Gadis Makasar” (Makassar Girl, 1965, oil on canvas, 82 x 57.5 cm, Collection of the National Gallery of Indonesia).	<b>114</b>
Fig. 10 Emiria Sunassa “Wanita Sulawesi” (Woman of Sulawesi, 1968, oil on canvas, 66 x 47 cm, collection of Oei Hong Djien Museum).	<b>115</b>
Fig. 11 Emiria Sunassa “Kembang Kemboja di Bali” (Frangipani of Bali, 1958, oil on canvas, 47 x 67 cm, collection of Oei Hong Djien Museum).	<b>116</b>
Fig. 12 Sapto Hudoyo “Gadis Bali” (Balinese Girl, 1954, oil on canvas, 90 x 75cm, collection of the National Gallery of Indonesia).	<b>117</b>
Fig. 13 Emiria Sunassa “Orang Irian dengan Burung Tjendrawasih” (Irian man with bird of paradise, 1948, oil on canvas, 55 x 65cm, when photographed, collection of Iskandar Waworuntu).	<b>118</b>
Fig. 14 Emiria Sunassa “Mutiara Bermain” (Pearl at play, date unknown, oil on hardboard, 79 x 91 cm, when photographed, collection of Ade Waworuntu).	<b>121</b>
Fig. 15 Sandro Botticelli “La nascita di Venere” (Birth of Venus, c.1486, tempera on canvas, 172.5 x 278.9 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy).	<b>122</b>
Fig. 16 Emiria Sunassa “Nude/Moonlight Bathing” (date unknown, oil on board, 100 x 50cm, when photographed, collection of Iskandar Waworuntu).	<b>124</b>

Fig. 17 Emiria Sunassa “Bronwaterbad” (Spring water bath, 1957, oil on canvas, 68 x 51 cm, when photographed, collection of Teguh Edhiyanto).	<b>125</b>
Fig. 18 Emiria Sunassa “Peniup Seruling dan Purnama” (Flute player and full moon, 1958, oil on canvas, 60 x 80 cm, present whereabouts unknown).	<b>126</b>
Fig. 19 Mia Bustam during Sukarno’s visit to SIM studio, 1957. Mia is standing second on right, Sudjojono is standing second on left.	<b>134</b>
Fig. 20 Mia Bustam “Portrait Diri” (Self-portrait, 1959, oil on canvas, dimension unknown, destroyed in 1965).	<b>137</b>
Fig. 21 Chairil Anwar (1922-1949).	<b>139</b>
Fig. 22 Cover of “Sudjojono dan Aku”(Pustaka Utan Kayu, Jakarta, 2006).	<b>140</b>
Fig. 23 S. Sudjojono “Istriku menjahit” (Sewing wife, 1944, oil on canvas, 55.5 x 71 cm, collection of the National Gallery of Indonesia).	<b>142</b>
Fig. 24 IGAK Murniasih “Rasanya kok enak ya” (Feels good doesn’t it?, 1997, 100 x 150 cm, when photographed, estate of the artist).	<b>168</b>
Fig. 25 IGAK Murniasih “Terimakasihku” (My gratitude, 2003, 60 x 100 cm, when photographed, estate of the artist).	<b>169</b>
Fig. 26 IGAK Murniasih “Sembahyang” (Prayer, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 170 x 100 cm, when photographed, estate of the artist).	<b>170</b>
Fig. 27 IGAK Murniasih “Satu Keranjang Nyonyo” (A basket of tits, 1991, 45 x 60 cm, acrylic and china on canvas, when photographed, estate of the artist).	<b>172</b>
Fig. 28 IGAK Murniasih “Pohon Kesukaanku” (My Favorite Tree, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 100 cm, present whereabouts unknown).	<b>177</b>
Fig. 29 IGAK Murniasih “Happy Bersamanya” (Happy to be with Him, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 100 cm, present whereabouts unknown).	<b>178</b>
Fig. 30 IGAK Murniasih “Relax” (2004, acrylic on canvas, 195 x 140 cm, present whereabouts unknown).	<b>179</b>
Fig. 31 IGAK Murniasih “Dancing with Garlic” (1997, acrylic and china ink on canvas, 300 x 100 cm, when photographed, estate of the artist).	<b>182</b>
Fig. 32 Affandi “Ibuku” (My Mother, 1941, 42 x 32 cm, oil on canvas, Collection of the National Gallery of Indonesia).	<b>194</b>
Fig. 33 Laksmi Shitaesmi “Kasmaran I-III” (Enamoured I-III, 2002, oil on canvas, 50 x 135 cm each).	<b>200</b>

- Fig. 34 Laksmi Shitaesmi “Indahnya Kehamilan” (The beauty of pregnancy, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 150 cm, private collection). **202**
- Fig. 35 Laksmi Shitaesmi “Menjelang Detik-detik Menegangkan” (Toward the tense seconds, 2004, acrylic on canvas, private collection). **202**
- Fig. 36 Caroline Rika Winata “Never Indonesian Enough” (2009, mixed media installation, dimension variable, collection of the artist). **204**
- Fig. 37 Laksmi Shitaesmi “Kutunggu Hadirmu” (Waiting for your arrival, 2010, acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 190 x 190 cm, private collection). **205**
- Fig. 38 Laksmi Shitaesmi “Aku, Aku, Aku, ... Beginilah Aku” (Me, me, me, ...this is me, 2010, fibreglass, mixed media, 156 x 168 x 20 cm, private collection). **206**
- Fig. 39 Louise Bourgeois “Femmes-Maisons” (1947, oil and ink on canvas/linen, 23.24 x 18.28 cm, collection of Solomon R. Guggenheim museum). **207**
- Fig. 40 Titarubi “Missing and Silent” (1998-2010, mixed media installation, dimension variable, collection of the artist). **213**
- Fig. 41 Titarubi “Bayang-bayang Maha Kecil” (Shadows of the Tiniest Kind, 2003-2009, ceramics and mixed media installation, in various private and public collections amongst others Oei Hong Djien Museum and Singapore Art Museum). **215**
- Fig. 42 Titarubi “Bayang-bayang Maha Kecil” (Shadows of the Tiniest Kind, 2002-2004, version (detail), ceramics and mixed media installation, in various private and public collections amongst others Oei Hong Djien Museum and Singapore Art Museum). **217**
- Fig. 43 Titarubi “Bral geura miang” (Now is the time to depart, 2004, digital print on vinyl, 200 x 150 cm, collection of the artist). **218**
- Fig. 44 Titarubi “Lindungi Aku dari Keinginanmu” (Protect me from what you want, 2002, mixed media installation, 200 x 90 x 100 cm approx., collection of the artist). **219**
- Fig. 45 Titarubi “Sesaji” (The offering, 2004, performance, performed in Kedai Kebun Forum, Yogyakarta). **220**
- Fig. 46 Titarubi “Guratan I” (Lines I, 2003, etching and dry point on paper, 10 x 10 cm approx., collection of the artist). **223**
- Fig. 47 Titarubi “Guratan III” (Lines III (detail), 2003, etching and dry point on paper, 10 x 10 cm approx., collection of the artist). **224**
- Fig. 48 Titarubi “Sesaji” (The offering, 2004, mixed media installation, dimensions variable, collection of the artist). **226**
- Fig. 49 Theresia Agustina Sitompul “Babyboom” (2009, mixed media installation, 180 x 300 cm approx., private collection). **228**

- Fig. 50 Kelompok PEREK "Kunduran Truk" (Unforeseen Circumstances, 23 May – 7 June 2009, Kersan Art Studio, Yogyakarta). **244**
- Fig. 51 Kelompok PEREK "Mabuk Sampah" (High on Waste, 2009, performance, 40', performed at the Yogya Biennial). **245**
- Fig. 52 Arahmaiani "Dayang Sumbi Menolak Status Quo" (Dayang Sumbi rejects the status quo, 1999, performance, performed at the French Cultural Centre (CCF) Bandung). **251**
- Fig. 53 Arahmaiani "His-Story" (2000-2001, performance, performed at the Jakarta International Performance Art Festival (JIPAF), Nippon International Performance Art Festival (NIPAF), Japan, and in Dresden, Germany). **255**
- Fig. 54 Arahmaiani "Soho Baby" (2004, performance, performed at the Second DaDao Live Art Festival, Beijing, China). **257**
- Fig. 55 Arahmaiani "Offerings from A to Z" (1996, performance installation, Chiang Mai, Thailand). **261**
- Fig. 56 Arahmaiani "Do not prevent the fertility of the mind" (1997, installation, part of Womanifesto festival, Bangkok, Thailand). **262**
- Fig. 57 Arahmaiani "Lingga – Yoni" (1994, acrylic on canvas, 182 x 140 cm, collection of Manit Sriwanichpoom). **267**
- Fig. 58 Arahmaiani "Etalase" (Display Case, 1994, mixed media installation, collection of the artist). **268**
- Fig. 59 Arahmaiani "11 June 2002" (2003, mixed media installation and performance, exhibited at the 50<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale). **269**
- Fig. 60 Arahmaiani "Thread" (2006, mixed media installation and performance, collection of the artist). **270**
- Fig. 61 Arahmaiani "Flag Project" (2004-ongoing, mixed media installation and performance, collection of Singapore Art Museum). **272**



## Glossary and Abbreviations

ASRI (Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia)	Indonesian Fine Arts Academy
Candi	Hindu/Buddhist temple
Carnavalesque	Literary mode that subverts official atmosphere through humor and chaos
CGMI (Consentrasi Gerakan Mahasiswa Indonesia)	Association of Indonesian Student Movement
Écriture féminine	Feminine writing or - a set of strategies to recapture feminine subjectivity through the act of writing
FBR (Forum Betawi Rembug)	Native Jakarta Brotherhood Forum
FPI (Front Pembela Islam)	Islamic Defenders Front
GSRB (also GSRBI, Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru)	Indonesian New Art Movement
Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia)	Indonesian Women's Movement
GNI (Galeri Nasional Indonesia)	National Gallery of Indonesia
HIS (Hollandsch-Inlandsche School)	Primary school in the Dutch East Indies
iCAN	Indonesian Contemporary Art Network
IKBTA (Ikatan Keluarga Betawi Tanah Abang)	Tanah Abang Betawi Community Association
ITB (Institut Teknologi Bandung)	Bandung Institute of Technology
ISI (Institut Seni Indonesia)	Indonesian Fine Arts Institute
Jawi	Arabic script used for writing in Malay language.
Jouissance	Enjoyment, sexual pleasure
Kodrat (also kodrat wanita)	Women's predestined fate – usually in religious sense

Kebaya	Javanese/Sundanese women's traditional blouse
Kelompok PEREK (Perempuan Eksperimental)	All female art collective
Keimin Bunka Shidoso	Cultural centre during Japanese occupation (1942-1945)
Kemben	Traditional body covering made by wrapping yards of fabric bandage-style on the upper part of the wearer's body
LEKRA (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat)	Institute of People's Culture
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans/transgender, and Intersex
Mooi Indie (Beautiful Indies)	Painting genre typified by lush landscape and idealised scenery in the Dutch East Indies
PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia)	Indonesian Communist Party
Persagi (Persatuan Ahli-ahli Gambar Indonesia)	Indonesian Painter's Association
Reformasi	Reform era, 1998-
RUU APP (Rancangan Undang-undang Anti Pornography)	Draft of Antipornography and
Pornoaksi dan Pornografi)	Bill
Sekolah Seni Rupa Indonesia	Indonesian School of Fine Art
Selendang	Scarf
SMKN (Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan Negeri)	Vocational senior secondary school
SIP (Suara Ibu Peduli)	Voice of Concerned Mothers
STSRI (Sekolah Tinggi Seni Rupa Indonesia)	Senior secondary school for performing and fine arts
SIM (Seniman Indonesia Muda)	Artists of Young Indonesia
Sanggar	Studio system

PEREK (Perempuan Eksperimen)

Experimental women [women who are open to sexual experimentation, sex worker]

Sumber Waras

Experimental body art group based in Faculty of Fine Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology

WIL (Wanita Idaman Lain)

The other women

WK (Wanita Karier)

Career women

WTS (Wanita Tuna Susila)

Women of no morals (sex worker)

TKW (Tenaga Kerja Wanita)

Women migrant worker



## Chapter One

### Introduction: Defining Experiences

In March 2007, a new contemporary art centre, the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, was opened in Brooklyn, New York, USA. From March 23- July 1, the Center staged an inaugural major exhibition titled “Global Feminisms: New Directions for Contemporary Art”. Curated by two renowned feminist art historians, Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin, the event was the first international exhibition dedicated to global feminist art from the 1990 to the present. The curators stated that the main aim of the exhibition was to present a showcase of international works by women artists from a feminist perspective. Moreover, the exhibition was noteworthy for looking beyond the Western brand of feminism, which had been perceived as the dominant voice in artistic expression since the 1970s.

In the same year, from August 1-10, another exhibition titled “Intimate Distance: Exploring Traces of Feminism in Indonesian Contemporary Art” was held at the National Gallery in Jakarta, Indonesia. This more modest exhibition presented a wide range of works by thirty-five Indonesian women artists from the 1940s until 2007. The aim of this exhibition was to look at traces of feminism in the works of Indonesian women artists and in the strategies used by these artists. It showcased works by mid-career and emerging artists as well as established artists and even some deceased artists. An important part of the exhibition was the launch of a book called *Indonesian Women Artists: The Curtain Opens*, written by three Indonesian women writers and scholars, namely Carla Bianpoen, Farah Wardani and myself.

There was no link between the organizers of the New York exhibition and the event in Jakarta. That they occurred within a relatively short period of time was a pure coincidence.<sup>1</sup> And yet, these two exhibitions perhaps can be seen to reflect on one another, as “Global Feminisms” undertook a search for non-Western perspectives on art and feminisms while the Indonesian exhibition attempted to open up the Indonesian context to the international discourse of feminism. Furthermore, the two events shared a common goal and theme as they both sought to look beyond the perceived dominance of Western feminisms and to search for a new approach in contemporary art using feminist perspectives.

Most importantly in the context of this thesis, the Indonesian exhibition was an attempt by Indonesian scholars and women artists to map out issues that are related to creativities and femininities in Indonesia’s patriarchal art world. Although other women-only exhibitions had been held in various Indonesian art institutions since the 1970s, “Intimate Distance” was the first of its kind that specifically attempted to highlight the influence of feminism in Indonesian contemporary art.

The use of the term ‘feminism’ for the exhibition was decidedly ambitious in the Indonesian context due to its negative associations and ambiguous definition, issues that will be elaborated below. During the artist talk session that followed the opening, some artists whose work appeared in the show questioned the use of the term and some even rejected it altogether (even though they did not object to being included in the show). Nonetheless, amidst the skepticism, most artists actually showed their support for the theme, arguing that it is important to acknowledge the wealth of female-centered experiences in their own

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<sup>1</sup> Another similarly-themed exhibition was also held at around the same time. “WACK! Art and Feminist Revolution” at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (March 4-July 16, 2007) was curated by Cornelia Butler and focused on the period 1965-1980 during which the majority of feminist activism and art-making occurred internationally. This exhibition showcased one hundred and twenty works by artists that spanned across different media. For more information about the exhibition see Butler and Mark (2007).

works. This mixture of skepticism and support highlighted the challenges faced by Indonesian women artists in defining their own experiences as artists, mothers, wives, daughters and sisters, all of which are context-dependent, fluid and complex, especially in Indonesia's patriarchal art world.

### ***"Intimate Distance" as background***

As the curator of "Intimate Distance", I argued that feminism was already a distinct discourse in Indonesian visual arts. Its effects and traces have been visible in many works over the past fifty years, shaping the artists' views on issues such as their body, private/domestic space, art-making and medium, and landscape/memory. However, in post-exhibition reflections, I became aware that the exhibition and the artists' talk session had revealed some complexities that were not fully captured in the exhibition or the book.

Issues such as the complexities of the term feminism/s, the stigma of being a feminist artist, the lack of understanding of the art medium as a political/feminist tool, and generally the strong gender bias within the mainstream art community were some of the topics that came to the surface. However, what was clear during the preparation of the book as well as during the curatorial research was that the term 'feminist artist' is still problematic in the Indonesian context. A feminist, including a feminist artist, is often painted almost comically as a militant, angry woman who rejects family values, hates men and/or is a lesbian

(Qibtiyah 2010).<sup>2</sup> For example in an article titled "*Feminisme Tak Menjadikan Perempuan Bahagia*" (Feminism does not Bring Happiness to Women) in a popular Islamic website Era

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<sup>2</sup> Qibtiyah discusses different perceptions of feminism/s from six different Islamic universities in Yogyakarta. It is interesting to note that most self-identified feminists are generally from the younger generation and also identifies themselves as Muslims. Even though their numbers are still small, this fact to some extent questioned some of the popular perceptions that Islam and feminism/s are not compatible.

Muslim (2013) states that feminism only brings trouble for women and many were plunged into (*terjerumus*) criminal activity (because of feminism).

For most Indonesian women artists, this labeling is highly problematic as it can create impediments to their career development; for example they can be pigeonholed as 'difficult' or 'too angry', thus limiting their exhibition opportunities. The fact that most key professions in the Indonesian art world such as curators, critics, lecturers, journalists, gallery owners and collectors are dominated by men further exacerbates this problem.

While the current market interest in Indonesian contemporary art has brought to the fore a growing number of female collectors, gallery owners and managers, this trend does not necessarily close the gender imbalance. On the contrary, many women artists continue to experience a strong gender bias against them in their career. Moreover, most Indonesian women artists still have to rely on male-dominated patronage networks in order to gain some advancement in their careers.<sup>3</sup> Being perceived as critical can create difficulties, especially when they are just starting to make a name for themselves.

On the other hand, some of the more established women artists such as Arahmaiani and Titarubi did in fact gain recognition precisely because they were perceived as critical. Arahmaiani, for example, established her reputation as one of Indonesia's leading feminist artist during the internationalization of Indonesian art in the 1990s. However, her reputation is a complex one and much of her fame can be attributed to external factors, especially the work of foreign scholars and curators. Titarubi states that her outspokenness

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<sup>3</sup> Patronage has often been perceived as one of the quickest ways for young artists to advance their careers. For example, the Indonesian feminist and scholar Toety Heraty, who established Cemara 6 Gallery and Café in 1993, has long been known for her support for Indonesian women artists. For many years, the gallery had a strong focus on women artists, but since 2003 the gallery – under a new male curator – has broadened its exhibition program, no longer focusing only on women artists.



and critical attitude are often perceived as being difficult and the attributes of an angry woman, yet her career was solidly found on her outspoken criticism of social injustice and gender issues. Nonetheless, a female artist from Bandung, Mimi Fadmi, argues that the labeling does not bother her at all. She even identifies herself as a post-feminist artist and states that her works speaks not only for women but also for LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans/transgender, and intersex) communities in Bandung (M Fadmi 2013, pers. comm., 07 February).

The label 'angry feminist artist' is not uncommon throughout the global art world. To counter this image, some artists deliberately utilize humor as an artistic tool, as exemplified by the actions of the artist/activist collective who are based in New York, Guerilla Girls, who launched a series of lectures, posters and publications to protest against what they perceived to be the inherent sexism and racism of the Western art world towards women artists and artists of color. During their actions and performances, they always wore gorilla masks to hide their identities.

The use of laughter and the *carnavalesque* in Western feminist art has been described as a revolutionary strategy to challenge patriarchy in art (Isaak 1996). In Indonesia, however, feminism is rarely associated with humor. Rather, its main connotation is that of a reviled, 'unnatural' political activity that is better avoided. In fact, it seems as if the majority of Indonesian women including many female artists abhor the label 'feminism'.

### ***Unnatural partnership: Women, political activism and feminism/s in Indonesia***

Historian Saskia Wieringa in her book *Sexual Politics in Indonesia* (2002) traces this association of feminism with 'unnatural' political activism back to the demonization of the communist women's organization Gerwani (*Gerakan Wanita Indonesia*, Indonesian Women's Movement) by the authoritarian New Order regime (1966-1998). Gerwani was the biggest Indonesian women's movement in 1950-1965, and its main aim was to reach equality with men. The organization did this initially by advocating for marriage reform, before shifting its focus to equal labor rights for women and equal responsibilities in the struggle for 'full national independence' and socialism (Wieringa 2002: 140).

During the height of Gerwani's activities, a cataclysmic event took place on September 30<sup>th</sup> 1965. Several high-ranking generals were kidnapped and some were killed in their residences when fighting the kidnappers. This event was later claimed by the New Order regime to have been orchestrated by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) to stage a coup against the current government. The alleged coup was suppressed under Suharto's leadership, paving the way for his entry to power.

Gerwani's association with the September 30<sup>th</sup> movement was cemented after the New Order regime orchestrated a campaign of unprecedented violence amongst others through the (in)famous film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (Betrayal of September 30<sup>th</sup> Movement/PKI) (Arifin C. Noer, 1984). The film contains scenes that depicted members of Gerwani committing acts of sexual debauchery as well as showing them participating in the torture (specifically mutilating the victims' genitals) and killing of the generals. The depictions have been proven to be false and in fact, were part of the New Order's political propaganda (Sen 1994; Wieringa 2002). By implicating Gerwani in the killings of the generals and particularly

by depicting them as active perpetrators of torture, the New Order regime portrayed political activism for women as savage and unwomanly.

Wieringa's study highlighted the link between politically conscious Indonesian women and communism and, to some extent, moral and sexual depravities. She states that women's organization established in the 1980s in Indonesia such as *Kalyanamitra* and *Solidaritas Perempuan* were often accused of establishing a 'new Gerwani', despite their more contemporary aims. Indonesian academic Melani Budianta points out that women's movements during the post-1998 *Reformasi* period made a point of breaking free from these stereotypes, so they were compelled to re-examine their political strategies by engaging with more inclusive, heterogeneous women from all levels of class, religious and ethnic backgrounds including conscious identification as mothers (Budianta 2012). Nonetheless, as a result of decades of vilification, Indonesian women artists not only struggled with the label, but this in turn has resulted in a demoralizing effect on the representation of the female body in post-New Order era.

### ***The female body, art and censorship in Indonesia***

The general reluctance by Indonesian women artists to display overt political activism and a commitment to feminist values may have contributed to the pragmatic attitude displayed by many artists towards the issue of censorship and the female body in the post-New Order era. While during the authoritarian regime sensitive subject matters such as criticism of the state or the president or articulating left-leaning political thinking were often the cause of severe censorship and persecution, the beginning of democratization in 1998 ushered in a new era in which visual artists have faced a rather different kind of censorship. When the

*Reformasi* (reform) era began in 1998, there was a sense of opening of issues and opportunities in women's movement to issues that were previously considered to be taboo or restricted such as women's rights, domestic violence, sexuality and even feminisms. These openings included a diverse development in women's writings, film-making, activism and to some extent, visual arts.

Yet, what is then noticeable after five years into the reform era is that censorship has shifted from the vilification of women as political activists in the military-dominated New Order regime to the sexualized female bodies as moral threats to the social fabric of Indonesian society with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the furious public debate about the *Rancangan Undang-undang Anti Pornografi dan Pornoaksi* (Draft Anti Pornography and Pornoaction bill, hereafter RUU APP) in 2006. The bill was created due to widespread concerns among conservative Muslims about the rising circulation of allegedly pornographic materials in many Indonesian cities. The draft of the bill was intended 'to stop the spread of pornography across Indonesia and to protect, to cultivate and to provide moral education for the Indonesian people' (Aliansi Mawar Putih 2006).

Ambiguous in its definitions of pornography and 'porno-action', and even more questionable with regards to its purpose, the draft was deemed to be a threat to religious, cultural and ethnic diversity and harmony within Indonesia. Critics of the draft regarded it with suspicion because they saw it as a political move by conservative Islamic groups aiming

at the “Islamisation” of Indonesia.<sup>4</sup> From a feminist perspective, the content of the draft was particularly concerning as it would have criminalised sexuality, with the female body apparently singled out as the primary target.

When the draft started to circulate in February 2006, it was greeted with mass demonstrations, intellectual forums and other forms of protest in large cities in Indonesia, mainly in Java. The vehemence of the protests was such that the parliament retracted the draft and promised that a new draft would be formulated that would be more sensitive to the cultural and religious diversity of Indonesia (yet there was no mention of gender sensitivity).

Despite continuous opposition the bill was eventually passed into law in 2008 after the content had been watered down slightly. Even in its final version though, the law’s definition of pornography still contains wording that is highly ambiguous and can be used to stifle freedom of expression across many areas of the visual and performing arts, literature and media. Article One of the law defines pornography as: *image, sketch, illustration, photograph, text, noise, sound, moving image, animation, cartoon, conversation, body movements or other form of message through media and/or public performance that contain lewdness or sexual exploitation that breach the society’s moral codes* (Sekretariat Negara Republik Indonesia 2008: 2).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The draft of the bill was rejected by intellectuals and academics (including high-profile liberal Islamic intellectuals), women’s groups, the arts community as well as non-Muslim communities. On the other hand, the draft was supported by many of Indonesia’s Islamic organisations such as Indonesia’s Ulema Council (MUI), the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI), the Islamic Defender’s Front (FPI), Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and one of the major political parties, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS).

<sup>5</sup> *Pornografi adalah gambar, sketsa, ilustrasi, foto, tulisan, suara, bunyi, gambar bergerak, animasi, kartun, percakapan, gerak tubuh, atau bentuk pesan lainnya melalui berbagai bentuk media komunikasi dan/atau pertunjukan di muka umum, yang memuat kecabulan atau eksploitasi seksual yang melanggar norma kesusilaan dalam masyarakat.*

Those caught creating or circulating banned content now face between six months and twelve years imprisonment or a fine between 250 million and six billion rupiah. Significantly, however, despite the huge public debate surrounding the drafting of the bill, the critics' fears that the bill would threaten Indonesia's cultural diversity and religious harmony has not materialized. Since the bill was passed into law, it has rarely been applied.

By 2013, Indonesia seems to have moved on, yet tensions remain. Censorship today is no longer the prerogative of the state but can be exercised with increasingly coercive power and, arguably, increasing arbitrariness by societal actors. Religious hardliners in particular have often taken the law into their own hands, posing new threats to the freedom of expression and religion. This trend is a product of a growing discontent in Indonesia that stems from the perceived failure of the reform movement to deliver most of its promises. In the post-Suharto era, the absence of state control has created a need for different types of bonds, many of which are based on narrow interpretations of religion and ethnicity as exemplified by mass organisations such as *Front Pembela Islam* (Islamic Defenders Front, FPI), *Forum Betawi Rembug* (Native Jakarta Brotherhood Forum) (FBR) or *Ikatan Keluarga Betawi Tanah Abang* (Tanah Abang Betawi Community Association) (IKBTA) from Jakarta.

Given that the state often remains silent – and in fact complicit – in the face of vigilante action, resistance against this growing trend of intolerance has been limited to some non-governmental organizations, community groups and individual artists. In the literary world, for instance, some female writers engage quite openly with issues long regarded as taboo. Transgressing cultural, social and religious boundaries, writers such as Ayu Utami, Dewi Lestari, Dinar Rahayu, Djenar Maesa Ayu and Fira Basuki have explored issues such as the female body, sexuality and desire. While this phenomenon has raised critical responses—

both positive and negative—from within literary circles, it has so far escaped the attention of both religious hardliners and the state.

However, the risk of becoming a target for persecution is real and not everyone is willing to speak out. In fact, self-censorship continues to be rife in parts of the broader art community and there appears to be a lack of consensus about how to respond to the legal and extra-legal restrictions on artistic expression. Moreover, the situation is further complicated by the fact that censorship issues have become a political bargaining chip for the government that can be used to win favours from conservative groups in the House of Representatives and in the general public. Fully aware of this challenging environment, most artists have developed a rather pragmatic attitude, soldiering on with their artistic principles without rocking the conservative boat.

During fieldwork for this research project, almost all artists that I spoke to, both male and female, expressed their opposition towards UU 44/2008 and its definition of pornography. Though many have continued to make works that challenge the first article of the bill, they tend to do it more discreetly now. Textile and performance artist Tiarma Sirait states that, while she is not afraid, she is now more circumspect in exhibiting works that have the potential to attract unwanted attention either from the government or religious fundamentalists (T Sirait 2010, pers.comm., 11 January). Tiarma's view appears to be echoed by other artists, with some artists opting to only exhibit their potentially controversial works to a select audience or overseas institutions. Specifically, women artists who wish to explore through visual language subject matter that is considered to be taboo such as sexuality or the body have found it more difficult to fully express their artistic ambitions.

### ***Definitions and distinctions: Feminisms or Gender?***

The debate about the anti-pornography law directed unprecedented attention to the role of women in Indonesian society, but it did not create a new generation of Indonesian feminists. Even in the visual arts community, many women shied away from defining themselves as feminists, partly perhaps because of the ongoing negative association of the term with moral decadence and leftist political activism. As a result, the very term feminism remains poorly conceptualized in the discourse about Indonesian visual arts, despite being mentioned occasionally in some Indonesian scholarly and non-scholarly texts (Joedawinata and Supangkat 1998; Sumartono 2001; Noerhadi 2003; Sinaga 2003; Adi and Bujono 2012). The paucity of academic works or refereed journals common in countries with an established arts infrastructure further accentuates this problem. Minimum infrastructure and government support for the arts in Indonesia has produced a situation where until recently it was the norm for textual references to art discourses to be disseminated through essays in exhibition catalogues, media reviews, or artist monographs. Although commercial publications such as *Visual Arts* magazine (now defunct), the weekly arts and culture section in national newspapers such as *Kompas*, *Media Indonesia* or *Pikiran Rakyat* and the internet have all helped to alleviate this situation, scholarly engagement with the arts remains underdeveloped, particularly in regard to women artists.

Even though various solo and group exhibitions of women artists in Indonesia have been curated, organized and staged since the 1970s – albeit not as many as male or mixed group exhibitions – organizers have been reluctant to refer to feminism when creating these exhibitions. This reluctance can be attributed to three main factors. Firstly, feminism in Indonesia is widely regarded as an imported ideology transmitted unmodified from the



West, representing the adversary of 'Eastern values' (*budaya ketimuran*) or 'Indonesian identity' (Sadli 2002). Secondly, the lack of a locally developed and broadly accepted critical framework for analysis has made it difficult to assess the work of women artists including issues such as art-making, medium and the perception of gender-based and/or feminist-inspired works. Thirdly, political works (by women artists) are not as marketable as works that are considered 'safe' both in content and medium. Quite possibly these reasons are also why the Indonesian journalist and writer Carla Bianpoen, despite her well-known support for Indonesian women artists, stated unequivocally that there is no such thing as Indonesian feminist art yet (Bianpoen 2012).

The challenges in using feminism in the curatorial framework could be seen in a number of influential contemporary art exhibitions after the end of the New Order including "Menyikapi Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan" (Taking a Stand: Violence against Women, Cemara Gallery, December 1998)<sup>6</sup>, "Bayang-bayang Maha Kecil" (Shadows of the Tiniest Kind, Titarubi, Cemara Gallery, 2001), "Women in the Realm of Spirituality" (National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta and Pontifical University Gregoriana, Rome, Italy, 1998), "Perempuan dan Diseminasi Makna Ruang" (Women and the Dissemination of Space, National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta, 2001) and Festival Ungu's visual art exhibition (Cipta Gallery, TIM, 2003).

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<sup>6</sup> The exhibition was organised by Toety Heraty and *Koalisi Perempuan* (Women's Coalition, a women's non-profit organisation) as a response towards the 13-15 May 1998 rapes of Chinese-Indonesian women. Indonesian artists both male and female, across generation and ethnic groups, created works that condemned the violence and the state's denial of the event. The exhibition also included performances and public forums which discussed a wide variety of women's issues from domestic violence, politics and expression in the arts. Half of the proceeds of the exhibition sale went to *Mitra Perempuan Crisis Center* (Women's Partner Crisis Centre) and *Divisi Perempuan Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan* (Women's Division: Volunteers for Humanity; both are non-profit organisations which dealt with the victims of the May rapes). For information about the exhibition see the exhibition catalogue "Menyikapi Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan" (1998). Many prominent and younger Indonesian artists, such as Agus Suwage, FX Harsono, Caroline Rika Winata and Tintin Wulia amongst others are Chinese-Indonesians. See also Chapter 6 for discussion on Caroline Rika Winata's work.

Sari Asih Joedawinata and Jim Supangkat's (1998) curatorial introduction in the "Women in the Realm of Spirituality" exhibition catalogue may exemplify the type of reading that dominates Indonesian curators' views of the works of Indonesian women artists. The premise of the exhibition was to explore the themes of women and spirituality from a feminist perspective. The curators explained that the women artists who were invited into the show explored spirituality and religion from their personal perspectives (Joedawinata and Supangkat 1998: 116-117).

According to the curators, the works in the show represented a particular kind of female perspective on spirituality and religion by showing a close connection with nature and the Goddess movement.<sup>7</sup> What the curatorial essay omitted was that the artists might look upon mainstream religion in a critical manner and/or indicate that religious life in Indonesia is dominated by male interpretations and perspectives. In fact, while most of the works did indeed explore nature's link to spirituality, some artists such as Astari Rasjid (now Sri Astari) took a more critical stance. Astari portrayed the patriarchal structure of Javanese spirituality and culture through her installation work *Prettified Cage* (1998, mixed media installation, dimensions variable). The curators' curatorial framework appeared to tiptoe around the fact that the close link between women, art and nature can embody criticism of patriarchy.

Another exhibition titled "Perempuan dan Diseminasi Makna Ruang" (*Women and the Dissemination of Space*, 2001) curated by Tommy F. Awuy in the National Gallery in Jakarta also presented a similar strategy in the curatorial framing. The exhibition's aim was to explore the notion of domesticity and its strong ties to femininity beyond the binary

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<sup>7</sup> The Goddess movement is a spiritual movement which emerged from second wave feminism predominantly in North America, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand in the 1970s. The movement seeks to connect nature and culture from a feminine perspective with female deity/ies replacing the male deity/ies in the established religion. See Klein (2009).

opposition of masculine public space and feminine domestic space (Awuy 2001: 3). Women artists in the show were invited to present their personal take on the subject matter and the curator encouraged them to search critically for the meaning of personal space.

Yet, once again the curatorial essay evaded the issue by moving on to talk about getting over binary opposition; it failed to mention that the real issue of gender construction and in some cases, gender oppression must be addressed before moving beyond binary opposition. The avoidance of a stronger political statement in this 2001 exhibition was particularly ironic because one group of artists invited to the show was Kelompok PEREK (Women's Experimental Group), the first Indonesian art collective that expressed left-leaning, feminist intentions in their work (2001).

Looking at the examples above, Indonesian art critic and curator Aminudin TH Siregar was perhaps correct in stating that Indonesian women's exhibitions are often curated ambiguously and *malu-malu* (timidly) (Siregar 2003). Both exhibitions reflect the general trend of avoiding the use of feminism as a political statement and as a basis for a critique of patriarchy in curatorial frameworks.

Nonetheless, what most Indonesian writers and scholars seem to agree upon is that (Western/post-structuralist) feminism/s entered the Indonesian art discourse in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> The term is juxtaposed alongside other Western critical theories that entered the Indonesian art vernacular during the mid- to late 1990s, but it remains undeveloped as a

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<sup>8</sup>Quite possibly the entry of feminism can be linked to Indonesian art's internationalization in the mid-1990s. Indonesia's introduction into the global contemporary art world in the mid-1990s coincides with the big shift in the global agenda in contemporary art. It should be noted, however, that despite the increased profile of Indonesian artists in international exhibitions the real impact of internationalization on Indonesian contemporary art is still disputed (Ingham (2007). Women artists in particular reaped few benefits from the process of internationalization as it was mostly male artists who were given access to international exhibitions, creating an unbalanced impression in international circles of Indonesian visual arts.

distinct critical theory in Indonesia,<sup>9</sup> even though, as Indonesian scholar and academic Melani Budianta explains, there is a general agreement by many Indonesian women's activists (and the art world) to use the term 'gender' rather than feminism, especially in the mainstream media. Gender was seen as a less threatening and more inclusive term than feminism, not least because it was widely used by international development organizations (Sadli 2002: 82-83). But the term 'gender issues' effectively means 'women's issues' in the Indonesian context, and is often a euphemism for feminism.

In this thesis I employ both terms - feminism and gender - although I do not use them interchangeably. I argue that feminism is a political discourse that critically engages with the processes of gendering; it includes an exploration of sexual difference and subjectivity but is also directed at social, cultural and economic organisation. Furthermore, I also argue that feminism does not necessarily speak for women but in fact, politically challenges the construction of women within a patriarchal society (Wolff 1990; Pollock 1999). I refer to feminist/feminism when discussing Western critical theory/ies and artistic strategies by Indonesian women artists whenever it is the artist/s' clear political statement. I also employ a feminist perspective throughout the thesis by doing a feminist reading of the history of Indonesian art, a feminist interrogation of particular themes in the works by women artists and a feminist analysis of the artistic practices of women artists.

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<sup>9</sup> Tracing the exact period when the term 'feminism' and 'gender' in Indonesian visual arts has proven to be elusive and not to mention frustrating due to lack of solid information. Toety Heraty, Indonesian feminist and scholar, claimed that her poetry and writings have used the term feminism in the 1970s [Toeti Heraty 2010, pers. comm., 01 August]. Heidi Arbuckle (2011) traced the early development about gender awareness in the visual arts as early as the 1950s in an article by Rukmi. However, Arahmaiani explained that when she started to gain wider recognition for her works that addresses gender critique in the 1990s, the term feminism/s was used by foreign curators and only entered the Indonesian lexicon then [Arahmaiani 2010, pers.comm., 07 June]. See also Saparinah Sadli's (2002) essay on the founding of Women's Studies department at the University of Indonesia.

By contrast, I use the term gender not only to differentiate the sexual and social construction of women from female biological traits but also as a commonly accepted term amongst Indonesian writers and scholars when discussing and analysing works by Indonesian women artists.

Yet, the thesis is not about defining what Indonesian feminism is, not only because that it is beyond the scope of thesis but also because such definition is seen by many art practitioners to limit their artistic expression. I argue that even though many practitioners still dispute the term and only some have embraced it (whether positively or ambiguously), Indonesian women artists have in fact used feminist strategies and have been inspired by feminism in their works to raise issues that are both personal and political, even though their works do not necessarily employ the visual languages familiar to Western feminist art. Their reluctance to embrace the term feminism can perhaps be read not only as their continuous search for local feminism/s that would be accommodative to the type of fluid and context-dependant works that they do, but also as their critique of the narrow definition of feminist art currently circulating in the Indonesian art world.

### ***Methodology***

One aim of this thesis is to outline a framework through which to analyse works by Indonesian women artists. I discuss international feminist discourses in relation to feminist-inspired strategies and/or gender critique in Indonesian contemporary art practices. I then propose two alternative frameworks through which to re-imagine the Indonesian female body, namely strategies of correction and interrogation. Strategies of correction are the re-insertion and re-inclusion of what was previously omitted or marginalised in Indonesian art

history, much in the spirit of the feminist recovery project (Harris and Nochlin 1976).

Strategies of interrogation are a range of critical queries and revisions of the already existing reading and views of Indonesian women artists.

In formulating these strategies I rely heavily on what feminist art historian and scholar Griselda Pollock has termed 'active re-reading'. In her text *Differencing the Canon* Pollock (1999: 8) argues that an active re-reading and reworking of that which is visible and authorised in the spaces of representation will be able to articulate that which, while repressed, is always present as its structuring other.

My starting point for analysis is grounded in the discipline of art history, namely from cultural and textual productions that are produced by women artists through art works, interviews, biographies, letters, and essays. I examine how critical language can be derived from these primary sources, thus basing the primacy of the analysis on the perspective of the female artists. To some extent, my analysis can be seen as embodying a stance that I criticise in the thesis, namely that of valorising female material creativity. Yet I argue that within these works there is a complex picture of Indonesian women artists and their socio-cultural environment. The art works are not a mere reflection of their personal stories and thoughts; their subjectivities cannot be simplified through their voice as primary sources. To balance this perspective, I look at the reception of art history and feminist-inspired works within the mainstream Indonesian art world. I demonstrate that it is equally important to look at the role of audience and reception in the production of meaning in order to open up a discursive field about feminism/s in Indonesian art discourses.

In conducting the research I used a snowball effect to interview artists, curators, writers, gallery owners, collectors and other stake holders in the Indonesian art world. I also did

archival research in several art institutions and research centers in Indonesia and Australia. I attended exhibitions, artist talks, discussions, seminars and conferences to gather information, and gave presentations at various conferences, graduate school and public forums to gain some critical feedback on my research. Yet the most illuminating experience during the course of the project was to interview and record the stories of so many women artists in Indonesia.

As an Indonesian living and working in Australia since 2001, I was often conscious of my particular position when I conducted my interviews. Kirin Narayan has written in her text *How Native is a "Native" Anthropologist?* (1993) about the false assumption that conducting research in one's own culture must surely be based on a position of intimate affinity. She argues that factors such as education, class, gender, race, sexual orientation or duration of contacts at different times often outweigh our cultural identity whether from an outsider or insider perspective. I situate my writing as what Narayan terms an *enactment of hybridity*, namely writing that depicts the author as minimally bicultural in terms of belonging simultaneously in the world of engaged scholarship and that of everyday life (1993: 672).

Feminism is also an important factor that shaped not only the methodology of the research but also my own positioning in the research project. Feminist methodology operates on the primary principle that we must take seriously the viewpoints of those who participate in our research. Furthermore, feminist researchers have argued that the research itself can contribute to producing a kind of engaged, transformative research which can produce knowledge that such an oppressed or marginalized group desires (Harding and Norberg 2005).

Yet such progressive notions have proven to be near impossible to implement in my own experience of fieldwork. As a young, female researcher researching Indonesian visual arts, which has so far been the domain of Indonesian male or foreign scholars, I was often placed in a position where I was told to 'sit and listen' not only by male interviewees but also by older Indonesian women artists and scholars. This I reluctantly did. My own feminist desire to create an equal and engaged research with my subject matter was and still is being challenged by my gender, age and even religion.

Ironically, when I conducted the second part of my field work in early 2011 during the second trimester of my pregnancy, both male and female artists warmed up to my presence and became more open in discussing their works and personal lives. Perhaps seeing my bulging belly they no longer considered me as a 'feminist threat' and were able to categorize me as a mother-to-be - harmless and self-effacing. The position of mother has long been highly regarded in Indonesian society and this idealized mother figure was particularly promoted during the previous political regime as a symbol of femininity and goal keeper of morality (Suryakusuma 1996).

Most artists preferred to conduct the interviews outside their personal living space, for example in their studio or in a public space such as café or restaurant. In the instances where I was invited to come to their house, often their husband or partner joined the interview. Unfortunately, in some cases, the husband or partner dominated the entire conversation or the artist would choose her words more carefully.

Virginia Woolf has famously stated that a woman must have money and a room of her own if she needs to write fiction. I argue that this is also applicable in the Indonesian context. For many women artists who can afford it, their studio is their pride and a place where they can



fully explore their artistic possibilities without the interference from their husband or family. Some younger artists share a space and are even happy to share with their artist boyfriend or husband. But in most cases Indonesian women artists work in whatever space is available for them, especially when they already have children.

Despite the mostly positive support that I received during the research, I was in fact constantly taken to task about my research project by both male and female artists. The perceptions that men and women are equal in Indonesian visual arts and that there is no such thing as gender discrimination are still very strong in the Indonesian art world.

My interest in women artists stems from my feminism. It is not the fact of being a woman that permitted and generated such desire, a view that accords with that of Griselda Pollock (1999:16-17). Because feminisms are inherently political, as a primary lens to interpret the relationship between an individual and social structure, my challenge as a researcher is to understand how feminisms as a contested discourse are able to produce an alternative reading of the works of Indonesian women artists.

### ***Selection of artists***

Emiria Sunassa, Tridjoto Abdullah, Maria Tjui, Nunung WS, Hildawati Sumantri, Mella Jaarsma, Dolorosa Sinaga, IGAK Murniasih, Arahmaiani, Titarubi, Laksmi Shitaesmi, Theresia Sitompul, Caroline Rika Winata, Diah Yulianti, Mimi Fadmi, Ferial Affif, Tintin Wulia and Kelompok PEREK, are some of the artists whose works have explored a wide range of personal, political, religious, class and socio-cultural issues. Moreover, their works present a complex picture of female subjectivities and even desire. Any of these artists would have warranted deeper analysis as part of this thesis. However, I decided to focus specifically on

artists whose works correspond with the strategies of correction and interrogation framed within specific themes, which will be elaborated later on. Many of the works in the thesis are selected for their engagement with performance and installation art but most importantly, from what I see as the artist's ability to use these medium to challenge the perception of Indonesian audiences on issues such as femininity, religion, ethnicity and class.

The artists selected for this thesis represent a cross section of Indonesia's women artists, both in terms of their age and the stages in their careers. Some artists have already reached an advanced stage of their career (Arahmaiani, Laksmi Shitaresmi, Titarubi), whilst others are considered to be young or emerging (Theresia Sitompul, Caroline Rika Winata). Others whose works will be analyzed have already passed away (Emiria Sunassa, Mia Bustam, IGAK Murniasih). Most of the living artists were born between the 1960s and 1980s. This is the generation that includes myself, the generation that grew up under the New Order regime and which therefore was subjected to the regime's construction of womanhood and femininity. We all grew up with the notion of *kodrat wanita* (women's predestined fate – pregnancy and maternal labor, usually in a religious sense) as something that has to be followed and even aspired to. Many of the works examined in this thesis question and challenge *kodrat wanita* as this concept has formed the basis of the artist's perception of gender issues.

I have thought about the need to select male artists for this thesis. Certainly there are some Indonesian male artists whose works have addressed the problems of gender and, more specifically, masculinity in crisis in their works. Nindityo Adipurnomo, for example, is

amongst those few male artists whose works critically address masculinity codes in Javanese culture within historical and contemporary Indonesian contexts.

Indeed, many women artists to whom I spoke, whether in relation to the thesis or the previously mentioned exhibition project, wish to have their works seen in an equitable light, not just in the gender-based framework of an all-women show. Nonetheless, after careful consideration, I decided that as a research project that focuses on feminism/s and gender issues in Indonesia, it should be framed and told from the perspective of women artists whose works are within the feminist language, or in reaction and relationship to it.

Driven by the same thinking as many other feminist projects, this thesis asserts that it is vital for Indonesian women artists to pave the way to reclaiming their own voice and identity, as well as to develop critical thinking towards feminism/s in Indonesia.

### ***Thesis structure***

The thesis is divided into two main parts, framed by implementing the two types of strategy mentioned previously, namely strategies of correction and interrogation. Following this introduction, the first main part – Chapters 2-4 – commences with an examination of the existing theoretical frameworks for feminist analysis. I then investigate from a feminist perspective the formation of the canon of Indonesian art history, in order to understand the basis for women artists' marginalization, and conclude by looking at the works of two women artists of the past and their unique place within Indonesian art history.

The chapters are thus arranged thematically rather than chronologically. In doing so, I am addressing a sense of continuation across generation and periods of time in the issues faced

by Indonesian women artists. Despite their different cultural, ethnic, religion and class backgrounds, themes such as motherhood and maternal subjectivity, women as artists and challenging femininity are the issues that appear almost constantly in their works. Moreover, the changing shift between the periods also reflected, that despite the strongly patriarchal structure in Indonesian art history, it is still possible to find ruptures created through feminist readings.

Chapter Two seeks to establish an analytical framework within which to analyze works by women artists. In this chapter I problematize the western feminist theories that have been adapted into Indonesian art discourses. The use of *écriture féminine* as an analytical tool has been dominant in the field of literature and to some extent in visual arts (Wardani 2003; Paramadhita 2007); other art scholars have used different frameworks, such as Maslow's theory of needs (Adriati 2010) and lyrical, autobiography reading (Wright 1994). These approaches appear to engage with the notion of difference and heterogeneity as proposed by the third-world feminist projects; however these approaches have only marginally engaged with the wider context of hegemonic masculinity in the Indonesian art world. This chapter further lays the groundwork to construct a framework through an active re-reading and re-visioning of elements of Indonesian art discourses by the use of psychoanalysis as one of the primary lenses. The use of psychoanalysis, I argue, is important to read between the lines and in the margins of art history in order to create a discursive space for feminist analysis in Indonesian art.

Chapter Three analyses two periods in Indonesian art history that are often defined as canonical, namely the period of Indonesian nationalism (1940s-1950s) dominated by the figure of S. Sudjojono (1913-1986) and the radical movement *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru* of

the 1970s-1980s. The chapter presents a re-reading of these canonical periods and events through an analysis of the structural nature of canon-making and its selective version of the past. By employing Pollock's notion of differencing the canon, this chapter does not simply replace the masculine canon with a feminine version. Instead it aims to 'difference' it by active re-reading and reworking of that which is visible and authorised in the spaces of representation (Pollock 1999). Furthermore, the chapter looks at how the two historical periods are reified and used as a model in canon-making through the inaugural exhibition of the National Gallery of Indonesia in 1999. By looking at canon as a myth of genius and masculine ideals, I want to look beyond the issues of sexism and discrimination. Through a psychoanalytical lens, I 'difference' the canon by arguing that the artist is a symbolic figure, where public fantasies in the case of S. Sudjojono of masculine nationalism, take representational form. The fantasies are not gendered exclusively masculine, but still function to sustain a patriarchal legend.

In Chapter Four I discuss two Indonesian women artists - Emiria Sunassa (1894-1964) and Mia Bustam (1920-2011) – whose creative lives spanned some important and turbulent periods in Indonesian art history. Emiria Sunassa was active during the early formation of the nation from the 1930s to the late 1950s while Mia Bustam was active from the late 1950s until her career was cut short by the anti-communist purge of 1965-1966. The two women participated in an era described by Caroline Turner (2006: 161) as the breeding ground for the ideological platform of Indonesian modern art. The aim of this chapter is to critically examine that important period through the frames of feminism and psychoanalysis. The analysis of Emiria's works will reveal that, despite using the same medium as her male contemporaries, her choice of subject matter and her aesthetic executions have set her

apart from them. Furthermore, Emiria presented a sense of haunting in Indonesian art history through a different vision of the nation and also positioned the artist as a uniquely cosmopolitan subject. Alongside the analysis of Emiria Sunassa, the mix of personal and political memoirs of Mia Bustam represents a counter-point to mainstream history. Her example represents the exact opposite of the 'great lives' (usually of men) that have dominated Indonesian history. Mia's marriage to S. Sudjojono enriched her memoirs with first-hand accounts of artistic milieux during and after Indonesia's revolutionary years as well as during the anti-communist conflict and reprisal in 1965 and after. Moreover, through her memoirs, the reader can gain an understanding of how Indonesian women had, and in fact still have, to negotiate a masculine space by using art and writing as the main tools for expressing the self.

The first main part of the thesis ends with Chapter Four. The following chapters (5-7) focus on strategies of interrogation. Firstly I look at two particular themes, namely political motherhood/maternal subjectivity and the monstrous-feminine as ways to search for the feminine in Indonesian visual arts. Then I explore how feminisms directly influenced works by Indonesian women artists and their own search for local feminism/s.

In Chapter Five I discuss the works of the late Balinese artist I Gusti Ayu Kadek (IGAK) Murniasih (1960-2006). Murniasih's works have been described as violent and absurdist, surreal as well as candid and humorous by Indonesian writers and art scholars (Dewanto 2000; Couteau 2001; Bianpoen 2006; Saidi 2007). These reactions come from the juxtaposition of violence and the female body in some of her series to the monstrous feminine in the forms of *vagina dentata*, the toothed vagina and medusa-like objects. And yet Murniasih's works appeal strongly to the mainstream art world in Indonesia, despite the

challenging nature of her subject matter. The chapter will discuss the ambiguity and the reception of Murniasih's works. The discussion seeks to read how her works seem to both assert and refute the insistent resort to abjection and the grotesque. The bizarre yet compelling works of IGAK Murniasih in this chapter represent the imbalanced relationship between the representation of the feminine, feminine desires and its masculine reading in Indonesian visual arts. I also examine the notion of the grotesque through Bakhtin's *carnavalesque* as another way of understanding female subjectivity in Indonesian art.

In Chapter Six I discuss the works of the artists Titarubi and Laksmi Shitaesmi. This chapter focuses on the representation of motherhood and maternal subjectivity in the work of these artists as a potential for a feminist reading of Indonesian art discourse. Indonesian art critics and scholars have generally been silent on the subject matter of motherhood and maternal subjectivity. In the formative years of Indonesian modern art, motherhood was considered to be a purely sentimental subject matter, glorification of the feminine or embedded in the masculine nationalist reading. The art works by Titarubi and Laksmi Shitaesmi challenge these stereotypes by depicting a more nuanced representation of motherhood. Their works also represent maternal subjectivity. The representation of motherhood is shown by feminist scholars to be a complex interaction between social concepts of maternity and the psycho-sexual dimension of maternal subjectivity. This cannot be expressed with the idealised representation of mother and children alone, but requires visual forms that can reiterate certain emotional or psychological state of motherhood, such as bliss and separation (Meskimmon 1998: 1). In the last section of this chapter I discuss an installation by a younger artist, Theresia Agustina Sitompul to indicate the complexity of reading this subject matter in Indonesian visual arts. I also discuss the distinction between motherhood

as the lived-in experience of daily chores and pleasures for women as mothers, and maternal subjectivity as a site of the psychic dimension of emotion and feeling (Sieglöhr 1998: 27) in the works of Indonesian women artists. I examine the works of these artists as an expression of what Sara Ruddick (1995) termed 'maternal thinking', the experience of motherhood as central to, and inseparable from, their life as artists.

Chapter Seven will conclude the section on strategies of interrogation by examining how feminism has directly influenced the works of Arahmaiani and Kelompok PEREK, an all-female artist collective. The chapter explores the link between feminism and performance art in the Indonesian context, even though both fields are still being redefined and challenged by their own practitioners. Arahmaiani has built an outstanding international career by using performance art as her primary medium of expression. When she first came to international attention in the 1990s as a feminist Indonesian artist, it was due mostly to her strong performances that addressed women's issues in Indonesia. Performers from Kelompok PEREK predominantly used performance art in their early years as a tool and strategy to undermine the patriarchal discourse in Indonesian society. Their performances explored the female body as a feminist strategy in post-Suharto Indonesia. This chapter investigates to what extent and in what ways Western models have influenced Indonesian women's performance art practices. The chapter also analyses what local differences arise given the nature and roles of performance art in Indonesia, and examines understandings and interpretations of 'feminism' in this context.

Finally, Chapter Eight presents the main conclusions of this research project and places it in the broader context of transnational feminism and global contemporary art from an



Indonesian perspective. A brief projection for further development brings this thesis to a close.

## Chapter Two

### Exploring Theories: Search for analytical framework/s

*...a woman never defines her own body, but is always being defined [by others]. That is what I want to recapture.*<sup>10</sup> (Arahmaiani 2003: 172)

In this chapter I establish an analytical framework through which to analyse works by Indonesian women artists. I discuss international feminist discourses in relation to feminism in Indonesian contemporary art practices. After looking at a range of studies by Western theorists and their influence on analyses by Indonesian scholars, I argue that there are still obstacles to finding a 'suitable' or less problematic framework for analysing works by Indonesian women artists. I propose several alternative frameworks through which to re-imagine the Indonesian female body, namely strategies of correction and interrogation.

In formulating these strategies I employ what feminist art historian and scholar Griselda Pollock has termed 'active re-reading'. In *Differencing the Canon* (1999) Pollock argues that an active re-reading and reworking of that which is visible and authorised in the spaces of representation will be able to articulate that which, while repressed, is always present as its structuring other (1999: 8). For example, Parker and Pollock (1981) argue that the discourse of art history has relied upon negated femininity in order to secure the supremacy of masculinity within the sphere of creativity.

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<sup>10</sup> "...tubuh perempuan ia tidak pernah memaknai, tetapi selalu dimaknai. Itu yang ingin aku rebut kembali."

By employing an active re-reading I aim to avoid the traps of binary opposition and the valorisation of the feminine that are often prevalent in feminist readings. The binary opposition of masculine vs feminine often just works superficially to point out the difference between the two without critically assessing the structural nature of patriarchy. Meanwhile, the valorisation of the feminine tends to create ghettoization whereby women position themselves outside the masculine system and do not engage in critique of the patriarchy from the inside. Therefore, I am taking on the challenge of analysing and criticising both sides of the argument - the masculine mainstream art world and the feminist-inspired analyses from both foreign and Indonesian scholars.

The search to find less problematic or suitable frameworks for the Indonesian context needs what Pollock (1999) has suggested, namely a *polylogue*: the interplay of many voices, a kind of creative reading where the power dynamics of culture can be read through its entanglement with various discourses.

Strategies of correction have primarily been done within feminist art history by re/introducing and re/inserting women artists previously ignored by the masculine structure. To some extent, my reading of the artists' works also functions to reintroduce the artists and their works within the masculine structure, such as the reading of Emiria Sunassa and Mia Bustam in Chapter 3.

However, the core of my research focuses on strategies of interrogation. These strategies aim to reveal not only women's socio-historically specific forms of writing and visual representation but also the patriarchal structure that surrounds them, for example canon and canon-making in Indonesian art history.

### ***Art history and feminisms***

Feminisms are an interweaving of sociopolitical, intellectual and material strategies that challenge power relations founded upon normalizing sex and gender roles (Meskimmon 2002). Feminist thinking spans a multitude of schools of thought and academic disciplines. In art theory, feminisms are remarkably flexible, as they are able to respond quickly to changes in both intellectual and material conditions. It is making innovative connections between ideas, objects and images to further question the structures that make the relationship between sex and gender seem natural, eternal and fixed. Scholars such as Griselda Pollock (Parker and Pollock 1981; Pollock 1996; Pollock 1999) combine diverse areas such as art history, feminism, psychoanalysis and Marxism to create in-depth analyses of canons in art history, while Bracha Ettinger (Ettinger 2004) explores psychoanalysis, philosophy and aesthetics to create the Matrixial theory about subjectivity and human creativity.<sup>11</sup>

The Western feminist approach to art history is predicated on the idea that gender is an essential element in understanding the creation, content and evaluation of art (Meskimmon 2002). Feminist inquiry in the field of art history, according to Adams (1996), initially has two main objectives. Firstly, it considers the ways in which women were/are discriminated against as artists and as subjects in art. Secondly, feminist art historians are also instrumental in discovering the various contributions made by women as artists and patrons. In the early years of Western feminist projects, feminist art historians created projects aimed at 'unearthing' women artists previously ignored by the male-dominated art

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<sup>11</sup> Bracha Ettinger is a scholar, artist and clinical psychologist whose areas of research have influenced disciplines such as art history, film studies, aesthetics and psychoanalysis. Ettinger's Matrixial theory looks at the idea of a feminine-maternal sphere, function and structure with its symbolic and imaginary dimensions based on femaleness in the real (womb). For introduction to Ettinger's works, see Giffney, et al. (2009).

world. An exhibition by Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris titled *Women Artists 1550-1950* in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1976 was an example of such a project (Nochlin 1988). The curators gathered a great number of works, from various private and public collections, by European and American women artists who were active from 1550 to 1950, to present a survey exhibition of the achievements of women artists from the time when they were a real rarity up until they had been gradually accepted by society (Harris and Nochlin 1976).

Clearly it was important to document and (re)present the achievements of women artists from across the age and genres starting from this particular point in Western art history. These projects also served other purposes: to give voice to the personal experiences of the artists, to provide a forum for expression and to document women's oppression as well as aspirations. However, it was no longer enough for Western feminist projects to simply keep rediscovering 'great women artists.' Feminist scholarship and artistic practices evolved towards re-conceptualizing the previous framework. The subsequent generation of feminist projects strove to include a more broadly social approach and even dip into the unconscious to look at how language, images, texts and objects that surround women as subjects could be reworked.

Scholars working within this area encountered continuous references to Western feminist activities in the 1970s, specifically in the United States, as one of the key points in time where a significant body of scholarship emerged, giving women artists their liberating force. Nonetheless, while radical sociopolitical art practice has successfully highlighted women's issues, second generation feminist scholars argued that these practices have had a limited effect. They failed, for example, to explain deeper, more inherent problems - such as

understanding how institutions operate, how ideology works, how images produce meanings for their viewers and thereby construct the viewers' perception (Wolff 1990; Pollock 1999; Meskimmon 2002; Reilly and Nochlin 2007).<sup>12</sup>

John Berger (1972) has pointed out that Western visual culture is saturated by images of women through the masculine viewpoint or masculine gaze. Similarly in Indonesia, there is a long-established familiarity with women as objects in art leading to the belief that they are incapable of producing art works themselves and are unable to sustain a career as professional artist. Moreover, art academies have little or no interest in creating a gender-inclusive curriculum or teaching feminist-related subjects.

In the West, feminist poststructuralist theories have deepened feminist analyses through a more theorized examination of art works and their surrounding factors. The rise of such theories from France, heralded by Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, drawn from the field of semiotics, psychoanalysis and Marxist theories, has contributed significantly to a wealth of women-centred scholarship. Women's 'writing' and the production of cultural texts by women became a key focus of the feminist agenda in art.

One of the key questions that arose from this field of inquiry is whether women artists and writers show evidence of a specifically female aesthetic and how this could be theorized (Weedon 2003: 117-18).

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<sup>12</sup> The debate involved geographical, generational and ideological differences between feminist scholars and art practitioners in the US (East Coast vs West Coast) and also North America vs UK. The debate centred on the practice of artists and scholars who focused on a specifically female experience and thus were labelled as 'essentialist' by those who were more interested in engaging postmodern theories in their works. Feminist works from the 1970s have been generalised as too focused on the search for the female experience, typically presenting works that represent oppression and/or victimhood. Exhibitions such as WACK! in 2007 aimed to dispel the stereotype by showing breadth of works by women artists working during the period 1970s-1980s (Meagher (2011), Butler and Mark (2007). See also 'the most divisive debate in feminist art history' in Broude, et al. (1989) and Gouma-Peterson and Mathews (1987) .

The theories also restructured the common view of art as a direct, personal expression of individual emotional experience. Art is, in fact, a part of social production; it is productive and it actively produces meanings. Furthermore, it is constitutive of ideology; it does not merely illustrate or translate the artist's personal life on canvas (Wolff 1981; Nochlin 1988).

### ***Your Body is a Battleground: the female body in art***

One core issue remains at the heart of almost all feminist debates in art theory, namely the female body. Betterton (1996) argues that the female body is a crucial site for feminist intervention in art practice because it was perceived as degrading to women in the erotic tradition in Western art, and yet at the same time offers a means of articulating female experiences.

The literature and scholarship on the subject is vast and constantly expanding, especially with the incursion of new technology into the discourse. Scholars who have analyzed the representation of the female body throughout the history of Western art include Lippard (1976), Parker and Pollock (1981), Pollock (1988), Chadwick (1990), Nead (1992), and Betterton (1996), while other scholars such as Donna Haraway in her *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991) have linked feminism, science and technology.

Feminist art projects have used the female body, more specifically the artist's body, to address a wide range of issues from sexuality to reproductive rights. The art practices of Euro-American feminist artists in the 1970s largely focused on the abject body with a strong

focus on installation and performance art works.<sup>13</sup> And yet the complexity of representing the female body does not stop at its corporeality but also includes the psychological dimension. These include conscious thoughts, feelings of the individual, the sense of self or in psychoanalytic terms, unconscious meanings, wishes and desires.

However, it soon became clear that the existing feminist critiques illuminated only the experience of white European and American women. Chandra Talpade Mohanty wrote one of the earliest and sharpest critiques of Western feminism in her essay *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1988). She argued that Western feminism has in fact colonized third-world women by suggesting a 'third-world difference'; a static category that seeks to explain how all third-world women are oppressed. Similarly within the art world, first-world feminism not only excluded the knowledge and history of women from other parts of the world, but also explicitly reinstated middle-class, heterosexual and obviously white viewpoints (Meskimmon 2002).

Ella Shohat (1998) highlighted these issues when she argued for the 'colonized body' as part of a layer in reading works by non-white women artists, where (white, first-world) feminism itself is indeed part of the problem and the critique. The powerful critiques of 'color blind' feminist theory by women from non-Western backgrounds thus established heterogeneity and difference as key conceptual strategies and new ways of thinking about a previously predominantly Western feminist project.

In the discussion below I outline some of the approaches that have been used by Indonesian scholars in analysing cultural productions by Indonesian women artists. Some of the

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<sup>13</sup> The abject body is defined as a transgressed body where the accepted physical and psychological boundaries are pulled apart, violated and redefined by the artists to deliver their strong messages (Kristeva (1982), Ross (1997), Jones (2007a)).



approaches such as *écriture féminine* have been seen as a useful framework to create and analyse women-centred texts. Because it emphasizes the need for women to 'write their own body,' a number of Indonesian literary scholars have adopted this framework as a tool to analyse Indonesian women's writing (Budianta 2003). Critics of this framework, however, have pointed out that *écriture féminine* is somewhat problematic when used in the Indonesian context. These differing views will be elaborated on in the following section (Budiman 2005; Allen 2007).

While the use of *écriture féminine* as an analytical tool has been fairly dominant, other scholars have used different frameworks, such as Maslow's theory of needs, and lyrical autobiography reading. The three approaches, to be discussed below, appear to engage with the notion of difference and heterogeneity as proposed by the third-world feminist projects. However these approaches have only marginally analysed the bigger context of hegemonic masculinity in the Indonesian art world.

### ***Écriture féminine and its use in the Indonesian context***

Psychoanalysis has become an appealing tool of analysis for scholars and academics in the visual arts, especially feminist scholars. Psychoanalysis involves not only the work of art itself but also the artist, the aesthetic response of the viewer and the cultural context (Adams 1996: 179). Both art and psychoanalysis are concerned with the power of images and their meaning, delving into the relationship between creativity, its products and

processes and history. Psychoanalytic enquiries into the nature of female identity, libido, sexuality and development are of major significance to feminist art historians.<sup>14</sup>

Three feminist scholars commonly cited in explorations of feminism and psychoanalysis are the French post-structuralists Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. While each theorist focuses on different aspects of psychoanalysis, there is a similarity in their engagement with the theory, namely to destabilize the subject within feminist criticism as a tactic in the exposure of masculine power (Butler 2006).<sup>15</sup>

*Écriture féminine* is a term coined by Helene Cixous. It is often translated as feminine writing - a set of strategies to recapture feminine subjectivity through the act of writing (Cixous, Cohen et al. 1976).<sup>16</sup> The importance of feminine writing, as argued by Cixous, is its capacity to circumvent the binary structures embedded in our current, 'masculine' system of thinking, whereby whatever is designated as different or other is appropriated, devalued and excluded.

Feminine writing is believed to be able to challenge the present modes of representation and perception and to bring forth a new structure to replace the hegemony. Cixous' vision of *écriture féminine* consists of several components, namely the writer's position, the

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<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Grosz (1996: 6) states that both Freud and Lacan are indebted to women through an array of analyses based on 'madwomen'...'[T]he whole cast of characters in his (Freud's) early work consists of women...not a single man is present. [He was a] man who never stopped talking about women.'

<sup>15</sup> Despite feminism's ambivalence towards psychoanalysis, it remains a complex, well-developed tool, which is attractive in creating a critical framework for analysis especially in the field of the visual. Indeed psychoanalysis has expanded to beyond psychology into areas in the social sciences and humanities. Feminist ambivalence concerning psychoanalysis is primarily due to its inherent masculine perspectives and interests. Yet, given its engagement with some notions of femininity (see footnote above), feminist scholars such as Toril Moi (1986) believes that by changing the notion of femininity psychoanalysis will have a transformative impact and thus result in a far-reaching feminist questioning. Moreover, Ranjanna Khanna (2003) has pointed out the link between psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory, emphasising the psychoanalysis' roots within the history of Western colonialism.

<sup>16</sup> The act of writing is simultaneously translated into the making and producing of artistic works such as painting, sculpture etc. Helene Cixous (1991) draws a parallel example from painting to the process and purpose of feminine writing.

process and purpose of writing, the relationship between writing and its subject, and the nature of meaning and genre.<sup>17</sup>

An important aspect of Cixous' conception of *écriture féminine* is her emphasis on writing the body. Cixous stresses that women's bodies - including their perception of themselves and their sex-specific experiences as women - have been appropriated and imaged by men. She states:

*Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth. .. [T]o write. An act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal ... (Cixous, Cohen et al. 1976: 880)*

Cixous argues in *The Laugh of the Medusa* that *écriture féminine* operates on two levels: on the first level the individual wo/man must find her own sexuality, one that is rooted in her own body, and find ways to express herself through the act of writing. Secondly, when a woman speaks, the structure of language will change - therefore a woman is no longer a passive object but takes over as an active subject. The change in the structure of the language will bring forth new signifiers that will include woman – previously excluded - into the stable order of meaning (Cixous, Cohen et al. 1976).

Critics of *écriture féminine* argue that defining the specificity of women's writing is a utopian attempt. It is parallel to the essentialist view that there is a universal category of 'woman' with shared interests and beliefs based on nature (Jones 1981; Sellers 1996). Another problem with *écriture féminine* is that woman seems to exist ahistorically, separated from

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<sup>17</sup> Psychoanalysis, especially the works of Freud and Lacan, has become the starting point for *écriture féminine*. In developing her theory, Cixous, et al. (1976) argue against the Symbolic Order proposed by Freud and Lacan as a phallogocentric system, within which the woman's body is unrepresentable.

social and cultural surroundings. Butler (2006) argues that gender is constructed by (and intersects with) different factors like race, sexuality, nationality, class and ability and that therefore difference is constructed, not inherent in every woman.

Indonesian scholars have repeatedly used *écriture féminine* as a starting point to analyse the representation of women in cultural productions.<sup>18</sup> Many Indonesian literary critics and writers took up *écriture féminine* to analyse the writing of self, specifically the erotic self (Paramadhita 2007: 67-68). Cixous and Irigaray were widely cited by Indonesian literary critics at the same time as the resurgence of women's writing in Indonesia in the 1990s.<sup>19</sup> The trend, which arguably started with the publication of *Saman* by Ayu Utami in 1998, marked the emergence of texts by other women writers that openly discuss women's sexuality.<sup>20</sup> Open discussion of women's sexuality, as represented through *Saman* and works by other women writers, makes a significant contribution to critical interrogation of the hegemony of patriarchy in Indonesia.

Nonetheless this view is countered by some critics – albeit smaller in number - who argue that the 'celebratory' contribution is still quite superficial and further investigations should have been made as to how effectively the works of Ayu Utami and her contemporaries criticised patriarchy (Bandel 2005; Marching 2007).

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<sup>18</sup> Enin Supriyanto and Farah Wardani, Indonesian art curator and art historian respectively, have used *écriture féminine* in their writings. See Wardani (2003).

<sup>19</sup> Pamela Allen (2007) argues that the need for such an explanatory framework seems to arise particularly after the collapse of the New Order regime in 1998.

<sup>20</sup> Indonesian women writers' exploration of themes of sex and sexuality has gained them the term *sastrawangi* (fragrant literature) in the mostly-male circles of Indonesian literature critics. The term, however, is considered to be patronising and somewhat derogatory as it refers as much to the physical appearances of the writers (as well as their age and class context as most of them are young, urban and middle class) as much as the content of their texts. Some of these writers in addition to Ayu Utami are Djenar Maesa Ayu, Fira Basuki, Dewi Lestari, and Dinar Rahayu. For discussion about *sastrawangi* see Hatley (1999), Allen (2007), Bodden *ibid*.

Furthermore, the use of *écriture féminine* as an analytical framework to analyse texts by Indonesian writers tends, as argued by Allen (2007), to result in a narrow interpretation. *Écriture féminine* in the Indonesian context is perceived as writing by women who focus only on sexuality, with a focus on high-profile Indonesian women writers and excluding other writers whose works are also informed by feminist thinking.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Gender critique in Indonesian visual arts discourses***

In visual arts, Indonesian critics and scholars are less certain about framing and reading works by women artists. However, Indonesian art texts that explained the rise of postmodernism in Indonesian visual arts in the 1990s such as *Outlet: Yogyakarta within Indonesian contemporary art scene* (2001) and *Aspek-aspek Seni Visual: Politik dan Gender* (2001) have cited feminisms as one of the critical theories that emerged in Indonesia during the 1990s. And yet the texts have little to say about the development of feminism as a distinct practice or critical discourse in Indonesian art.

Tommy Awuy's curatorial essay (2001) mentioned in the previous chapter, touched upon the issue of moving beyond binary opposition as a basis for analysing works by Indonesian women artists. Awuy's argument possibly refers to the representation of women as victims of patriarchy in many works of Indonesian women artists. This is also an issue that was often discussed during the fieldwork with many artists and arts practitioners in Indonesia, namely that 'feminist art' equals to this type of representation.

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<sup>21</sup> Hellwig (2007) has argued that Nukila Amal's *Cala Ibi* for example has represented a different kind of female subjectivity through allegorical style instead of direct references to the female body or taboo subjects represented in *sastrawangi*. Also, *Forum Lingkar Pena* (Circle Pen Forum), an Islamic literary community, has helped to foster publications by young women writers despite its Islamic-based philosophy. Founded by Helvy Tiana Rosa and her sister Asma Nadia and Mutmainah in 1997, this self-funded organisation is described by Arimbi (2009) as canon counter-discourse as they provide a multitude of Muslim women identities. See Hellwig *ibid.*, Arimbi (2009) and also Hellwig (2011).

Yet, given that many Indonesian women (and also LGBTI communities) still find it difficult or even unacceptable to point out gender oppression in the strongly patriarchal society, I argue that it is still necessary for women artists to employ this strategy. For example, Arahmaiani's politics of visibility, which will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 7, worked particularly well in not only addressing gender issues in Indonesia and overseas, but also in challenging Western feminisms itself. Cheng (1999: 208) argues that any kind of presence – defined as representational visibility – still offers greater possibility than absence, for the subject to achieve momentary liberation and exercise individual will.

Nonetheless, some Indonesian art historians and curators, such as Farah Wardani, employ gender critique (*écriture féminine*) to explore the notion of subjectivity in the works of Indonesian artists, both female and male. Her reading of the Balinese artist IGAK Murniasih brings out elements of the artist's works often overlooked by mainstream art critics:

*In Murni's [works] painting acts like masturbation. In an environment where sex becomes obsession as well as commodity, a woman's body is worshipped to the extent that she is trapped within a passive narcissist prison. Looking at Murni's works we are reminded about the other side of women's sexuality, a narcissist desire to reclaim one's own body after being violated, given for the others to enjoy. The body reclaims itself by copulating with each of its own parts.*<sup>22</sup> (Wardani 2003)

Wardani is able to read beyond the personal narratives and/or the artist's biography. She has suggested that the representation of disembodied organs is a way for the artist to

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<sup>22</sup> Pada Murni, melukis seolah menjadi sarana masturbasi. Dalam sebuah lingkungan di mana seks menjadi obsesi sekaligus komoditas, tubuh wanita diartikan sedemikian rupa hingga menempatkan perempuan dalam sebuah penjara narsisme yang pasif. Melihat karya-karya Murni seperti diingatkan akan sisi lain dari seksualitas wanita, suatu hasrat yang narsistik untuk merebut kembali tubuh sendiri yang telah terlalu banyak terperkosakan, diserahkan untuk dinikmati yang lain. Dalam persetubuhan dengan setiap organnya sendiri, tubuh itu menemukan dirinya kembali.

reclaim her pleasure from the Symbolic. The implication of Wardani's reading is that the female body and sexuality can also be theorised through art works, not merely presented as an object for viewing pleasure (Murni's works will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 5).

However, this kind of framing is still scarce in the Indonesian art world. Art critics, scholars and historians, both Indonesian and foreign, have focused their attention on the relationship between biography, symbolism and style in conveying their gender-based assessment. By focusing on style and form, the scholars look for particular expressions by women artists through symbols or other representational strategies in their works.

Indonesian art critic and scholar Sanento Yuliman was one of the first Indonesian scholars to specifically raise the issue of gender in his art criticism. He argued that a 1987 exhibition by a group of women artists named *Nuansa Indonesia* was one of the strongest clarion calls of *perang seks* (sex war or gender war) between Indonesian female and male artists (Yuliman 2001). The critic stated that works in this exhibition were markedly of masculine nature, as bronze sculptures and large canvasses dominated the exhibition. According to Yuliman the absence of women's visual language such as pottery, embroidery, *batik* and other fiber-based art indicated the domination of a masculine paradigm even amongst women art practitioners.

Yuliman's essay echoes a similar view voiced by American feminist critic Lucy Lippard, who argues that certain forms, shapes and colors are strongly associated with works by women artists. These 'feminine' qualities are then reclaimed by feminist artists to restate their political messages (Lippard 1976). For Yuliman, these visual languages should have been included in the exhibition and celebrated as expression of female voices although unlike

Lippard he did not go on to discuss the way these visual languages are celebrated in works of feminist artists.

Yuliman's statement was arguably ahead of its time in questioning the predominance of the masculine medium in modern art in Indonesia, and was echoed by the renowned Indonesian feminist and scholar Toety Heraty. In her *Perihal Rekayasa dan Bias Gender (On Manipulation and Gender Bias)*, Heraty also calls for the reinstatement of a female language in the visual arts (Noerhadi 2003). The proposal by both writers is supported by another Indonesian art curator and writer, Enin Supriyanto, who calls for the inclusion of gender-based assessments in Indonesian art history (2001; 2003; 2007). Supriyanto particularly pays attention to what he sees as the clash between high art (classic Western art history) and low art (visual culture, traditional art), which has the effect of marginalizing female-based visual cultures i.e. pottery, *batik*, and embroidery.

This approach assumes that only women artists have the capacity to produce such visual vocabulary, yet many male artists are equally skillful and have used such language and colors throughout the course of art history. The issue is even more tangled by the hybridity of practice and themes in contemporary art practice, especially in Indonesia where there is no clear-cut distinction between contemporary art practices and craft.

In contrast to Yuliman and Noerhadi, artist and academic Dolorosa Sinaga seems to take for granted that any medium in art can be non-hegemonic. Instead of focusing on artistic medium and content she urges women artists to take more direct action by creating a movement (Sinaga 2003). Sinaga side-steps the possibility of medium as political tool and argues that Indonesian women artists are still too preoccupied with their personal issues. She argues that Indonesian women artists avoid direct political actions despite the fact that



their works already express socio-political concerns.<sup>23</sup> However, Sinaga also acknowledges that it is inconceivable that the (Indonesian) women's art movement should be the same as Western feminism, especially from the 1970s as the experiences and context are different.<sup>24</sup>

The dissonance between theorists such as Yuliman, Noerhadi and Supriyanto and practitioners as represented by Sinaga is quite striking. The critics seem to be building an argument that it is possible to analyze gender issues through style and medium in the works of art, and at the same time the approach also offers a possibility for a wider interpretation of works by women artists. The practitioners from Dolorosa Sinaga to Kelompok PEREK, however, seem to disregard this idea and prefer to focus on other issues, such as creating a support group or even political movement for women artists.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Reading personal history from the canvas***

Through her numerous publications about Indonesian women artists (1994, 1996, 1999), art historian Astri Wright paved the way for writing about Indonesian women artists. Her 1994 book *Soul, Spirit and Mountain* (1994) includes one chapter to women artists, with a focus

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<sup>23</sup> Sinaga's views are quite possibly influenced by her involvement in political activism after 1998. Her strong reluctance to be labeled as 'women artist' was well-known in the Indonesian art world. However, her view changed drastically after the events of May 1998 where hundreds of Chinese-Indonesian women were raped during the last days of the New Order regime. A formidable abstract sculptor, she slowly progressed into making female figures to signify her shifting politics. For a discussion of her works see Arbuckle (2008) or Bianpoen, et al. (2007).

<sup>24</sup> Here we can argue that women artists are already taking steps to accept the concept. Perhaps they are also seeking to integrate feminism into their artistic processes. However, the art world in Indonesia, just like anywhere else in the world, is comprised of interlinked components, namely critics, curators, academia (local and foreign), collectors, and cultural institutions. The lack of interest on the part of curators and critics in researching works by Indonesian women and especially a strong lack of a woman's perspective also add to the problems. In August 2007, during an artist's talk session in the National Gallery which I convened, some artists also raised the issue of re-examining feminism and even proposed to discard the term completely and use a new term that is unique to the Indonesian context (Pambudy (2007).

<sup>25</sup> Women artists in my various interviews have indeed expressed the need for a support group. Kelompok PEREK for example, was formed amongst other things from the need for a support group for women artists. They seek to create a friendly environment and space to work where they can explore women-centred perspectives in their art works. See also statements about the non-political nature of medium by Tiarna Sirait and Dolorosa Sinaga in the event described in n.14.

on Kartika Affandi and Lucia Hartini. Wright's writing heavily focuses on their biographies and uses their works to represent the artists' narratives and reflect the socio-cultural contexts of the paintings.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, art journalist Carla Bianpoen, co-author of *The Curtain Opens: Indonesian Women Artists*, has written a large body of work on Indonesian women artists and she is also a strong supporter of some prominent women artists. Perhaps informed by her background in journalism, her writing similarly focuses on human interest and the personal narrative of the artist. She stated in an interview that 'women's biographies are intricately woven into their works, for most women artists work from within their experiences and feelings' (Supriyanto 2007a).

This approach elevates the personal history and narrative of the artists, often ignored by mainstream art critics, into something visible through representational strategies, thus turning the personal into something political. Themes such as the everyday life of Indonesian women/artists that so far were considered to be a private domain or limited to feminine spaces are interpreted openly as a question mark or as a challenge to patriarchal views.

Yet, such reading possibly not only limits the potential for a multifarious interpretation of their works but also reduces the complex symbolisms in the art works. The focus on

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<sup>26</sup> Wright's approach reveals the problematic relationships between the artists and their domestic and social backgrounds – an important framework often ignored by male critics - yet Wright's approach tends to position the artists in a unilateral independence outside the patriarchal culture. For example, it is limited in its reading of Kartika Affandi and Lucia Hartini's works in the dynamic context of Indonesian visual art.

personal history or even trauma may invite the belief that art works straightforwardly mirror the artist's innermost feeling and thoughts.<sup>27</sup>

This approach also often falls short of creating productive reading beyond the art works as biography or personal history of the artist. Moreover, it fails to penetrate the rigid patriarchal structure and masculine gaze in Indonesian art regardless of how well-intentioned the artistic or curatorial strategy is. An example of this problem is an exhibition titled *Provocative Bodies*, September 22 - October 14, 2004 in CP Artspace, Jakarta. Curated by Jim Supangkat, the exhibition showcased paintings and sculptures of two male artists from different generations, namely Mochtar Apin (1924-1994) and Teguh Priyono (b.1964).<sup>28</sup> The exhibition by Supangkat was intended to explore Apin's later period, still focusing on his signature nudes. According to the curator, Apin's latter nudes were an exploration by the artist to look beyond the female body as an object in art. The curator further argued that Priyono continued Apin's exploration; Priyono's sculptures are metaphors for the overwhelming power of female sexuality and empowered women. The curatorial framework thus was intended to explore the feminine power in the works of these male artists.

Apin's nudes are delicate paintings with soft, harmonizing tones. The artist showed his technical skills acquired through his extensive studies in Europe, from composition to anatomical details that are in accordance with traditional rules of nude painting. In contrast

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<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the reading also invites accusations of over-subjective readings from the scholar when objective, rational historical distance is expected from such work. Paradoxically, the objective, rational reading is almost always embodies a masculine framework in reading and/or interpreting art works. The search for female-based visual language thus faces a significant stumbling block as it cannot escape the prescribed masculine framework. For further discussion see Pollock (1999).

<sup>28</sup> Apin was known as one of Indonesia's leading modernist painters; he was also a member of Persagi (Persatuan Ahli Gambar Indonesia, Indonesian Painter's Association). Apin travelled extensively in Europe as part of his education and he subsequently settled in Bandung as a lecturer in the Faculty of Fine Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology. While he was a staunch member of the Bandung School, which is known for its strong abstract art, Apin's body of work was dominated by his nude paintings.

to Basuki Abdullah's pin-up, exaggerated nudes, Apin's nudes are more subdued and almost natural in their depiction.

However, in contrast to the argument presented in the curatorial notes, Apin's paintings still represented the female bodies from a singularly male perspective. The paintings in the exhibition showed the figures posing with various objects, such as umbrella, sarongs, and they always appear to be either lost in thought or in an amiable mood. Meanwhile, more disturbingly, Priyono's works failed completely to show the empowering female sexuality. Instead, the sculptures represented an aggressively male gaze in looking at the female body through a representation of writhing, masturbating and female-to-female sexual games.

The strategy of including women artists within the mainstream consciousness does not in itself guarantee an investigation of the highly-gendered nature of the Indonesian art world structure. A similar situation applies in the case of a strategy related to the biography approach developed by Ira Adriati, an academic from the Bandung Institute of Technology. Adriati has approached gender-based reading of visual arts using a psychological framework. Using Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Adriati argues that the works of Indonesian women artists are the manifestations of their self-actualization processes (Adriati 2010). Maslow's theory explains that humans have a hierarchy of needs, such as physiological, safety, love and belonging and esteem, with self-actualization sitting at the peak of the pyramid. Even if all other needs may have been fulfilled, one is incomplete if one is unable to manifest one's self-actualization. Central to Adriati's thesis is the notion that Indonesian women artists feel the need to create art as a realization of personal potential and thus are

not only able feel a sense of fulfillment but also get validation of their capabilities within mainstream society.<sup>29</sup>

This approach gives a more nuanced reading of the artist's biography, yet it still relies predominantly on personal narratives of the artist. Furthermore, this reading reinforces the belief that a woman's art works are the direct manifestation of her innermost feelings and thoughts. Adriati only critiques the patriarchal structure without sufficiently explaining how the structure actually works to marginalize women artists or how it was created in the first place.

### ***Searching for the feminine in Indonesian visual arts***

The abovementioned approaches by scholars and writers concerned with Indonesian art and literature have given us a glimpse of the challenge of finding a suitable framework in which to analyse works by women artists.

While *écriture féminine* has the potential to read female subjectivity through the act of writing and creating art, the narrow focus on and interpretation of sexuality in Indonesia has excluded a wide range of other issues for Indonesian women artists and writers. For example, identifying women with their bodies is dangerously open to the conservative interpretation of biological traits such as size, hormones, lack of strength, menstruation, reproductive functions, and so on. Furthermore, what constitutes a female body is determined by social, historical, cultural, ethnic and even class specificities.

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<sup>29</sup> Ira Adriati is amongst the few female academics in Indonesian art academies who are committed to feminist ideas in critiquing the male-dominated Indonesian art world. She has published a book about women artists (Western) and various journal articles of Indonesian women artists (Adriati (2007a), Adriati (2007b), Adriati and Sachari (2008).

Women writers mentioned in the previous paragraphs are mostly based in Jakarta or other urban areas; they mostly have tertiary education and are of middle to upper class background. The issues of sexuality and sexual freedom represented in their works, while not necessarily limited to Indonesian urban areas, have overshadowed the potential of these issues to criticise patriarchy and the reading of female sexuality for the vast majority of Indonesian women. Furthermore, the controversy surrounding the writers and their works made the texts unable to stand as a sustained critique of patriarchy in post-New Order Indonesia. As Wolff (1990: 133) has stated 'biology is always overlaid and mediated through culture, the ways women experience their bodies are a product of political and social processes'.

Therefore, I propose to employ a twofold approach, namely strategies of correction and strategies of interrogation, as a strategic framework through which to read works by Indonesian women artists. Strategies of correction have primarily been practised within feminist art history by re/introducing and re/inserting women artists previously ignored by the masculine structure. While I have explained the limitation of this strategy, in the Indonesian context it is still necessary. Due to the limited research that has been done in Indonesian art history, Indonesian scholars and academics are continuously finding new discoveries and interpretation about art and artists in general.

I will apply the approach of re-discovery of women's works in the case of Emiria Sunassa and Mia Bustam. However, the research will primarily focus on strategies of interrogation. These strategies aim to reveal not only women's socio-historically specific forms of writing and visual representation but also the patriarchal structure that surrounds it, in particular canon and canon-making in Indonesian art history. Wolff (1990) argues that there is a need to

understand body politics for the purposes of feminist analysis. She states that 'any body politics therefore must speak of the body; stressing its materiality and its social and discursive construction, yet at the same time be able to subvert and disrupt the patriarchal regime that surrounds it' (Wolff 1990: 138).

### ***Interventions in art history***

Strategies of correction must inevitably deal with history. Since its beginning in the 1940s, Indonesian art has been dominated by an all-male cast and a male version of history. History and its canons have always been selective in their inclusion strategies and often ignored those considered to be minorities, women artists being the prime example. This exclusion has also discriminated against other groups that have been rendered invisible, such as artists working outside the urban centres or outside Java and Bali, and non-academically trained artists (according to Mella Jaarsma, co-founder of Cemeti Art House, IGAK Murniasih was initially rejected by the Balinese art worlds because she was not academically trained but she was later embraced by the mainstream art world).

In creating an intervention in the hegemonic masculinity of Indonesian art history, I employ an active re-reading using the lens of psychoanalysis, in order to reveal what has been suppressed or hidden under art historical canons. Searching for the feminine within the Indonesian canons, I have taken up Griselda Pollock's notion of *differencing* the canon, that is a re-reading or re-visioning what is already there in the system, rather than merely inserting/reintroducing women artists within art history.

Arguably, Indonesian art history has been built on the premises of nationalism and modernism, both of which are rendered almost exclusively male. Since its beginning in the

1940s, Indonesian art history has been dominated by male artists, writers and critics, thus it has been seen almost as 'natural' that not only Indonesian art historiography is predisposed towards male artists but also that women's participation was/is often undocumented.

A case in point is the publication of selected essays about Indonesian modern art titled *Seni Rupa Modern: Esai-esai Pilihan* (2006). Edited by two Indonesian critics and curators, Aminudin TH Siregar and Enin Supriyanto, the publication selects forty essays by Indonesian artists, writers and critics from the 1930s until the 1950s. Perhaps unsurprisingly, considering Indonesian art history's masculine formation, the selected writers are all male and all but one of the artists discussed in the publication are also male (the only exception is Emiria Sunassa).

Ranjana Khanna's (2003) notion of colonial melancholy provides a useful framework for investigating the roots of this problem, which will be explored in more detail in Chapter 4. Khanna posits that colonial melancholia is a post-colonial affect, where haunting occurs within colonial subjects unable to mourn the loss of their culture – rendered invisible by colonialism – and its aftermath.<sup>30</sup> By reading the works of Indonesian women artists against the grain of mainstream nationalistic sentiments, a psychoanalytic lens is used to analyse the formation of Indonesian art history within a feminist framework.

Further use of psychoanalysis is also employed in analysing the canons of Indonesian art history. Art history often consists of several, often competing canons. Canons may be understood as retrospectively legitimating the backbone of cultural and political identity.

Canons signify what academic institutions establish as the best, the most representative,

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<sup>30</sup> Melancholia is the failure to properly introject lost love objects and to internalize values so that they can contribute to the formation of ego structure, particularly the super-ego. The colonised subject is unable to mourn the loss of culture or tribe as it is being rendered invisible by colonialism. One of the results of the loss of memory is haunting, where the objects haunt the subject in a hallucination or trace (Khanna (2003).



and the most significant texts. Moreover, they establish what is unquestionably great, as well as what must be studied as a model by those aspiring to the practice (Pollock 1999: 3).

In Indonesia, there are two canons of art history seen to have emerged from two particular historical periods namely the nationalist expressions in the 1940s and the turn towards experimental arts in the 1970s. The strategy to difference the canon is significant in order to not fall into the trap of creating or substituting the existing masculine canons with their feminine counterpart. Historical texts about Indonesian art have repeatedly emphasised the roles of its founding fathers such as S. Sudjojono, Hendra Gunawan, Affandi and others as canons of Indonesian art. While it is tempting (and quite legitimate) to argue for the inclusion of names such as Kartini, Rukmini, Emiria Sunassa, Tridjoto Abdullah within Indonesian art history's formative years, such re-inclusion/reinsertion would not address the issues of gender bias in the canons of Indonesian art.

Furthermore, nationalism is a gendered process. Indonesian women's participation in post-independence processes has been documented in works by scholars such as Susan Blackburn (2004), Elizabeth Martyn (2005), and Saraswati Sunindyo (1998) amongst others but the link between nationalism, gender and art has not been explored thoroughly by scholars. Indeed, most artists documented in Indonesian art history during this period were male and yet this has never been questioned by Indonesian art historians.

The psychoanalytic reading aims to tease out the construction of hegemonic masculinity within Indonesian art history and its beginning as a constitutive effect of colonialism. The mainstream nationalist-masculinist belief (Supangkat 1997; Soemantri, Supangkat et al. 1998; Sudjojono 2006 (orig. 1946)) that Indonesian modern art began as a reaction to colonialism is only partially true, because it does not make explicit the connection between

the emasculated colonial subject and the hyper-masculine/national attitude as reflected in many revolutionary paintings and sculptures in post-colonial Indonesia.

The *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia* (GSRB, Indonesian New Art Movement) in the 1970s, which will be explored in more detail in Chapter 3, will be analysed through Freudian psychoanalysis to suggest the possibility that this movement had elements of Oedipal struggle. This reading is an attempt to difference the canon or to expand the critique of the canon, in addition to a gender analysis of the movement.

I aim to reveal that what has been considered as 'natural', i.e. male gaze and male domination in the Indonesian art world, is in fact deeply connected to its traumatic formation during decolonisation as well as a representation of an internal struggle between Father and Son in canon formation.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Body Politics/Politics of the Body***

Readings of political motherhood, maternal subjectivity and the monstrous feminine are amongst the strategies of interrogation that I propose in order to open up a discursive space of alternative female subjectivity. These strategies function to re-read the works of Indonesian women artists that are already within the mainstream art world. The active re-reading of these works also looks at how an alternative reading can produce interpretations that are closer to a non-patriarchal expression of gender and the body.

Ideas of feminism in the Indonesian context may have paved the way for articulating the female experience in the visual arts. However, the ambiguities in the ideological

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<sup>31</sup> For discussions on male domination in Indonesian visual arts see for example Arahmaiani (2011), Adriati (2007b), and Noerhadi (2003).

construction of Indonesian women in the post-Suharto era are also manifest in the everyday life of many Indonesian women. That is, female agency is still split between the perception of modern womanhood i.e. independent and urbane, and the more familiar perception of harmonious domesticity i.e. mother and wife as their primary roles through for example, idealised representation of motherhood. Without privileging one position over the other, the ambiguities often result in the production of texts that are contradictory and revealing at the same time.

For example, an artist from Yogyakarta, Lelyana Kurniawati (b. 1976), reinstates in her paintings the female nude, with all its latent eroticism, as a symbol of beauty. Kurniawati's recent paintings mostly consist of self-portraits. The artist paints full length figures of herself, often multiplied within one pictorial surface surrounded by objects of personal meanings to the artist. One painting titled "A..but..her..fly" (2009, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 120 cm) (Fig.1) depicts three nude figures of the artist, kneeling and looking upwards with a slight smile. Painted on a pink background, the figures are surrounded by butterflies and flowers. The artist however, altered this vision of female sensuality by adding a thin red paint over the figures, simulating the effect of a running liquid (blood?) as well as leaving the upraised arms of the figures unfinished, making them look like stumps. The painting seems to have a playful association with butterflies as indicated by the title, and at the same time suggestions of the incapability of flight as shown by the missing arms/wings of the figures.

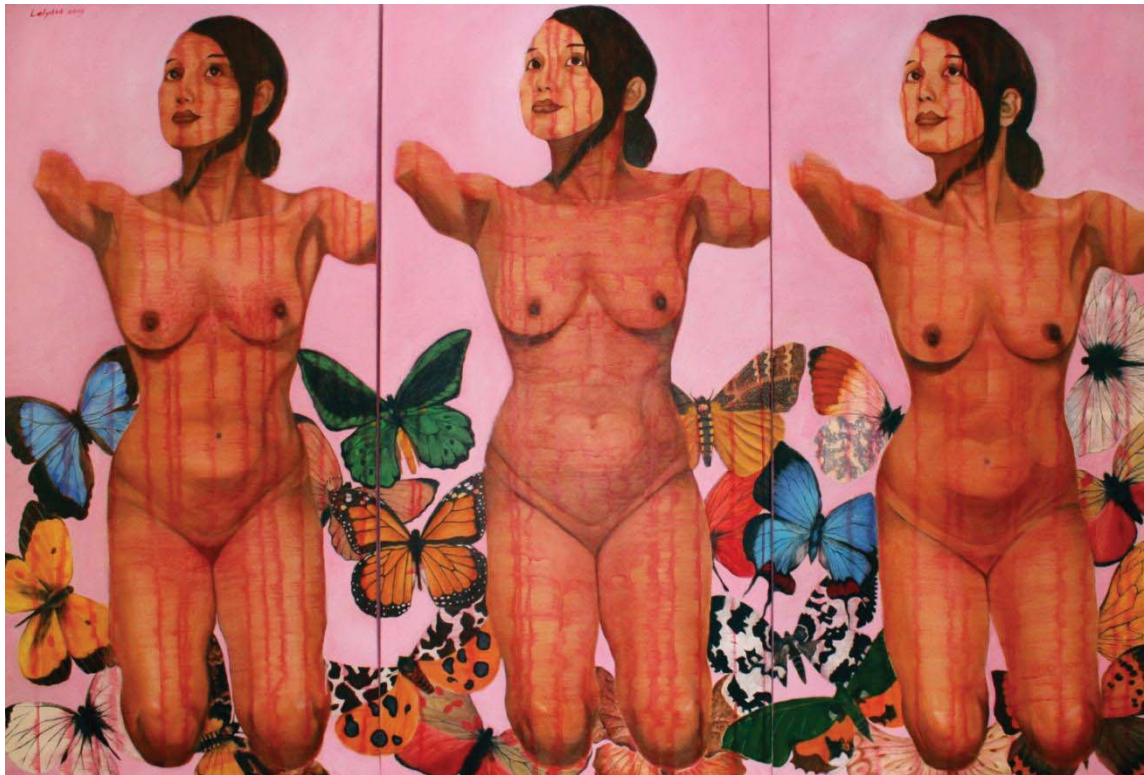


Fig. 1 Lelyana Kurniawati "A..but..her..fly" (2009, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 120 cm (triptych), collection of the artist).

The artist has stated that the nude functions as a metaphor for the self, and as such is a vehicle for the exploration of her own sexuality (L Kurniawati 2010, pers. comm., 20 July). This statement implies a more autobiographical intent and downplays the influence of the male gaze still pervasive in Indonesian visual arts. Kurniawati's essentialist explanation of her works appears to disregard the preoccupations of feminist criticism over the past ten years. Paradoxically, Kurniawati is also a member of Kelompok PEREK (*Perempuan Eksperimental*, Experimental Women's group), an all female art collective whose founding was inspired by feminist ideas.<sup>32</sup>

The ambiguities in Kurniawati's statement and self-portrait seem to suggest that she is, in fact, attuned to the contradictions of feminism and aware of how its uncertainties impinge on her creativity. Moreover, she created her painting at a time when all distinctions

<sup>32</sup> Kelompok PEREK will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

pertaining to sexuality and identity seem to be under review in Indonesia. So-called 'pornography' came flooding in with the advent of new digital and online media and information networks, prompting the Indonesian government to be increasingly pressured by the 'moral majority' to expose and punish 'deviant' sexual practices such as homosexuality, trans-sexuality, premarital sex and what is deemed pornographic as discussed in Chapter One. Kurniawati seemingly responds by defying the ban with a hint of rebelliousness, making concessions to feminism and art styles that are implicit rather than overt.

In post-New Order Indonesia contemporary Indonesian women artists have consistently explored the ambiguity of feminine identity and experience. I argue that an active re-reading of the works that deal with the representation of motherhood and maternal subjectivity enables us to see beyond the binary-construction set by hegemonic masculinity in Indonesian art. In this thesis motherhood is not seen as the ultimate representation of the feminine but rather as an active, speaking subject that is also compatible with the identity of the artists as the maker of images and mother as the maker of flesh.

Julia Kristeva provides a pathway for examining motherhood and maternal subjectivity in the visual arts. In her 1980 *Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini* she explores the representation of motherhood in classical Western art through the images of Madonna in the works of Giovanni Bellini. Kristeva (1980: 140-1) argues that motherhood is represented through formal abstraction of luminescent colours and forms that dominate the canvas, therefore denying the mother as a real person to appear.

Yet women not only continuously write, produce and make art, they also have been able to negotiate the male traditions of representing motherhood. In representing motherhood,

women artists are dealing with both a biological given and a rigid set of conceptions and representations. In this sense Kristeva's thinking has been unable to explain the link between female creativity and art. At the heart of the representational problem is motherhood as the original division of labour: men create art, women have babies. Therefore the question left is how do women represent motherhood and maternal subjectivity when they actively play a role in shaping this reproductive role? This is where the reading of maternal subjectivity is helpful to add a more in-depth explanation of the psycho-symbolic elements of motherhood, such as ambiguity and fear, which are often ignored by the mainstream art world.

### ***Abjection and the monstrous feminine***

Another strategy to analyse the representation of the female body is through the lens of the abject and the grotesque. The notion of the abject that destabilises and disorganises the selfhood is useful in analysing works by Indonesian women artists. The abject challenges the power of the social to shape and regulate human bodies. Jones (2007) argues that women artists in the West since the 1990s have used abjection to destabilize the everyday relationships between food, death, sex and bodies. The use of ab/object in visual art practices can also be seen as an attempt to counter the 1970s art history stereotype of 'women's art' (Butler and Mark 2007; Meagher 2011).

The notion of the abject in art was first introduced through the work of Julia Kristeva, mainly in the field of literature, before it was applied in other areas from architecture to the visual arts. *Powers of Horror: an Essay of Abjection* (1982) is a theoretical account of the psychic origins and mechanisms of revulsion and disgust through a reading of Freud's Oedipus

complex and Lacan's mirror phase. Kristeva argues that the formation of the self that occurs before the Symbolic phase, as identified by Freud and Lacan, in fact occurs much earlier, namely when the infant starts expelling what seems to be part of itself such as urine, vomit, excrement. And yet, what is abjected does not disappear altogether; it hovers at the periphery of one's existence, constantly challenging one's fragile borders of selfhood.

Kristeva also suggests that abjection can explain the structural and political acts of inclusion/exclusion, which establish the foundations of social existence. She asserts that the abject has a double presence: it is both within 'us' and within 'culture' and it is through both individual and group rituals of exclusion that abjection is 'acted out' (Tyler 2009: 79).

Abjection is attractive to feminist scholars because it offers the possibility that 'reading for the abject' within specific cultural domains can challenge and/or displace the disciplinary norms that frame dominant representations of gender. Covino (2000) states that abject criticism is a departure from traditional aesthetics, which has informed significant feminist typologies and has proved a triumph for women. Feminist theorists see the practice of abject criticism as variously exposing, disrupting and/or transcoding the historical and cultural associations between women's bodies, reproduction and the abject (Koerner 1997; Tyler 2009).<sup>33</sup>

However, some scholars have pointed out the limitations of reading abjection. Abjection is not just a psychic process but a social experience. Disgust reactions, hate speech, acts of physical violence and the dehumanizing effects of law are integral to processes of abjection. Indeed, abjection should be understood as a concept that describes the violent exclusionary

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<sup>33</sup> One of the most influential texts of abject criticism is Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1993). Indeed, *The Monstrous-Feminine* is frequently cited as evidence of the use of Kristeva's theory of abjection. The book analyses a genre which repeatedly produces maternal bodies as abject – horror film – and employs close analysis to expose the violent gendered codes of abjection (Creed (1993).

forces operating within modern states: forces that strip people of their human dignity and reproduce them as dehumanized waste, the dregs and refuse of social life (Krauss 1999: 236). The problem, as Butler states, is to imagine how 'such socially saturated domains of exclusion be recast from their status as "constitutive" to beings who might be said to matter' (1993: 189).

In *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1994) literary theorist Mary Russo warns that the risk of this affirmative abjection is precisely that it might reproduce rather than challenge the cultural production of women as abject. Similarly art historian and critic Martin Jay (1994) argues that with the assimilation of artists whose work incorporates some form of abjection into the museum, its power as cultural critique from the margins may be diminished. What once had been considered taboo may now be consumed as style, as exotic fetish. Jay questions the ethics involved in the exhibition of repulsive and genuinely harmful substances as exemplified in the "Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art" exhibition (1993). His most compelling critical question is: '(H)ow can the artist avoid the sublimating elevation of abjection into precisely the idealized state it is supposed to undermine?' (Jay 1994: 242).

Nonetheless, abjection is still attractive to theorize the 'other' in the Indonesian art world, namely the marginalised and the periphery. I employ the abject and the grotesque through what Barbara Creed has termed the *monstrous feminine* to bring out elements of female desire in the works of an Indonesian woman artist, elements that are hidden or suppressed by the mainstream art world. As will be demonstrated, the expression of female desire is able to unsettle the notion of femininity and subjectivity in Indonesian visual arts.



### ***Concluding remarks***

Using the lens of psychoanalysis I will construct a framework through an active re-reading and re-visioning of elements of Indonesian art discourses. The use of psychoanalysis is important in order to read between the lines and in the margins of art history. Only through the inclusion of such methodological tools can a discursive space for feminist analysis in Indonesian art be created.

Both strategies of correction and strategies of interrogation are concerned with finding a non-patriarchal expression of gender and subjectivity, yet the danger of essentialising or valorising the feminine in the works of Indonesian women artists is always present. For example, the analyses of abjection and the grotesque and motherhood and maternal subjectivity are still fairly open to a celebratory type of reading. And yet, precisely by highlighting the complexities I will show that an awareness of body politics in the Indonesian context serves as an entry point to understanding how a strategic reading might produce feminist texts.

## Chapter Three

### Firing the Cannon: Indonesian Art Canons as myth and masculine ideal

Employing Griselda Pollock's notion of differencing the canon, this chapter analyses two key eras in Indonesian art history, namely the period of intense nationalist activity around the time of the achievement of Indonesian independence (1940s-1950s), and the time of the emergence of the radical movement *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia* (Indonesian New Art Movement, 1970s-1980s). The chapter presents a re-reading of the canons through an analysis of the structural nature of canon-making and its selective version of the past. By differencing the canon, this chapter does not simply replace the masculine canon with a feminine version; instead it aims to difference it by an active re-reading and reworking 'of that which is visible and authorised in the spaces of representation' (Pollock 1999: 8).

These two periods are generally accepted by Indonesian scholars as the formative periods of Indonesian art history (Soemantri, Supangkat et al. 1998; Hasan 2001; Adi and Bujono 2012; Hasan, Malna et al. 2012). The first part of this chapter focuses on the figure S. Sudjojono – regarded as the 'founding father' of Indonesian modern art. I will analyse Sudjojono's writings and discuss his iconic painting *Di Depan Kelambu Terbuka* (In front of the open mosquito net, 1939, oil on canvas) as an example of how Indonesian modern art has been shaped by the masculine gaze as well as a masculine nationalist response to colonialism.

The second part of the chapter will analyse another canon, namely the *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia* (henceforth GSRB) that emerged from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s. The movement, spearheaded by eleven young Indonesian artists from three different cities in

Java, was inspired by experimental arts from the West; from Dada at the turn of the twentieth century to Fluxus in the 1960s. Most scholars agreed that this movement was the catalyst for a change in direction in Indonesian modern art towards experimentation and socially conscious art production. The section on GSRB discusses how even within this most progressive group, the turn towards experimental arts not only neglected gender issues but also strengthened gender stereotypes.

I argue that the active re-reading of these canons will illuminate the margins and tease out the in-between spaces in the canons. These elements have been rendered almost unrepresentable by the existing modes of hegemonic discourses, and thus the gendered nature of the canons have been normalised and accepted as tradition. This chapter deals with the canon as myth and as masculine ideal as a framework to explain the context and background of the two women artists, Emiria Sunassa and Mia Bustam, discussed in Chapter 5. Specifically, this chapter aims to pave the way to understand why, despite their small body of work, these artists are significant players in the Indonesian art world. As Pollock (1999: 8) has indicated, the writing of art histories, the place of the artist and of the woman artist are over determined by mythic structures that naturalise a particular range of meanings for masculinity, femininity, and sexual as well as cultural difference.

In this chapter I also discuss the 1999 inaugural exhibition of the National Gallery of Indonesia, to demonstrate how art institutions are heavily implicated in canon-making. I look at how the aftermath and representation of two historical periods namely the nationalist struggle in the 1940s-1950s and the turn towards experimental arts in the 1970s, contributed to the strengthening of hegemonic masculinity in Indonesian art history in this particular exhibition.

An institutional approach will not only enable us to describe the social and economic conditions that make art possible today but it also removes solitary individual agency from the question of art. Furthermore, it opens up analysis of the art work as being constituted by a complex field of forces that are not visible in the art object itself.

### ***Postcolonial masculinity, canon-making and Indonesian modern art***

Linda Nochlin in her famous essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (1988) was amongst the first to raise the question of the lack of women in the canons of Western art history. Her influential text later paved the way for many feminist art historians to recover the works of women artists previously unacknowledged or ignored by the masculine canon. Nonetheless, this type of scholarship also privileges valorisation of the feminine by women artists and does not necessarily deconstruct the structure of art history itself.

Feminist art historian Griselda Pollock defines canon as a discursive formation that constitutes the object/texts it selects as the products of artistic mastery and thereby contributes to the legitimization of white masculinity’s exclusive identification with creativity and with culture (Pollock 1999: 9). She proposes to use psychoanalysis and semiotics to read against the grain, in order to deconstruct the structure of patriarchy that resides at the heart of art history.

The complexity of Indonesia’s modern art history can be traced back to the central Modernist idea that modern art is universal – there is only one kind of modern art and it exists ‘everywhere’; paradoxically ‘everywhere’ was only the industrialized nations of the West, thereby excluding ‘other’ modern art history outside the West (Clark 1993; Araeen,

Cubitt et al. 2002; Desai 2007). Moreover, the notion that modern art history exists in a linear timeline suggested that each new –ism began in a chronological sequence and that there was a clean break from the past. This is especially problematic when one considers the various developments that had happened at the same time *within* modernism itself, especially in Indonesia.

Traditional arts have existed side by side with modern art practices and have been a rich source of context for Indonesian modern art since its inception in the 1940s. Art historian and critic John Clark, writing about modernity in Asian art, argues that the closed discourse of Euro-American perspectives has relegated the dynamic development of Asian modernities to be derivative, secondary, disingenuous and inauthentic (1993: 2). And yet, the transmission of knowledge that occurred constantly between the colonialists and the colonized also contributed to the discourse of modern art in Asia. For when other forms of knowledge are being adopted or transported across geopolitical boundaries, they are then articulated in a different discourse by those who are adopting them (Clark 1993: 4; Poshyananda 1996). Therefore modern art in Asia is comprised of multiple layers of interpretation.

Moreover, the idea that art existed outside its social context – or art for art’s sake - stated that modernist art is self-referential and has achieved an autonomous status. Therefore art existed outside social, historical or cultural context (Harrison 1995). This view automatically excluded an important factor in the development of modern art history in many developing countries pre- and post-Second World War, namely the emergence of nationalism, as well as the amalgamation with local traditions that influenced artistic practices in those countries.

Scholars have pointed out that nationalism itself is a gendered process. Cynthia Enloe (1989) has noted that nationalism has been regarded as a male phenomenon, springing from masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation and masculinised hope. Anne McClintock (1993) argued that nationalism is constituted in the beginning as a gendered discourse and must be understood using a theory of gender power.

Moreover, the emergence of nationalism is also the opportunity for colonised men to reclaim their masculinity after being subjected to feminisation during the colonial rule. As Partha Chatterjee states, once the "civilized white men" boarded their ships to return to their country after colonialism ended, the new masters of postcolonial nations then invented nationalist projects that reflected their ability to imagine manhood for themselves (Chatterjee 1993).

The historian Frances Gouda noted this feminisation (and to some extent, infantilisation) of the native male through her study of the Dutch East Indies. The natives were not only seen as needing guidance and the firm hand of their colonial rulers (Gouda 1993), they were also seen as the personification of a neurotic feminine (Gouda 1997). Furthermore, Gouda (1999) has suggested that the macho behaviour and attitude of Indonesian men during the 1940s – 1950s can be seen as a calculated response to colonial labelling of weakness, and to some extent as a means to reclaim their masculinity.

L. Ayu Saraswati (2011) suggests that in constructing a new manhood in post-colonial Indonesia, Indonesian nationalist projects use the narrative of the female beauty as exemplified in the *Buru* tetralogy by the Indonesian author Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Both Gouda (1999) and Saraswati (2011) suggest that colonialism reordered the structure of masculinity of both colonised men and male colonizers by feminizing the former because of

their race. Gouda (1999: 164) looks at how the image of a nationalist fighter (*pejuang*) relied heavily on hyper-masculinity and femininity was perceived as a threat to revolutionary lassitude.

Saraswati further argues that the female characters in Pramoedya's *Buru* tetralogy function to facilitate the postcolonial nation's new masters' reclamation of their masculinity. While Saraswati is referring to the literary texts of Pramoedya, I argue that something similar also occurred in the visual arts as represented through the works and writings of S. Sudjojono (1931-1986).

### ***Truth and Beauty: the early years of modern art in Indonesia***

*... We will find S.Sudjojono as the prominent figure in laying the foundation for Indonesian modern art. He established the canon of 'Jiwa Khetok' (visible soul) as the most important value in the realism tendencies of artists under the PERSAGI banner<sup>34</sup>. (Effendy 2008)*

Although most Indonesian art historians tend to agree that the creation of Indonesian modern art started with Raden Saleh Syarif Bustaman (1811-1880), it was only fifty years after his death<sup>35</sup> that a movement by a group of indigenous painters emerged and this

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<sup>34</sup> Maka kita akan menemukan sosok S. Soedjojono sebagai figur yang paling menonjol terutama dalam melahirkan pijakan seni rupa modern Indonesia. Ia pernah menelurkan satu konsepsi kanon "Jiwa Khetok" sebagai nilai paling penting dalam kecenderungan realisme para perupa yang bernaung dalam PERSAGI.

<sup>35</sup> An indigenous painter of Javanese aristocratic background, he was educated, trained and widely travelled in Europe for over twenty years before settling back in the Dutch East Indies in 1852 (Marasutan (1973), Wisetrotomo (2001), Kraus (2012). Saleh's style was heavily influenced by Romanticism – a style which was popular during his time in Europe; the style championed strong emotion evoked by aesthetic experiences such as through the sublime power of nature and its aesthetic qualities. When he died in Buitenzorg (Bogor) in

movement was noted as the real start of Indonesian modern art. Nonetheless, the group's style was a departure from Saleh's Romanticist works and instead focused on Realism. This section will focus on the group called Persagi (*Persatuan Ahli-ahli Gambar Indonesia* – the Indonesian Painter's Association), especially the role and influence of one of its co-founders, S. Sudjojono (1931-1986) in shaping Indonesian modern art history.<sup>36</sup> While there are other names mentioned in Indonesian modern art history as the founding fathers of Indonesian modern art, such as Affandi (1907-1989) and Hendra Gunawan (1918-1983), what distinguished Sudjojono was his articulation of his views and thoughts on Indonesian art and nationalism; he was able to express the intellectual and emotional fervour in pre and post-independence Indonesia.<sup>37</sup>

Extensive publications have outlined the trajectory of Indonesian modern art history.

Scholars such as Holt (1967), Wright (1994), Spanjaard (1993; 2004), Miklouho-Maklai (1997), Soemantri (1998), Yuliman (1976; 2001) and Supangkat (1979; 1993; 1997; 1999; 2000) traced the development in post-colonial Indonesia with Persagi.

Established in 1938, Persagi started as a reaction against the established genre of landscape painting, dubbed '*Mooi Indie*' (Beautiful Indies) by Sudjojono.<sup>38</sup> Landscape painters such as

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1880, Saleh did not leave any students or followers, he remained the only Western-trained indigenous painter in the nineteenth century.

<sup>36</sup> The current translation of Persagi as Indonesian Painter's Association is commonly used in many art history texts. However, the literal translation is in fact Indonesian Picture Experts Association. The use of *ahli gambar* (picture/drawing expert) as opposed to *pelukis* (painter) was perhaps an effort by the artists to distance themselves ideologically from the academically-trained and influenced painters of the *Mooi Indie* school, i.e. to be closer to reality/the people; indicating one of their avant-garde tendencies.

<sup>37</sup> Affandi is considered to be one of the Founding Fathers of Indonesian modern art because of his signature style of spontaneous, strong, expressionist strokes often forming thick impastos results in heavily textured canvasses. This style is acquired through direct application of paint on the canvas and by using his fingers to create his images. His well-known subject matter was his self-portraits as well as the everyday life. Despite his friendship and association with his staunchly nationalist peers such as Sudjojono and Hendra Gunawan, Affandi was steadfastly apolitical, preferring to work on his paintings rather than getting involved in politics. In spite of that, Affandi was a well-respected artist and he also exhibited extensively overseas.

<sup>38</sup> The founding year has been a subject of debate amongst Indonesian art scholars. In Claire Holt's book *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (1967) the founding year was mentioned as 1937 and this has been cited



Abdullah Surio Subroto (1878-1941), Mas Pirngadi (1865-1936), Wakidi (1889 - ?) were indigenous painters trained under the influence of Dutch academic style. They created idyllic images of exotic, tranquil landscapes, a genre favoured by the middle to upper class Dutch in the Dutch East Indies (Fig.2).



Fig.2 Abdullah Suriosubroto "Pemandangan di Sekitar Gunung Merapi" (Scenery around Mount Merapi, ca. 1900-1930, oil on canvas, 59 x 95 cm).

The '*Mooi Indie*' painters adhered to the classical formula of European painting whereby the pictorial space must be neatly divided between front, middle and back space. Care in adding light and contrast must be given in order to enhance a certain section of the image and, most importantly, the colour combination must be 'clean' (Hasan 2001), presumably to give the painting a 'refreshing' effect.<sup>39</sup>

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widely in other texts. However, a recent publication by Indonesian curator and art historian Aminudin TH Siregar (2010) established the exact date as 23 October 1938.

<sup>39</sup> An example of the formula was explained by Pirngadie in 1928: *When drawing clouds, use white and ochre, and mixed with a little bit of vermillion. Shadows can be painted by adding into the previous colours with blue.*

However, such strict adherence to the rules was challenged by a young painter who trained under Pirngadie in 1928. The young painter was Sudjojono who later claimed that artists must be free from conventions to be able to express their soul.<sup>40</sup> Painting is not measured by how fast it is painted from the real object but by the intensity of its subject-object relations indicated by the stroke of the brush (Yuliman 1976).

Sudjojono Sindudarsono (1931-1986) was born in Kisaran, North Sumatra, of Javanese parents who had transmigrated to Sumatra and worked as plantation labours. When Sudjojono was four years old, a local HIS (*Hollandsch-Inlandsche School* - primary school in the Dutch East Indies) teacher and painter by the name of Judokusumo took him as his foster son.<sup>41</sup> Judokusumo was impressed by Sudjojono's intellect and aptitude for drawing from an early age. In 1925, Judokusumo and Sudjojono's family moved to Batavia where he continued his HIS schooling before moving to Bandung and Yogyakarta to further his education. Sudjojono was initially trained as a teacher in *Taman Guru of Perguruan Taman Siswa*, Yogyakarta, but later he decided to become a painter.

Sudjojono's foray into painting marked the beginning of Indonesian modern art. He established the search of 'Indonesian-ness' in Indonesian painting and has been credited with inventing the Indonesian equivalent of art (*seni*), artist (*seniman*) and painting (*lukisan*). When Sudjojono and his peers established Persagi in 1938, the goal was to

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*To create water shade on the rice fields, add the previous colour combination with a bit more of the ochre and the blue. Ochre is the key. One must avoid the use of black and white* (Pirngadie quoted in Hasan (2001): 82-3). Pirngadie's background as a highly-accomplished draftsman to a Dutch botanist may have contributed to the formulaic description above. Moreover, to attain the 'perfect image', a certain artistic licence was also practiced by the artists by eliminating objects in their view that were not in keeping with the aesthetic rules of this genre.

<sup>40</sup> Sudjojono also trained under Chioji Yazaki, a Japanese painter in 1935 in Batavia, but not much is known of his training under Yazaki.

<sup>41</sup> Students of HIS schools typically came from families with royal background, civil servants or other distinguished families. The school used Dutch as the main language of instruction while another school on a similar level called the *Inlandsche School* only used the local language.

demonstrate the capability of Indonesian painters to paint just like Western painters and also to begin the search for new Indonesian identity/ies in art.<sup>42</sup>

Sudjojono was often perceived to be the spokesman of the group due to his articulate writings and intelligence.<sup>43</sup> During and after Persagi's short-lived existence (the group dissolved during the arrival of the Japanese in 1942, its members were absorbed into *Keimin Bunka Shidoso* (Cultural Centre in 1943) although accounts of its existence tend to vary).<sup>44</sup> Sudjojono produced a number of texts that were highly influential in the subsequent development of modern Indonesian art and also towards the negation of women as artists.

Firstly, Sudjojono and to a larger extent, Persagi, championed the notion of painting the real. In his book, Sudjojono stated:

*These new painters will not only draw tranquil huts and bluish mountain, or paint romantic corners, or nice and pleasing themes but also they will draw sugar factories and thin farmers, rich people's cars and a young man's pantaloons.*<sup>45</sup> (Sudjojono 1946 in Hasan 2001: 5)

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<sup>42</sup> In its establishment in 1938, the founding members were Sudjojono, Agus Djaya, Affandi and Hendra Gunawan. Other recorded members were Abdul Salam, Sumitro, Sudibio, Sukirno, Suromo, Surono, Setyoso, Herbert Hutagalung, Syoeaib, Emiria Sunassa and many more (Yuliman 1976). Emiria Sunassa is the oft-cited female member of Persagi even though several other members were also active within the group such as Tridjoto Abdullah. See Bustam (2006) for Tridjoto's involvement with Persagi.

<sup>43</sup> According to Siregar (2010) this was a label that Sudjojono was apparently uncomfortable with. He claimed that his writings were independent thoughts and did not represent Persagi's views. However, given Persagi's activities and nationalist outlook it was inevitable that the group and Sudjojono were strongly linked.

<sup>44</sup> After independence several artists associations were established such as *SIM (Seniman Indonesia Muda)* 1947, *Pelukis Rakyat* (1947), *Pelukis Indonesia* (1950). Indonesian artists were split up over political views, geographical positions and also aesthetic ideologies, each following a certain direction which they deemed to be suitable. Documentation about these groups remains scarce, but overall the names which were present in textbooks referred to mostly male artists (Yuliman 1976 in Hasan 2001: 85-6). For further information on the historical accounts of these artist associations, see for example Sanento Yuliman's posthumous publication in Hasan (2001). See also Adi and Bujono (2012).

<sup>45</sup> *Pelukis-pelukis baru ini tidak hanya akan menggambar gubuk yang tenang atau gunung yang kebiru-biruan, atau melukis sudut-sudut yang romantic atau schilderachtige en zoetzappige onderwerpen saja, akan tetapi mereka juga akan menggambar pabrik-pabrik gula dan petani yang kurus, mobil orang-orang kaya dan pantalon si pemuda.*

Sudjojono's insistence that Indonesian painters should only paint the truth, no matter how ugly, is strongly influenced by Western art history. Supangkat (2000) traces Sudjojono's aesthetic view to that of Gustave Courbet, a figure in the Realism movement (?1840 – 1880). Courbet argued that 'the art of painting can only consist of the representation of objects which are visible and tangible for the artist' (Nochlin 1971: 25). Supangkat argues that Sudjojono's thinking revealed an international element in the modern art discourse in Indonesia, not merely a synthesis of local and national elements as perceived by Western scholars (Supangkat 2000; Siregar 2010).

Indonesian art historian and curator, Aminudin Siregar, however, disagrees with Supangkat's reading of Sudjojono's realist vision. Siregar argues that the comparison between Sudjojono and Courbet is potentially confusing as it frames Persagi with the European movement from more than a century earlier. Furthermore, according to Siregar, Sudjojono's view on realism was based on a complex relationship between socio-political concerns and post-colonial experience instead of pure aesthetic concerns as espoused by the Western Realism (2010: 372-381).

As a movement, Realism's aim was to give a truthful, objective and impartial representation of the real world, based on the meticulous observation of contemporary life (Nochlin 1971: 13). The emphasis on contemporaneity was brought into the extreme subsequently by the Impressionism movement through the depiction of 'impression of the moment' – for example captured by the artists through fast brushstrokes on their canvasses. Nonetheless, both Indonesian scholars appear to agree that Sudjojono demonstrated his sympathy towards the plight of the Indonesian people by painting reality, i.e. the truth about their conditions.

Yet, no matter how objective the artists' eyes, he or she is limited to paint the visible world on a flat, two-dimensional surface such as canvas or paper. Hence, the artist's perception of the real is conditioned by the limitation of the medium – both canvas and paint as well as their technical skills – in depicting three-dimensional objects. What is considered to be the truth must be acknowledged as a selective kind of reality whereby the artist must confirm to certain aesthetic 'rules'. Moreover, '*kebagusan* (goodness/beauty) is one with truth' claimed Sudjojono, for 'truth reveals honesty and indeed, beauty within the subject matter' (Sudjojono 1946: 52).

I would like to suggest the possibility that the truth as espoused in Indonesian modern art history is in fact, a gendered set of practices.<sup>46</sup> Sudjojono's texts for Indonesian painters to look for 'a uniting pattern for a new Indonesia' (*corak persatuan Indonesia baru*) reflect the perspective of Indonesian post-colonial masculinity as described by Saraswati (2011) and furthermore, by negated femininity in the visual field.

This is especially evident during the early years of Sudjojono's career when he wrote some of his strongest texts. This was also a period when Sudjojono tried to formulate Indonesian artistic identity as contributing to the nationalist movement. Part of his text in *Seni Lukis, Kesenian dan Seniman* (1946) is worth quoting at length:

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<sup>46</sup> Spaces of modernity in Western art were determined by the experience of being a modern subject. The key markers of modernity were leisure, consumption, spectacle and money. In Pollock (2003) two famous Impressionist women artists, Mary Cassat and Berthe Morisot, Pollock argued that the spaces of modernity were revealed by the class and gender of the artists hence subject matter was determined by *access* to those spaces. For example, scenes of domestic life and/or feminine spaces that were chosen by the artists represented subject matter that was easily accessible to them as bourgeois women, as opposed to the spaces available to the artist/*flâneur*, i.e. cafes, urban spaces, entertainment districts. In this regard, a male artist as the modern subject had the relative freedom to access modern spaces that were not accessible by a female artist of the same class.

*Can we say that this is an exhibition of Eastern art, or of Indonesian art? No! the things and themes depicted are Indonesian, but the character of the brushwork and the colour feeling are still Western ... The compositions are indistinguishable from those of Adolfs, Locatelli, Jan Frank, Sayers and of other European painters who live here ... Because we still follow the style of others – starting with Raden Saleh, Abdullah Sr., Pirngadie up to present day painters – our original indigenous way of painting is rusted and cannot come forth, it remains inside, hidden, alone like a beautiful maiden turned toward a Western wall who is stranger to the young artists of today. The maiden awaits the daring suitor ... Painters of Indonesia! Seek the key that will open the door for that beautiful maiden, seek it each your own way. (Sudjojono in Holt 1967: 148-149)*

In another text:

*Indonesian painters!*

*If you still have the blood within your own breast which carries the seeds of imagination from your Goddess of Art, let us leave your touristic dogma, break the chains which disrupt the freedom of your blood to give a place, to take care of the seed to become the mighty and powerful wings of the garuda which can take you towards the blue sky, hovering to see and absorb the goodness of the earth, moon, stars and the sun, nature which are created by God. Perhaps you will be forced to sacrifice, then burn from the heat of the sun, you will feel a pain on your chest because you are unable to breathe or hunger from the lack of food but your death will not be in vain. Go to the palace of your Goddess and be brave to knock on her gate while saying: “O Goddess, I have arrived.” And the Goddess without a doubt and with a joy in her heart will open the gate herself, letting you in: “Enter my beloved.” And you can say, “Have I sacrificed enough to show my love to you O Goddess?”*

*"Enough, enough, enough."*<sup>47</sup> (Sudjojono 2012 (orig. 1939): 23-24)

The heroic overtone of the above writing not only strongly emphasized the view of the artist-as-hero but also positioned the female as a distant mythological or allegorical figure.<sup>48</sup>

Sanento Yuliman (1976) has argued the importance of Sudjojono's writings as a modernist statement to distance the modern artist as an autonomous individual from the communal, anonymous traditional 'artist.' Sudjojono also claimed a role for art other than that of an 'empty market commodity', indicating his left-leaning commitment to improving social and political conditions for Indonesians.

Sudjojono's vision was also shared by other Indonesian critics of the time, most notably Trisno Sumardjo. Sumardjo in his essay *Penghidupan Seniman* (Life of an Artist) states that:

*An artist is happy when he has materials to work with, is able to paint in his studio, on the rice field or on the street. In essence it is similar to the happiness of a housewife when she*

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<sup>47</sup> Pelukis bangsa Indonesia!

Kalau masih ada darahmu sendiri di dadamu yang membawa benih angan-angan dari Dewi Kesenianmu itu, mari tinggalkanlah dogma ala turismu itu, putuskanlah rantai-rantai yang mengganggu kemerdekaan darahmu untuk memberi tempat, memelihara benih menjadi garuda yang besar dan bersayap kuat bisa membawa kamu ke langit yang biru melayang-layang melihat dan menghisap kebagusan dunia, bulan, bintang-bintang dan matahari, alam ciptaan Tuhan. Barangkali kamu terpaksa berkorban, terbakar kelak karena panas matahari, sakit dada karena tidak bisa bernafas atau lapar tidak makan tetapi kematian kamu tak sia-sia. Pergi ke istana Dewi Kesenian kamu dan berani mengetuk pintu gerbangnya sambil berkata: "Dewi, saya datang." Dan Dewi Kesenian tadi tidak sangsi dan dengan suka hatinya membuka pintu sendiri, mempersilahkan: "Masuklah kekasih yang kucintai." Dan kamu bisa berkata pula: "Cukupkah saya berkorban untuk memperlihatkan cinta saya kepadamu, Dewi?"

"Cukup, cukup, cukup."

<sup>48</sup> Paradoxically, Sudjojono also criticized the artist Basuki Abdullah for painting 'well-built, pretty, half-naked young women à la Hollywood.' He was identifying the exoticising of Indonesian women and the treatment of women as sexual objects common in Western culture. And yet, after his second marriage to Rose Soemabrata in 1959, Sudjojono received a commission to paint nudes and used his wife as a model, styling her in classical style of Western nude. Sudjojono also painted Rose Pandanwangi (as she is later known, Pandanwangi or fragrant *pandan*, is the name he gave her after the marriage) in various settings and scenes. In comparison with Sudjojono's painting and sketches of his first wife, Mia Bustam, Pandanwangi is represented as a modern woman with modern clothing (wearing blouse and skirt) with a range of activities, such as playing the piano (she was a professional *seriosa* singer), reading newspaper to simply resting. Nonetheless, most of these paintings depict Pandanwangi within domestic settings, even though she also worked as a professional singer with RRI (Radio Republik Indonesia, Radio of Republic of Indonesia) for a period of time. For a comprehensive catalogue of Sudjojono's paintings on Rose Pandanwangi see Sidharta (2006).



*can live in her furnished house and with her pretty children; similar to a civil servant who can give good allowance to his wife.*

...

*[a]rt and suffering are the tests which our artists must endure for the sake of his soul. He must create the truth and present it to his people and nation. Sometimes he has to sell his own pants so he can eat and buy paint, sometimes he may be forced to give up his lover or his wife to someone who has a better position, so perhaps from his suffering and pain he will produce art works which will be admired across generations.*<sup>49</sup> (Sumardjo 2006 (orig. 1951): 93-5)

Sumardjo's essay argues that an artist must have the vision and strength to continue his fight to portray the truth. Written in 1951, the strongly nationalistic essay warns Indonesian artists to avoid decadent art works produced by 'bourgeois' artists such as Dullah and Basuki Abdullah – referring to the romantic-naturalist genre 'Beautiful Indies' for which these artists are known for. Furthermore, Sumardjo also emphasizes the importance of Indonesian artists keeping their art expression free in post-colonial Indonesia (Sumardjo 2006 (orig. 1951): 93-94).

Sumardjo's essay echoes Sudjojono's writings in its reference to freeing the artist's soul from the conventions of tradition as well as its emphasis on the artist's social commitment.

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<sup>49</sup> Kebahagiaan pelukis ialah jika ia mempunyai cukup bahan-bahan untuk bekerja, bisa melukis di sanggarnya, di sawah, atau di jalanan. Pada hakikatnya sama halnya dengan kebahagiaan seorang nyonya rumah jika ia bisa tinggal di rumahnya dengan nyaman dengan perabot-perabot yang cukup dan anak-anak yang manis; sama halnya dengan pegawai yang bisa memberi uang belanja yang cukup pada istrinya...[s]eni dan penderitaan merupakan ujian dan mesti terglembeng bersatu-padu dalam jiwa seniman-seniman kita. Ia mesti menghasilkan yang jujur dan menyajikannya kepada masyarakat dan bangsanya. Kadang-kadang ia terpaksa menjual celananya supaya bisa makan dan membeli cat, pernah terjadi terpaksa melepaskan kekasih atau istrinya kepada orang lain yang lebih baik kedudukannya, sedangkan mungkin dari celana atau kesedihan yang dideritanya itu akan timbul buah seni yang dikagumi orang dari zaman ke zaman.



The philosophy reflects a strong humanist spirit in its rationale and yet, it is deeply contradictory. While it champions individualism of the artist as speaker of truth, on the other hand the person who is often the object of their activities – the woman – is treated as a thing or an abstraction (Berger 1972) - a mythical maiden or goddess or a possession to be traded. Furthermore, in light of Supangkat's argument that Indonesian art history was shaped by a 'moralist aesthetic' or 'agreement' it appears that such views are strongly marked within masculine spaces. 'The truth' painted by artists within this period was also produced from an inherently male position.<sup>50</sup>

The legacy of this notion of truth as coming from an inherently male position can be illustrated further from one of Sudjojono's iconic paintings titled *Di Depan Kelambu Terbuka* (In front of the open mosquito net, 1939, oil on canvas, 66 x 86 cm) (Fig.3). The painting depicts a woman sitting on a chair between two open embroidered white curtains. Behind the chair, the artist painted dark curlique ironwork, suggesting a four-poster bed. The woman is wearing a flowery *kebaya* (traditional Javanese blouse) paired with a dark sarong with her hair arranged loosely on her back. She sits with one arm leaning on the armchair, but her posture is far from relaxed. She appears to sit hunch-backed and the other arm seems to grip the edge of the chair rather tensely. Her face is pale and she stares at the viewer with a pensive, almost sullen, expression.

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<sup>50</sup> As cultural producers, women artists were not only far and few between but also inhabited a complex position within Indonesian society during that time. The painfully slow inclusion of women artists into Indonesian art history can be attributed to poor documentation about any artist working during the years of the revolution. More importantly, the significant cultural pressure as well as traditional gender roles imposed by society also marked the contested subjectivity of women as artists. Nonetheless, there are other contributing factors to this delay: firstly, the lack of support from their own (mostly male) peers limited their professional development. Secondly, the unconventional career choice, even for male artists by Indonesian standards of the time, also contributed to their minor reputation.

Critics have praised this work as one of the high peaks of Indonesian modernism. Claire Holt (1967: 197) states that this painting is Sudjojono's best work and that a deeply human feeling emanates from the whole work. Holt's opinion served as a stimulus to further reading of the painting, as well as cementing the painter's mythological status as the pioneer of Indonesian modern art. Holt's opinion was informed by the established painting genre of the "Beautiful Indies" where women were portrayed as exotic objects and always dressed in beautiful clothes, or in the words of Sudjojono, *seolah lebaran setiap hari* (as if every day is *Lebaran* (the Muslim holy day) (2006 (orig. 1946): 1). Therefore, with its expressionist brush strokes and unflattering depiction of the subject matter *Di depan Kelambu terbuka* was certainly a major turn from the established genre and a clarion call for more truthful subject matter in Indonesian paintings.



Fig.3 S. Sudjojono "Di Depan Kelambu Terbuka" (In front of the open mosquito net, 1939, oil on canvas, 66 x 86 cm).

Siregar (2012) claims that in the 1950s, the woman in this painting often

became the subject for discussion amongst artists and art critics. They were curious not only about the identity of the woman but also whether she had a relationship with the artist. The mystery was answered only in 2006 when Mia Bustam, Sudjojono's first wife, published her

memoir *Sudjojono dan Aku* (Sudjojono and Me). In the memoir, Bustam relates how Sudjojono explained the identity of the woman in the painting to his pregnant wife. The woman was known as Adhesi, a prostitute with whom Sudjojono lived for a short while before Sudjojono and Mia were married in 1943. Sudjojono took Adhesi to live with him and his parents; she was later re-named Miryam by Sudjojono. But their relationship was short-lived as Adhesi/Miryam left Sudjojono. Despite his repeated entreaties, she refused to go back to him. He speculated that she left him because she was unable to live with an artist who had no regular income (Sudjojono by that time had resigned from his regular job as a teacher and decided to do painting full time). Mia remarked that Sudjojono's act of renaming Adhesi is reminiscent of the story of Jesus saving Mary Magdalene (Bustam 2006: 373-374).

The narrative of Adhesi/Miryam was not known to the general public, although it has been in the art public's imagination that the woman who posed for the painting could be a prostitute.<sup>51</sup> Mia Bustam's comment perhaps unwittingly provided another insight into the myth of the artist. Siregar also states that this painting was possibly painted during a rocky period in Sudjojono and Adhesi/Miryam's relationship. Siregar's (2012) study shows that there are four signatures of the artist dotted on the canvas, a highly unusual practice. According to the author, this possibly signified that the painter had a strong feeling of possession towards the work and by extension, the model.

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<sup>51</sup> In Bustam (2006: 373-4) Adhesi was described as a sex worker from the Pasar Senen area, a former colonial railway station. The area was relatively close to the Jakarta Concert Hall and often frequented by artists, bohemians and the youths of Jakarta. Sudjojono stopped visiting the area before his marriage to Mia Bustam and only told her when she was pregnant with their first child. On the same occasion Sudjojono also revealed that he had contracted gonorrhoea in the past, but he reassured her that he had medical examination that gave him a clean bill of health.

This background information further emphasizes the fact that the subjects of modern Indonesian paintings are largely determined by the masculine gaze. Apart from representation of everyday reality, another popular subject matter in the 1940s and 1950s was armed conflict. Speck (2004) states that the portrayal of men involved in warfare and armed conflict on canvas is the ultimate contribution to citizenship and the quintessential gendering activity. In the Indonesian context women were rarely portrayed on canvas as fighters or guerrillas (even though historical documentations have proven that women were indeed actively involved in fighting).<sup>52</sup>

Sudjojono's insistence on painting the truth (*kebenaran*) was shaped by a strong nationalist belief, a sentiment echoed by the rest of the nation during the 1940s–1950s. While Indonesian and foreign art historians agree that the union between aesthetic and politics in S. Sudjojono's writings and Persagi (*Persatuan Ahli-ahli Gambar Indonesia*, Indonesian Painters' Association) was something quite distinctive in the development of a modern art discourse in Indonesia, they seemed to have not taken into account that nationalism is a gendered process.

Moreover, women and their bodies have played a central role in imagining the nation, symbolizing their uniqueness and difference and supporting nationalist struggles. In most cases 'women are the symbol of the nation, men its *agents*, regardless of the role women actually play in the movement' (Carter, Connolly et al. 1993). To be the 'symbols' of the nation imposes codes of acceptable behavior on women. In this regard, the status of women as a monitor of national progress (modernization) and women as the embodiment of

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<sup>52</sup> That Indonesian women also participated in armed conflict has been documented by Arbuckle (2011) and Sunindyo (1998).

national/indigenous tradition has become a dilemma for many feminists studying nationalism.<sup>53</sup>

Mobilizing women to defend the nation promotes a legitimate public position for women and an opportunity for a political role (Enloe 1989: 55). However, there also exists a real danger of women's interests and identity being manipulated into a larger sense of national womanhood to further the nationalist agenda and attract more support from the masses (Heng 1997: 30). Thus nationalism is a contested process for women rather than an inclusive discourse.

### ***"Representing Indonesian Modernity" as Canon-making***

One of the ways to read this contested process is by reading the representation of women in the collection of the National Art Gallery. The connection between the symbolic space, nationhood and gender can be traced by reiterating the original role of this cultural institution. Public cultural institutions can serve the cause of the nation in two ways:

*They foster feelings of collective belonging by providing a public space dedicated to the shared enjoyment of treasures and in which equality of access renders citizenship transparent. Through their contents and strategies of display, museums reaffirm the nation-states that sponsor them as the heirs to Western civilization and adherents of the modern tradition. (Duncan 1998: 101)*

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<sup>53</sup> Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989): 7 further identified roles for women in nationalism that describe the points above, namely women as biological reproducers of the nation's members, reproducers of the boundaries of the nation, central participants in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture. Women are also positioned as signifiers of ethnic/national difference – as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories and as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles.

The art world is structured as an interdependent network of socio-economic actors who cooperate - often contentiously or unknowingly - to enact and perpetuate the art world, while at the same time negotiating kinds and levels of cooperation in a mutually understood careerist and competitive context. The players range from art schools, colleges, professional art teachers, artists, art historians, academic art theorists, art critics and art writers to art dealers and galleries, curators, and museums. The primary function of the art world is to continually define, validate and maintain the cultural category of art, and to produce the consent of the entire society to the legitimacy of the art world's authority to do so (Wolff 1981; Bourdieu 1984; Pollock 1999).

National consciousness, or rather the identification with what Anderson (1991) called an imagined community, is the product of state-sponsored social construction and education, and it is here that the interests of the state and the function of the cultural institutions are linked. If identity presupposes the collecting of objects, it is no coincidence that the foundation of a national museum has been a priority of any newly founded nation-states. Strategically located in the heart of the capital, cultural institutions such as a national museum or national gallery have become necessary signifiers of the modern state. The National Art Gallery Indonesia (*Galeri Nasional Indonesia*, GNI) was opened in 1999, with the staging of an exhibition titled *Modernitas Indonesia dalam Representasi Seni Rupa* (Representing Indonesian Modernity through Visual Arts). The curators formulated an opening show that aimed to trace the development and progress of Indonesian modern art. Significantly, however, they also confirmed the patriarchal approach towards Indonesian art history. By looking at the representation of women in the exhibition (and indirectly, the

collection of the national gallery), I argue that the symbol-systems of nationalism and particularly visual imagery are also largely seen through the masculine gaze.<sup>54</sup>

*Modernitas Indonesia dalam Representasi Seni Rupa* was formally opened on May 8<sup>th</sup> 1999.

It fits one of the criteria for institutional activities that valorize structure and hierarchy in the art world, namely the exhibition as a kind of ‘blockbuster’ museum show of canonized artists. The exhibition showed paintings and sculptures from GNI’s collection with the aim of representing the history of modern Indonesian visual arts from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the late 1970s. Eighty-five artists were represented in the show with one hundred and thirty works, including iconic names such as Sudjojono, Affandi, Abdullah Suriosubroto and Nashar. Yet only *two* women were included in the exhibition - Ni Made Kadjeng and Ida Hadjar.

Despite its grand aim of representing Indonesian modernity through visual art, there are several unresolved issues within the exhibition including, for example, the difficulty of representing a diverse development of visual arts through a single exhibition. In Supangkat’s curatorial essay, he argues that:

*(t)he development of Indonesian modern art in Java and Bali is situated very closely with the process of modernization in Indonesia. In this regard especially in its early stage, [Indonesian modern art] can [be said to] reflect Indonesian modernity. Nonetheless, the one hundred and thirty works presented in this exhibition do not necessarily describe the development of this modern art. The choosing of these works is not because these works are prime [works by the*

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<sup>54</sup> Analyzing the connection between gender, nationhood and art in Indonesia through the collection of the National Gallery is admittedly fraught with loopholes. Not only was the gallery’s conception in 1999 long overdue, given Indonesia’s independence in 1945 (therefore not conforming to the urgency of creating a national identity by a newly-found state as outlined above), but the collection itself was also gathered over a period of four decades without any particular collection policy or direction. For information regarding the formation of GNI’s collection see Dirgantoro (2003).



*artists] or important in the development of art but because these works can be seen to present a cultural representation.*<sup>55</sup> (Supangkat 1999: 19)

The curatorial essay also states that the exhibition aims to bring closer the two streams of modernization in Indonesia namely modern, urbanite art from Java and the traditionalist myth of Bali, therefore aligning the development of modern art with the tension between nationalism, modernity and tradition in Indonesian society.

Moreover, the curator himself seems to think that despite the objective of the curatorial framework, the art works may not necessarily represent the peaks of Indonesian modern art but are simply a generalised representation of the different streams in Indonesian modern art. This begs the question of what the criteria for these one hundred and thirty works were in order to be included in an important statement by the national gallery, especially given there are over one thousand five hundred other works to choose from.<sup>56</sup>

The exhibition was divided into several subsections - portraiture, landscape, the daily life, and the narrative in art. The two women artists in the exhibition, Ni Made Kadjeng and Ida Hadjar were respectively included in the daily life and narrative art sections. Kadjeng's painting titled *Pasar di Yogya* (Yogya Market, 1965, oil on canvas) is a depiction of a local market in the town of Yogyakarta. Painted in bold and colourful brushstrokes, the figures

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<sup>55</sup> Perkembangan seni rupa modern Indonesia di Jawa dan Bali berada pada posisi yang sangat dekat dengan proses modernisasi di Indonesia. Karena itu perkembangan ini, khususnya pada awal perkembangannya bisa mencerminkan modernitas Indonesia. Namun 130 karya yang ditampilkan dalam pameran ini tidak segera menggambarkan perkembangan seni rupa modern ini. Pemilihan karya-karya ini bukan karena unggul, penting dalam perkembangan seni rupa tapi karena karya-karya ini bisa dilihat sebagai menampilkan **representasi budaya** (emphasis in the original, underlined words by the writer). See Supangkat (1999).

<sup>56</sup> One could argue that this is a curatorial strategy to stretch the theme to include everything and anything in-between. Yet, other factors might also be at hand, for example that the GNI's collection simply does not have the major works which represent the 'peak' of Indonesian modernity due to the fact that most significant works are in the hands of private collectors. Therefore the curators simply had to work with what was available. For further information on the conception of GNI's collection see Dirgantoro (2003). For an example of a significant private collection in Indonesia see Spanjaard (2004).



that dominate the foreground are busy engaging in typical market activities. While the title indicates that the subject matter is located in Yogyakarta, some aspects of the painting are reminiscent of Balinese painting with its crowded and tight space, the figures' poses, and even a hint of temple gates in the horizon. Not much is known of Kadjeng and her artistic output. Media sources only indicate that she later established the *Sekolah Seni Rupa Indonesia* (Indonesian School of Fine Arts) in Denpasar, Bali in 1967, two years after the painting was made (Bali Post 2012).

Ida Hadjar (1942-2004), the more well-known of the two, was educated in *Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia* (ASRI, Indonesian Fine Art Academy, now *Institut Seni Indonesia*, Indonesian Art Institute), Yogyakarta. She was well-known for incorporating techniques of Western painting into the traditionally flattened space of batik. Hadjar's painting titled *Main Gitar* (Guitar Playing, 1975, natural pigments on cloth) depicts two women together on a red sofa/day bed on a dark brown background. One of them is holding a guitar while the other one lounges on the day bed with one arm raised above her head. The scene exudes a relaxed atmosphere and even has hints of intimacy.

Women are far more extensively represented as subjects in paintings and sculptures rather than as artists, especially in the portraiture section.<sup>57</sup> Thirty five paintings and four sculptures were selected from thirty artists to be shown in the *Lukisan Potret* (Portraiture) section. There were seven self-portraits of male artists in this section while the rest of the section was overwhelmingly dominated by women as subjects. Indonesian women in this section can be classified into several archetypes: the artist's wives, mothers, models, 'ethnic

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<sup>57</sup> Portraiture as a genre in the twentieth century has occupied a central position in the mimetic culture of the West. The most popular genre of painting, it has been crucial to the construction and articulation of the 'individualism' (Woodall (1997). In particular, Meskimmon (1996) argues that self-portrait as a form within the genre is dependent on the conception of the artist as a special individual, worthy of representation of his/her own right.

girls' and modern women. Most of the subject matter was styled in accordance with classical Western academic conventions, from the profile view to the depiction of the face and body in consistently lit geometrical shapes to enhance the universal and ideal qualities of the figures.

The ideal qualities of the sitters are also highlighted by the fact that most of them were the artists' wives or mothers, the two socio-cultural roles of Indonesian women that are most highly-prized traditionally and in contemporary state ideology. Furthermore, most of the sitters' identities are represented in terms of their relationship to the artist – with no mention of their personal name (with the exception of Sudjojono's painting *Rose Pandanwangi Istriku* in which he inscribed the identity of the sitter, namely his wife). The portrayal of the figures does not make reference to the likeness or the personality of the sitter but rather the ideal qualities that these figures represent as the companions of the artists or as idealised femininity.

Rizki Zaelani's curatorial essay also looked at the metaphoric quality of two paintings in the section, namely Affandi's painting titled *Ibuku* (1941) and Sudjojono's painting titled *Ibu Menjahit* (1944).<sup>58</sup> Zaelani states that the representation of mothers and motherhood by the artists is about the celebration of moral values and also as a metaphor for the national situation (Zaelani in Supangkat 1999: 23).

Zaelani's statement reinforces the views of Anthias and Yuval-Davis, cited previously, namely that within the symbols of nationalism women are represented as biological reproducers of the nation's members. Moreover, the various archetypes of ethnic girls in

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<sup>58</sup> The title of Sudjojono's painting *Ibu Menjahit* was later corrected by Mia Bustam, Sudjojono's first wife and the subject matter of this portrait. Mia Bustam stated that the painting is actually titled *Istriku* (My Wife). See Chapter 4 for discussion of this work.

this section also represent them as signifiers of ethnic/national differences – as symbols in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories.

The legacy of Sudjojono's writings thus can be traced through the representation of the feminine in the inaugural exhibition of the National Gallery of Indonesia. It might be argued that gender construction within Indonesia's modernity was clearly on display in this exhibition where women were represented as symbols of the nation while men were its active agents. From the line-up of Indonesian 'maestros' such as S. Sudjojono, Affandi, and Hendra Gunawan, the exhibition not only cemented the validity of mainstream art history but also further emphasized the exclusion of women within Indonesian modern art history, with only two women included in the show out of eighty-five artists in total. A sense of disconnection between the art world and Indonesian women's agency is projected, with women confined to a passive presence and as idealized images.

Arbuckle (2011) suggests that Sudjojono's (and to some extent, Sumardjo's) view of the hyper-masculine nationalist artist is necessary in order to secure the site of masculinity within the sphere of nationalism and creativity. Sudjojono and his peers relied on negated femininity to establish their own identities as artists and producers of texts in Indonesian art history, and their mythology is further reified in the *Representing Indonesian Modernity* exhibition.

Moreover, Saraswati (2011) in her analysis of post-colonial masculinity suggests that such manhood is claimed and constructed, in part through possession of female beauty.

Femininity in this context, is the most available and traditional source of capital for the post-colonial male to reclaim his masculinity.

## **Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru**

*The members of GSRB moved away from the mould of painting as a medium, they borrowed Neo-Dada concepts or American Pop Art and Photorealism that used concrete objects and familiar images in the everyday life. As a new aesthetic that is close to the sociocultural condition of its people. As a media for social critique or a new way to appreciate art. It is undeniable that GSRB became a canon in the practice and strategy of realism in the subsequent development of art.*<sup>59</sup> Effendy (2008)

This statement from Indonesian art curator Rifky Effendy implicitly links Sudjojono's legacy with *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia (GSRBI- Indonesian New Art Movement)*. Effendy was writing for a major exhibition at NUS Museum, Singapore, in 2008, which brought together works of Indonesian modern and contemporary arts. The exhibition titled *Strategies towards the Real: S. Sudjojono and Indonesian Contemporary Art* showed over thirty works by Sudjojono and contemporary Indonesian artists to explore Sudjojono's legacies in Indonesian contemporary art.

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<sup>59</sup> Penggunaan unsur – unsur yang bisa dipahami oleh masyarakat sekitar merupakan keniscayaan yang muncul dalam kanon GSRB, seperti juga saran Soedjojono. Pada karya-karya GSRB mereka menggunakan strategi apakah obyek temuan seperti kasur, rantai, replika patung arkeologis maupun imaji-imaji dari poster dan iklan atau unsur – unsur rupa grafis lainnya. Alih-alih bahwa aspek komunikasi atau metafor dalam artistik realisme Soedjojono untuk menyampaikan pesan – pesan ideologisnya dalam lukisan diartikulasikan kembali secara radikal. Para anggota GSRB keluar dari pakem maupun medium lukisan, meminjam konsepsi gerakan Neo-Dada atau seni POP Amerika maupun Fotorealisme yang menggunakan unsur benda-benda kongkrit dan imajimaji yang akrab, yang ada dalam kehidupan keseharian. Sebagai suatu estetika baru yang erat dengan keadaan sosial-budaya masyarakatnya. Sebagai media kritik sosial maupun tawaran baru untuk mengapresiasi karya. Tak dipungkiri bahwa GSRB kemudian menjadi kanon dalam praktek dan strategi realisme dalam perkembangan seni rupa selanjutnya.

*Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia* (GSRBI – Indonesian New Art Movement) started in 1975 and dissolved in 1987. Spearheaded by eleven young artists and students from three different cities (Jakarta, Bandung and Yogyakarta) and art academies (IKJ – Jakarta Art Institute, ITB – Bandung Institute of Technology, and ISI – Indonesian Art Institute), the



Fig.4 FX Harsono “Paling Top” (Most Top, 1975, mixed media, 196.5 x 99.5 x 50 cm) –part of GSRB exhibition.

movement launched a series of exhibitions and a manifesto to criticise what they perceived to be the conservatism of art academies. The founding members of the group were Anyool Subroto, Bakhtiar Ainoel, Pandu Sudewo, Nanik Mirna, Muryoto Hartoyo, F.X. Harsono, Hardi, Bonyong Munni Ardhi, Ris Purwana, Siti Adiyati Subangun and Jim Supangkat.

The first exhibition of the movement was held in August 1975 in Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM – Ismail Marzuki cultural centre) in Jakarta. It was controversial for several reasons; the group used

mostly readymade materials as their artistic media, they used collages and assemblages, and included social commentary in their subject matter (Fig.4). These three factors were strategies by the group to criticise what they called the stagnation of Indonesian art. The 1970s was a period where Indonesian art was dominated by painting; artists retreated into

their inner self and/or explored traditional cultures and symbolisms in their art works. The group saw these tendencies as conservative and elitist, thus through their manifesto the group aimed to bring new visual language and content into Indonesian art discourse.

From the perspective of art history, the emergence of the movement fitted the framework described by Clark (1993) as a particular phenomenon in Asian modern art. He argued that modern Euro-American art styles were used as a form of art discourse to criticize older or “traditional” cultural forms and their current practitioners. The younger generation of artists used such styles to stand outside local culture and relativise it as a way of criticising its perceived deficiencies. They were thus able to discover the real and authentic strengths of the local culture (1993:7-8). Examples of this phenomenon are the development of modern art in the Philippines and Indonesia (Guillermo 1993).

In the Indonesian context, the emergence of GSRB was also partially driven by the political situation of the time. Siti Adiyati Subangun, one of the two female members of GSRB (the other one, Nanik Mirna, passed away in 2010) states that she and her peers worked in a climate of fear (SA Subangun 2013, pers. comm., 09 February). She remarks that the memories of the 1965-1966 killings were still fresh in their collective memory; therefore everything that was critical of the New Order’s developmentalism was perceived to be dangerous by the artists. The 1965-1966 anti-communist killings not only haunted the artists of GSRB, they also depoliticised art practice generally in their aftermath. Setianingsih Purnomo (1995), in her writing about socio-political art in Indonesia, observes that between 1966 and 1975 there was a tendency for Indonesian artists to engage in traditional symbols and culture. She argues that this tendency stemmed from the retreat into the inner self by

many artists as a reaction against the politically laden environment of Indonesian art pre-1965.

Nonetheless, the generation that came after also saw the corrupt and repressive government that effectively silenced opposition and criticism. The mid-1970s was marked by a series of violent student demonstrations that led the New Order government to ban university students from being involved in, organising or attending any kind of political activities. The repressive atmosphere coupled with the conservatism of the art academies led to restlessness and rebelliousness among students.

The young artists were no longer content to explore traditional symbols and cultures; they perceived the conservatism of their lecturers and senior artists not only as a betrayal of the ideas of *kerakyatan* as espoused by Sudjojono, but also of the death of innovation in art. The 1970s was also a period when publications about the development of art in the West came into circulation, either through university libraries or from individuals who acquired them overseas, further influencing the desire for new visual languages among the young artists. Protests and experimental exhibitions from the mostly young students such as *Desember Hitam* (Black December, Jakarta, 1974), *Nusantara-Nusantara!* (Archipelago-archipelago, Yogyakarta, 1974) and *Pameran Seni Kepribadian Apa* (What Personality?, Yogyakarta, 1977) were some of the key events that reflected the rebellion in the Indonesian art world.

After their inaugural 1975 exhibition, the group organised two more exhibitions in 1977 (*Pameran Presentasi* (Presentation, Jakarta, 1977) and 1979 before they went into a long hiatus and the artists focused on their own individual careers. GSRB's 1979 publication

chronicled the thought processes and the background of their 1975 exhibition, considered to be a landmark exhibition in Indonesian art history (Adi and Bujono 2012).

The 1975 exhibition was controversial for several reasons: it challenged the orthodoxy of art education in art academies, it explored new visual languages in Indonesian art and presented new approach in art-making, perhaps also unwittingly, a brought back socio-cultural content in the works of art. Critics of the movement were damning in their reviews, calling it 'immature', 'artistic abomination' (*penodaan artistik*), 'vandal' (Kusnadi in Supangkat 1979). While others were more supportive of the students' efforts to express their concerns through new visual languages (Sudarmadji in Supangkat 1979; Yuliman 2001).

The group were reunited in 1987 in their final exhibition titled *Proyek 1: Pasar Raya Dunia Fantasi* (Project 1: Fantasy Super Market). Singapore art historian Paul Khoo described this exhibition as the less schizophrenic [of the two GSRB exhibitions] on account of its more cohesive theme and art works (Khoo 2011). The exhibition certainly showed the maturation of the themes developed in the first exhibition in 1975. *Proyek 1: Pasar Raya Dunia Fantasi* was less concerned about making a statement or a grand manifesto than their first group exhibition, yet it was no less ambitious than their first one (Fig.5).



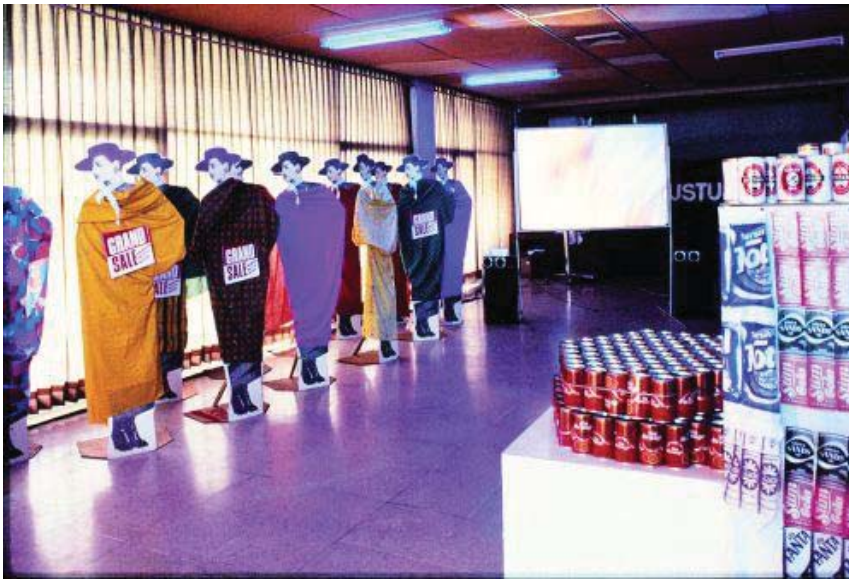


Fig.5 Pasaraya Dunia Fantasi: 1 (Exhibition view, 1987).

Jim Supangkat, curator and member of GSRB, explained that the group did extensive research in preparing the 1987 exhibition. Scholar and art historian Sanento Yuliman assisted the artists in bringing

materials and guiding the group discussions in preparation for the show. The exhibition centred on the position of visual arts in a consumerist Indonesian society (GSRB 1987). It was a large collaborative project that included readymade objects and also individual art works that were carefully made to resemble everyday objects with satirical content. The combination of art and everyday life was deliberate as the group further sought to erase the distance between them.

In contrast to the first show (and the subsequent exhibitions), the 1987 exhibition involved more people from different disciplines. Sixteen visual artists and designers, academics, writers and journalists participated, and in addition a theatre group (*Teater Koma*) was also involved. The catalogue of the exhibition explained the meticulous preparation for the show including a working diagram for exhibition display and essays by scholars and writers explaining the context and philosophy behind the exhibition (GSRB 1987).

The group eventually dissolved after their 1987 exhibition. Scholars have cited internal tension within the group especially between Supangkat and Hardi (Purnomo 1995;

Miklouho-Maklai 1997; Ingham 2007). The tension was caused by disagreements about which way the movement was heading after their projects; Harsono and Hardi both have stated that they disagreed with Supangkat's views that the group should focus more on their aesthetic and avant-gardist exploration while they were keen on exploring socio-political issues in their works (Hardi and Harsono 2013).

### ***The Legacies of GSRB***

The 2008 exhibition *Strategies towards the Real* at the National University of Singapore Museum mentioned in the beginning of this section was amongst the recent reinterpretation of Sudjojono's visions<sup>60</sup> and GSRB. The exhibition was curated by Singaporean curator Wang Zineng with essays by Indonesian art scholars. The essay by Rifky Effendy quoted in this chapter argues for the link between Sudjojono's vision in representing the truth and GSRB's strategic use of ready-made objects as their primary media.

GSRB was/is remains a controversial movement in Indonesian art history for reasons elaborated below. In its early activities the movement was heavily criticised by Indonesian critics and academics due to its audacity in exploring 'non-art' medium and its controversial subject matter (Supangkat 1979; Miklouho-Maklai 1997; Zaelani 2001; Hasan, Malna et al. 2012). Nonetheless, the movement was not without its supporters as well, amongst them art critic and scholar Sanento Yuliman. Yuliman argues that these young artists were against the idea that the product of art is mere extension of handwriting, or that it is a creation that

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<sup>60</sup> Other exhibitions that celebrated Sudjojono's works and legacies are for example 'Jiwa Ketok dan Kebangsaan: S.Sudjojono, Persagi dan Kita' at the National Gallery of Indonesia, 20 September – 06 October 2013 and 'Seabad Sudjojono' at Museum Topeng dan Wayang at Ubud Bali, 4-15 October 2013.

reflects the character, temperament and psychological condition of its maker (Yuliman in Hasan 2001: 101-2).<sup>61</sup>

GSRB intended to move away from the idea that art works are created from an individual effort, which was the premise of Sudjojono and Sumardjo's thinking about the role of the artist. Yet, ironically, as exemplified through the exhibition above, the legacy of Sudjojono has in fact come full circle in Indonesian art history.

Effendy firmly situated GSRB as the inheritor of Sudjojono's vision, thus bringing two dominant themes in Indonesian art history to resurface, namely nationalism and socio-political commitment. Scholars such as Setianingsih Purnomo (1995), Brita Miklouho-Maklai (1997), Susan Ingham (2007), and Paul Khoo (2011) have all agreed to some degree that GSRB as a movement was able to bring back socio-political issues as an important subject matter in Indonesian art discourse.

However, there are also dissenting opinions about how socio-political issues should be perceived in Indonesian art. Art curator and writer Enin Supriyanto (2000) has written about this tendency to focus on the legacies of nationalism (*kebangsaan*) and socio-political commitment in Indonesian art historical writing as stunting the growth of future development in Indonesian art discourse. In this essay, Supriyanto urges Indonesian artists to move on and embrace openness as well as exchange of information to combat the 'myths' (*mitos*), as he calls them. On the other hand, he does acknowledge that GSRB has provided the platform for Indonesian artists to transgress conventions in art-making.

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<sup>61</sup> Para perupa muda itu menentang gagasan yang memandang rupa (hasil seni rupa) sebagai perluasan tulisan tangan, yaitu hasil karya yang memperlihatkan bekas tangan – yang merupakan watak, temperamen, dan keadaan jiwa pembuatnya.

Singapore art historian Paul Khoo, who conducted extensive research on GSRB, was also quite critical about the construction of GSRB's mythology. He argues that GSRB's focus was not only on reviving social commitment in the visual arts but rather as a critical look at hegemony where culture is linked with political domination (2013: 5). Khoo's study further looks at how the different visions within the movement have contributed to the dissolution of the group and at the same time, contributed towards its mythology.

Khoo is correct in arguing that the movement's goals were often confused with those of GSRB's spokesperson, Jim Supangkat. Supangkat's vision of GSRB's avant-gardism was later promoted and developed as the precursor of the turn towards post-modernism in Indonesian art discourse. This perception then culminated in another controversial exhibition titled Jakarta Biennale IX (1993-1994).<sup>62</sup> In a recent anthology of Indonesian art writings, Indonesian writer Wicaksono Adi (Adi and Bujono 2012: xxxvii) further confirmed Supangkat's vision. Yet some members of GSRB, notably FX Harsono and Hardi, were reluctant to follow Supangkat's vision of non-political art and remained adamant that the movement has always been dedicated to changing Indonesian visual arts by bringing up socio-political content in art.

### ***Gender and avant-gardism in GSRB***

Despite GSRB's aims to reconnect with the people and place art in context, the group seemed to neglect one important issue in their attempt to democratise art-making in their projects. The group rarely mentioned gender issues in their projects as confirmed by Supangkat in 2013 interview. As mentioned before, the group only had two women in their

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<sup>62</sup> For more explanation about the controversies of Jakarta Biennial IX see Hujatnikajennong (2001).

initial membership, Nanik Mirna and Siti Adiyati Subangun. Supangkat later reflected that that both Mirna and Subangun were unusual for their time because they were strong and outspoken women (J Supangkat 2013, pers. comm., 07 February). While this fact may or may not have had any direct implications for the output of the group as a whole, in some way it reflected the atmosphere within the group and their perception of gender issues in visual arts.

Nanik Mirna (b.1951) tragically drowned in Klungkung, Bali, in 2010 during her weekly visit to a local beach. She had established a career in journalism after graduating from the painting studio STSRI ASRI (now ISI – Institut Seni Indonesia, Indonesia Art Institute), and last held an editorial position with the women's health magazine *Panasea*. Mirna was married to former district head of Gianyar, Anak Agung Gede Bharata who also passed away with her during the incident.

Siti Adiyati Subangun (b.1951) studied painting at STSRI ASRI. Subangun has had a diverse career, working as an artist, teacher, gallery manager and currently as an organic farmer in Yogyakarta. In addition to her education in visual art, she is also a trained Javanese classical dancer. Subangun is often invited as public speaker in forums about her involvement in GSRB as well as about art and interreligious connections.

Subangun further stated that there was no gender issue within the group. She stated that both men and women were treated equally and even often shared working and living spaces. She states 'it never crossed my mind to differentiate between men and women, and especially during my time in GSRB' (SA Subangun 2013, pers. comm., 09 February). She repeated these statements in a public forum in Bandung, March 2013. She also stated that she initially refused to speak in this forum when the organisers specifically asked her to talk

about gender issues in GSRB, so instead Subangun told anecdotes about the group and later on spoke about her personal journey after GSRB.

While it is heartening to hear her statements that there were no gender issues within GSRB, the interview and her public talk in fact painted a different picture of the group dynamic.

Subangun stated quite proudly that she often took the role of an administrator for the group, namely writing letters, proposals and collecting documentation of the group's activities. She also acted as a treasurer for the group's projects, saying that none of the men were willing to take up these roles (SA Subangun 2013, pers. comm., 09 February).

Subangun's anecdotes about individual members of the group and stories of how they often shared the working and living spaces painted a picture of a close-knit and supportive group; they also illuminate how women artists negotiated the masculine spaces within the group. She stated that during the 1987 exhibition more women were involved and some were keen to join the group. According to Subangun, these women mostly came from design or performing arts backgrounds. The majority of the group was reluctant to accept them, mainly because they considered these women to be high maintenance who needed to be looked after (or *cewek manja* [spoiled girl]).<sup>63</sup>

Her comments illustrated the group dynamics of GSRB, whereby all group members had to be tough (*kami ini seperti kuli* – we were just like labourers), especially the women, i.e. not relying on the male members to treat them as a precious object. Her anecdote also

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<sup>63</sup> Sociologist Mely G. Tan (1996) in the essay *Perempuan, Masyarakat dan Kreatifitas* (1996) argues that some areas in the arts are designated as feminine territory, for instance fashion design. She states that Indonesian society thinks that women should not aspire to become artists, and further criticises Indonesian artists, curators and critics for their patriarchal mindset.

confirmed that in order for women to be part of the group they needed to accept the masculine codes of the group.<sup>64</sup>

The roles that Subangun took in the group were in fact the type of feminine, caring roles often relegated to women. Hardi, another member of GSRB, later commented in the same 2013 forum in ITB that 'any art movements (in Indonesia) should include women, as (mass) media prefers and even adore women (artists)'.<sup>65</sup> The statement by Hardi perhaps was intended as a compliment to the roles that women have played in art movements in Indonesia (and specifically to Subangun and Mirna), but at the same time suggested the stereotyping that occurred in the predominantly male scene.<sup>66</sup>

Subangun's statements reveal how hegemonic masculinity was firmly embedded in society, even in the most progressive groups. Her insistence that there were no gender issues merely highlights how normalised these gender stereotypes were within the art world, and in the wider Indonesian society.

Secondly, the group's goal to elevate forms of low art into the realms of high art, citing popular and mass cultures also neglected to mention traditional craft practices. Whilst they argued that visual languages derived from traditional cultures can be legitimised as high art,

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<sup>64</sup> Ira Adriati (2013), lecturer and art historian, has suggested that Subangun's work titled *Child's Game* ([English title], 1975, found objects, dimensions variable) in the first exhibition has been perceived not as intellectually stimulating as the others. She later argued that this was not the case, as her research indicated that there was a careful consideration behind the placement of each object. The piece depicted a traditional Javanese game 'dakon' or 'congklak', placed on the floor against a white wall while the artist drew a pair of hands on the wall.

<sup>65</sup> Kalau saudara-saudara berminat membuat gerakan seni rupa, libatkanlah perempuan. Supaya biar terekspos, supaya populer karena biasanya perempuan-perempuan ini yang digemari media; banyak diwawancara, banyak pengagumnya (dan dapat jodoh).

<sup>66</sup> Hardi is a controversial figure in GSRB history. It has been speculated that his outspokenness and often eccentric character has contributed to the group's disbandment. Hardi's presentation in the 2013 public forum interestingly emphasised the belief of the artist as a prophet that brought forth the words previously mentioned. He repeatedly used Islamic jargons to describe his views and role in the history of GSRB, for example citing that he has received *pencerahan* (revelation) during his time with the GSRB. While it is hard to guess his actual intention (as he could be just keen on stirring controversy) he was quite earnest in his opinion about GSRB as a canon in Indonesian art history.

they prioritised forms of visual languages familiar to the middle to lower classes in urban centres in Java. Enin Supriyanto (2001) has indicated that the adaptation of craft into visual art in Indonesia has failed to mention that this was predominantly a traditional domain for women. The adaptation thus marginalizes forms of feminine visual languages in the mainstream forms of art.

Supangkat has admitted that the group neither had any gender awareness in their art-making nor showed any concern for political correctness (J Supangkat 2013, pers. comm., 07 February). His piece titled *Ken Dedes* 1975, mixed media, 61 x 44 x 27 cm, collection of Singapore Art Museum) (Fig.6) was one of the iconic pieces from the group's first exhibition. Supangkat combined the bust of *Ken Dedes* – considered to be the symbol of high art during the Majapahit period – with a pedestal where the artist drew a crude caricature of a woman's lower body. The upper part of the torso is naked and the viewer can see the nipples; the artist also drew the figure wearing a pair of jeans with the fly unzipped, showing a hint of pubic hair.

The sculpture hit a nerve with many people, not necessarily because the sight of a woman's half-naked torso and pubic hair was offensive to Indonesian eyes (and public morality) but more because the artist dared to combine the form of high art with a crude pop-culture like drawing. Supangkat's piece was true to the group's manifesto of eliminating aesthetic boundaries between high art and low art. While the artist has insisted that the works in GSRB were an exploration and rebellion in aesthetics and not, as others might perceive them, a socio-political commentary, *Ken Dedes* has nonetheless invited several interpretations apart from its aesthetic implications.



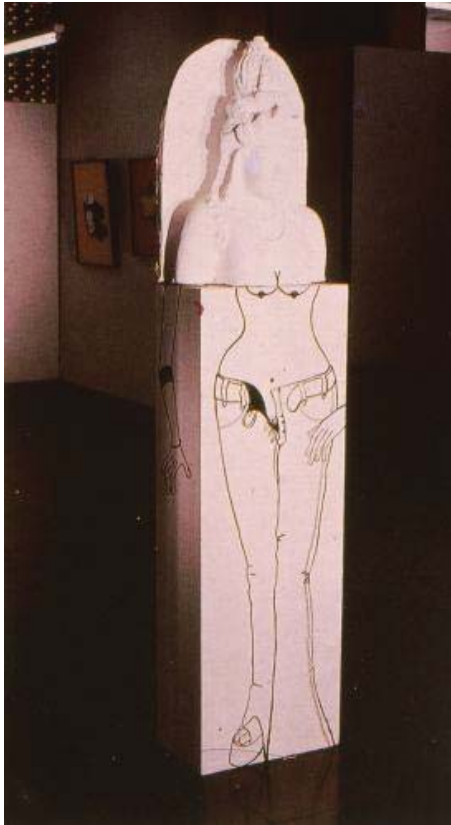


Fig.6 Jim Supangkat "Ken Dedes"  
(1975, mixed media, 61 x 44 x 27 cm).

Miklouho-Maklai (1997) has suggested that the work represented a sense of dislocation between tradition and modernity, between high art and low art. Flores (2010) commented that the work was a complex piece that not only commented on the rigidity of the art world that did not allow this kind of work to flourish, but also a commentary of Suharto's claim of the Javanese lineage of his New Order government. Ingham (2007) suggested that this work was a comment of the artist on contemporary Indonesia, where Western

consumerism met Indonesian traditions. According to Ingham the pose of the figure with the provocative

clothing (or rather lack of it) suggested that the figure represents an act of prostitution.

### ***Differencing the Canons: Concluding Remarks***

*Ken Dedes* thus links us back to Sudjojono's iconic painting, *Di Depan Kelambu Terbuka*.

Both works employ a similar strategy to deliver their political message and defiance against the established canon, namely that they both used a female body – specifically, a sexualized female body. While it is legitimate to read these works as the domination of masculine gaze over the female body, I would like to argue further that these works can also be read within a psycho-symbolic reading. The use of a sex worker in *Di Depan Kelambu Terbuka* might represent an emasculated colonial subject's attempt to reclaim his masculinity while

Supangkat's *Ken Dedes* may have represented an Oedipus struggle or the artist's effort to reclaim the canon from the father.

In Freudian terms, the child must internalise and identify with its parents and associated external control and authority before eventually introjecting them to develop an internal authority, its super-ego - in this context, for artists, their own artistic identity. The rebellion by the young artists in GSRB reflects this struggle with parental or external authority before eventually securing a place in the Indonesian art canon. Yet, as Pollock (1999: 14) has reminded us, the nature of the canon is to secure the succession between the father and the son at the expense of other voices as well as to establish a masculine hierarchy in art history.

GSRB certainly has a firm place within the Indonesian art canon. While much of the scholarship has been dedicated to its avant-gardism and its role in bringing back issues of social commitment in art, the movement also perpetuated Sudjojono's legacy in their marginalization of women as artists and, more broadly, gender issues in the Indonesian art world.

Moreover, an interrogation of the reverence towards artist-as-hero brings us closer to the structural nature of canon-making. Freud has spoken about the valorisation of the artist in modern Western art history as a 'great man' corresponds with the infantile stage of idealisation of the father. This stage is then quickly undermined by the worshipping of the hero; the not-father who always rebels against, overpowers or even murders the overpowering father (Pollock 1999). Sarah Kofman (1988) has argued that people's attitude to the artist has always been ambivalent, as the artist is often both idealised father and

hero; the cult of the hero is thus a form of narcissism as it is the identification with the first ego ideal.

The biography of Mia Bustam, which revealed the narrative behind S. Sudjojono's iconic painting *Di Depan Kelambu Terbuka*, is an attempt to humanise (*memanusiakan*) the figure of Sudjojono. Her comment about Sudjojono's renaming of Adhesi to Miryam reveals more about the religious identification of canon-making and the cult of the artist. And yet, as I will discuss in the following chapter, the author herself reflects ambivalence about the reputation of the artist-as-hero.

To some extent, art history monographs and biographies function to provide a life for the artist, a heroic journey through struggles and ordeals, a battle with the professional father to win a place in what is always his – the father's – canon (Pollock 1999). By looking at canon as a myth of genius and masculine ideals, we go beyond the issues of sexism and discrimination. Following Pollock's view about the artist as an ideal, I argue that in Indonesia the artist is a symbolic figure where public fantasies such as Sudjojono's masculine nationalism and GSRB's rebellion take representational form. The fantasies are not gendered exclusively masculine, but still function to sustain a patriarchal legend. The fantasies are gendered in their structure buttressed by the historial subjugation of Javanese woman, the gendered state of Indonesia and the gendered nature of major religions.

## Chapter Four

### Haunting in the Archipelago: Emiria Sunassa and Mia Bustam

In this chapter I discuss two Indonesian women artists - Emiria Sunassa (1894-1964) and Mia Bustam (1920-2011) – whose creative lives spanned some important and turbulent periods in Indonesian art history. Emiria Sunassa was active during the early formation of the nation from the 1930s to the late 1950s while Mia Bustam was active from the late 1950s until her career was cut short by the anti-communist purge of 1965-1966.

The two women participated in an era described by Caroline Turner (2006: 196) as foundation years for the ideological platform of Indonesian modern art. Much scholarship has been dedicated to nationalism in Indonesian art history (Holt 1967; Supangkat 1993; Wright 1994; Yuliman 2001; Siregar and Supriyanto 2006) but virtually no study has looked at the link between nationalism, art and gender in Indonesian art history.<sup>67</sup> The aim of this chapter is to fill that gap and critically examine the important period from the 1940s to the 1960s through the frames of feminism and psychoanalysis.

Furthermore, this chapter also seeks to establish that canons and canon-making in Indonesian art history as masculine ideals as discussed in the previous chapter. The discussion of the artists and their works in this chapter reflects the challenge to re-insert women artists within the canons of art history and at the same time, reveals the ruptures in linear art history created by their representation of feminine.

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<sup>67</sup> Heidi Arbuckle (2011) doctoral thesis on the life and work of Emiria Sunassa constitutes the first detailed academic research that links the issues of gender, art and nationalism in Indonesian art history.

Cynthia Enloe (1989: 44) states that nationalism is typically born out of masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation and masculinised hope. Enloe further emphasises the feeling of the male colonial subject as emasculated under the white men's rule. Echoing Enloe's argument, historian Frances Gouda describes the colonial perception of Indonesian men in the early years of the Indonesian republic as weak, effeminate and incapable of ruling themselves (Enloe 1989; Gouda 1999). It was then the role of the colonial ruler to provide the firm hand of an older brother to guide the Indonesian natives towards civilisation and progress (Enloe 1989; Gouda 1999). Thus the 'macho' idiom and behaviour of Indonesian men during the revolutionary period of 1945-1949 can be seen as a calculated response to colonial labelling (Gouda 1999:161). The 'hyper-masculine' description by Gouda aptly describes the language, behaviour and outlook of the - mostly male - Indonesian painters during the period. In the paintings of Sudjojono and his peers, the new nation was represented through masculine imaginings in which women played particular feminine roles to accord with their position in a modern, patriarchal nation.

The analysis of Emiria Sunassa and Mia Bustam shall reveal that, despite using the same medium as their male contemporaries, their choice of subject matter and, in Emiria's case, her aesthetic executions were distinctly different. The discussion of Emiria's personal background draws on Bianpoen, Dirgantoro et. Al.'s 2007 book *The Curtain Opens: Indonesian Women Artists* and Heidi Arbuckle's *Performing Emiria Sunassa: Reframing the Female Subject in Post/Colonial Indonesia* (2011).

Alongside the analysis of Emiria Sunassa, the mix of personal and political memoirs of Mia Bustam represents a counter-point to mainstream history; they are the exact opposite of

the 'great lives' (usually of men) that have dominated Indonesian history. Mia's seventeen year marriage to S. Sudjojono enriched her memoirs with first-hand accounts of artistic milieux during and after Indonesia's revolutionary years as well as during the communist tension of 1965 and after.

In my discussion of Mia Bustam I look at how her memoirs represent another kind of haunting in contemporary Indonesia, namely memory of the 1965 events where up to half a million Indonesians lost their life after the alleged communist coup (Roosa 2006).<sup>68</sup>

### ***The Dark Archipelago: the narratives of Emiria Sunassa***

#### ***Emiria Sunassa's timeline***

Emiria Sunassa (1894-1964) or Emiria Sunassa Wama'na Poetri Al-Alam Mahkota Tidore, also known as Emma Wilhelmina Pareira/Emmy Pareira, is one of the few women painters active during the early years of Indonesian modern art (Fig. 7).<sup>69</sup> Background information about her works and biography is scant and existing sources often disagree, but from the diverse oral and written evidence a general outline can be constructed.

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<sup>68</sup> Other discussions of these events include Anderson and McVey (1971), Cribb (1990), Cribb and Brown (1995), Heryanto (1999), and Wieringa (2003).

<sup>69</sup> The various names of Emiria Sunassa derive from the multiple narratives of the artist as explained in Arbuckle (2011). Because there are several possibilities concerning her origin, these names are not only markers of her identities but also of her constructed subjectivities. Arbuckle's research shows that when she was still alive, Emiria rarely disputed her history as she may have benefitted from the various personas that other people have constructed of her.



Fig. 7 Emiria Sunassa in 1942 (photographed in her home/studio).

Born on August 5<sup>th</sup> 1894, Emiria claimed to be the daughter of the Sultan of Tidore of the time, Sultan Sahadjuan.<sup>70</sup> She was Dutch-educated and attended the *Europese Lagere School* (European Elementary School) until the third grade only.

The fact that she went to the *Europese Lagere School* suggests that her family had some rank and influence within the colonial administration of the time, as the school was exclusively for the children of Dutch and foreign officials and residents.

Emiria may also have had Manado heritage, as some people remembered her coming from a Manoppo-Pareira family from Manado (Arbuckle 2004: 43). It may be that she had both Manado and Tidore heritage, as later in life she expressed a strong interest and commitment to Eastern Indonesia, as indicated in her active involvement with Maluku and Sulawesi communities. She acted as a political figure (*tokoh*) in both communities; she was also elected a symbolic leader for the people of Dutch New Guinea (later the province of Papua) in the Round Table Conference in New York 1949.

<sup>70</sup> The source of confusion concerning Emiria's background can be attributed to scant official information on her childhood. Arbuckle in her study pieced together Emiria's background from oral histories from various people connected to Emiria. Although she clearly originated from Eastern Indonesia, Emiria's exact birthplace and ethnicity are still shrouded in mystery. Scholars (Holt 1967; Arbuckle 2004, 2011; Bianpoen 2007) who have done some research about Emiria are uncertain as to whether she was born in the island of Tidore, North Maluku, or in Tanawangko, North Sulawesi. Both Holt and Bianpoen argued that she most probably came from Tidore while Arbuckle (2004) states that Emiria was born in Tanawangko, a small village inhabited by a Tidorese community in North Sulawesi, about 17 kilometres south west of the province's capital Manado.

Emiria had a diverse career as nurse, secretary, administrator and secretary, and travelled widely in the Dutch East Indies and as far as Europe before she became a painter. She claimed to have been married several times, though there is no conclusive record of these marriages. She travelled in Brussels and Austria against the backdrop of World War I in 1914-1915, studying Dalcroze method eurythmics. Before her travels in Europe, Emiria had trained as a nurse in Cikini Hospital, Jakarta from 1912-1914. Later in the 1920s -1930s, Emiria travelled in the Dutch East Indies where she worked in plantations, mines and factories, then lived with ethnic groups in Papua, Kalimantan and Sumatra.<sup>71</sup> During her travels in the archipelago she often stayed in remote villages and lived with local tribes. When she settled down in Batavia in the late 1930s, she had become a worldly woman. This was the period when her involvement in the indigenous painter organisation Persagi (*Persatuan Ahli Gambar Indonesia* – The Indonesian Painter Association) was first noted, which means that Emiria was well over forty when she took up painting (Holt 1967: 251-2).

Emiria was one of the three female artists linked with Persagi, along with Saptarita Latif and Tridjoto Abdullah, and she actively participated in Persagi's group exhibitions.<sup>72</sup> In contrast

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<sup>71</sup> Arbuckle (2011) suggests that the short-lived nature of Emiria's marriages could be attributed to her inability to have children, or as a way of conforming to heterosexual norms of the time.

<sup>72</sup> Tridjoto Abdullah (1916-1958) was the younger sister of artist Basuki Abdullah and the wife of a prominent Taman Siswa teacher, Ki Tjokro Suharto. Mia Bustam in her first memoir noted Tridjoto's participation within the Persagi and Soekarno circle where she was identified by her married name Nyi Tjokro (Bustam 2006: 42). She is primarily known as a sculptor whose works consisted of monuments and public sculptures in expressive realist style. She learnt anatomy and model-making under the tutelage of two Dutch mentors. One of her surviving works can be seen in Solo, Central Java. Bianpoen (2007) has stated that Tridjoto was able to make ends meet by making the public monuments and national hero sculptures. This fact seems to suggest that Tridjoto had a real career as a professional artist instead of making her art on the side. Furthermore, it also appears that she was able to compete with her male contemporaries in acquiring public commissions of her work. Not much is known about Saptarita Latief, even though she is regularly mentioned as a member of Persagi in Indonesian art historical texts. The association with the group has been suggested through her inclusion in Persagi's group photograph, yet other sources have mentioned that she was active as a painter, albeit very briefly in the 1940s (Arbuckle 2011).



to the two other women artists, Emiria had started painting individually and was not linked to any nationalist movements before she took up painting.<sup>73</sup>

Emiria participated in Persagi's inaugural show in 1940 and also in the group's breakthrough exhibition in 1941. Later, Holt (1967: 251-2) noted that she had a solo show at the Union of Art Circles (*Bond van Kunstkringen*) shortly before the beginning of the Japanese occupation of Indonesia and continued to paint well into the occupation period. After Persagi members were absorbed into *Keimin Bunka Shidoso* (Cultural Centre during the Japanese occupation), Emiria held a solo show (1943) organised by Poetera (*Pusat Tenaga Rakyat* – another cultural organization, this time established by Indonesians and headed by Sudjojono). In 1946, Emiria held another solo exhibition, this time for charity with the Red Cross in Jakarta.

Her last exhibition was in 1959 in Taman Seni Rupa Merdeka, Kebayoran, Jakarta, where she participated in a group exhibition with Trisno Sumardjo, Oesman Effendi and Zaini. Emiria reportedly left Jakarta some time in the same year, possibly to travel to Sumatra for unknown reasons. It was later reported that she died in Lampung in 1964. She left all her possessions with her neighbour, Jane Waworuntu, in Jakarta. Through Jane's descendants researchers can gain access to the majority of Emiria's works.

Sudjojono and other painters are known to have studied under the tutelage of more senior native painters or directly under a Dutch artist (Holt 1967, Yuliman 1976, Wright 1994). There are contrasting opinions about Emiria's artistic training. She was assumed to be an autodidact by Indonesian scholars yet Arbuckle points to several historical sources that

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<sup>73</sup> It was suggested in a 1952 interview that she had already started painting before her involvement with Persagi. See Arbuckle (2011).

indicate that she was trained under the Dutch professor Guillaume Frederic Pijper (1893-1988). In Arbuckle's study, Pijper is credited with mentoring Emiria into taking up painting.<sup>74</sup>

Emiria was commonly associated with Persagi, although she did not train or work with the group. Persagi's nationalistic vigour came from an unmistakably masculine perspective; most of the paintings represented common subject matter: self-portraits, still-lives and most importantly, the portrayal of the Indonesian people during and after the revolutionary period - and yet they were limited to the island of Java. Emiria was linked to Persagi almost by association as she often exhibited with them, but her choice of subject matter offered a different perspective of the new nation.

While Emiria also painted other subjects, this chapter mainly focuses on her portraiture of traditional culture and people, to emphasise the contrast between her choice of subject matter and that of her contemporaries.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, the chapter looks at how her indigenous portraits are a potential site for ruptures in nationalist and colonial discourse.

### ***Reading the primitive***

Arbuckle (2011) argues that Emiria's paintings presented the dark, unexplored margins of the nation. Her paintings of tribes from Papua and Kalimantan do not merely represent the exotic other; they also problematize the idea of the nation as an imagined community.

Arbuckle frames Emiria's visual production of the indigenous portraits against the

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<sup>74</sup> Pijper also lived with Emiria as her boarder and it has been suggested by Arbuckle (2011: 109-138) that he was also her lover.

<sup>75</sup> I am conscious of the labelling of traditional or indigenous people through western or modern eyes. However, the distinction that I make between modern and traditional in the context of Emiria's works in this chapter is for the sake of convenience. Traditional culture in Emiria's context means the representation of her memory and recollection of her travels in the remote parts of the archipelago.

background of her political activities, namely her involvement with Papua's self-determination in the 1950s (2011:31).

Building on Arbuckle's statement, I suggest that the dark, unexplored jungles in Emiria's paintings represent colonial melancholia as described by Ranjana Khanna (2003) in her 2003 text *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Postcolonialism*. Khanna described colonial melancholia as a post-colonial affect where haunting occurs within colonial subjects unable to mourn the loss of their culture – rendered invisible by colonialism and its aftermath.<sup>76</sup>

Some Indonesian scholars have labelled Emiria's paintings as neoprimitive (Sanusi Pane (1949) in Arbuckle 2011: 9). Kusnadi (1978), for example, an Indonesian art critic and scholar, states that:

*She is the pioneer of primitive style or naive painting in Indonesia. Although her paintings are numerous, they are difficult to come by now. Emiria paints only with her enthusiasm. Without a study of the basic techniques, her entire expression is born out of her primitive realisation of herself also. Her creative spirit flows through nontechnical forms as an expression that conveys unsettling atmospheres or frightening tales. (Kusnadi 1978 in Arbuckle 2011: 87-88)*

Similarly, Sudjojono, the leader of Persagi remarked:

*Emiria, even though a woman, [is] more macho than other people. Her style is primitive, honest like a small child. Her heartfelt emotion springs? like a boil on a virgin's lips.*

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<sup>76</sup> Melancholia is the failure to properly introject lost love objects and to internalize values so that they can contribute to the formation of ego structure, particularly the super-ego. The colonised subject is unable to mourn the loss of culture or tribe as it is being rendered invisible by colonialism. One of the results of the loss of memory is haunting, where the objects haunt the subject in a hallucination or trace. See Khanna (2003).

*Unbridled, unaccountable, whether we like it or not it appears suddenly in overlooked places.*

*Plenty of people do not understand her art, because Emiria's aesthetic is very peculiar.*

*However to those who understand?, Emiria continues to be sympathetic in her impulsiveness.*<sup>77</sup>(Sudjojono 2000 (orig.1946): 88-89)

Writing for an exhibition in December c. 1943<sup>78</sup>, Sudjojono placed Emiria firmly within the exciting development of a new modern art movement in Indonesia. His respect is due to Emiria's unconventional and 'impulsive' aesthetic. In Sudjojono's eyes, not only is Emiria able to visualize primitiveness in her works but this is even more remarkable because she is a woman who is more *jantan* (macho) than others.<sup>79</sup> The statement above further underlines Emiria's aesthetic as *unsettling* for the art world. For the art world to 'understand' and read her works she has to be reframed with a masculine language and/or framed as the mysterious Other.

Furthermore, for the urban middle class Indonesians living in Batavia (later Jakarta) it was rare to see the representation of indigenous groups in their urban surroundings; thus paintings with such subject matter would be seen as 'foreign' or 'strange' (Arbuckle 2011: 171). Comments and reviews on Emiria's paintings that represented indigenous portraits were more or less centred on the effect of the paintings, with phrases such as '*tinggal di dunianja sendiri*' ('living in her own world'); 'the objects seem to originate not from the real

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<sup>77</sup> Emiria meskipun seorang perempuan, [namun] lebih jantan dari orang-orang yang lain. Coraknya primitif, "bares" seperti anak kecil. Keluar hatinya seperti keluar bisul di bibir perawan. Tak bisa disangka, tak bisa dihitung, mau atau tak mau dia tahu-tahu muncul di tempat yang tak diperhatikan orang. Banyak orang yang tak mengerti akan keseniannya, sebab kebagusan Emiria aneh sekali. Akan tetapi bagi orang yang mengerti, Emiria terus-menerus simpatik dalam impul-sifiteitnya.

<sup>78</sup> The essay titled "Pameran Gambar 8 Desember" is part of Soedjojono's compilation of writing in "Seni Lukis, Kesenian dan Seniman" – originally published in 1946 and re-published in 2000. As the essay is undated, it could be a review for the second Poetera exhibition in 1943 where Emiria participated.

<sup>79</sup> Sudjojono championed an aesthetic philosophy which he called '*jiwa ketok*' (visible soul). He argued that artists must be truthful in their representation of the people; in doing so their style must also be original, not a copy of someone else's. By originality, Sudjojono favoured realism, expressionism.

world, but from *dunia asing*' (foreign or strange worlds), '[F]ear of the power of nature can be felt in almost all of her paintings'<sup>80</sup>.



Fig. 8 Emiria Sunassa "Penganten Dayak" (Dayak Wedding (reproduction), date unknown, oil on canvas, 68 x 54 cm).

*Pengantin Dayak* (Dayak Wedding, c. 1942-1948) is one of the few publicly known paintings by Emiria owned by a public institution (Fig.8). Collected by the Fine Arts and Ceramics Museum in Jakarta, the painting depicts five figures dressed in tribal clothing arranged statically behind a decorated table with gongs laid at its foot. The painting certainly adheres to Persagi's rejection of the Mooi Indie genre. The Mooi Indie genre was known for its romantic style through a depiction of lush vistas of colonial landscape while Persagi painters favoured the realist approach. Emiria's painting emphasizes intensity and emotional response through deep shadows and contrasting colours between the figures and the

<sup>80</sup> Original comments from Rivai Apin (1948) and Rosa (1948) as quoted in Arbuckle (2011: 180, 181 and 195).

background. *Pengantin Dayak* is described by Holt as ‘an unhesitating, strong and integrated statement with a tribal ceremonial as a subject’ (1967: 252).

In comparison to the various ethnic types portrayed by male painters in the *Modernitas Indonesia dalam Representasi Seni Rupa* exhibition discussed in the previous chapter, Emiria’s female portraits convey a sense of directness and character. A closer look and comparison between Nasyah Jamin’s *Gadis Makasar* [sic] (A Makassar Girl, 1965) (Fig. 9) with Emiria’s *Wanita Sulawesi* (Sulawesi

Woman, 1958) (Fig. 10) underline some of the differences. Jamin’s sitter adopted a conventional sitting pose with the sitter’s hands crossed on her lap and her eyes averted from the painter/viewer. The careful rendition of the traditional shirt and traditional sarong that blends harmoniously with the saturated yellow background emanates a feeling of softness and femininity as well as an idealized image of a Makassar girl. The painting seems to suggest that it was painted from a live model.

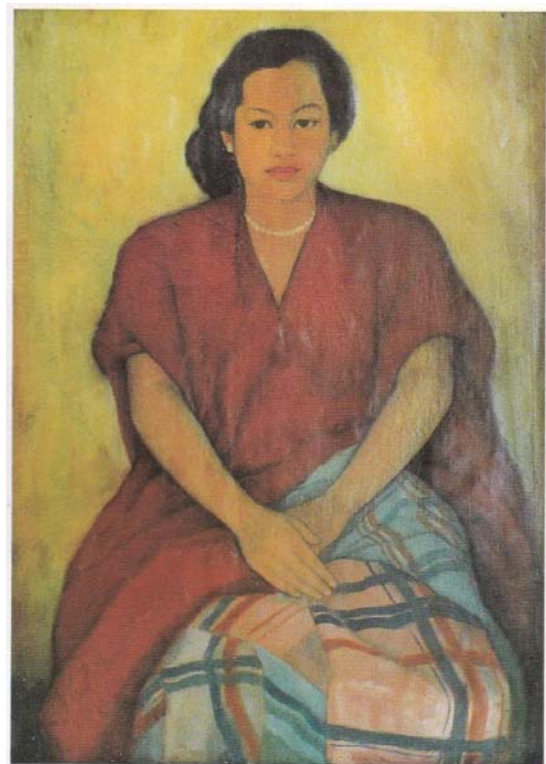


Fig. 9 Nasyah Jamin “Gadis Makasar”  
(Makassar Girl, 1965, oil on canvas, 82 x 57.5  
cm)

In Emiria’s portrait of a woman from the same

island, the sitter is portrayed in a classic frontal view and she is also wearing the customary *baju bodo*<sup>81</sup> - the traditional loose shirt, and sarong against a geometric background. The woman’s pink shirt and geometric sarong are rendered in tight, broad brushes while her

<sup>81</sup> *Baju bodo* is a traditional loose billowy shirt worn by women from several ethnic groups in South Sulawesi.



right hand clasps the edge of the sarong, holding it upright in a gesture of pride (or modesty?). The pink, green and blue geometric background echoes the sarong's pattern, which creates a contrast to the woman's head. In this particular work the right hand appears to be left unfinished and is also out of proportion to the rest of the body.<sup>82</sup>

The painting's focus point centres on the woman's dark impassive face, staring straight at

the viewer, and her two large earrings,

which are painted in detail. Emiria seems to concentrate more on the sitter's face through smaller and softer brushstrokes that appear as an effort by the artist to catch a certain life-like quality.

While Holt has suggested that most of Emiria's works from her later period seemed to have been painted from memory (1967: 252), this painting shows that Emiria was able to capture the well-known strength of character of a Sulawesi woman through that memory alone. It is interesting to look closely at this

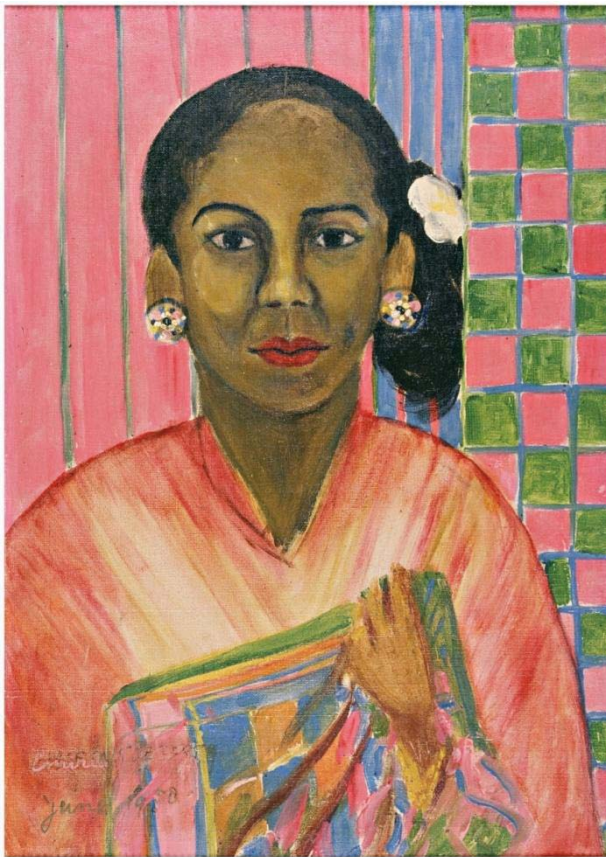


Fig. 10 Emiria Sunassa "Wanita Sulawesi" (Woman of Sulawesi, 1968, oil on canvas, 66 x 47 cm

<sup>82</sup> Arbuckle (2011: 246) has suggested that Emiria possibly had difficulties in drawing hands and feet well. A number of Emiria's paintings show simplified hands or feet, sometimes they are simply omitted/hidden. In *Pengantin Dayak* (1946) the artist simply placed the hands of the figures behind the long table. Nonetheless, she seems to have resolved this problem in her latter works in the late 1950s.

proposition by comparison with another of her works that was painted during the same period, namely the painting *Kembang Kemboja di Bali* (Frangipani Flower of Bali, 1958) (Fig. 11).

In this work, a woman is portrayed in three-quarter view and is wearing traditional Balinese attire. Her head is garlanded with white frangipanis. She is wearing a dark blue *kemben*<sup>83</sup>



Fig. 11 Emiria Sunassa "Kembang Kemboja di Bali" (Frangipani of Bali, 1958, oil on canvas, 47 x 67 cm).

that stops below her bare breasts and her shoulders are draped with pink shawl-like fabrics; on the right shoulder the fabric appears to have been decorated while the left one is of transparent quality, half-covering the left breast. Against three dark vertical planes, the figure almost appears to blend with the background but the impression is interrupted by a bright white light near a horizontal band on her head. The depiction of her face has similar formal qualities to the *Wanita Sulawesi* painting, in particular the nose, eyebrows and lips, which may have been painted from memory as well.

Again, the artist appears to concentrate more on

the face, but in this work, the focus is slightly altered by the striking flower garland, thus bringing together the visual depiction of the flowers and the title of the painting.

<sup>83</sup> A *kemben* is a traditional body covering made by wrapping yards of fabric bandage-style on the upper part of the wearer's body.





Fig. 12 Sapto Hudoyo "Gadis Bali" (Balinese Girl, oil on canvas, 90 x 75cm).

In *Kembang Kemboja di Bali*, despite the emphasis on the flowers as a marker for her ethnic identity and gender, the artist's portrayal of the figure appears to have been at odds with the idea of exoticism and femininity commonly associated with the flowers. Instead, the bare breasts and the dark brown skin of the figure seem to emphasize a strong tribal

quality. To compare this work with another depiction of a similar subject

matter, the painting of a girl by Sapto Hudoyo's *Gadis Bali* (Balinese Girl, 1954) (Fig. 12) highlights innocence and youthful beauty. The girl is painted sitting in a three-quarter view, wearing Balinese traditional attire. In contrast to Emiria's portrayal the breasts are fully covered with *kemben* and one shoulder is covered with yellow *selendang*. Her hands are crossed on her lap above a green piece of cloth and she is holding a white frangipani. The figure demurely averts her eyes from the viewer amidst a background of frangipani trees, some of which have started to bloom, thus emphasizing the freshness of her youth.

Although Emiria's painting of a Balinese woman shares with Sapto Hudoyo's painting some visual references such as Balinese traditional dress and hairdo, it does not conform to the conventional depiction of beauty of a Balinese woman. Instead, it emphasizes the otherness of the figure. Emiria's figure, painted in 1958, evokes a not so far and perhaps an idealized

past where Balinese women were still unencumbered by the trappings of modernity, while Sapto Hudoyo's figure, painted in 1954, seems to have been moulded by the socio-cultural values of the time. Significantly, in contrast to the two paintings by Nasyah Jamin and Sapto Hudoyo, Emiria's figures gaze straight at the painter/viewer, forcing the viewer to engage with the paintings. The artist arguably represented her female figures as subjects with



Fig. 13. Emiria Sunassa "Orang Irian dengan Burung Cendrawasih" (Irian man with bird of paradise, 1948, oil on canvas, 55 x 65cm).

agency rather than the modest, retiring women perceived and portrayed by the male artists.

The work *Orang Irian dengan Burung Cendrawasih* (An Irian man with Bird of Paradise, 1948) (Fig. 13) also stands out by virtue of its formal qualities. One of Emiria's earliest works, it depicts a man holding three birds of paradise against a dark

background. If we compare this painting with *Wanita Sulawesi*

(1958) and *Kembang Kemboja di*

*Bali* (1958), where the artist aspired to create a life-like quality to her figures in the paintings, this particular work successfully conveys a strong impression of an encounter with a Papuan man. The painting is simple and static. The figure dominates the space, whilst the bold strokes that shape the eyes, nose and lips are painted in balance to convey the artist's

impression of a 'primitive' man. Arbuckle suggests that this painting could have been painted *in situ* as it was very 'convincing' (2008: 144) implying that the artist was able to convince the viewers that they are looking at a portrait of a real man and captured the essence of his being through an impressionistic approach.

As mentioned throughout this chapter, Indonesian modern art during its early years was embedded strongly within the nationalist movement. Nationalism itself as noted by Enloe (1989) has been regarded as a male phenomenon so that masculinised memory appears embodied in the representation of warfare in Indonesian art history. The paintings by Sudjojono entitled *Sekko* (c. 1949, oil on canvas, the collection of State Palace), and *Fleeing* (1947, oil on canvas, the collection of State Palace), Hendra Gunawan's *Guerilla Fighters* (1955, oil on canvas), or Dullah's *Guerrillas Preparing* (1949, oil on canvas) are a fair representation of a common subject matter where men are portrayed as being engaged in various activities as fighters and heroes during the revolutionary period. The elevation of participation in armed conflicts in the visual arts is seen as the ultimate contribution of citizenship by artists and also served as the quintessential gendering activity (Speck 2004: 11).<sup>84</sup>

By painting a different subject matter from the nationalist imaginings of her contemporaries, Emiria not only proposed a more inclusive vision of the newly emerging nation but her choice of subject matter also suggested the artist's cosmopolitanism.

Cosmopolitanism, as explained by Kwame Anthony Appiah, is a 'duty' to live with all the

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<sup>84</sup> Alternatively, Basuki Abdullah's paintings of Javanese mythologies could also be seen as a (masculine) re-imagining of the postcolonial nation. Often dismissed by his contemporaries and scholars as a mere society painter, Abdullah is well-known by his Baroque paintings of nymphs, society ladies and nudes. By emphasising the masculinity of the mythical males in his paintings, Arbuckle (2011) has suggested that despite the painter's low reputation, his works could in fact present an effort by a native painter to reclaim the emasculated native male under the colonial rule.

other people in this world and the moral challenge that humanity should rise up to (Appiah 2006; Papastergiadis 2012). Appiah further explains that cosmopolitanism consists of two strains of thought. First, we have an obligation to others beyond those to whom we are related by kith and kind. Second, we take the values not just of human life but also of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance (Appiah 2006: xv).

Emiria's cosmopolitanism can be assumed from her portrait works. Emiria represented empathy towards her subject matter by painting them at close quarters, portrait style, instead of in a particular situation or events. Artists have used portraiture as a genre since the Renaissance era not only to capture a likeness of their sitter but also to convey their character. In Emiria's case the identities of her sitters are unknown and nothing is known about the exact location or date of their meetings. Thus it is debatable whether Emiria intended to capture her sitters' physical likeness through her portraits; it is quite likely that it was an act of recollection by the artist from her various journeys.

Mobility and close connection to nature are just two of many layers of Emiria's narrative. Nonetheless these two layers form a framework for reading her works as an expression of cosmopolitanism. Her extensive travels in Europe and in the archipelago allowed her to absorb different cultures and ideas while still retaining her concern about her own people as exemplified by her political activism. By acknowledging the otherness of those who are culturally different and by also acknowledging other rationalities, her paintings underline the limits of the nationalist imagining as more or less defined by masculine views and a narrow sense of nationalism. The figures in her portraits might be interpreted as





Fig. 14. Emiria Sunassa "Mutiara Bermain" (Pearl at play, date unknown, oil on hardboard, 79 x 91 cm).

representing the artist's view of the nation's Other/new citizens who were rarely taken into account in mainstream history, including art history.

### ***Tracing the feminine: Emiria's nudes and native landscape***

Emiria's intervention into the masculine discourse can be further explored through her other subject matter, namely her nude

paintings.<sup>85</sup> The paintings that will be discussed in the following section link the artist's female nudes to the dark archipelago mentioned in the previous section.

*Mutiara Bermain* (Pearl at Play, c.1942-1948) depicts two nymphs in an underwater setting. With long, loose hair the nymphs are standing above an open scallop shell surrounded by anemones on the ground and a floating jellyfish on the top left corner. The nymphs are standing in a *contrapposto* position with one nymph dominating the scene with her raised arms and a Mona Lisa-like smile. Her right arm straddles the other nymph's back just below her left breast whilst the other one is offering a pearl in an intimate gesture. The artist makes several visual references to Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (c.1486) (Fig. 15) in the

<sup>85</sup> According to Arbuckle (2011) Emiria painted a series of female nudes that were related to motherhood, spirituality and religion, particularly in her last years in Jakarta (late 1950s) when she was already in her sixties.

depiction of the female figures above an open scallop shell.<sup>86</sup> The enigmatic *Birth of Venus* has intrigued Renaissance scholars over the decades. Several interpretations have been offered of this painting, chiefly centring on its mixed pagan and Christian symbolisms. The renowned art historian E.H. Gombrich (1945) has suggested reading this painting as an expression of beauty whereby the viewer can be transported to a divine realm.

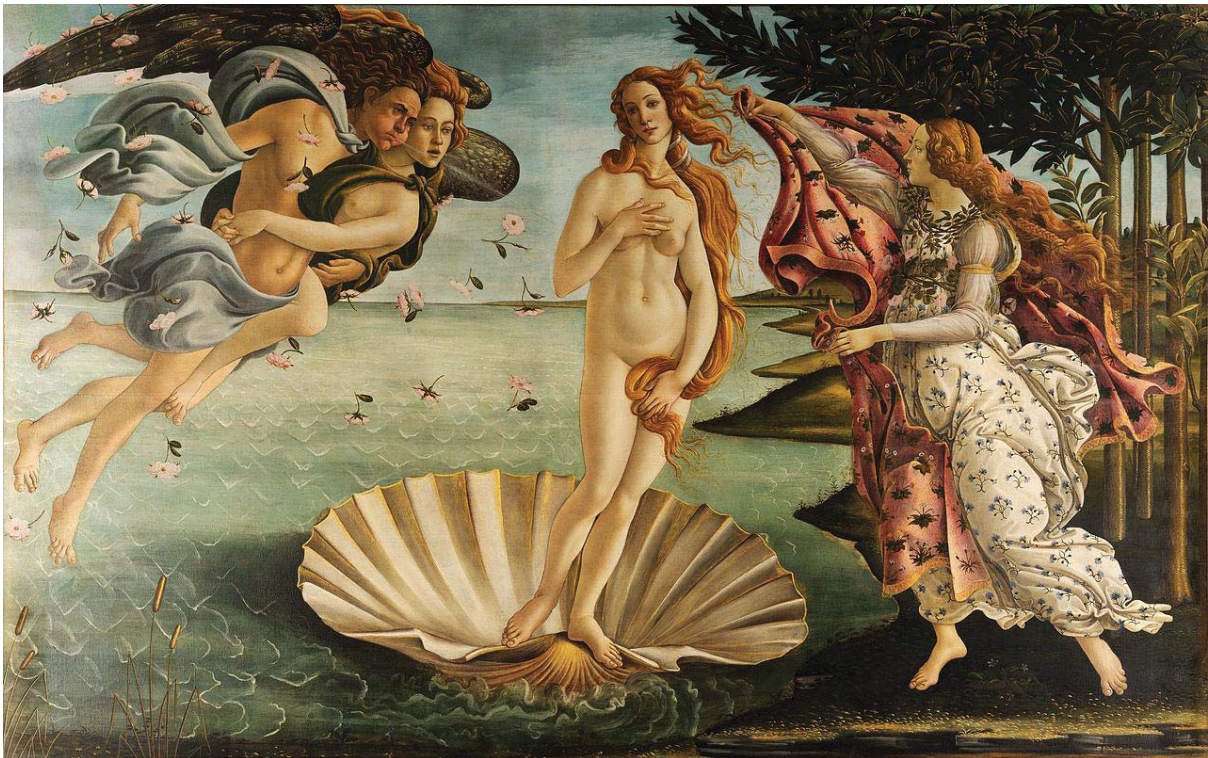


Fig. 15. Sandro Botticelli "La nascita di Venere" (Birth of Venus, c.1486, tempera on canvas, 172.5 x 278.9 cm).

Arbuckle (2011) has suggested the possibility that Emiria might have referenced local folklore for her painting, namely the story of Putri Tunjung Buih or Putri Junjung Buih, which was popular in West Kalimantan and Palembang, to justify her claims of royal heritage. Soekmono (1995) also referenced this folk story in his study of the Javanese *candis*, to

<sup>86</sup> Botticelli's '*Venus*' is a depiction of the Goddess of Beauty emerging from the sea. Born as an already adult nubile woman, Venus is standing on the edge of the shell with long and loose hair with her right hand covering one of her breasts, her other hand modestly covering her genital with her hair, which flows like a scarf. She is blown ashore by two wind deities while a nymph is waiting to receive her on firm land with a scarlet robe.

describe royal succession in the kingdom of Daha. The only similarity between the story of Putri Tunjung/Junjung Buih and Botticelli's Venus, however, is that they were both born out of foam (*buih*).

Even though the visual references to *The Birth of Venus* are evident in *Mutiara Bermain*, there is a reversal process at play in the latter. Botticelli's painting depicted the Goddess of Beauty as virginally shy by covering her breast and genitalia. Moreover, Venus is being depicted about to receive a robe to cover her naked body.<sup>87</sup> Emiria's *Mutiara Bermain* depicts the figures *still* in their underwater surrounding where they appear to be dancing. The display of female nudity and the seemingly erotic play between the two nymphs underline the artist's relative ease in depicting subject matter that would have been considered risqué at the time.

A painting titled *Untitled (Nude)/Untitled (Moonlight Bathing)* (undated) (Fig. 16) is another work that firmly placed female sexuality on the artist's canvas. A lone female figure is lying on the foreground of the canvas. She is lying on her back with her hips turned towards the viewer exposing her genitals, her languid pose further emphasised by her arms stretching above her head, her closed eyes and a blissful expression. The relaxed pose, however, is marred by two white lines angled at ninety degrees, forming a triangle above her body. The lines create a tension between the languid pose and the empty space around her, the triangular line/light simultaneously focuses/encloses the body.

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<sup>87</sup> Despite Venus' status as the symbol of love and beauty, the depiction of the goddess about to receive a robe to cover her nudity is labelled by scholars as one of the Christian elements in the painting. Scholars have suggested that the painting is in fact an allegory of marriage. For a neoplatonic reading of this painting see Gombrich (1945); for the painting as an allegory of marriage see Zirpolo (1991) and Long (2008).





Fig. 16 Emiria Sunassa "Nude/Moonlight Bathing" (date unknown, oil on board, 100 x 50cm).

Arbuckle has noted that this painting was undated and possibly not even publicly exhibited (2011: 246). Certainly when the painting was created (Arbuckle dated it in the 1940s through cross-referencing the artist's style) it was not part of the nationalist romantic agenda and furthermore the possibility that it was deliberately undated and stored away suggested that the artist appeared to have understood its potentially scandalous impact. In addition to the sensuality of the pose, the figure itself arguably can be read as a metaphor for the female landscape.

This notion can be seen through another series of Emiria's nudes. A typical work is *Bronwaterbad* (ca.1954) (Fig. 17). Emiria started to experiment with cubism during the 1950s and she painted mostly female nudes. *Bronwaterbad* is a depiction of a woman taking a bath in an outdoor setting. With the figure's torso turned towards the viewer, the artist painted her breasts as two large pink balls that almost look as if they are detached from the body. Holding a flower under a stream of water tipped out from a water jug, the figure's dynamic pose is emphasized by the free flowing lines and her exaggerated buttocks.





Fig. 17 Emiria Sunassa "Bronwaterbad" (Spring water bath, 1957, oil on canvas, 68 x 51 cm).

The painting *Untitled (Peniup Seruling dan Bulan Purnama)*<sup>88</sup> (Flute Player and Full Moon, 1958) (Fig. 18) is another example of this theme. A lone figure on the right side of the canvas is standing against a tree, playing a thin musical instrument. The figure is standing next to what appears to be a watercourse. Small hills line the watercourse while the vista is bathed under a full moon made of concentric circles, where a serpent-like shape floats towards the moon. The painting's palette is a monochromatic dark blue and grey; the figure is painted in brown with a

white line outlining its shape. The overall impression is of idyllic tranquillity and yet the serpent casts an ominous shadow over the scene.

There are some similarities in the depiction of the female figure with the landscape in these paintings in terms of their uncanny effect. In *Untitled (Nude)/Untitled (Moonlight Bathing)*, the artist depicted a female figure in repose. However, the figure was painted so smoothly that the body paradoxically appears to be rigid. On closer inspection, the torso is slightly arched as the hip turns unnaturally towards the viewer. The contradiction was perhaps deliberate, as the artist may have painted an enactment of female desire, so that the figure itself becomes the source of an underlying tension further emphasized by the triangle. The

<sup>88</sup> The painting is not titled by the artist thus it is labelled as 'untitled'. However, I have assigned a title for descriptive purposes.

shape of the breasts is then echoed by the shape of the undulating hills in the *Untitled* (*Peniup Seruling dan Bulan Purnama*) painting.

The artist appeared to have assimilated her female figures to nature (and quite possibly the native landscape, untouched by modernity). Furthermore, her distinct, neoprimitive style

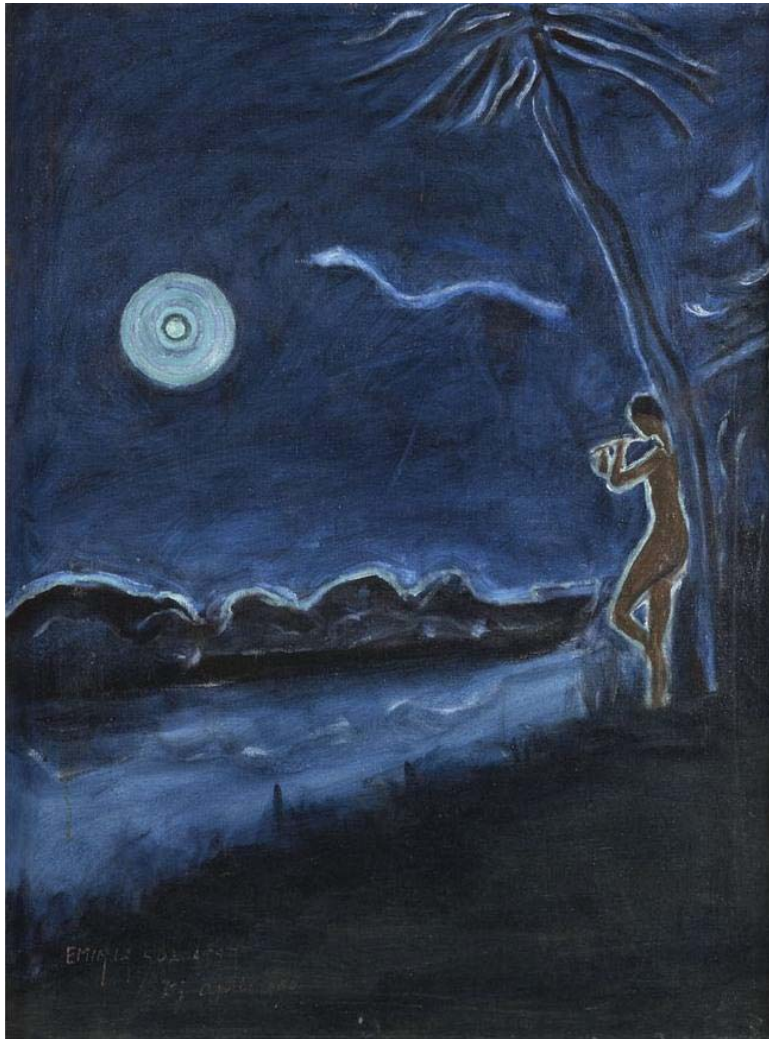


Fig. 18 Emiria Sunassa "Peniup Seruling dan Purnama" (Flute player and full moon, 1958, oil on canvas, 60 x 80 cm).

embodies a sense of cohesion and simplicity in close association with nature. In their suggestion of connection to nature and water, these paintings also suggest a connection with the concept of fertility.

The notion of the feminine as national landscape ('*ibu pertiwi*' or motherland) has been a strong rhetoric in Indonesian national consciousness (Sunindyo 1998). Indeed, the association of Indonesian women with

nature, spirituality and/or unbridled sexuality has been observed by many scholars (Hatley 1999; Andaya 2000; Creese 2004). Female sexuality linked to fertility, which was essential to human survival, had been celebrated throughout small, pre-modern Southeast Asian

societies prior to the sixteenth – seventeenth century (Andaya 2007). This concept, however, was tamed and contained due to the establishment of large-scale political empires dominated by men. Womanly energies were appropriated to support the male structure in the forms of queens, concubines or dutiful wives (Hatley 1999). Nonetheless, Emiria's paintings evoked the sensual, lived experience of the local environment through her strategy of mirroring. The figures and the landscape reflect one another in a subtle way; from the evocation of the landscape in her female figures to association with fertility in the landscape. Her female figures evoked an idea of the feminine as a representation of unsuppressed instinct and unselfconscious sexuality of the primitive.

### ***The Primitive and the Feminine: Nationalism's internal Others***

In *The Question of Lay Analysis* Sigmund Freud infamously referred to the sexual life of the adult woman as the 'dark continent' (1926: 212). The comment, made because of the lack of clinical materials on the sexual life of girls and women for psychoanalysis, also acknowledged Freud's half-knowledge and, furthermore, his curiosity about the topic. The expression 'dark continent' referred to virgin, hostile and impenetrable dark forest, taken from the African explorer Henry Morton Stanley. Freud's fetishizing of women as mysterious and impenetrable also drew attention to psychoanalysis' roots in the age of colonialism.

Ranjana Khanna (2003) links the deep anxiety over women in psychoanalysis to anxiety towards the primitive. Khanna expands Freud's notion of melancholy into what she terms colonial melancholia. Melancholia, or the refusal to mourn, is a form of incorporation, that is swallowing whole something that cannot be assimilated or expelled (Khanna 2003: 166). Khanna argues that the colonized subject is unable to mourn the loss of his or her culture or

tribe, as it is made unknown or invisible to him or her by Western hegemony. One of the resulting symptoms is haunting, in which the lost object haunts the subject in the form of hallucination. History, memory and trauma experienced by postcolonial subjects cannot be eliminated by state nationalism alone.

As outlined in the previous chapter, the study of the emergence of Indonesian modern art in Indonesia has been strongly centred on the premise that it was a reaction against colonialism and that it was a natural consequence of nationalist movements sweeping the archipelago in the 1940s and 1950s. This premise manifested in many ways, from strong emphases on the fact that the founding fathers of Indonesian modernism were self-taught artists to intense polemics on finding the 'true Indonesian identity' in visual arts (and generally, in other forms of cultural production).

The strong emphasis on self-taught skills and nationalism avoids consideration of dealing with problems and exclusions in strong anti-colonial movements, such as the erasure of the connection with and artistic training from their Dutch mentors and the marginalisation of those living outside the nationalist centres. Yet, these issues never really left the consciousness of mainstream art history. For example in the recent scholarship on Emiria Sunassa and also in Mia Bustam's first memoir, the reader is reminded again that decolonisation was a difficult process.

Emiria Sunassa's indigenous portraits and nudes might be said to display colonial melancholia as described by Khanna. Robbed of their means of expression of the self, the colonised subject must use an alien language and culture that cannot reflect their true being; therefore the indigenous self remains half-hidden and moving to greater fragmentation. The indigenous portraits are by and large spectres of the Other in the

postcolonial archipelago. They depict a nation in a fragmented process of becoming instead of already being united under a single national identity.

Through the nude paintings we can draw further conclusions, for instance that the artist was reclaiming the female body through a native, female subjectivity (Arbuckle 2011). Yet the artist's mirroring of the female body and the landscape has suggested that the association between women and nature can be seen as an alternative view of the archipelago. Herewith Emiria's paintings create a rupture in Indonesian art history by putting forward an alternative representation of the feminine as positive re-evaluation of the native, female sexuality during the nationalist period. This notion nonetheless stood at odds with the image of the cultural nationalists of women as signifiers of moral purity and sexual innocence in post-independence Indonesia (Suryakusuma 1996).

The marginalisation of Emiria Sunassa in Indonesian modern art history possibly emerged from several factors. First, she stood outside the patronage system of the time. Indonesia's first president Sukarno was a well-known art collector and patron of many Indonesian artists; his collection was diverse and represented many important artists but it also reflected his personal taste. Emiria's works are noticeably missing from this important collection, the first comprehensive art collection in independent Indonesia. The exclusion can also be attributed to her neoprimitive style and her female figures that did not fit into the tropes of paintings of women in the presidential collection.<sup>89</sup> Second, Emiria did not appear to have a personal link with any male artists of the time, which distanced her further

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<sup>89</sup> Sukarno's collection featured many significant works by leading Indonesian artists. Some paintings were bought by the first president himself during a visit to the artist's studio and some were commissioned. Sukarno collected a significant number of paintings with women as subject matter, from portraiture (often a generalised representation of ethnic/racial types with titles such as '*Gadis Sunda*', '*Gadis Arab*') to nude pin-ups (dominated by Sukarno's favourite painter, Basuki Abdullah).

from the traditional art historical perspective where women artists are usually identified in terms of their relation to men, whether as sister, wife, muse or mistress.

Emiria's depiction of the nation created a discursive space within Indonesian art history. Her indigenous portraits (along with her grotesque females, motherhood and spiritual works) did not fit into the masculine imaginings of the mainstream history and yet they were/are part of the nation.

The marginalisation perhaps can also be attributed to the fear of the primitive/Other that is able to shatter the illusion of the imagined community and masculine imaginings of the nation. Furthermore, Emiria's paintings also reveal the repressed elements of the nation, from its peripheral members to its traumatic formation. The haunting in Emiria's works shadows the notion of a united, patriarchal Indonesia. Moreover, her narratives of mobility and cosmopolitanism showed that while the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised was deeply imbalanced, it was ultimately an ambiguous one.

### ***Painting Ghosts: The Narratives of Mia Bustam***

In this section I discuss, through a close reading of her memoirs, the narrative of Mia Bustam, a painter and activist from the late 1950s and mid-1960s. The memoirs are a story of resilience and fortitude during the hard years of the revolutionary period and the subsequent turbulent political chapter in Indonesian history. In contrast to Emiria Sunassa, Mia Bustam's life story is well-documented due to the publication of her memoirs, yet very little of her work (mostly paintings and drawings) survived. They were either destroyed or misplaced during the 1965-1966 events or otherwise have disintegrated.



Mia Bustam is commonly known as S. Sudjojono's first wife, or more recently as an ex-political prisoner. Yet her career as an artist plus her involvement with two art organisations – SIM (*Seniman Indonesia Muda* – Artists of Young Indonesia) and later on, LEKRA (*Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat* – Institute of People's Culture, a cultural organisation affiliated with the PKI (Indonesian Communist Party)) – have not been thoroughly explored even though they demonstrated the remarkable capability of a woman to combine careers in art and politics. Through a close reading of her memoirs, I piece together the narrator's descriptions to retell her narratives as an artist and activist.

In 2006 she published her first memoir *Sudjojono dan Aku* (Sudjojono and Me), covering the years 1941-1958. In 2008, the second memoir was published titled *Dari Kamp ke Kamp: Cerita Seorang Perempuan* (From Camp to Camp: the Story of a Woman) covering the years 1958 - 1978. The memoirs present several narratives from one woman: wife, mother, artist, activist, political prisoner, and grandmother. The narratives are tightly interwoven, as the author often does not employ a linear progression. Snippets of caricature, anecdotes, and other kinds of idiosyncratic pieces from her memory create a rupture in her writing and provide the reader with a personal insight to Indonesian art history.

The first memoir has a deeply personal touch as it tells the story of the author's marriage and its subsequent breakdown. The memoir discusses her life with S. Sudjojono with additional chapters by the eight children providing testimonies about their father.<sup>90</sup> The memoir is intended by the author to provide the human side of Sudjojono as the artist and

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<sup>90</sup> The memoir initially was intended to be published within only the family circle as a kind of family chronicle, however on the suggestion from Hersri Setiawan, a family friend the manuscript was later on edited and submitted for publication after being delayed for nearly a decade. The family decided to delay the publication for political reasons as stated by the editor: "*maklum masih awal 90-an – tunggu sikon!*". The statement implied that it was not safe to publish the memoir during the New Order regime due to the sensitivity of the contents (Setiawan in Bustam 2004: xi).

‘father’ of Indonesian modern art, largely emphasizing the relationship between the husband and the wife. The memoir thus centres the narrative on a male figure – yet, throughout the writing the author also weaves her agency into the narrative.<sup>91</sup>

The first memoir represents a complex kind of truth in self-life-writing as it depicts a kind of ‘truth’ that relies on cultural convention concerning what a ‘life’ should be like, how its story can be told in speech and somewhat differently in writing (Stanley 1992: 243). Mia’s identity as a Javanese woman of both aristocratic and middle class backgrounds shapes her progressive views, but on the other hand it is precisely her cultural background that compels her to fulfil the role of the (somewhat) compliant wife.

Some art critics have praised the memoir as an important historical account of a mythologised era of Indonesian modern art history, yet her narrative as an artist (and activist in the second memoir) has not been explored sufficiently in the reviews (Rukardi 2006; Nurcahyo 2013). Considering that the breakdown of her marriage in fact enabled her to regain her sense of self and to launch her artistic and subsequently political career, the oversight seems remarkable.

The second memoir focuses on her story in various political camps during her 13 years of imprisonment. It shares the feature of many prison memoirs all over the world in its focus on the human condition and surviving the extremes of suffering from torture, hunger, isolation and loss (McGregor and Hearman 2007). The second memoir is situated within the alternative retelling of Indonesian history from an ex-political prisoner’s point of view (McGregor and Hearman 2007: 362). Loosely, the memoir is structured from the author’s

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<sup>91</sup> The author’s statement that the memoir focuses on the figure of Sudjojono and their life together – hence the title *Sudjojono dan Aku* (Sudjojono and Me) – seems to deny her own subjectivity. Paradoxically, the author’s stated intention is somewhat misplaced as the memoir is in fact, highly critical of Sudjojono (Bustam 2004: xv-xvi).



life as a single parent after her separation from her husband, her subsequent activities within SIM to her arrest and imprisonment. The tone is not overtly personal or confessional despite the deep pathos in her descriptions of the many aspects of prison life. In comparison to the first memoir there is also not a great deal of self-reflection in the second memoir, perhaps because by now her identity has also been very much shaped by her political life.

### ***Mia Bustam's timeline***

Mia Bustam was born Fransiska Emanuela Sasmiati/Sasmiya Sasmojo in 1920. Her father, Raden Ngabehi Sasmojo, worked as an assistant administrator in the Bataviasche Kunstkring (Batavia Art Society), where the family lived in a small pavilion near the main building (Bustam 2006: 3). She was of Javanese background of a minor aristocrat family with family connections throughout Yogyakarta, Semarang, Pati and Jakarta. Her formal education is not clearly described in the first memoir, but there are references to her ability to read Dutch, English, German and Russian literatures (Bustam 2006: 7).

Sasmiya met Sudjojono in 1943 in the Bataviasche Kunstkring. Despite strong objections from her family they were married within the same year. She was the model wife and partner to the idealistic and volatile Sudjojono. In their sixteen years of marriage, she gave birth to eight children all of whom survived into their adulthood before Sudjojono left her in 1958 for Rose Sumabrata. Initially in her married life Sasmiya was content to play a supporting role for Sudjojono, yet her writings about the social life of the Persagi members

and the Indonesian art association SIM revealed an astute observation (Fig. 19).



Fig. 19 Mia Bustam during Sukarno's visit to SIM studio, 1957. Mia is standing second on right, Sudjojono is standing second on left.

Like Emiria Sunassa, Sasmiya only took up painting in her later years, after her separation from Sudjojono in 1958 (they were officially divorced in 1959). After the separation, she joined SIM (*Seniman Indonesia Muda*) and participated for the first time in their exhibition using her new name Mia Bustam in 1959 (Bustam 2006: 209).<sup>92</sup> Mia is her nickname while Bustam is a shortened version of 'Bustaman', her family lineage (*trah*) in the royal family of Yogyakarta. Mia did not mention specifically her reason for changing her name in the

<sup>92</sup> *Seniman Indonesia Muda* was established in 1946 initially as the propaganda wing of Pesindo (Pemuda Sosialis Indonesia). Later on it became a separate arts organisation with distinct departments such as Literature, Drama, Ketoprak, Printmaking, Ceramics and Painting (headed by Sudjojono). SIM's main preoccupation was to support the newly formed republic through the means of arts. It was, for example, often engaged in creating agitprop posters or promoting other ventures of the republic. The most lively description of SIM can be found in Mia Bustam's memoirs. Little information is publicly available about SIM and even less about its female members. In interview transcripts available at IVAA (2009), Mia mentioned Ibu Sumirah (Sumilah), Harjadi's wife, as another female member of SIM. Sumirah/Sumilah was the treasurer of the organisation.

memoir, but it is quite possible that she did so in order to regain a sense of new self and as a way to mark a new chapter in her life.

Mia later became the head of SIM from 1962 to 1963 and the head of the LEKRA branch of Yogyakarta. She was arrested and imprisoned for 13 years without trial due to her involvement with the latter organisation. She was moved around in various political prisoner camps, spending most of her imprisonment in Wirogunan Prison Yogyakarta (1966-1971) and Bulu Women's Prison - Plantungan Rehabilitation Installation Semarang (1971-1976). She was finally released on the 27<sup>th</sup> July 1978.

### ***Sudjojono dan Aku: Becoming an artist***

Immediately after her divorce in 1959, Mia decided to take up painting. She recalled that during their marriage Sudjojono often encouraged her to draw. After their divorce and perhaps encouraged by positive support from her friends her decision could be seen as a therapeutic act and also as a way to reaffirm her own self within the artistic community. She decided to paint a self-portrait as a way to mark her entry into painting:

*In 1959, after the divorce, I made a self-portrait (my face was still thin) with a bamboo wall background which used to be Maria Tjui's room. At the corner of the painting, there are jasmine buds and further at the back there is my small temple with baby Rino (9 months old) which I took from a sketch which I made previously.<sup>93</sup>*

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<sup>93</sup> "Pada 1959, setelah bercerai, aku membuat potret diri (masih agak kurus wajahnya) dengan latar belakang dinding bambu bekas kamar Maria Tjui. Di pojok lukisan ada kuntum-kuntum melati, dan di belakangnya lagi ada pura kecilku dengan bayi Rino (9 bulan) yang kuambil dari skets yang pernah dibuat." The painting later on went on a travelling exhibition to the Eastern bloc countries organized by LEKRA. After the exhibition, it was also exhibited in Jakarta as part of PKI's 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In 1965, the painting as well as the whole PKI office was burnt down by an angry mob (Bustam 2008: 23).

Fortunately, a black and white reproduction image of this painting survived (Fig. 20). While she indicated in the first and second memoir that she had done some sketches of her children, none of the works survived. In her self-portrait we can see a possible reworking from one of the sketches. The portrait is a representation of the artist as a slim and pale woman of indeterminate age. Wearing a flowery *kebaya* (traditional shirt) with a *sanggul* (traditional Javanese hair bun), she gazes at the viewer with her large dark eyes. Even though she claims not to have had formal artistic training, the portrait is adeptly executed to represent the physiognomic likeness and her strength of character. The painting exudes a certain fragility but at the same time a sense of pride through the slightly raised chin and the direct gaze.

The artist chose to paint herself within her private space instead of in an artistic milieu. Her 9-month old baby is painted on the top left side in front of a small Hindu temple while on the right side, slightly cropped in the reproduction image, is a cluster of jasmine flowers. While the painting can be seen to represent a peaceful, domestic scene, the artist alters this perception by firmly placing



Fig. 20 Mia Bustam "Portrait Diri" (Self-portrait, 1959, oil on canvas, dimension unknown).

herself in the front space of the painting, dominating her surroundings. Mia thus simultaneously distances herself from the image of the feminine as an inherent part of the domestic scene while asserting an alternate, more independent feminine identity.

While Mia's self-portrait may not be intended as a feminist statement by the artist, the self-portrait is a positive assertion of woman as subject rather than object in representation. The artist herself in her memoir stated that the surviving image is a memento and proof that she used to be able to paint such work (*sebagai kenangan dan bukti bahwa aku pernah bisa*

*melukis seperti itu*) (Bustam 2008: 23). Her self-reflective statement is a telling point that the work is important to her not only from a technical perspective but also from the context from which it was generated.

Traditionally, self-portraiture in Western art history is a masculine domain. Meskimmon (1996) argues that self-portrait as a sub-genre in Western art practice is linked to the concept of 'artist' as a type, that is the artist as a special individual who is worthy of self-representation in his own right. She further argues that self-portraits acquire their status through institutions and the discourses of art history that supported the myth of the great artist.<sup>94</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century artists started to resist the limitations of academic tradition and opted for the avant-garde and modernism, thus positing the idea of the artist as a visionary, a 'creative genius' (Meskimmon 1996: 18). In the context of Indonesia, the pervasiveness of this typecast is the representation of Indonesia's celebrated poet and bohemian Chairil Anwar. Anwar's brooding gaze, the slightly tilted head, and the raised hand holding a cigarette is one of the most enduring images of a bohemian, romantic genius in Indonesian visual culture (Fig. 21).<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Not surprisingly perhaps this canon is race, gender and class exclusive (Meskimmon 1996: 15). Marginalized groups rarely came into self-representation. Meskimmon further argues that the iconography for self-portraiture has often proven to be difficult to negotiate for artists outside the canon. Such iconographic tropes ranging from the portraits of the (male) artist as Christ to representations of the clothed male artist and his female nude model all valorised the position of the artist as a special individual, ensuring the authenticity of his vision.

<sup>95</sup> Over the years, Anwar has been widely referenced and represented through various medium from film, music, literature to visual arts. One of the leading contemporary artists of Indonesia, Agus Suwage, has appropriated Anwar's particular image to create a series of portraits in which his subjects are painted mimicking Anwar's gesture ("I/Con exhibition", Nadi Gallery, Jakarta 2007). Another exhibition titled "Puisi Cinta Chairil Anwar" organised by Mes56 in Yogyakarta (January 2009) invited young artists to create works





Fig. 21 Chairil Anwar (1922-1949).

When women are typically represented as mute objects with their cultural agency marginalized from the mainstream, self-portraiture is often a strategy to control their representation. Some Indonesian women artists use this strategy not only to assert their agency in a normative society but also to explore deeper psychological dimensions of their personal background. Laksmi Shitaresmi (b. 1974) has created a series of pregnant self-portraits that explore maternal subjectivity (her works are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6) while Kartika Affandi (b. 1934) is one of the

senior women artists in Indonesia who has created series of self-portraits in examining her relationship with her famous father, Affandi (1907-1990).

Mia's self-portrait articulates the experience of women-as-artist through a domestic setting, a common theme in self-portraiture by women artists. The steady gaze of the artist in Mia Bustam's self-portrait is a reminder that this work is in no way a 'prettified' self-representation of the artist nor a 'woman' displayed as the carrier of beauty (Meskimmon 1996: 28). The artist has created a work that arguably challenges the conventional representation of women in Indonesia during the period of Indonesian modernism. It was

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based on Anwar's love poems. The promotional poster of the exhibition displayed a young woman, dressed in a yesteryear costume gazing at the viewer, again, mimicking Anwar's particular imagery.

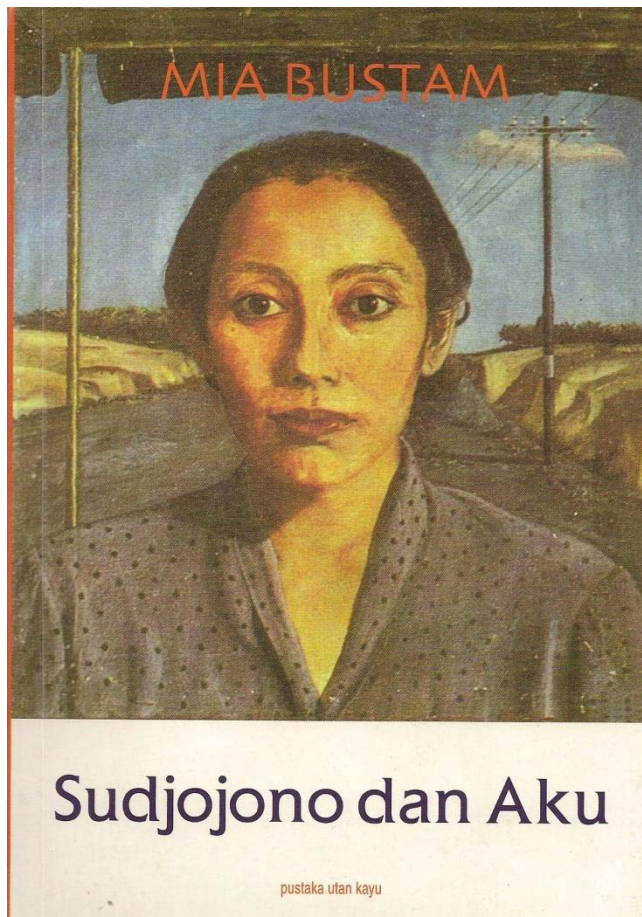


Fig. 22 Cover of “Sudjojono dan Aku” (Pustaka Utan Kayu, Jakarta, 2007).

more common to see self-portraits by male artists as a way to reassert the masculine and bohemian nature of the profession.

It is useful to compare Mia’s own self-image with two other works by her then-husband, Sudjojono. Sudjojono painted Mia on several occasions. The painting titled *Istri Saya* (My Wife, 1952) which was used for the cover of Mia’s first memoir, depicted Mia against a

stretch of road (Fig. 22). Mia was portrayed sitting on a horse-drawn carriage while partially obscured behind

her is a stretch of road with electricity poles against a blue sky. She is wearing a dark purple *kebaya* and a *sanggul*. While the artist’s commitment to realism during the 1950s was well known, the painting of his wife appears to have another layer of meaning. One can sense that even though the sitter is facing the viewer, her gaze falls into a space somewhere behind the viewer; the sitter appears to be presented in the role as a wife instead of being represented as herself.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Rose Sumabrata, who later became Sudjojono’s second wife, accurately commented that Sudjojono did not put forward the character (of Mia) behind the portrait (*kurang mengedepankan watakku yang sebenarnya*). Sudjojono infamously left Mia for Rose after his proposal for a polygamous marriage was rejected by Mia. Ironically, due to this Sudjojono was expelled from the PKI, which saved him from the purge of 1965-1966 (Bustam 2006: 253).



Another painting of Mia –titled *Ibu Menjahit* (Sewing Mother, 1943, oil on canvas) (Fig. 23) was collected by the National Gallery of Indonesia and shown in its inaugural exhibition mentioned in the previous section. The painting, according to Mia, is in fact titled *Istriku* (My Wife). According to Mia,

*The painting of his mother survives, now in the collection of the National Gallery in Gambir, together with my self-portrait when I was sewing and pregnant with our first child (in 1943). The portrait was [originally] titled “My Wife” but after Sudjojono remarried, the title of the portrait, which was at that time collected by the National Museum, I’m not sure by who, was then changed to “Sewing Mother.”<sup>97</sup>*

(Bustam 2006: 376)

The painting depicts the artist’s heavily pregnant wife sitting on a chair with her head bowed down in concentration with one raised hand pulling an invisible thread, while a piece of white cloth lies on her lap. One of the earliest works of Sudjojono, it combines the artist’s early expressionistic style on the background with a careful study of the sitter’s body. Problematically, the change of title not only erased the sitter’s identity but also (mis)represented the artist’s wife as an allegory of *ibu pertiwi* (motherland). The (mis)representation might be seen to underline what Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989) have argued, namely that within the symbols of nationalism women are represented as biological reproducers of the nation’s members and as mere participants in national, economic, political and military struggles at the expense of their subjectivity.

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<sup>97</sup> “Potret ibunya selamat, kini termasuk koleksi Galeri Nasional di Gambir, bersama potret saya ketika sedang menjahit dan hamil anak pertama kami (1943). Potret itu berjudul “Istriku,” namun setelah Sudjojono menikah lagi, potret yang sementara itu dikoleksi oleh Museum Nasional, entah oleh siapa, judulnya diubah menjadi “Ibu Menjahit.”



Fig. 23 S. Sudjojono "Istriku menjahit" (Sewing wife, 1944, oil on canvas, 55.5 x 71 cm).

In contrast to Sudjojono's two images of Mia that blur the sitter's identity with idealized types, Mia's own self-portrait firmly situated the artist within her domestic space. It is a significant context for many women artists, namely that their artistic practices often take place within their own home. Again, this goes against the grain of Western traditional self-portraiture notions – adapted into Indonesian modern art discourse – where the details of

home and family are considered to be inappropriate (Meskimmon 1996: 74).

With the inclusion of her child in her self-portrait, the artist is referring to domestic space as a model location to represent herself. This notion is further emphasised in another work, namely a family portrait in 1958. The painting was intended to be a juxtaposition of Mia at the centre of the work with her eight children surrounding her; it also includes her mother and Marah Djibal, a family friend (later to become a LEKRA figure). From the description the work appears to be a visual reference to Sudjojono's *Kawan-kawan Revolusi* (Friends of the Revolution, c.1946-1947, oil on canvas, the collection of State Palace).<sup>98</sup>

<sup>98</sup> This undated painting appeared to be the last painting Mia Bustam (2006) made before her imprisonment. Sudjojono's painting was apparently created as a challenge from Trisno Sumardjo to Sudjojono. Sumardjo challenged Sudjojono to finish a painting of all of his friends within one day to which Sudjojono promptly took

Mia's family portrait, perhaps unwittingly, not only appropriates an iconic work by a male artist but also subverts its subject matter. Mia substitutes the heroic figures that have sprung from a masculine, nationalist memory with her own foci of reverence, namely her own family members. By positioning her family members in place of heroes, Mia destabilizes the notion of heroism and inserts family structure/domesticity as the central narrative. Furthermore, by placing herself at the centre of the narrative Mia reasserts her Self in the core of the family. She emphasises the unconventional nature of this family in contrast to the traditional Javanese family where the father sits as the centre of the family's universe.<sup>99</sup>

On the reception of the family portrait, she recounts this story:

*One day, when I was not painting, Mas Pardal arrived ... he recognised that painting and then said, "What a pity, it is not finished yet, and Djon is no longer here." I laughed.*

*"Well, the painter is still here!"*

*"Oh, so it is you who painted [it]?"*

*He was amazed! Of course I was proud: my painting was mistaken as the maestro's painting!*<sup>100</sup> (Bustam 2008: 22)

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up and won. The painting was later on collected by Soekarno. A famous photograph of Soekarno by Henri Cartier-Bresson showed Soekarno with arms clenched in a forceful manner with the painting on the background.

<sup>99</sup> This painting has never been finished due to her various political activities and later on, her imprisonment. Ironically, the painting is the only known surviving work by her (it now hangs on her house). The original work depicts the artist in the centre with three of her children while the rest remain in sketch – after her release, she tried to finish the painting but according to her, that ended up 'disastrously' (Bustam 2008).

<sup>100</sup> Suatu hari, sedang aku tidak melukis, Mas Pardal datang...Ia mengenali lukisan itu, lalu berkata "Eman, dereng dipun rampungaken, Mas Djon sampun mboten wonten ngriki." Aku tertawa.

"Lha wong ingkang nggambar taksih wonten kok!"

"Lho, Mbakyu to, ingkang melukis?"

Heran dia! Tentu saja aku bangga: lukisanku disangka lukisan sang maestro!

Mia did not seem to be particularly resentful that her work was seen as Sudjojono's work. In fact, she seemed to be quite proud (*bangga*). The paradoxical nature of this statement suggests that despite Mia's own artistic efforts, there was a sense of ambiguity to her own skill as an artist. When she was praised for her first oil on canvas work, she was still in doubt of her own ability. I quote her text at length:

*I painted in the workshop with SIM's junior members, the model was a girl from a village near Bangirejo Taman. She was wearing a green shirt. Whilst I was painting I heard Djibbal mutter behind me, "You are really a painter."*

*Is it true? Will I ever be a real painter? I compared the portrait of the girl with the real one, it is the same indeed! The nuances of the skin tone on her face, the shapes of her shirt are also similar. I am quite pleased.<sup>101</sup> (Bustam 2008: 20)*

She then gained further confidence in her techniques by continuously practising her skills through painting still lifes.

*I plucked the Desemberbol from the garden and I planted it in that pot. I arranged the cover of the altar in curvy shapes, I placed the pot above it, [then] I started to paint. I finished it in three days. It was good, it appeared to be three-dimensional, not flat. I began to feel confident and my brushstrokes became more solid.<sup>102</sup> (Bustam 2008: 21)*

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<sup>101</sup> Aku melukis di sanggar bersama para yunior SIM, modelnya adalah seorang gadis dari kampung dekat Bangirejo Taman. Ia memakai baju hijau. Selama aku melukis, kudengar Djibbal menggumam di belakangku, "Ibu memang pelukis."

Benar? Apakah aku akan bisa menjadi seorang pelukis benar-benar pelukis? Kubandingkan potret gadis itu dengan gadis aslinya, memang sama! Nuansa warna kulit wajahnya, lekuk-lekuk bajunya juga sama. Senang juga hati ini.

<sup>102</sup> ...desemberbol kucabut dari taman dan kutanam dalam pot tadi. Tutup altar kuatur berlekuk-lekuk di meja kecil, pot kutaruh di atasnya, aku terus mulai melukis. Tiga hari selesai. Bagus, sudah kelihatan plastis, tidak

The tone of her descriptions in the memoir gradually moves from self-doubt to confidence. We can perhaps attribute this to the support from her peer group in SIM. Moreover, her subject matter ranged from still lifes to painting life models, suggesting that both men and women members of SIM studied together in an open environment. Mia was able to further the technical skills and support required to start her career as an artist. Problematically though, because the *sanggar* system was a typically masculine space, women who participated in them were rarely mentioned.<sup>103</sup>

Photographic documentation of SIM's activities reveals snapshots of exhibitions, the *sanggar* environment as well as family members. SIM was an open, commune style environment where members often shared living and working space together. Paintings, posters and sculptures produced by SIM members in several photographs depict nationalist, propaganda subject matter. Given the political situation of the 1940s until early 1950s, many Indonesian male artists were not only involved in armed conflicts with the Dutch or Japanese but also worked with underground nationalist leaders, providing support in the form of journalistic works or propaganda posters.

Mia's choice of subject matter when she was still studying under SIM thus was markedly different from that of the other, mostly male members of the group. Mia's subject matter,

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plat (datar). Aku menjadi percaya diri, dan sapuan-sapuan kuasku menjadi mantap. The gradual development of her confidence and artistic skills was later on proven by a commission from the National Front for the Liberation of West Irian in 1963 when she was asked to create a painting of TNI's military incursion to West Irian (Bustam 2008: 23).

<sup>103</sup> The *sanggar* system allowed students to study and learn the techniques of one or several masters within the group before they 'graduated' and set up their own professional practices. Sudjojono was known to also accept female students either during his involvement with *sanggar* or when he was already living in Jakarta (post 1958). Some of his female students went on to become professional artists, such as Maria Tjui and Kartini Basuki. In her first memoir Mia mentioned Maria Tjui as a student of Sudjojono's in 1955 (Bustam 2008: 23). Maria Tjui (b.1934) paints in expressionist style with a diverse subject matter. Her style is often compared to Affandi's. Kartini Basuki (b.1948) studied under Sudjojono for only one year before he passed away in 1986; she paints mostly still lifes and landscapes with realist style. For discussion on Kartini Basuki see Kusnadi (1991).

as seen from her statements, ranged from domestic settings to still life and life models. The distance between her choice of subject matter and that of her contemporaries at SIM was quite noticeable.

When the new republic was declared in 1945, Indonesian women were granted the right to vote, constitutional equality and equal pay in the civil service. They were also actively visible in the public arena. Despite the strident political environment around her (and also within her domestic life with Sudjojono) Mia's choice of intimate subject matter was a curious one.

Perhaps this decision can be attributed to several factors: firstly, in establishing her own identity as an artist and in adherence to the *sanggar* system, and possibly in eagerness to learn, Mia sought to emulate the style of Sudjojono; perhaps Sudjojono's reputation as the 'father of Indonesian modern art' and 'maestro' had elevated him into an almost mythical position.

Secondly, the identity of the artist in post-independence Indonesia was largely shaped by masculine spaces, as explained in the previous section on Emiria Sunassa. The *sanggar* system was not only dominated by men, it was also deeply steeped in the gendered discourse of nationalism. Quite possibly, as a woman making her name as an artist, she sought acknowledgement and tacit support from this peer group through master-student relationship and chose to paint 'safe' objects. The choice of the subject matter thus not only reflected the strict adherence to the *sanggar* system where a master/senior artist provides the guidance of the artistic direction for his students but also despite Mia's intention to

provide an evaluation of the maestro in the memoir, her emulation of Sudjojono's style reflected a more ambivalent attitude towards Sudjojono as the artist-hero.<sup>104</sup>

### ***Dari Kamp ke Kamp: Arts and Politics***

Mia's self-confidence grew along with her political activism. As mentioned previously, she was a member and head of *Seniman Indonesia Muda* and later she became involved with LEKRA. Holt (1962), Foulcher (1986), Antariksa (2005) together with Mia Bustam (2006, 2008) all noted that SIM played an important role between 1946-1963 in building up resistance against the Dutch and support for the newly-established republic.<sup>105</sup>

Even though throughout her second memoir Mia never mentions her official role in SIM, it was clear that after she passed the entry test and was fully accepted as a student in SIM's workshop, she was more than just a student or a supporter. When Sudjojono left Yogyakarta for Jakarta in 1959, he also left the organisation in a dispirited state.

Many students also moved to Jakarta to find employment in the commercial world. Left without any leader/teacher or studio/living space, Mia appeared to take on an unofficial role of leader. She then wrote a long and eloquent letter to other SIM members to remind them of SIM's deteriorating condition:

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<sup>104</sup> Mia was more forthright in her criticism of Sudjojono's shifting views. When Sudjojono was elected as a member of parliament for the Indonesian Communist Party, he was often away in Jakarta for parliamentary sessions and only came to Yogya on weekends. Upon a visit from a cultural group from Prague to Yogya, the couple arrived late to the concert hall. Sudjojono later grumbled about being placed on the back of the hall, not at the front as befitted his new status. Mia was embarrassed and irritated at his complaint and thought of him as importunate ever since he was elected (Bustam 2006: 233).

<sup>105</sup> SIM members created and produced anti-Dutch and revolutionary posters, which they distributed behind the enemy lines as well as political cartoons in the *Kedaulatan Rakyat* newspaper. Between 1946 and 1959, Sudjojono was the undisputed leader of SIM. Mia's role and participation during these years appears to have been a supporter and documenter of the community until their separation. For discussion on SIM's activities see Holt (1967: 201) and Bustam (2006: 388).



*... [W]ithout close unity we will never be able to move forward as an organisation whose goal is to dedicate our abilities to the People and their fight, and to spread the correct and proper understanding about the duty of the artist as a cultured human being which cannot be separated from the wider world, without going astray from those duties.*<sup>106</sup>

It was unclear whether her passionate plea was able to garner the financial support that SIM needed. Nonetheless, in 1963 Mia and her fellow students decided to pool their financial resources and buy a plot of land north of Yogyakarta (Bustam 2008: 25-7).<sup>107</sup> Mia then moved her family into the workshop (Bustam 2008: 27). She noted that they were happy and able to live comfortably from their land (Bustam 2008: 29-33). By this time Mia had also started to attend LEKRA's various forums.

Mia joined LEKRA after its first congress in Solo, 22-28 January 1959. She was invited by Njoto, initially only as an observer (*peninjau*), but her attendance was apparently noted by the central board members. Afterwards, Mia received a personal letter from Joebaar Ajoeb stating that she was now formally registered as a member of LEKRA (Bustam 2008: 9).<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Karena tanpa kesatuan jang erat kita tidak akan pernah bisa maju sebagai organisasi jang bertudjuan mengabdikan kemampuan kita kepada Rakjat dan perjuangannya, dan menjebar pengertian jang benar dan tepat mengenai tugas seniman sebagai manusia budaya jang tak akan bisa melepaskan diri dari dunia luas, tanpa menyeleweng dari tugas2 itu.

<sup>107</sup> The new workshop was envisaged to be like a Makarenko-style commune where SIM members including their families can create art works and live together from their own land. After successfully buying a 2000 square metre (0.2 acre) plot of land, however, they continued to struggle in building their dream house. During that time inflation was rife and due to a bad financial arrangement with LEKRA, SIM's workshop was only partially built (Bustam 2008: 29).

<sup>108</sup> As a LEKRA member, Mia was active in various activities from judging the annual tidy town competition, organising a committee for visiting foreign artists to attending various conferences. In 1964, Mia attended the Revolutionary Literature and Arts Conference (KSSR) in Jakarta. She was already a member of the executive committee and her recollection of the conference was *menyenangkan* (enjoyable). Furthermore, Mia also enrolled herself in Universitas Rakjat (People's University – established by LEKRA in July 1962). Along with the remaining members of SIM, Mia took units on 'everything, especially what a leftist should know' such as Introduction to Marxist Political Economy, and more. SIM members with another arts organisation, Pelukis Rakjat, also participated in creating a mural to celebrate the end of a semester party. Mia was awarded the



Mia's commitment to politics thus was quite clear by this stage. Her various political activities – albeit still connected to her background as an artist - slowed down her personal works.<sup>109</sup> Her last personal work before her imprisonment was the previously mentioned family picture, while her last official commission was to be a series of portraits of Communist figures, from Marx, Engels, to Njoto; however she was unable to start painting due to her heavy workload (Bustam 2008: 43).

### ***Imprisonment***

Mia noted that there was already a 'heavy tension' in the air in the last week of September 1965. Following the alleged attempted coup by the Indonesian Communist Party, many PKI supporters were captured in a series of arrests. Mia was arrested on November 23<sup>rd</sup> in her house. Along with several other students and SIM members, she went through several interrogation processes before finally being placed in various political prisons. She was placed in Wirogunan Prison Yogyakarta (1966-1971) and then the Bulu Women's Prison - Plantungan Rehabilitation Installation Semarang (1971-1976).<sup>110</sup>

The period of her imprisonment – or as she dryly calls it, '*disekolahkan sama Pak Harto*' (sent to school by Soeharto) – is narrated throughout two-thirds of the second memoir. It brought an immediate end to her artistic career in the conventional sense, but Mia

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best student award, much to her amazement. Mia then continued her study and took special units in PKI politics (Bustam 2008: 15-16).

<sup>109</sup> Hersri Setiawan mentioned that Mia might have exhibited her paintings with other women painters in 1964. In his book "Memoar Pulau Buru" (2003) he stated that Mia might have exhibited her works along with Siti Ruliyati, Kustijah Edhi Soenarso, and Kartika Affandi. Both Siti Ruliyati and Kustijah Edhi Soenarso were amongst the first female students of ASRI Yogyakarta. See excerpt of Setiawan's memoir in Setiawan (2011).

<sup>110</sup> In October 20<sup>th</sup>, her eldest son Tedjabayu was captured while on a guard duty as a member of CGMI (*Consentrasi Gerakan Mahasiswa Indonesia*, Association of Indonesian Student Movement); she would only see him again fourteen years later (Bustam 2008: 50).

nonetheless continued to create during her imprisonment, albeit only sporadically.<sup>111</sup> Her prison days were filled with various forms of activities, from gardening to making craft products with other inmates to sell outside the prison. During religious holidays or other national holidays, the prison opened a bazaar to sell their handmade products to the visiting public.<sup>112</sup>

She states that women inmates in Plantungan Prison did not suffer extreme physical abuse like the men in Buru Island, rather they suffered psychological threats, unfair sanctions, verbal abuse, medical neglect and boredom in listening to the incessant praises of the New Order over the Old Order [by the guards] (Bustam 2008: 218). Many inmates, especially the younger ones, were prone to exploitation by the warden. Often they were asked to spy on their own friends with promises of new fabrics, jewellery and of course, early release.

Mia does not write much about the physical and/or sexual abuses suffered by the women inmates in her memoir. By contrast to *Suara Perempuan Korban Tragedi '65* – an edited book by Ita F. Nadia (2007) of harrowing testimonials by women inmates of the 1965-1966

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<sup>111</sup> While incarceration did pose serious limitations for many imprisoned, left-leaning artists like Mia – not to mention heavy and often paranoid censorship of the most banal form – it did not stop her from participating in creative outlets. Creative life and artistic activities inside New Order's prisons are recorded in an article by Hersri Setiawan. Setiawan, a former member of LEKRA and also a family friend, recorded various forms of performances such as classical Javanese theatre and traditional music during his time in Salemba prison and later on, Buru Island (Setiawan and Foulcher 1995: 1). The authors document the range of artistic activities of many leading artists and writers who were incarcerated at the same time as himself as well as showing the resilience of human spirit in the face of extreme hardships (Setiawan and Foulcher 1995: 2). Even though Setiawan exclusively writes about his experience in men's prisons, Mia's retelling of her experience in various women's prisons also documents similar activities. Annual religious celebrations, regular day and night performances, choirs are documented in Mia's memoir. She notes that all of these activities were very helpful in fighting the frustrations and despair in waiting for their release. See Bustam (2008: 151) and also Setiawan and Foulcher (1995).

<sup>112</sup> Criticizing the corrupt guards, Mia (2008: 225-8) states that even though they were able to sell their handmade items, the inmates rarely saw the actual money and they were primarily being used as a 'cash-cow' by the guards.

events, Mia's memoir only noted a few stories of the physical/sexual abuse suffered by other inmates.<sup>113</sup>

Mia's second memoir differs from other political prisoner memoirs in Indonesia by virtue of the fact that the author is able to isolate her own experiences from the recurring images strongly associated with the killings of 1965-1966. Thus her memoir provides a certain kind of 'objective' retelling of prison life as opposed to the catalogue of sexual abuse and torture that appeared almost uniformly in other testimonies (Budiarto 1997; Sulami 1999; Pohlman 2004; Nadia 2007). Hearman (2009) argues that recurring stories in various testimonies from prison inmates such as the 'river of blood' in Surabaya and the public stoning of a school principal in Boyolali were often not directly experienced by the prisoners themselves. These resilient images reflect the lack of new knowledge about the killings as well as the ways in which people who have suffered traumatic events may recall and represent their memories of these events (Hearman 2009: 34).

With her reputation as an artist known throughout prison, Mia participated in various cultural and religious activities by utilizing her skills as a painter. This meant that she was often designated as an 'artistic director', 'set designer', or 'costume designer' as well receiving the occasional (unpaid) commissions by the prison wardens. Mia documented several occasions when she was asked by them to paint. During her time in Wirogunan Prison, Mia made her first painting in response to a request from a warden. She chose to paint a jasmine tree that had grown in the surrounding area (Bustam 2008: 139). She then narrates the story of how the painting was displayed in an open space near the men's

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<sup>113</sup> However, this does not make her testimony less convincing than other testimonials: when she was discovered to be a member of LEKRA, the interrogator proceeded to throw knives towards her perhaps in an attempt to terrorize and elicit some information from her. While she was not physically harmed, the event left a deep mark on her (Bustam: 80-4).

prison, like a 'solo exhibition', where it could be appreciated by other prisoners (Bustam 2008: 139).

Her second documented painting was made when she was in Plantungan Rehabilitation Installation. Again, Mia was asked by the warden to paint and this time her canvas and paint were supplied by the prison. She chose to paint a landscape in the surrounding area. While she habitually followed the aesthetic convention of realism, it appears this time she chose not to. Instead, she omitted one object, namely a row of barbed wire. Although she states that her decision was purely 'pragmatic', namely that the object did not fit the conventional aesthetic criteria of a 'beautiful' landscape (Bustam 2008: 210), the removal of the barbed wire could also be seen as a metaphor for an unrestricted, open vista. The removal of the offending object could express a yearning for freedom.

After her release in 1978, she co-founded a former women inmates' organisation as well as taking on various translation and editing jobs to support herself, usually under a different name due to the stigma of employing former political prisoners. She lived in Cinere, Depok, West Java, where she passed away on 2 January 2011.

Mia's multiple narratives as a wife, a single mother, an artist and activist also illuminate the multifarious negotiations necessarily undertaken by a woman in a patriarchal society to express her subjectivity. The use of art to reclaim her identity is crucial in understanding how art works not only as a modernist aesthetic expression but also as a kind of self-affirmation for the artist. Self-representation is usually reserved for male artists in Indonesia (and in the West), whereas a woman would normally appear as model, wife, or muse; Mia's representation in her self-portrait and family portrait challenge the previous view by putting forward feminine space and context through her small body of work.

### ***Emiria and Mia: Exceptional Women***

Through the texts of Emiria Sunassa and Mia Bustam we can trace the haunting in the archipelago as an expression of colonial melancholia, specifically by attributing it to the nation's inability to mourn after great traumatic events.<sup>114</sup> Abraham and Torok, in *The Shell and the Kernel: the Renewal of Psychoanalysis* (1994), argue that in normal circumstances, a person mourns a loss by introjecting the lost person or object. Introjection facilitates integration into the psychic fabric. By refusing to mourn, the person incorporates the object 'whole', thus disavowing loss and keeping the object alive inside.

And yet, while the artists appeared to be haunted by traumatic events in their lives, I argue that the content of their works also haunts Indonesian mainstream art history. In Emiria's case, her depiction of the nation from the margins and her representation of the feminine in the early modern period of Indonesian art underlined the limitations of the nationalist

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<sup>114</sup> Nonetheless, since the mid-2000s a younger generation of Indonesian artists have started to seek the truth behind the events. Most were prompted by the desire to know what had happened to their family members, relatives or neighbours during the 1960s. The multi-media artist Tintin Wulia (b. 1973) created installation and multimedia works that deal with her family history, Chinese-Indonesian identity and the 1965 events. Her grandfather was taken away in the middle of the night by a mob in 1965 because he was involved in Baperki (*Badan Permusjawaratan Kewarganegaraan Indonesia* – Indonesian Citizenship Assembly), a Chinese-Indonesian political party, established in 1954, whose members were linked to the Indonesian Communist Party. Another art project titled, "September Something" a series of exhibitions in 2005 organised by Agung Kurniawan and Kedai Kebun Forum in Yogyakarta dealt with memory and perception of the 1965 events by young contemporary artists. Employing research and focus group discussions, the artists were encouraged to create works that reflect their own perceptions of the events. As the artists are mostly born in the 1990s, many in fact expressed ignorance or only vague knowledge about 1965. The works were a mixture of exploration into personal history, pop culture and reflections of community trauma, yet perhaps tellingly, only one work represented Gerwani (<http://kedaikebun.com/english/september-something-visual-art-project/>, accessed 13 April 2013). Analyses about memory and trauma of 1965 in Indonesian visual arts are far and few in between. Most writings which look at how Indonesian artists deal with the event tend to focus on the art works as representation of political events and/or the socio-political consequences. Kenneth M. George (1997), writing about a painting by A.D. Pirous titled *The Sun After 1965*, called for ethics of reading in analysing art works created by artists during and after 1965. Unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss memory and trauma of 1965 in visual arts.

imaginings. Both the representation of the primitive and the feminine in her works do not fit into the image of a unified, masculine nation and its patriarchal art world.

Emiria is often described as mysterious and her aesthetic as unconventional, even out of this world. Yet, these perceptions of the artist and her works certainly do not emerge from the world of the supernatural. Quite possibly they came from the rupture in the mainstream masculine perception instigated by Emiria's alternative representation of the feminine.

With the ghosts of 1965-1966 still lingering in the Indonesian psyche, the haunting effect is more immediate in several ways. For example Ariel Heryanto wrote that in New Order Indonesia communism never really died. The regime was unable to fully eradicate communism's supposed influence and was haunted by images and symbols of the hammer and sickle in the most banal ways (Heryanto 1999).<sup>115</sup> The same can be said about Indonesia in the reform era; despite the freedom from state oppression, sporadic banning and censorship of leftist activities still occurs, either by the government or more commonly, Islamic mass organisations.<sup>116</sup>

Mia's memoirs haunt the mythology of the great artist in Indonesia (and to this I also add Sudjojono's mythology) by suggesting that writing and observation of historical events are

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<sup>115</sup> Both Heryanto (1999) and Vickers (2010) discuss the aftermath of the 1965 killings long after the massacre. Ironically, the Communist Manifesto also started with the sentence "A spectre is haunting Europe -- the spectre of communism". Vickers (2010) discusses how the spirits of the victims of the mass killings often reappear in the forms of ghosts or apparitions in the public consciousness long after the killings. The apparitions often appear in public spaces associated with the sites of the mass killings and/or unmarked graves of the victims. He argues that the unresolved deaths and missing bodies constitute the sense of haunting from Javanese and Balinese spirituality, thereby hampering the process of reconciliation between the state and the victims.

<sup>116</sup> Mass demonstrations by mass organisations such as Front Anti-Komunis Indonesia (FAKI), Front Anti-Komunis (FAK) are staged in public places whenever there are efforts by the Komnas HAM or the government to organise reconciliation or fact-finding missions about the 1965 events (Politik Indonesia 2004). In 2006, a presentation about contemporary Marxist movements organised by Ultimus Bookshop was forcefully stopped by local community and local police due to allegation of communist activity. See statement by KontraS (2006). The state attorney general's office also banned a book by John Roosa (2006) titled 'Pretext to Mass Murder'. The book presents fresh evidence regarding the 1965 events which further question the official view. The ban was finally lifted in 2010 (Tempo 2010).

not limited to male authors or hero-oriented. Mia Bustam's memoirs suggested that both men and women actively participated in the making of Indonesian art history, yet the latter is often undocumented and neglected in the collective memory. However, I would like to suggest that while Mia's memoirs may call for more memoirs and texts by women artists, it does not simply mean that her memoirs valorise the feminine experience. Mia's memoirs suggest a shift from art history as a narrowly bounded space into a bigger, discursive space that criss-crosses different disciplinary areas.

Although different in cultural background and personal life, Emiria Sunassa and Mia Bustam were both exceptional women who were active as agents and eyewitnesses in the shaping of Indonesia's modern art history. Despite their initial introduction to art through male figures, they were able to create their own unique identity and negotiate the art world, whether by constructing multiple subjectivities or by taking leadership roles in political art organisations.

The representation of females in their works within everyday settings gives agency to women who were normally represented as objects or an ideal. By painting the female figures looking directly at the viewers, the artists attempted to engage the viewers with their subjectivity. Emiria's subject matter was more diverse than Mia's, however. Emiria's female figures represented woman as the artist's personal background, memory and fantasy, from indigenous portraits to female sexuality, often in close connection with nature.

The relatively small size of Mia's body of work is no doubt attributable to her long imprisonment. Yet from what we can read in her memoirs, her paintings represent an emerging female perspective in Indonesian modern art history. Her insertion of agency into

the representation of women in her works depicts the image of women not as subordinate to men. Moreover, she demonstrated that it was possible for women artists to control their own representation through self-portraiture.

Emiria, on the other hand, with her Eastern Indonesian background, her cosmopolitan upbringing and relative freedom from the constraints of domestic life, was in a unique position among the figures of Indonesian art history. Her neoprimitive style was respected and acknowledged by many art critics of the time yet it was never really included within the prescribed genre, namely realism. The figure of Emiria herself seems to represent the mysterious feminine and the Other in Indonesian art discourse (perhaps not dissimilar to IGAK Murniasih, to be discussed in Chapter 5).

Mia, framed by conventions of social status and position as a Javanese *priyayi* woman and wife of a national 'hero', was more culturally and socially constrained. After her divorce, she placed herself as a student before her confidence grew over time but she was quite content to follow the style of the 'maestro'. After her release from prison in 1978, she focused more on translation works as well as continuing quietly to support fellow ex-political prisoners.

Both women also experienced loss and displacement in their personal lives. Emiria grew up under Dutch colonial rule, which severed her connection with her culture/s and people, yet her narratives revealed the complex relationship between the colonizer and the colonised. For her, colonialism was not a simple binary opposition; her life trajectory produced a tangled web of colonizer-colonized relationships, which she negotiated in both her personal and political lives.



From Emiria and Mia's narratives it is quite clear that both women were active in politics. Emiria not only represented Papua at the UN but also opened her house in Jakarta for Papuan activists to support their cause and lobbying efforts. Mia's direct involvement with a left-wing political organisation and the grave consequences are significant as they also open the way to understand one of the main factors that has contributed to the ambiguous relationship of many contemporary women artists in Indonesia with socio-political activism.<sup>117</sup> In contrast to male painters, neither Emiria nor Mia represented overt political symbolism in their works despite being heavily involved in politics.

Nonetheless the representation of political symbolism in their works appears in several ways. Firstly, from the memoirs we can see that Mia's surviving work and descriptions of them came from her study period, where she was more or less confined to the masculine environment of the studio system. Furthermore, Mia has stated in her second memoir that she in fact received commissions from the Indonesian Communist Party to produce paintings of Communist heroes such as Marx and Engels. Yet she was unable to complete the commission.

Secondly, I have argued that Emiria's indigenous portraits can be read as the artist's political view of the newly established republic. This was an outward-looking view of the nation and more deeply connected with its multiple cultures and nature. I have also suggested that her paintings underline the limits of the nationalist imagining as more or less defined by masculine views and a narrow sense of nationalism.

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<sup>117</sup> With the exception of Arahmaiani and Titarubi, most contemporary Indonesian women artists tend to shy away from expressing socio-political issues in their works. While early feminist art projects in the West in the 1970s were inseparable from socio-political activism, in Indonesia feminism, activism and visual arts still co-exist rather uneasily. The negative perception of Indonesian women's involvement in politics under the New Order regime can be attributed to the heavy stigmatisation of Gerwani, the progressive women's political organisation aligned with the Indonesian communist party (PKI) (Wieringa (2003).

For both women, politics was an important part of their lives, yet it appears to be fairly separated from their artistic productions. They were involved in almost all aspects of political life in Indonesia and helped in changing the nature of public debate. Yet the lack of recognition of their contribution to the history of Indonesian art is a feature of occlusion from the mainstream rather than their lack of contribution.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Female Desire and the Monstrous-Feminine in the Works of IGAK Murniasih**

In this chapter I analyse the representation of the female body through the lens of the abject and the grotesque in the works of the Balinese artist IGAK Murniasih (1966-2006). Murniasih or Murni was a prolific painter before she passed away from cancer. Her extensive body of work mainly consisted of drawings and paintings. She was one of only a few Balinese women artists who were able to enter the mainstream Indonesian art world. Her strong and expressive works coupled with unusual subject matter captured the attention of many Indonesian art critics and curators.

Murniasih's subject matter revolves around the themes of sex and the body. The subject matter, according to Hardiman (2003), reflects a deeper meaning about female sexuality and desire than simply an expression of pain or personal issues. I argue in this chapter that Murniasih's representation of the abject and grotesque body alongside with some of the works of Indonesian performance artists discussed in Chapter 7, in fact unsettles the notion of femininity and subjectivity in Indonesian visual arts.

The reading of Murniasih's works in this chapter is framed within the notion of the monstrous-feminine (Creed 1986). Barbara Creed, an Australian film theorist, first conceived the term to explain the representation of women as monsters in horror films. Creed uses Kristeva's notion of the abject to describe things that '[disturb] identity, system, order' and '[do] not respect borders, positions and rules'. According to Kristeva, abjection both horrifies and fascinates; it also thrives on ambiguity and transgression of taboos and boundaries.

Murniasih's works have been described as violent and absurdist, surreal as well as candid and humorous. These reactions come from the juxtaposition of violence and the female body in some of her paintings to the monstrous feminine in the forms of *vagina dentata*, the toothed vagina and medusa-like objects. And yet, despite the challenging nature of her subjects, Murniasih's works appeal strongly to the mainstream art world in Indonesia. The chapter will discuss the ambiguity surrounding the reception of Murniasih's works. The discussion seeks to read how her works seem to both assert and refute the insistent resort to abjection and the grotesque.

The abject and the grotesque as subjects have also been employed by Indonesian male artists such as Ivan Sagita, Agus Suwage, Tisna Sanjaya and Heri Dono.<sup>118</sup> These artists all have something in common in their representation of the abject and the grotesque, namely that their subject matter represents a condition, a sick body of Indonesia's socio-political landscape. The abject, violated figures, be it the artist's or other bodies, emerged as a reaction to the excessive commodification of art and the oppressive atmosphere that repressed critical voices and creative art practices during Indonesia's New Order period. The abject and grotesque figures also represent both the victims and the perpetrators of state violence. Importantly, however, they are rarely read as referring to the artist's biography.

Precisely the opposite is what I will argue in regards to the works of IGAK Murniasih. In

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<sup>118</sup> Ivan Sagita (b.1957) has worked with representations of the abject on surrealist paintings: half-human, half-animal forms depicted on a background of a dark and gloomy landscape. Wright (1994) commented that Sagita's abject figures emerged out of the social conditions that surrounded the artist, as a form of social critique, while Saidi (2007) observed that the figures represent the philosophical state of mind of the artist. The artist Agus Suwage (b. 1959), whose works explore the representation of Indonesia's socio-political conditions, consistently depicts his own face and body in various abject states through drawings and installation works. Tisna Sanjaya (b. 1968) has created a series of print works that represent the grotesque, such as the famous *Pesta Pencuri* (1988, drypoint and etching on paper). In this series, grotesque and misshapen humans, half-beasts and half-humans frolic together in raucous celebration in a satirical representation of the country's political figures. The grotesque also forms the core of Heri Dono's (b.1960) works that represent the downtrodden and the marginal people in Indonesia. Heri Dono's works use the grotesque to demonstrate how humor and parody can be used to criticize hegemonic power in Indonesia.

contrast to the works of Indonesian male artists where the use of the abject and grotesque as subject matter is generally seen as representation of the external world, Murniasih's works tend to be seen by most critics as a representation of her internal world, specifically her personal biography.

The tendency to link a woman artist's biography and the reading of her work is attributed by Griselda Pollock (1999) to the binary opposition between the feminine and the masculine in visual arts. Pollock argues that feminism's attempts to celebrate and valorize the feminine have created a trap that represents woman as the sign of gender. Thus when women (artists) are allowed to speak, they seem to confirm the dominant culture's worst suspicion, that all they can speak of is (their) sex.

Pollock's statement is particularly relevant in the context of Indonesian visual arts. One of the biggest problems in reading works by Indonesian women artists is the tendency by curators and critics to rely on personal history to read their works. For the predominantly Muslim society, sex and sexuality are rarely discussed in the Indonesian public sphere despite the familiarity of 'male magazines' featuring scantily clad women on newsstands, small shops selling medication to treat erectile dysfunction for men and *jamu* (traditional medicine) for tightening the vagina. The discussion on sexual subject matter is also often dominated by a male/religious perspective. In particular, women's bodies are often linked to issues of morality. Within this context, most Indonesian women rarely find an outlet to explore their perspectives on sexual subject matter. Moreover, it is often the case that when women do speak about sexual subject matters, it is assumed to be grounded in personal experience.

And yet, as I will elaborate in a section in this chapter, the reception of Murniasih's works by the Indonesian mainstream art world is more ambiguous. The bizarre yet compelling works of IGAK Murniasih discussed in this chapter represent the unbalanced relationship between the representation of the feminine, feminine desires and their masculine reading in Indonesian visual arts. I also examine the notion of the grotesque through Bakhtin's *carnavalesque* as another way of understanding female subjectivity in Indonesian art.

### ***Murniasih's timeline***

Born in 1966 in Tabanan, Bali, I Gusti Kadek Ayu Murniasih or Murniasih was the tenth child in the family of a farmer who later moved to South Sulawesi as part of the Indonesian government's transmigration program. When Murniasih turned ten, she moved to Ujungpandang (now Makassar) to work as a domestic helper for a Chinese-Indonesian family, who later funded her to finish her studies. The Chinese-Indonesian family later relocated to Jakarta along with Murniasih (Hardiman 2003). After working in her employer's textile factory, in 1987 she moved back to Bali, where she found work as a jeweller in Celuk, Gianyar, where she also met the man who would become her husband.<sup>119</sup>

The marriage did not last very long. Her husband took a second wife in order to have children, as Murniasih was unable to have children after surgery to remove a cyst in her womb. Murniasih apparently rejected his decision to take a second wife, and filed for

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<sup>119</sup> Unfortunately despite the various sources documenting Murni's biography, the exact year of her movements are more often not listed. In regard to her family's move to South Sulawesi, it is possible that they moved there during the heyday of the New Order's transmigration program in Bali in the early to late 1970s. Murni would have been around 6 or 7 years of old, perhaps even younger at the time.

divorce.<sup>120</sup> According to Carla Bianpoen (2007: 143) Murniasih set a precedent for Balinese women to file for divorce, as it was against the *adat* for a woman to do so. It was not until three years later, in 1993, that the divorce was finalised.

In a similar way to Mia Bustam, after her divorce Murniasih took up painting under the tutelage of I Dewa Putu Mokoh, who taught her the Pengosekan style.<sup>121</sup> Murniasih began to exhibit her works in group exhibitions in 1995, together with the Seniwati Gallery for Women community, established by Mary Northmore in 1991. Murniasih thrived under Mokoh's tutelage and also that of her later partner, Mondo Zanulini. Zanulini, an Italian artist living in Bali, remarked that the three of them often painted together, and that 'she was the most incredible and creative of the three of us' (Bianpoen, Dirgantoro et al. 2007: 143).

Shortly before Murniasih passed away in 2006, she and Mondo exhibited together at the Italian Institute in Jakarta in 2008. According to her obituary, Murniasih had opened a private museum only several days before her death. The museum is called *The Murni Museum*, and it displays her prodigious body of works (Bianpoen 2006). During her relatively short career Murniasih also exhibited in respected art galleries such as Cemeti Art House in Yogyakarta (2000, 2001), Nadi Gallery in Jakarta (2000), Bali Biennale in Denpasar (2005), CP

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<sup>120</sup> Art critic and writer Jean Couteau (2001) states that Murni was quite proud (*bangga*) to be able to file for a divorce. This is an interesting point as while divorce is not desirable in Bali due to material and biological property rights, it is not very unusual for a woman to initiate it. Megan Jennaway (2002) in her study on women's desire in Bali points out that most Balinese women file for a divorce due to their unwillingness to participate in polygynous marriage. Husbands, who have the option of taking a second or third wife, in fact, have little incentive to divorce.

<sup>121</sup> Pengosekan style artists focus on representation of religious and spiritual symbols in their works. Cosmic diagrams and mandalas are no longer constrained in magical drawings and cremation cloths but instead enlarged and elaborated in large-scale canvases. The style also emphasizes *ngorten* technique, namely the use of heavy black outlines of the subject matter. Dewa Nyoman Batuan (1939-2010) was one of its foremost figures. For discussions on Pengosekan style see Setem (2011) and Vickers (2013).

Open Biennale in Jakarta (2003) as well as other group exhibitions in Indonesia and overseas.<sup>122</sup>

Murniasih's works are a combination of playfulness, violence and humour. Coupled with often explicit subject matter and an unusual use of colours, Murniasih's works deviate from the prescribed tradition of Balinese paintings, as well as cultural norms. Her signature style of simple, bold outline on bright monochromatic background initially derived from the Pengosekan style taught by her mentor, Putu Dewa Mokoh. But Murniasih developed her own style, which was later perceived by a critic as 'ground breaking for Balinese art' (Hardiman 2004).

The works' focus on sex and violence, either self-inflicted or by external factors, has led at least one critic to suspect the artist may have had sadomasochist fantasies (Saidi 2007). Furthermore, the artist's non-academic and non-Javanese backgrounds are often used to categorise her works as something that only reflects her personal world, rather than the artist's reflection on gender issues around her (Hardiman and Zaelani 2003; Couteau 2011).

I suggest that Murniasih's works, while containing all the elements described above, also have the potential to reveal patriarchy's discomfort at the expression of female desire. By employing the notion of the monstrous-feminine, I read Murniasih's abject and grotesque bodies as not just an expression of inner torment or the artist's trauma but as an active, potentially castrating female agency. Furthermore, her odd misshapen creatures/forms are

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<sup>122</sup> She also had a solo exhibition in a prestigious gallery in Thailand, Numthong Gallery in Bangkok in 2002. After Murni's death however, there is no further news about her museum. Mondo Zanulini, Murni's ex-partner has remarried and now has a daughter whom he named after Murni. Mella Jaarsma and Nindityo Adipurnomo, founders of Cemeti Art House informed me that Zanulini has called them for assistance in managing Murni's works. He is unable to look after the collection properly or to raise the necessary funds to house the works in a museum standard environment. It is now feared that Murni's works, which are still largely unstudied, will be lost or damaged for good.



an expression of female desire (*jouissance*) that transgresses the rigid socio-cultural conventions in Indonesian and Balinese society, as framed by Bakhtin's carnivalesque.

### ***The monstrous-feminine in Murniasih's works.***

In her 1986 text *Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: an Imaginary Abjection* Barbara Creed discusses the representation of women in horror films as more than just victims. She extends Kristeva's notion of abjection by looking more closely at how women are represented differently in horror films through the lens of psychoanalysis. Abjection, as Kristeva wrote in *Powers of Horror* (1982), is ultimately part of our self. It is what we reject, expel and locate outside our self as not-me, in order to protect our boundaries.

Creed's text identifies the first category of abjection as bodily wastes and corpses, the ultimate in abjection. The second category is what transgresses boundaries or boundary ambiguities. The third category is the maternal. Female monstrosity in horror films is almost always related to mothering and reproductive functions. However, Creed suggests that the abject maternal is a construction of patriarchy.

Creed further argues that while women are often represented as victims, or in Freudian logic as a castrated male, women can also be active monsters through, among others, the archaic mother, monstrous womb, or witch. While not necessarily an assertion of female power, the fact that a woman can be a castrating female (as opposed to a castrated male) does challenge the patriarchal view that women are always victims.

The infamous Calon Arang in Balinese mythology can be seen as the representation of female monster *par excellence*. In the story, Calon Arang, the widow-witch of Girah, lives

during the reign of the Javanese King Airlangga. Out of fear of her demonic powers no suitor dares to ask her beautiful daughter, Ratna Manggali, for marriage. In revenge, Calon Arang spreads disease and devastation to the land. The god Siva advises King Airlangga to send the powerful sage Mpu Barada. Through his mystic power, Mpu Barada averts the calamity, purifies Calon Arang with holy water, and converts her to good.

For the Balinese, Calon Arang is above all *Rangda*, the grotesque Supreme Witch with wild eyes and huge pendulous breasts in the theatrical performances. In the performance she is confronted but never defeated by Mpu Barada who takes up the form of *Barong*, a mythical creature. The story of Calon Arang has been a subject of study by Indonesian feminists in an attempt to reclaim her as a positive representation of female power. Toeti Heraty (2000) and Gadis Arivia (2003) are both noted for this critical study.

I argue that Murniasih's works, with their representation of violence, sex, grotesque bodies, disembodied and exaggerated body parts, resonate with Creed's notion of the monstrous-feminine. While her works also represent grotesque female figures, there is a distinction between her portrayal of the monstrous and the Calon Arang myth. Murniasih's grotesque bodies seem to reveal other themes such as humor and desire that are continuously at play in her works and they represent a more positive and open-ended reading of her works than the Calon Arang myth. The discussion below will analyze how her works fit into Creed's notion, ending with the ambiguous reception of the representation of female desire in Indonesian visual arts.

Indonesian art historian Farah Wardani (2003) sees Murniasih's works as

*... a different part of women's sexuality, a narcissistic desire to reclaim her own body that has been violated so many times, [the body is] taken by others to enjoy. In copulating with each of its own organs, the body rediscovers itself.*<sup>123</sup>

Jean Couteau (2001), an art writer and cultural observer living in Bali, catalogues

Murniasih's subject matter thus:

*... penis, vagina, lower lips; and as for the scenes she depicts ... there is not only the "regular" position of love making, but also "standing love", male and female fellatio, self-fellatio, penetration by alien objects, masturbation, sucking, kissing and hugging of all sorts and manners, and, more.*

Ross (2003: 286) argues that "abject art is saying to the viewer: this failure is not necessarily unproductive, for it can have the effect of complexifying the body." The depiction of a transgressed female body in Murniasih's works has been described as violent and absurdist (Bianpoen, Dirgantoro et al. 2007: 141). In some of the paintings in the object series, Murniasih depicts a female torso that is cut below the shoulders and above the shins, with random objects inserted into the upper thigh area. In *Rasanya Kok Enak Ya* (Feels Good Doesn't It?, 1997) (Fig. 24) a long pointed shoe/foot is inserted from just below the backside, with the tip of the object protruding from the front part of the upper thighs. This is a typical juxtaposition in this series. Various other objects such as scissors, bottle, knife, and umbrella have also been depicted in a similar style quite repetitiously.

The confronting part of the works is the placement of the sharp objects in, near or around the genital area. The objects are inserted between the upper thighs while the bodies also

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<sup>123</sup> "...sisi lain dari seksualitas wanita, suatu hasrat yang narsistik untuk merebut kembali tubuh sendiri yang telah terlalu banyak terperkosa, diserahkan untuk dinikmati yang lain. Dalam persetubuhan dengan setiap organnya sendiri, tubuh itu menemukan dirinya kembali."



Fig. 24 IGAK Murniasih "Rasanya kok enak ya" (Feels good doesn't it?, 1997, 100 x 150 cm).

appear to straddle these objects. The juxtaposition of the objects in the paintings shows that the objects are in fact underlining the fragile borders of the body. The orifice stands as the border between what is inside and what is outside of the body, or what is permissible and what is taboo.

The insertion of the sharp objects also interrupts a conventional reading. As the objects protrude from the front of the body, they simultaneously evoke pain and self-defence. The object seems to arm the vagina from further attack – while it is seen as a

violation of the body, it also ambiguously acts as a penis-in-disguise, a potential weapon.

This series appears to represent the female sex in a cultural ambivalence – as a victimized body but also as a threatening sex – that is at play in Murniasih's works. The image that we see in her works is the link between life and death drives, the image of a woman as a vampire, threatening and devouring and castrating men, a *vagina dentata*.

By comparison, the work *Terimakasihku* (My Gratitude) (Fig. 25) depicts a sitting figure from behind, both hands clasped and raised, praying to a temple-like structure. In contrast to the geometry of the structure, the artist places an organic shape on top of it facing the figure, disjointed and dominating the top of the structure. The shape resembles a vagina, surrounded by small radiating black lines that represent hair. In another work *Sembahyang* (Prayer, 2004) (Fig. 26), the radiating lines are transformed into tentacles as an example of the threatening power of women's sex. A figure is sitting on the ground with a similar gesture - both hands pointing towards a figure's orifice. The figure is depicted surrealistically with elongated, elastic limbs while the orifice is unmistakably a vagina, depicted as an open, layered 'central core' with tentacle-like shapes sprouting from around it.

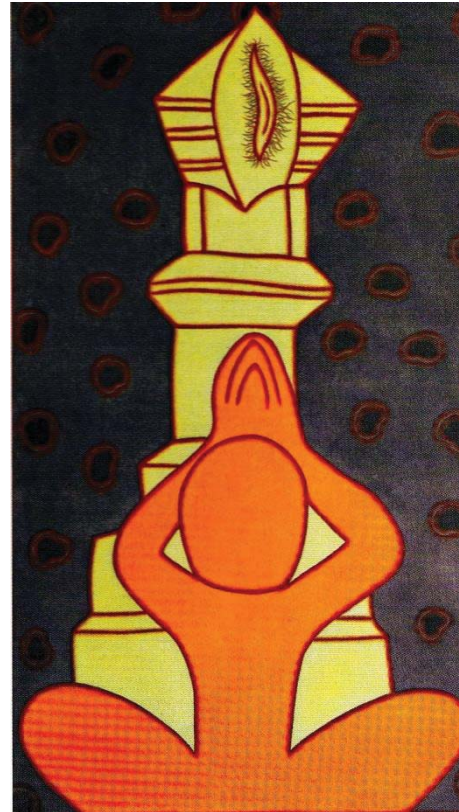


Fig. 25 IGAK Murniasih  
*"Terimakasihku"* (My gratitude,  
 2003, 60 x 100 cm).

The tentacle-like shapes invoke the image of Medusa's head.<sup>124</sup> A female gorgon with snakes as her hair in Greek mythology, Medusa's myth inspired Sigmund Freud to write his castration complex theory, linked to the Oedipus complex, as one of the founding theories of subjectivity in psychoanalysis. According to the Freudian reading, to decapitate equals to castrate. The terror of the Medusa's head is thus a terror of castration related to the sight of something. In the original mythology, the sight of Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror and turns him into stone. This is translated by Freud as to turn stiff is to get an erection. Thus by



Fig. 26 IGAK Murniasih "Sembahyang" (Prayer, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 170 x 100 cm).

simultaneously experiencing fear and erection, the spectator is reassured that he is still in possession of a penis.<sup>125</sup>

These theories were later rejected by feminists. Kofman (1985) argues that instead of simply initiating fear and anxiety, the sight of a woman's genitals incites an inseparable blend of horror and pleasure. Cixous in her *Laugh of the Medusa* parodied Freud's reading by stating that the sight of Medusa's head is not castrating; instead 'you only need to look at the

<sup>124</sup> In Greek mythology, Medusa was a female gorgon, a monster with snakes as hair, born out of the union between the Earth and the Sea, between Gaia and Pontus. Medusa was famous for her ability to turn her onlookers into stone by the virtue of her stare. She was beheaded by Perseus who afterwards used her head as a weapon before giving it to the goddess Athena who placed it on her shield as a protection talisman. For discussion on Medusa see Warner (2007).

<sup>125</sup> The phallic shape of the snake and especially its multiplicity in Freudian reading are interpreted as multiple penises; the reversal into the opposite works to remind the viewer that she is lacking of a penis (Freud (1997). For links between castration complex and feminism see Wright (1993).



Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.'  
(2003: 134).

Lauretis (1984) neatly encapsulated the reading of Medusa's head as a problem in representation. She suggested that the myth restricted the narrative role of women in ways that the original narrative does not because we have inherited only 'hero narratives' (i.e. the focus is on Perseus, the hero, the gorgon slayer).

Murniasih's paintings *Terimakasihku* and *Sembahyang* offer some representational possibilities of this combination of feminine horror and pleasure. In Indonesian visual arts, Murniasih's works along with others to be discussed below, might be read as an expression of repressed female desire in the Indonesian, specifically from a Balinese context.

The disembodied and exaggerated parts of the female body in Murniasih's paintings not only interrupt the conventional reading but also echoes what Bakhtin (1968: 317) characterizes as 'body in the act of becoming' where:

*... it [the body? – author's emphasis] is continually built, created and builds and creates another body. This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body: the bowels and the phallus. These two areas play the leading role in the grotesque image, and it is precisely for this reason that they are predominantly subject to positive exaggeration, to hyperbolization; they can even detach themselves from the body and lead an independent life, for they hide the rest of the body, as something secondary ... Next to the bowels and genital organs is the mouth, through which enters the world to be swallowed up. And next is the anus. All these convexities and orifices have a common*

*characteristic: it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an inter-orientation.*

Murniasih's work titled *Sekeranjang Nyonyo* (A Basket of Tits, 1991) (Fig. 27) is one of her early works that exemplifies the disembodied and exaggerated body. The artist paints dozens of breasts that dominate the canvas, piling and tumbling over each other. On the left side of the canvas emerges a large hand, outstretched as if trying to stop them from falling over, while on the right corner of the painting a pair of fingers is pinching a nipple.

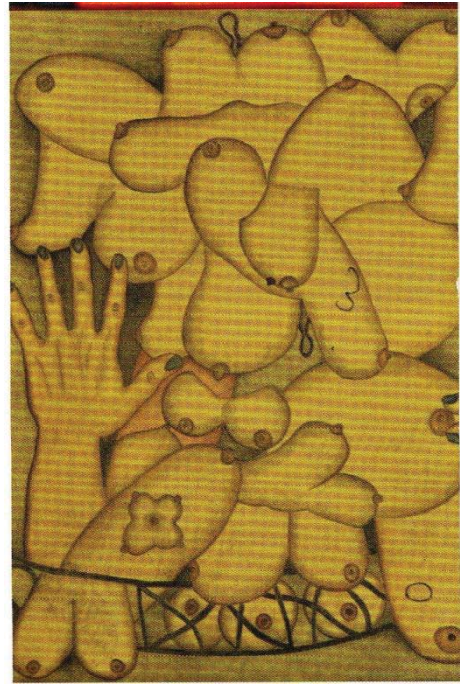


Fig. 27 IGAK Murniasih "Satu Keranjang Nyonyo" (A basket of tits, 1991, 45 x 60 cm, acrylic and china on canvas).

The genital organ and breasts in Murniasih's paintings not only appear to be disjointed from the body as a whole, they also defy the convention of a contained body in *wayang* figures in classical Balinese paintings (and indeed, Western classical nudes). The parading of the grotesque is often the isolation and display of hyperbolic bodily parts, whereby the scattering and redistribution of the parts is the antithesis of the body as a functional tool or of the body as still life (Stewart 1993: 105).

In Balinese cosmology, the body from the waist down is perceived as lowly or impure, the middle part of the body is neither pure nor impure, while the upper part of the body from the shoulders up is the highest or the purest (Hobart et al 2001: 101). Thus Murniasih's juxtaposition of the genital above the head, while exaggerating its internal elements,



transgresses cultural boundaries associated with the human body in Balinese society. *My Urine* (2004) is another work that exemplifies this transgression. The artist replaces her usual female figure with a male figure. In place of a head, the artist painted a concentric disc with several green tentacle shapes cascading over the chest, reminiscent of the tentacles in her *vagina dentata* painting. The figure is holding its penis, which discharges several drops of liquid into a container that is held over the head by a small female figure wearing a bright green skirt.

Wardani (2003) and Couteau (2001) agree that Murniasih's works challenge the aesthetic orthodoxy of traditional Balinese painting while they are still recognizable as Pengosekan style. Murniasih's tutor I Dewa Putu Mokoh (b. 1934) is a well-known painter of the Pengosekan style, a style known for its meticulous treatment of the subject matter, with exact steps.<sup>126</sup> Mokoh's painting, however, often departs from this aesthetic tradition by focusing instead on a particular subject matter and simplifying the background, enabling the subject matter to emerge as the focus. Furthermore, his subject matter tends to depict the everyday life rather than the religious narrative that preoccupies his contemporaries.<sup>127</sup>

Vickers (2013) states that in Balinese painting, especially in the Renewal period (post-Second World War), artists still utilize traditional aesthetics. Most notable of these is the highly decorative background space, where no subject matter would stand out either thematically or visually. This can be attributed to the notions of *sekala* (otherworldly) and *niskala* (worldly or material), which co-exist in everyday Balinese life.

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<sup>126</sup> First, the artist makes a pencil sketch and traces the sketch with black ink for the outlines, then the shadings are created and finally the artist will fill in the form with colours. The painting is traditionally executed on a dark background where the subject matter fills up the whole space. See also Wiyanto (2000a).

<sup>127</sup> Mokoh's paintings, despite the non-classic style and theme, show his previous aesthetic training with organic lines, muted colours and close grouping of the subject matter. The figures and the objects in the paintings are arranged in an open relation with each other and the viewers are treated to narratives of everyday life in Bali.

Murniasih's paintings, however, depart from both the Pengosekan style and that of her tutor in several ways. She focuses on one subject with, most commonly, a plain background. She chooses bright, primary colours for her background – another turn from the earthy palette of traditional paintings - with minimal and efficient lines in her shapes. The shapes are only tentatively connected to each other, especially in her later works where she abandoned the decorative tendencies of Balinese paintings.

Murniasih's sharpest turn from her mentor's influence is in her choice of themes. As emphasised in the two observations quoted above, Murniasih has created a series of works that appear to focus primarily on sex. Graphic depiction of genitals, erotic body parts, fetish items and sexual intercourse where bodies morph into an object or vice versa dominate her canvasses.

Couteau (2001) and Setem (2011) explain Murniasih's otherness in several ways. Firstly, she did not grow up in the normative values of the *banjar* or the typical Balinese system, thus her cultural memory is not of wayang mythology as exemplified in classical Balinese paintings. This background invariably impacted on Murniasih's aesthetic sense: she did not use the repetitive patterns familiar in the work of many Balinese artists. Secondly, Murniasih learnt painting outside the art academy, where her style was not influenced by the theory and analytical style of the art academy. While Couteau praises Murniasih's style as 'wild, imaginative and naive in an odd surreal way', I argue that Murniasih's "otherness" can also be attributed to the depiction of the monstrous-feminine in her works.

### ***Displacing desire: Sex and humor in Murniasih's works***

When asked why there is so much sex in her paintings, Murniasih stated that 'Without sex, life is like food without salt' (Couteau 2001). In the same article she gleefully told the interviewer that the reason why she also painted female masturbation on her canvas is '... the best proof that I love myself!'

Dewanto (2000), Couteau (2001), and Bianpoen (2007) have remarked that Murniasih's depiction of sex transcended socio-cultural constraints and explored 'various zones of female sexuality', as will be elaborated in the next section. Wardani (2003), as quoted at the beginning of this chapter, provided a more incisive reading by stating that Murniasih's inclusive sexual symbolisms are in fact a sign of rebirth, of self-discovery, of pleasure. I suggest the possibility that sex is only a part of her work; pleasure or *jouissance* play a larger role in Murniasih's work.

By Murniasih's own admission, it is *her* pleasure/desire that is depicted on canvas a point to which many writers constantly refer. Some writers have also implied that the symbolism in her works hinted at sadomasochism (Saidi 2007). To some degree these observations have only focused on a singular reading of desire, namely that it is personal and can only be produced by one's own personal experiences. For example, Rizki Zaelani and Hardiman state that Murniasih's works "all come from personal memories. Beyond the issue of being a conventional or cosmopolitan woman, Murniasih stands for her own personal stories" (Hardiman and Zaelani 2003: 212).

However, I argue that we need to look at the broader context, namely through the social constructions of female desire in the artist's environment, which have shaped her personal vision. On such a reading, the artist's desire is not a separate phenomenon from the social

ideas of female desire; instead it is construed within her own socio-cultural environment. At this point it is useful to examine the context of Balinese sexuality and how Murni is perceived to transcend those constraints.

### ***Women and desire in Bali***

Classical (western) scholarship on Balinese society such as that by Bateson and Mead (1942), Belo (1970) and Wikan (1990) has described the character of the Balinese people as “emotion devoid” or “dissociated.” Most famously, Bateson and Mead concluded that life in Bali is ‘a rhythmic, patterned unreality of pleasant, significant movement, centered in one’s own body to which all emotion long ago withdrew’ (1942: 48).

According to these accounts of Balinese psychology, desire retreats into the body. It is an image of emotional impulse as internalized, unable to be expressed outwardly in social interactions (Jennaway 2002: 139). However, other scholars such as Jensen and Suryani (1992) Connor (1995), Howe (2005) as well as Jennaway have challenged the classical views, presenting case studies on how Balinese people express their emotions through a wide range of rituals (funeral, trance), performing arts, and also in the everyday.

Certainly for women in Bali (and perhaps in Indonesia generally), cultural constructions of female desire limit the free and unrestrained expression of their emotional travail. More recent research has looked into the representations of female desire in Balinese culture. For example, Helen Creese’s (2004) groundbreaking study about the representation of female desire in pre-colonial literatures in Bali has highlighted the need for more historical research on the history of female sexuality in Bali.

Jennaway (2002) and Suryani (2004) show that the idea of marriage is imperative in the life of a Balinese woman, and the idea of erotic desire often centres upon the figure of the future husband (Jennaway 2002: 243). Both Jennaway and Suryani state that notions of purity permeate Balinese sexual practices. These notional proscriptions are aimed at ensuring that the female partner's genital does not defile the male partner when it comes into contact with him. Classical conventions regarding the position of intercourse dictate that a woman should arrange herself on the bed so the man is always superior to her; thus his head should point towards the sacred orientation of Gunung Agung. His head must also be more elevated than hers, and he will certainly never place his head below her pubic region. While Jennaway's informants were quick to point out that these notions are frequently subverted in practice (2002: 148), wives do not have the right to reject sexual intercourse. Culturally, it is a wife's obligation to please and serve her husband (Jennaway 2002: 148).



Fig. 28 IGAK Murniasih "Pohon Kesukaanku" (My Favorite Tree, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 100 cm).

Jennaway (2003) has suggested that repressed female desire in Bali appears in the form of hysterical illness. Unable to express their desire because of rigid religious and cultural conventions that favor feminine passivity, subservience and chastity, Balinese women may express their frustrations obliquely in the form of body-speech. Given that the nature of the illness is often attributed to spirit intervention known as *babainan*, women who express



Fig. 29 IGAK Murniasih "Happy Bersamanya" (Happy to be with Him, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 100 cm).

their sexual insecurity in this way are generally treated kindly because of its supernatural associations.

Thus Murniasih's candid admissions of her own desire in visual art are shocking for reasons mentioned above. Even though traditionally female

sexual desire in Balinese is represented in various *kakawin* (prose and poetic works in Kawi script), females tend to be seen as passive, receptors of male desire.<sup>128</sup>

*Pohon Kesukaanku* (My Favorite Tree, 2003) (Fig. 28), *Happy Bersamanya* (Happy to be with Him, 2003) (Fig. 29) and *Relax* (2004) (Fig. 30) exemplify the theme of desire in Murniasih's pleasure series. *Masturbasi* (Masturbation, 2002) can also be categorized as belonging in the series.<sup>129</sup> The works are frank in their depiction of genitalia: a woman is attached onto a giant penis while hanging upside down (*Happy Bersamanya*), a giant tree-like object has a trunk is made of penises – albeit with a slit at the bottom reminiscent of a vagina (*Pohon Kesukaanku*) and a pair of sexy underwear is depicted halfway down while a finger is pleasuring the vagina (*Masturbasi*).

<sup>128</sup> See for example Creese (2004).

<sup>129</sup> Interestingly, these works were selected by various curators to be included in various exhibitions in Indonesia. The first two were in the "CP Open Biennale 2003: Interpellation" (Jakarta 2003, curated by Jim Supangkat, Asmudjo J. Irianto and Rizki A. Zaelani) and the last two were in "Indonesia Contemporary Art Now" (Jakarta 2007, curated by Enin Supriyanto). The provocative nature of these works certainly straddles the line between artistic expression and sensationalism, none of which are explained in-depth in the curatorial essays.



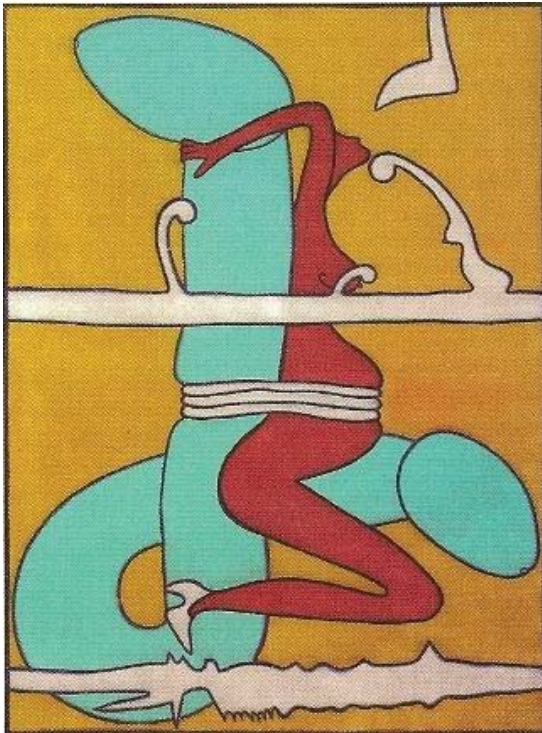


Fig. 30 IGAK Murniasih "Relax" (2004, acrylic on canvas, 195 x 140 cm).

Hardiman and Zaelani (2003: 212) argue that the representation of sex comes from the artist's personal experiences, not as the artist's comments on social or gender issues<sup>130</sup> for reasons that will be explored in the next section.

But Wardani (2003) wrote that because sex is both commodity and obsession in Bali, the (Balinese) female body is trapped inside a passive, narcissistic prison.<sup>131</sup> She argues that

the ways the various objects in Murniasih's works morph and have intercourse with each

other can be seen as liberation from this cultural entrapment.

The artist's cultural identity thus becomes a contested arena whereby the interpretation of her works has opened up the problematic issue of representing female desire. The statement from the male critics can be read as an attempt to separate the socio-cultural context of sex in Murniasih's works, thus limiting the possibility of other readings as well as confirming the patriarchal vision that the only thing women can speak of is (their) sex.

<sup>130</sup> They also state that Murni's depiction of sexuality is *not* because she is a Balinese. The critics seem to assert Wardani's statement of sex as both a commodity and obsession in Bali. However, Hardiman and Zaelani fail to mention that both men and women participate in Bali's sex industry. Shay (2010) reported that a documentary titled "Cowboys in Paradise" (2010) contains candid interviews of men, also known as Kuta Cowboys, offering sex to foreign female tourists. The documentary caused an uproar in Bali on its release and prompted raids by Balinese authorities on tourist areas, arresting young Balinese men on the suspicion of selling sex.

<sup>131</sup> With the influence of tourism in colonial times and modern Bali, Balinese women have always had to negotiate their desire between tradition and modernity. Female sexuality, which has always been a part of Bali's image-making, is constructed through the eyes of the heterosexual male, both foreigners and Balinese alike.

Both desire and trauma are represented through pathos and humour in Murniasih's works. Humour, as most of her titles suggest, can work as a cathartic release from her trauma (Saidi 2007). But humour can also highlight the possibility of experiencing libidinal license, a *jouissance* of the polymorphic, orgasmic body (Isaak 1996: 15). Murniasih's works suggest the possibility of both readings.

Mikhail Bakhtin has provided the theoretical grounding of laughter as misrule and the subversive potential of the grotesque through *Rabelais and His World* (1968). This study dealt with the tension between folk cultures and official Middle Age church culture. Bakhtin looked at carnival as a complex system of meaning and used the term 'carnavalesque' to explain the tradition of comic vernacular literature that existed in the ancient form alongside the official one (Bakhtin 1968: 14-17). Bakhtin outlined the sensuous and concrete material of the carnival as it derived from the physicality of the human body. He used the term 'grotesque realism' to describe the comical representation of the human body in the carnival (Bakhtin 1968: 18-21). For Bakhtin, such comical representation simultaneously ridicules and celebrates. His study of the carnival points to the continuous and repeated tradition of oppositional meaning to highlight the possibility of the carnival as an alternative social order (Bakhtin 1968: 10).

Murniasih's representations of exaggerated penises are often depicted in a comic style. Painted over busy backgrounds, sometimes made of half-concentric circles, they appear to confirm Bakhtin's notion of a becoming body. The sense of frantic energy and urgency depicted in *Pohon Kesukaanku* (2003) and *Happy Bersamanya* (2003) are even more pronounced as highlighted by the vortex-like background.



While it is the penis, rather than woman (in *Happy Bersamanya* (2003) and *Relax* (2004)), that appears to have been the focus of the paintings, the artist appears to satirize the Symbolic by subtly creating a sense of threat and ambiguity. In *Happy Bersamanya*, the balloon-like giant penis is threatened by the woman. Even though she is straddling the penis, her hand morphs into a weird claw with the middle finger transforming into a sharp point, as if ready to puncture the 'balloon'. The artist seems to point out that despite the multiple-penis-as-trunks in *Pohon Kesukaanku*, the trunks appear to have been taken from elsewhere before being attached to the 'tree'; while the opening at bottom of the tree broods silently, quite similar to the representation of the vagina in her previous series.

Murniasih represents her figures as being in a constant process of morphing into various objects. One of her signature images is a pair of legs whose feet turn into a pair of high heel shoes. Murniasih also features various body parts which, according to Couteau (2001), tend to transform themselves into various tuber-like objects. *Dancing with Garlic* (1997, oil on canvas) (Fig. 31) exemplifies Murniasih's fascination with transformation. The painting depicts a female figure on the right of the canvas with her eyes closed and large eye-like objects floating behind her. Facing the female figure are two hybrid creatures that occupy the centre and left side of the canvas. The first creature has a human head and face, it is on its hand (?) with a twisted, elongated neck, its hind legs joined to the second creature, whose head is depicted as a garlic bulb while its right leg has morphed and split into three large leaves. The female figure, however, does not escape the artist's treatment as a grotesque object - her legs and fingers are also transformed into indeterminable organic objects.

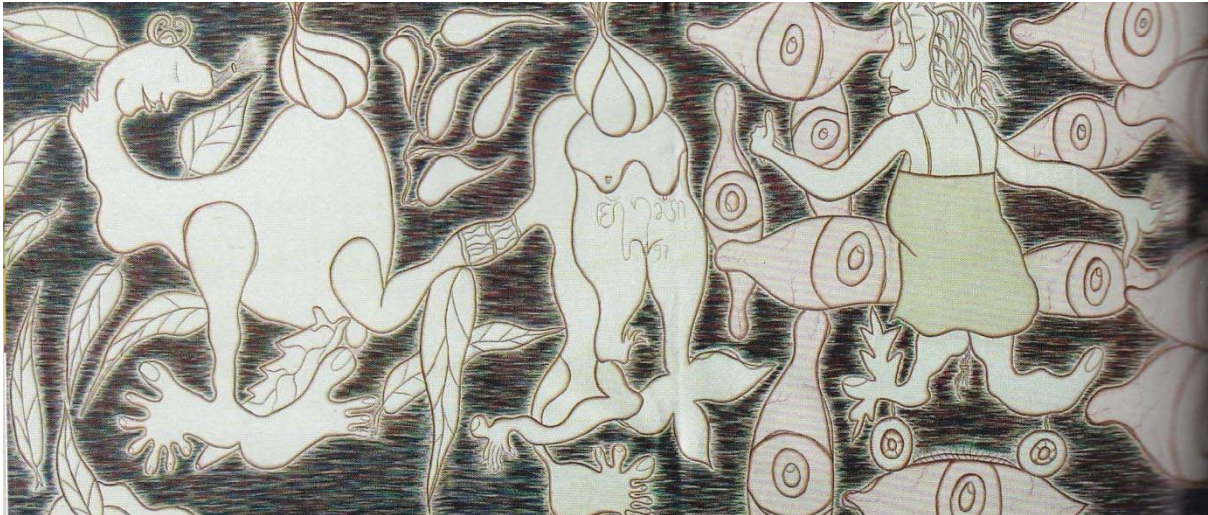


Fig. 31. IGAK Murniasih "Dancing with Garlic" (1997, acrylic and china ink on canvas, 300 x 100 cm).

These hybrid creatures, often with erotic connotations, appear to exemplify Bakhtin's grotesque beings whose "extreme aspect never presents an individual body; the image consists of orifices and convexities that present another, newly conceived body. It is a point of transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception" (Bakhtin 1968: 318). The artist appears to conform to this idea by playfully transforming and morphing various objects with the body to emphasize a sense of disorder and an undercurrent of violence.

However, the sense of chaos and violence is undermined by the comical, ribald nature of Murniasih's titles. Both the title and the symbolism in the painting aim to create wonder and to produce humor that is derived from the everyday. The laughter produced by these works produces a kind of *jouissance* as proposed by Irigaray, Cixous and to some extent, Kristeva. *Jouissance*, the French term for extreme pleasure also connotes the bliss of sexual

orgasm (Wright 1993). Cixous in *Laugh of the Medusa* (1975) has pointed out the possibility of laughter, sex and writing as anarchic activities that can undo the structures of patriarchy.

Feminine writing plays around with the ideas of opposition and terror. For a woman to show her genitals is somewhere between offensively outrageous and farcically funny, an act of aggression, but also something to snigger at in which laughter disperses the fear that keeps current structures in place. Laughter, as Cixous (1975) suggested, functions as both mockery and sheer pleasure.

Murniasih's works have shown how bodies are fragmented. In some of her paintings, the figures possess both male and female genitalia, or have phalluses that morph into tongues. These strange, grotesque figures can be seen as attempts to break up and realign a body image, to reclaim it from some predetermined representation and reinterpretation by the Symbolic.

By discussing Murniasih's works through the lens of the monstrous-feminine, I argue that the representations of the grotesque and abject bodies in Murniasih's works are a challenge to the male gaze in Indonesian visual arts. Murniasih's grotesque bodies are not simply a representation of the artist's personal history but they are also an expression of female desire filtered through a Balinese context.

### ***Reading Murniasih: Framing desire***

Murniasih's meteoric rise in the Indonesian contemporary art world cemented her status as the brightest star to emerge from the male-dominated Balinese art world (Bianpoen 2007: 141). Since her premature death, her artistic career has been compared to that of Emiria

Sunassa, who also emerged from the male-dominated art world in the early twentieth century in Indonesia.

The attempt by Indonesian writers to position Murniasih as a groundbreaking, quasi-feminist artist can be attributed to her unique background: a woman, non-Javanese, lower class background, and no formal training in art. Even in her own cultural context as a Balinese, Murniasih was considered to be unusual: she did not follow the stereotypical gender mould (which was attributed to her displacement from the *banjar* culture) within the Balinese arts world. Art historian Astri Wright states that in the local context Balinese women artists are considered to have no perception of colour and that they prefer dancing because painting is perceived to be a dirty occupation (Wright quoted in Wiyanto 2000a: 4). Furthermore, Murniasih was also quite open about her sexuality. In several exhibition reviews, critics wrote about Murniasih's character as playful, candid and even naive. One writer wrote: '... She boasts the attributes of a typical Balinese village woman - sun-darkened skin, a hard worker, somewhat bashful and softly spoken, unimpressably (sic) dressed' before adding that despite being ordinary looking, her art is anything but ordinary (Suardika 1998).

These uncommon traits coupled with her bold and often explicit subject matter have no doubt contributed to Murniasih's perceived persona as an unusual, even wild/genius woman/artist. Her choice of subject matter is regarded as mostly biographical (and is often compared to that of Frida Kahlo whom she admired) and yet she did not profess any connection with feminist strategy or theory. Murniasih's works have so far been read as an extraordinary output of an extraordinary, *singular* woman.

Nonetheless, Murniasih's works are also open to another interpretation, namely the celebration of the feminine, from the unabashed celebration of female pleasure to the use of female-centric imageries (vagina, breasts, 'central core' motifs) in her paintings. The positive depiction of the female genital in Murniasih's works to some extent opens the way to an essentialist reading of the glorification of feminine power in her works. Such an interpretation is especially invited in the *Sembahyangku* painting. The focus of the painting is the vaginal shape, which could also point to the feminine power that is contained within it.

However, Murniasih's representation of feminine power in her work does not rest in the works that represent female-centric imageries as explained above. The actual celebration of feminine power lies in the works that employ humour and laughter in juxtaposition. Works such as *Rasanya kok enak ya?* (1997), *Sekeranjang Nyonyo* (1991) and *Pohon Kesukaanku*, (2003) despite the violent elements, use Creed's notion of active monsters or the castrating female to assert agency by women in Indonesian visual arts.

### ***Murniasih as an outsider artist?***

Before Murniasih was 'discovered' by the mainstream Indonesian art world through her solo exhibition *Perjuangan Murni* (Murni's Struggle/True Battle) at the Cemeti Art House, Yogyakarta in 2000 she already had her solo exhibition in 1995 at Seniwati Gallery in Ubud, Bali. Founder and owner Mary Northmore remarks that Murniasih's talent was already visible during her time with the gallery. Northmore states that her subject matter and willingness to experiment outside the Balinese painting tradition made Murniasih's works

stand out from the rest of her peers in the 1995 exhibition (M Northmore 2009, pers. comm., 07 February).<sup>132</sup>

Founders of Cemeti Art House, Mella Jaarsma and Nindityo Adipurnomo were urged to look at Murniasih's works by the art historian and critic Astri Wright. Both Jaarsma and Adipurnomo in separate interviews remarked that Murniasih's works are remarkable and different, yet they hesitated initially in showing her works in Cemeti, known as the unofficial centre for Indonesian contemporary art. Adipurnomo stated that he feared that he would be accused of exploiting Balinese artists because in addition to being Balinese, she is also a woman and most importantly, a self-taught artist (NA Adipurnomo 2010, pers. comm., 14 July).<sup>133</sup> Jaarsma however, stated that despite her shocking subject matter, Murniasih was able to transcend her personal issues in her works (M Jaarsma 2013, pers. comm., 20 February), which quite possibly explains why they finally invited Murniasih to show her works in Cemeti.

Mella Jaarsma's statement reflects the fact that Murniasih's works were able to open up a new discursive space in Indonesian art. Her representations of what is considered to be a private domain provided the perfect background for discussions on female body and female

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<sup>132</sup> However, Seniwati Gallery occupies a niche market in Bali and Indonesian art world in general; it represents only women artists and only women from the local area in Ubud. And yet, its strong focus on and dedication to supporting the works of local women artists and their community seem to have created a sense of segregation between the artists they want to support from the broader Indonesian art world. Furthermore, due to the gallery's strong sense of locality, most of the works tend to stay true to the Balinese painting tradition with the exception of artists such as Murni and Cokorda Mas Astiti (b. 1948). The gallery appears to have the support of mostly foreign scholars and some Indonesian critics but this has not translated into mainstream success. For further information on Seniwati Gallery's foundation years see Seniwati Gallery (2001). Since December 2012, the gallery has undergone a transformation into Seniwati Artspace for Women. Lead by Ni Nyoman Sani, former member of the old gallery, the space has relocated away from the tourist area of Ubud and now focuses on building the collective's new career. See Sertori (2012) and also their website <http://www.seniwatigallery.com/>, accessed 23 September 2013.

<sup>133</sup> Adipurnomo revealed that despite Murni's outwardly 'naive' appearance, she apparently had an acute business sense. According to Adipurnomo, she negotiated with the owner of Nadi Gallery, Biantoro Santoso to show her works around the same time with Cemeti, much to the disappointment and chagrin of Cemeti's founders.

desire in Indonesian visual art. Furthermore, Murniasih's emergence came within two years of the *Reformasi* era where there was a lot of support for freedom of expression in Indonesia. It was also around the same time that many Indonesian women writers started to produce works that explored female sexuality. There was also a degree of acceptance of gender/feminist-based approaches in many cultural arenas in Indonesia. Murniasih's rise in the art world during the early to mid-2000 period can be seen as part of this trend, alongside the formation of Kelompok PEREK, discussed in chapter 7.

The great interest in Murniasih's works is perhaps driven by a new visual representation of female subjectivity in Indonesian visual art. Not only have Murniasih's works garnered a lot of positive attention, but journalists, writers and critics are almost unequivocal in their praise, a situation almost impossible to find with works by other women artists in Indonesia.<sup>134</sup> Art curator and academic Rizky Zaelani suggested that Murniasih's inclusion in the various biennales in Indonesia in the period 2003 to 2005 was because her works are considered to be 'outsider art'.<sup>135</sup>

Outsider art or *art brut*, as explained by the art critic Arthur Danto, is art that exists outside the institutional framework of the art world (Danto 1997). Artists who are self-taught often fall into this category (though that is not always the case). However while Murniasih did not study art in formal art academies, she did learnt the basic techniques of the Ubud Pengosekan 'school'. Subsequently, she also learnt new techniques and subject matter

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<sup>134</sup> See for example highlights from Nadi Gallery's website: <http://www.nadigallery.com/mediacoverage.htm>, accessed 17 March 2013. Also Dewanto (2000); Wiyanto (2000b); Banua (2001). Nonetheless, according to Mella Jaarsma, Cemeti's decision to include Murni in their exhibitions was met with strong criticisms from the Balinese art community. According to Mella, the strongest criticism was that she was an autodidact and a virtual unknown in the Balinese art scene. While she may have exhibited in Seniwati Gallery for Women, the gallery as such operates outside of the mainstream art world, both in Bali and Indonesia.

<sup>135</sup> Adipurnomo also stated that at Cemeti's show Murni was largely ignored by the critics because her works were considered to be 'too exotic.' See also n.18 above on Murni's acute business sense. Interview, Nindityo Adipurnomo, Yogyakarta, July 2010.



through her stint at the Seniwati Gallery for Women. She was also known to be quite assertive and comfortable in dealing with commercial galleries in Indonesia. Therefore, I argue that she was not strictly an outsider artist.

Perhaps paradoxically, Murniasih's works dealing with grotesque bodies such as in the *Dancing with Garlic* (1997) painting have received the most praise. The largely positive reviews were of Murniasih's exhibition with Nadi Gallery, Jakarta. Her depiction of the abject bodies or the monstrous feminine such as *Rasanya kok Enak ya* (1997) or *Sembahyang*, however, has only been glossed over, perhaps due to the violent nature of the representations that most people are uncomfortable to write or read. Moreover, her background as non-Javanese and a self-taught artist coupled with her bold subject matter may have contributed to the sensation caused by her works.

Murniasih's images of the grotesque bodies and the monstrous-feminine appeared to be celebrated and even *accepted* as a representation of women's desire in post-New Order Indonesia. Yet this acceptance appears to be short-lived, as Indonesia experiences a kind of conservative backlash in the more liberal atmosphere of Reformasi era. Visual artists are wary of depicting certain issues such as sex, nudity, or religious symbolism in their works for fear of attracting the attention of religious hardliners as discussed in chapter one. Yet despite the controversial subject matter, Murniasih's works were able to escape censorship by religious hardliners. While this can be attributed to her relatively low exposure to the overall mainstream media and arbitrariness of censorship by religious mass organizations;<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Most of the censored art works in Indonesian visual arts occurred either in public space such as outdoor installation/public sculpture or involving a well-known public profiles such as the controversial Pinkswing Park case in 2005. For discussion on censorship and public art in Indonesia see Dirgantoro (2007), Hutabarat (2011).



quite possibly her active period occurred when there was still an atmosphere of tolerance in post-New Order Indonesia.

This acceptance highlights a particular problem for the representation of women in Indonesian art world. The mostly positive reception of her works rests heavily either on the representation of her biography or on valorization of the feminine in her paintings.

Contextualising Murniasih's aesthetic achievements solely within her personal background displaces the socio-cultural context of her works. Valorizing the feminine in her works appears to confirm the mainstream view of women as being defined by their gender.

Her works perhaps ultimately resonate with Wolff (1990) that the abject and grotesque bodies are neutralized and have little impact on mainstream culture.<sup>137</sup> While the artist may not intend her works to criticize or challenge patriarchy, I believe that they do reveal the nervousness of the patriarchal worldview.

The mostly male critics argue that her works do not represent wider gender issues, let alone feminist issues (a view that seems to be supported by Murniasih's oft-quoted statement: "I just paint my own experience"). Furthermore, they often point out that Murniasih's view came from her low education and working class background (Mas'ad 2000; Hardiman and Zaelani 2003). Hence, in order for her works to be accepted and read within acceptable views of the mainstream, her works were categorized as naïve, unusual or childish. One writer states that the humour and jokes [in her paintings] are closer to ill-mannered teasing

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<sup>137</sup> Wolff (1990: 129) has warned that the excesses of the carnivalesque or the grotesque often operate to reaffirm the status quo, providing licensed but limited occasions for transgressions to be ultimately neutralized. Whether such transgressions might have any impact on the culture, according to Wolff, remains a question.

than a heroic struggle against patriarchy (Banua 2000).<sup>138</sup> This refusal or perhaps inability to read Murniasih's works as a gender critique may reflect the anxiety of the mainstream Indonesian art world towards expressions of female desire.

Her untimely death prevented the general audience from seeing more of her works in the public space, although this should not have prevented further analyses of her works.<sup>139</sup> The positive reception of Murniasih's works reflects the changing perception of the representation of the female body in the Indonesian art world especially after *Reformasi*.

The grotesque and abject bodies in Murniasih's works on a superficial reading may have been influenced by the artist's personal narratives. Certainly, Murniasih's ability to render visible what is generally suppressed is what makes her works very compelling to read in a feminist framework, especially in Indonesia. To some extent this reading also allows scholars to examine the representation of the female body and female desire in order to bypass the socio-cultural restrictions/censorship discussed in Chapter 1.

While initially her works have been dismissed by the contemporary Balinese art world due to her lack of formal art education (Wright quoted in Wiyanto 2000a: 5), in the mainstream Indonesian art world Murniasih was able to transcend this situation. She was 'discovered' by the mainstream art world and was able to build an impressive career in a short period of time. Ironically, while her works would have been considered as offensive before 1998, during the liberal atmosphere of *Reformasi* they were celebrated and accepted as new representations of women-centred visual language in Indonesian art. The changing perception of Murniasih's works as discussed in this chapter reveals the possibilities for a re-

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<sup>138</sup> ...humor dan olok-oloknya lebih menonjolkan sikap menggoda yang kurang ajar ketimbang perlawanan heroik – terhadap patriarki misalnya.

<sup>139</sup> See n.4 about Murni's plan for a museum.

reading of female desire in Indonesian art, moving beyond the conventional reading of the female body as passive receptor of the male desire/gaze. Yet as we will see in following chapters, Indonesian women artists still face a significant hurdle when they explored the female body in art when using their own body, not only within the art world itself but also to the general public.

## Chapter Six

### Searching for the Feminine: Motherhood and Maternal Subjectivity

In this chapter I examine the work of the artists Titarubi and Laksmi Shitaresmi, among others. Both are known for the diversity of their work, encompassing painting, sculpture, installation and performance art. This chapter focuses on the representation of motherhood and maternal subjectivity as another way to read the female body previously explored in Chapter 5. The analysis of these artists's work is also a gateway for a new feminist reading in Indonesian art discourse.

Indonesian art critics and scholars have generally been silent on the subject of motherhood and maternal subjectivity. Motherhood is considered to be a purely sentimental subject, glorification of the feminine or embedded in the masculine nationalist reading, as I demonstrate in the coming section. The art works by Titarubi and Laksmi Shitaresmi challenge these stereotypes by depicting a more nuanced representation of motherhood. Their works also represent maternal subjectivity as the site for psychological dimensions of mothering.

Feminism/s as an artistic strategy in Indonesian contemporary art is, if acknowledged at all, usually associated with provocative and political works by women artists. Furthermore, both in and outside Indonesia, motherhood and feminism are often seen as incompatible.

Motherhood has been a thorny issue within Western feminisms. Maternal art, according to Betterton (2010), often attracts a hostile reception from art institutions and academics, particularly from feminist artists, and in feminist critiques of essentialism that have long rejected the representation of the maternal body.

Yet many feminist artists are mothers. Recent scholarship on feminist mothers/artists in the West has argued for more in-depth explorations of maternal subjectivity and artistic creativity (Sieglöhr 1998; Liss 2009; Betterton 2010; Baillie 2011). One problem is that the representation of mother and child is generally idealised and even romantic. Yet studies in the West have shown that such images are often far more complex than meets the eyes (Meskimmon 1998).

The representation of motherhood is shown by feminist scholars to be a complex interaction between social concepts of maternity and the psycho-sexual dimension of maternal subjectivity. This cannot be expressed with the idealised representation of mother and children alone, but requires visual forms that can reiterate certain emotional or psychological states of motherhood, such as bliss and separation (Meskimmon 1998: 1). In the last section of this chapter I discuss an installation by a younger artist, Theresia Agustina Sitompul, to illustrate the complexity of reading this subject matter in Indonesian visual arts.

In this chapter I discuss the distinction between motherhood as the lived-in experience of daily chores and pleasures for women as mothers, and maternal subjectivity as a site of the psychic dimension of emotion and feeling (Sieglöhr 1998: 27) in the works of Indonesian women artists. I propose to examine the works of these artists as an expression of what Sara Ruddick (1995) termed 'maternal thinking', the experience of motherhood as central to, and inseparable from, their life as artists.

### ***The changing representation of motherhood in Indonesian visual arts***

Most Indonesian critics have been more or less silent on the issue of motherhood and maternal subjectivity in art. Having said that, the figure of the mother has been represented in the visual arts since the beginning of modern art in Indonesia in the 1940s. Male artists from Sudjojono to Affandi have represented their mother/wife on canvas either as an idealised figure or as a representation of the nation during the formative years of

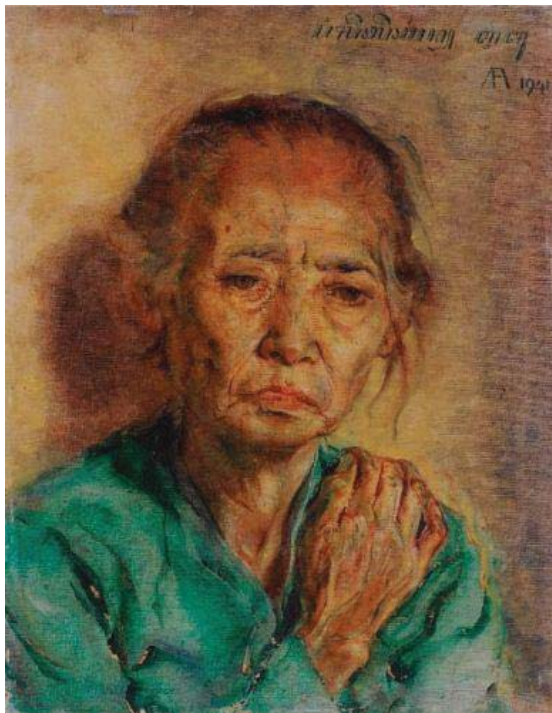


Fig. 32 Affandi “Ibuku” (My Mother, 1941, 42 x 32cm, oil on canvas).

Indonesian modern art in the 1940s – 1950s.<sup>140</sup>

For example, a painting by one of Indonesia’s greatest painters, Affandi (1907-1990), showed his technical mastery in depicting his mother in the realistic style, before he recreated the subject matter in his more familiar expressionist style in the 1960s (Holt 1967: 227-8). *Ibuku* (My Mother, 1941) (Fig. 32) depicts a figure of an old woman in frontal position on an ochre background. Her lined face and tired expression are emphasised with a crossed hand

over her chest, as if wanting to massage her tired shoulder. The figure wears a simple *konde* (hair bun) and faded turquoise *kebaya* (Javanese traditional blouse). She stares into an invisible space between the viewer and herself. The artist was able to record the age and hard life of his mother by a sensitive rendering of the wrinkles on her hand that echo the lines on her face and neck.

<sup>140</sup> See Chapter 4 for a discussion of Sudjojono’s painting of Mia Bustam called *Istriku Menjahit*, later renamed *Ibu Menjahit*.

The painting is remarkable evidence of the artist's mastery of realist technique; we can see the beginning of his characteristic explosive expressionist style in the depiction of the loose, flowing lines in the *kebaya* and veins on his mother's hands. Such a realist portrayal of the artist's mother elevates the painting above a mere portraiture. According to Rizki A. Zaelani (1995) in his exhibition essay:

*The painting titled 'My Mother' (1941) by Affandi has become an important mark in the history of resistance ... [M]otherhood as a theme in this context appears to celebrate a certain morality, about [being] 'a role model', and also about the values of spirituality (for example acceptance into the afterlife).<sup>141</sup>* (Zaelani 1999: 22-3)

The curator reminded the reader that the representation of the mother figure in art is about a celebration of moral codes, of normative and also spiritual values that emanate from the figure itself. The painting was made during the Indonesian revolutionary years, thus the curator saw the painting as a statement of struggle, namely the struggle to live, and also of acceptance of hardship during the revolution.

Women artists, however, were not exempt from this idealisation of motherhood in their works. Many artists have represented motherhood as the archetype of femininity. However there has been some nuanced representation of this subject matter, namely an exploration into themes of maternal subjectivity in the works of Emiria Sunassa and a psycho-symbolic reading of parturition in the works of Kartika Affandi (b.1934).

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<sup>141</sup>Lukisan Ibuku (1941) karya Affandi misalnya, menjadi catatan penting dalam sejarah perlawanan ... Tema ibu, di sini sepertinya juga menyangkut suatu perayaan moral, tentang 'model yang patut dicontoh,' tentang berlakunya sandaran nilai-nilai spiritualitas (misalnya keselamatan akhirat).

Arbuckle's groundbreaking research on Emiria Sunassa has mapped the representation of motherhood and maternal subjectivity in that artist's work. Arbuckle pointed out that while Emiria Sunassa predominantly painted an idealised representation of motherhood, some of her paintings from this series also represent the psychological tension in mothering (Arbuckle 2011).

The painting titled *Mother and Child* (reproduced in *Indonesian Affairs*, 1952), possibly painted in the 1940s, represents what seems to be an idealized view of mother-child bonding. The mother is painted lying on her side, asleep while her child lies next to her. The mother's arm reaches across the foreground to cradle the child's face as she closes her eyes. The child returns the embrace by holding on to her mother's arm and face but s/he is awake. The child's eyes are open with slightly furrowed eyebrows and downturned mouth that suggest anxiety or even fear.

Arbuckle (2011) has suggested that, given the painting was painted in the 1940s, it is possible that it was a representation of the circumstances surrounding her adoptive daughter. Emiria was unmarried and she was in her fifties, presumably beyond childbearing age, when she adopted her daughter and later a son. In Arbuckle's study it was suggested that the daughter, Erika, was adopted from an Indonesian woman who fell pregnant to a Gurkha soldier (Arbuckle 2011: 217).

Without the traditional male figure in the family, Emiria's personal circumstances were certainly unusual for an Indonesian family of the time, but she was possibly amongst the first female artists to represent the psychological dimension of mothering through her



art.<sup>142</sup> Kartika Affandi (b.1934), the daughter of Affandi, provided another reading into the representation of parturition in visual arts.

Kartika Affandi's painting *Rebirth* (1981, oil on canvas) is a visceral work that portrays a lower torso of a woman giving birth to a fully grown body through an exposed and bleeding vagina; the figure's face is red and her expression is anguished. According to the artist, the painting represents the symbolic rebirth of her artistic identity<sup>143</sup> - she has long been known as a gifted painter but critics always compare her works less favourably with those of her famous father (K Affandi 2013, pers. comm., 21 February). The painting can be read as a representation of a woman artist's artistic ambition and her struggle to place herself as part of the father's canon.

In the next sections I discuss two Indonesian women artists whose works explore pregnancy, parturition and motherhood. These experiences have influenced and shaped their works in the real and imaginative realms in subtle and complex ways. Their works also challenge the established expectations of femininity and motherhood, and offer complex and nuanced insights into the experience of maternal subjectivity.

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<sup>142</sup> The search for a symbolic '*ibu*' in Indonesian art history perhaps can be seen as a feminist response in establishing the feminine within Indonesia's masculine art world Soemantri, et al. (1998). Supriyanto (2007b) suggested RA Kartini (1879-1904), a women's rights figure, as the precursor to Emiria Sunassa. While Arbuckle has argued that Emiria's role as the symbolic mother of Indonesian modern art is not without problems, I believe that it is still necessary to trace and establish a type of historical timeline of Indonesian women artists. The lack of resources and research about women artists in Indonesia has made it too easy for the Indonesian art world to forget about women artists who participated in the formative years of Indonesian modern art, such as Emiria Sunassa. Indeed, perhaps it is necessary for scholars to engage in the politics of visibility to draw some attention to the role of these women.

<sup>143</sup> Yet in Weinbaum, et al. (2010), she stated that she made this painting after her first divorce and the painting represents her release from the anger and jealousy that she experienced in her marriage.

### ***The Maternal Nude: Laksmi Shिताresmi***

Laksmi Shिताresmi (b. 1974, based in Yogyakarta) has created a series of works that depict women as mother and wife, and later as mother, wife and artist (Fig. 38). Laksmi is a graduate of *Institut Seni Indonesia* (Indonesian Art Institute- ISI) in Yogyakarta with a degree in painting. Married to a fellow painter, Anggar Prasetyo, the couple has three children with the latest addition born in August 2010.

Laksmi was born into a strongly patriarchal family. She states that she had a difficult childhood as her parents gave preferential treatment to her younger brother. As she was largely left to her own devices, she started to channel her energy into drawing and poetry, winning several competitions along the way. Perhaps due to the success and appreciation of her talents at an early age, Laksmi entered the art institute without the approval of her parents. She supported herself in various ways including working as a fitness instructor before she was able to support herself through her art works (Marianto 2004: 27).

Although Laksmi's main body of work is painting, in 2009 she started a series of three-dimensional works and installations. Her initial subject matter has been interpreted as largely autobiographical and even as a form of therapy (Wisetrotomo 2004). In her 2002 solo exhibition, titled *Daun Pada Dada* (Leaves on the Breast) Laksmi predominantly represented a link between the female body and symbols of nature. Dark pallets predominate her canvasses, as dark-skinned figures were depicted on largely dark blue/brown backgrounds. The figures were largely nude or wore simple fabric wrapped around their bodies; in some paintings plants were depicted sprouting from their bodies.

Ayu Utami's essay in the catalogue for the *Daun Pada Dada* exhibition discussed the difficulties experienced by Indonesian women artists in representing the female body in visual arts (Utami 2002). She stated that women artists (and to some extent, women writers) cannot claim that their bodies are neutral and unproblematic. According to Utami, they will always be seen as both subject and object of the male gaze, especially when representing the female body through their art.

In this exhibition Laksmi appeared to have represented contradictory representations of the female body, namely between an idealised representation of the nude and a representation of herself. Her female figures awkwardly intersect the lines between the naked and the nude.<sup>144</sup> *The Portrait of Prajna Paramita* (2002) was a representation of the mythical figure of Ken Dedes with large round breasts, sultry eyes and seductive body language. The painting was part of a series of mythical female heroines in Javanese mythology. The artist represents the mythical figure of Ken Dedes as the embodiment of erotic beauty.

Arguably, Laksmi was more successful in representing female desire in the *Kasmaran* (Enamoured) series. It is a series of five paintings where the artist painted herself with a piece of fabric wrapped around their waists; the self-portraits close their eyes, their hands are playing with their hair in what appears to be the gestures of sexual awakening.

*Kasmaran III* (2002) (Fig. 33) further emphasises this notion with the figure pointing towards her lower region.

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<sup>144</sup> The nude in the tradition of Western classical art as described by Kenneth Clark (1956) is a body without sin; it is a balanced, prosperous and confident body whereas the naked is described as the natural state when we take off our clothes, which implies a sense of embarrassment and discomfort. John Berger, however, later contested Clark's definition of the nude. Berger (1972) argues that to be naked is to be oneself while to be nude meant to be displayed for the others to see. Moreover, the nude also relates to lived sexuality. Since the female body is synonymous with nudity in European painting tradition, Berger argues that nudity is always conventionalised through the male gaze.

Laksmi's second exhibition in 2004 titled *Dunia Laksmi* (Laksmi's world) marked the beginning of the representation of maternal subjectivity in her body of work. Maternal subjectivity can be depicted not only from the representation of the artist as mother, but also the physical and psychological dimensions of the stages of motherhood, from daughter-mother relationship, pregnancy, parturition, and post-partum in visual forms.<sup>145</sup>



Fig. 33 Laksmi Shitaresmi "Kasmaran I- III" [three of five canvasses] (Enamoured I-III, 2002, oil on canvas, 50 x 135 cm each).

Laksmi's works are typically large-scale canvases, with her female figures usually self-portraits surrounded by rich symbols. The figures are usually painted in full length, nude or

<sup>145</sup> The iconic work of maternal subjectivity in the West is Mary Kelly's *Postpartum Document* (1973-1979) where the artist explored the mother-child relationship in visual forms. She documented the first six years in her child's life and her psychological state as a mother through installation art. The installation consisted of diary entries from breastfeeding to her child's fecal stages, baby clothes to language acquisition. This work was influenced by feminist art and postmodernism and has had a profound influence on feminism, art history and psychoanalysis.

partially clothed and set against bright, primary colours background. Laksmi's figures, according to Marianto (2004), were never intentionally seductive or positioned as victims, rather they are the tools that the artist used to narrate her stories.<sup>146</sup> And yet, by emphasising the autobiographical nature of the artist's work, the authors are isolating the art works from a wider socio-cultural context, thus in effect limiting the political effect of the artist's works.

I offer a different kind of reading to the representation of the nudes in Laksmi's paintings, especially in regards to her maternal nudes. As Lynda Nead has argued, one of the principal functions of the female nude has generally been the containment and regulation of the female sexual body (1992: 6). But if, as Nead suggested, the function of the female nude is to make 'safe' the borderline between nature and culture, the maternal body potentially disrupts that boundary. The maternal body points to a liminal state where the boundaries of the body are fluid. In the act of giving birth, as well as during pregnancy and breastfeeding, the body of the mother is in constant exchange with that of the child. Whereas the nude is seamless, the pregnant body signifies the state in which the boundaries of inside and outside, where self and other dissolve (Betterton 1996). In this respect, the maternal nude is a contradiction in terms or, as Betterton suggested, a rupture in representation (1996: 33).

Laksmi's *Indahnya Kehamilan* (The beauty of pregnancy, 2003) (Fig. 34), *Menjelang Detik-detik Menegangkan* (Toward the tense seconds, 2004) (Fig. 35) and *Kutunggu Hadirmu* (Waiting for your arrival, 2010) (Fig. 37) explore the representation of the erotic nature of

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<sup>146</sup> Most writers appear to agree that Laksmi's paintings were autobiographical. In fact, Wisetrotomo (2004) was at pains to point out that her works are not exhibiting the pain and suffering of women in general, but rather they came from the sublimation of desire and the representation of wild metaphors from the artist. Wisetrotomo, the curator of Laksmi's 2004 exhibition was also careful to emphasise that the paintings in the exhibition, which were largely self-portraits, were self-contained expressions that came from the artist's own world, hence the title of the show.



the pregnant body and the maternal imagination from the perspective of the embodied productive subject.

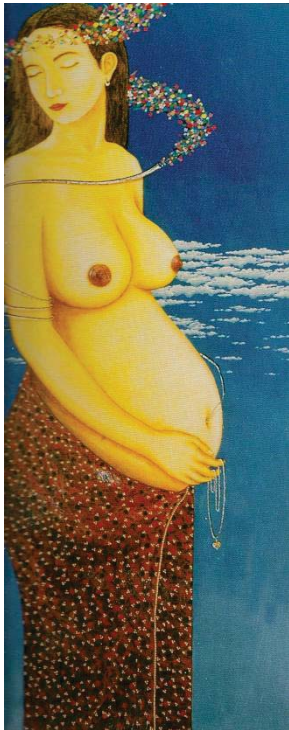


Fig. 34 (L) Laksmi Shitareshmi *Indahnya Kehamilan* (The beauty of pregnancy, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 150 cm).

Fig. 35 (R) Laksmi Shitareshmi *Menjelang Detik-detik Menegangkan* (Toward the tense seconds, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 150 cm,).

The first two paintings were painted during the artist's first pregnancy in 2003-2004. In *Indahnya Kehamilan* she depicted herself wearing a brown batik wrap, with her large belly protruding prominently against a blue background, which appears to be the sky. The figure tilts her head sideways and closes her eyes, while a stream of small flowers swirls around her head like a colourful ribbon. The stream of flowers bursts forth from a small string, which is twisted around the upper body, down around the upper arm and then disappears inside her navel. A round clock is attached to the string, denoting the time - eleven thirty-

five - and the figure holds a small gold necklace with a heart pendant where the hand rests just below the navel.

The second painting *Menjelang Detik-detik Menegangkan* depicts the artist in a similar pose but in a different mood. The figure now wears a white fabric tucked under the stomach and her gaze falls into a space between herself and the audience. Her hands, holding a small plant root, are clasped in front of her chest. The string now winds itself around her heavily pregnant stomach while threading through several needles before disappearing into the navel. The round clock is still attached to the string, denoting the time as one twenty-seven. The artist also painted several small children's toys in front of the figure alongside a burning oil lamp; on the top right corner below the horizon, a small figure is painted in what appears to be a prostate position. In the previous painting, the mood is peaceful as emphasised by the blue sky background, while in the latter the artist painted the figure against a red background with a vivid green, exuding a tense mood despite the figure's pensive expression.

In both paintings the artist represented the female body as a split subject between the erotic 'object' and the affirmation of self, and yet in Laksmi's works this representation is often laced with ambiguity. Both figures are in a sense displaying their body to the gaze of the viewer with their nakedness, especially in *Indahnya Kehamilan*. In the painting, the artist represented her erotic pregnant self with symbols of time and beauty surrounding the figure in a reaffirmation of the ultimate feminine identity. Thus if the representation of pregnancy is a rupture in representation, then paradoxically the smooth, contained body of the artist appears to deny this notion.

Nonetheless, the artist did not simply valorise her feminine self through this painting. The work also functioned as a defiant, albeit subtle, attitude from the artist against the socio-cultural norms that surrounded her. The artist has stated that she had some social difficulties with her surroundings when she first moved into her new neighbourhood in Yogyakarta (Supriyanto 2010). The neighbours often talked behind her back and disapproved of what they considered to be a morally questionable profession (L Shitaesmi 2011, pers. comm., 03 March). By showing her pregnancy in its naked glory, Laksmi opened up the possibility of representing her true 'self' through the naked figure and at the same time cloaking it within a powerful symbol of feminine identity, thus deeming her maternal nudes more acceptable.

Another artist, Caroline Rika Winata (b. 1976), has also created a series of photographs of herself during her pregnancy dealing with issues of identity and maternal concern. The artist, who is Chinese-Indonesian, created a series of photographs showing herself heavily pregnant with her first child. The photographs show the artist kneeling, standing and stretching her arms, typical poses of a pregnant woman with her eyes closed. She wears a *cheongsam* (*qipao*, one-piece Chinese gown) with *made in china* text all over the yellow dress.

She explained that the photographic series was inspired by her difficult experience in obtaining



Fig. 36 Caroline Rika Winata, *Never Indonesian Enough* (2009, mixed media installation, dimension variable).



the paperwork for her wedding because of her Chinese-Indonesian background (CR Winata 2010, pers. comm., 18 July). She feared that when her child was born, he would face similar difficulties throughout his life because he would be half Chinese, half Indonesian (she is married to a Javanese). The series of photographs accompanied the dress as part of an installation. *Never Indonesian Enough* (2009) (Fig. 36) represented a deep maternal concern for the future of her unborn child as shown by an image of the artist putting her hand on her belly in a protective mode, while also showing her defiance by explicitly covering her dress



Fig. 37. Laksmi Shitaesmi "Kutunggu Hadirmu" (Waiting for your arrival, 2010, acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 190 x 190 cm).

with *made in china* texts.<sup>147</sup>

*Kutunggu Hadirmu* (Waiting for your arrival, 2010) (Fig. 37) depicts Laksmi in her third pregnancy in mid-2010. She stated that she had no problem in depicting her changed body in the painting, despite the many pregnancies and sagging breasts (L Shitaesmi 2011, pers. comm., 03 March). Indeed, this time the artist's body appears to no longer

<sup>147</sup> During the New Order regime Chinese-Indonesians were subjected to various direct or non-direct discriminations such as the banning of cultural expressions and the use of Mandarin, limited or no political role or representation. During Abdurrahman Wahid's presidency in post-Reform Indonesia (1999-2001), the bans were lifted but most laws and regulations which were formed during the New Order era remains.

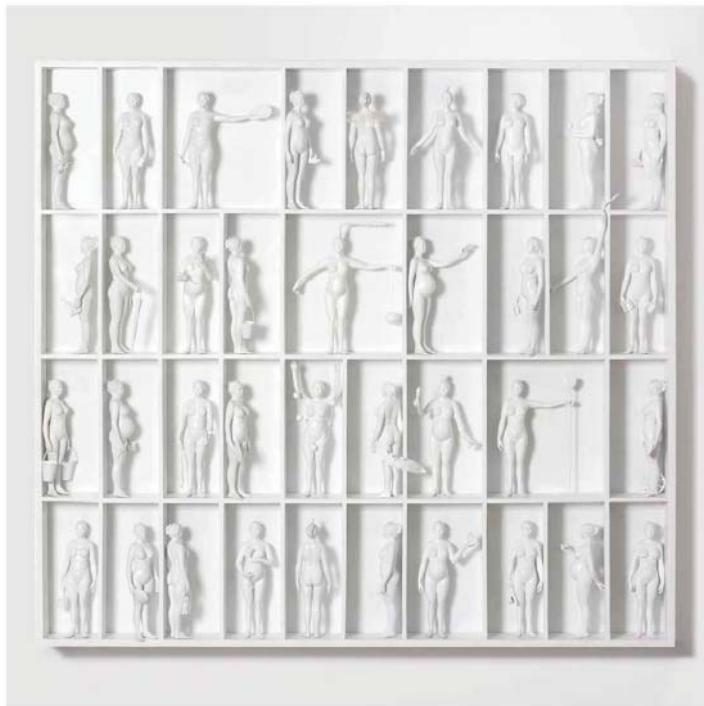


Fig. 38 Laksmi Shitareshmi "Aku, Aku, Aku, ... Beginilah Aku" (Me, me, me, ...this is me, 2010, fibreglass, mixed media, 156 x 168 x 20 cm, private collection).

promise that erotic quality that emanates from the two previous paintings, even though the figure now appears without any fabric covering her waist down. *Kutunggu Hadirmu* represents a stable but calm defiance on the part of the artist.

In *Aku, Aku, Aku, ... Beginilah Aku* (Me, me, me, ...this is me, 2010)

(Fig. 38) the artist created thirty-seven self figures arranged

individually within thirty-seven compartments in a 1.5 x 1.6 metre square box. Mounted on the wall, the box comprised a mixture of pregnant and non-pregnant figures in various standing positions, each figure holding different objects on their hand/s and/or balanced on the head. Some objects were normal household items such as umbrella, bucket, lamp, plant, drinking glass, ladle, and book; some appeared to have more symbolic meanings such as a pair of wings (attached to the back of the figures), string of balls, a heart, a torch, a wheel, and a smoking chimney; while others were natural objects such as an apple, a bunch of grapes, a banana leaf and an owl.

The eclectic objects arranged together with the figures symbolise the classic depiction of a woman's multiple roles within the household. The artist arranged the figures in individual compartments that echo the spatial arrangement of rooms within the house. Laksmi's installation echoed a classic series of work by Louise Bourgeois titled *Femmes-Maisons* (1945-1947) (Fig. 39), a series of four paintings depicting nude females whose heads and torsos were replaced by houses. Bourgeois' series have been discussed extensively as representing the female body as a prisoner not only of her home or domestic sphere but also of her sexuality (Nicoletta 2005: 366).

The works by these artists represent parallel themes in different contexts; they also depict the limitations of the domestic sphere that are infused with ambiguity. According to Nicoletta (2005), Bourgeois' series discusses Lacanian ideas and the concept of bisexuality in her works, while according to Supriyanto (2010) Laksmi's works are imprinted within her identity as a Javanese woman.

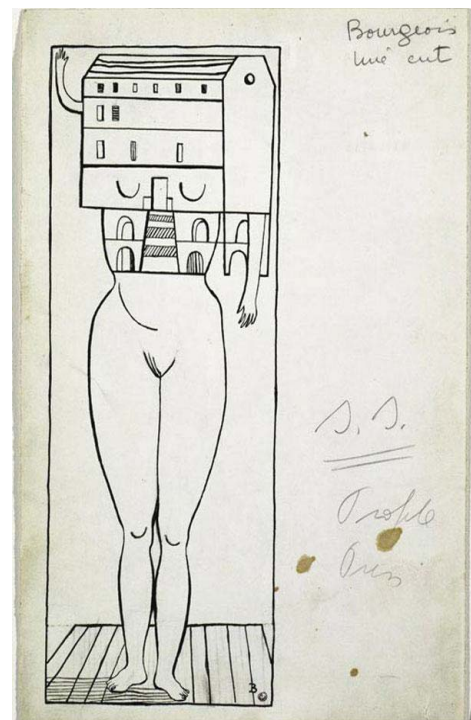


Fig. 39 Louise Bourgeois. "*Femmes-Maisons*" (1947, oil and ink on canvas/linen, 23.24 x 18.28 cm).

According to Supriyanto (2010), the notion of keeping harmony and balance with nature and one's surroundings forms the base of Javanese identity. He argues that Laksmi's works are a representation of the internalisation processes of conflicts within a Javanese self; the

concept of *legawa* and *ikhlas* (to accept willingly) are repeatedly stressed by the artist in her various exhibition statements.<sup>148</sup>

And yet the artist's Javanese identity is a cultural construction as much as her gender is a construction. By emphasizing that her art works are a representation of Javanese self, the curator has problematically placed the artist's works under a heavily patriarchal philosophy. I argue that the depiction of domestic life in Laksmi's installation is not simply an expression of *legawa* and *ikhlas*. It was a narrative space where the work simultaneously asserted a woman's subjectivity and pointed out the limitations of the woman/domestic sphere. Some of the figures seemed to suggest a desire to escape from the containment through a pair of wings or a hand that crosses the orderly lines of the compartment. Thus Laksmi's body of work is a critical look by the artist at the tension between domestic life and artistic creativity.

### ***Titarubi: Herstory in Art***

Rubiati Puspitasari or Titarubi was born in Bandung, in 1961. She completed her tertiary education in the Faculty of Fine Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology in 1997, majoring in Ceramics. She is one of the most prominent women artists in the Indonesian art world and has created a substantial body of work since she first exhibited in 1988 (Fig. 46). Currently residing in Yogyakarta, Tita, as she is colloquially called, is also the founder and director of iCAN (Indonesian Contemporary Art Network), an arts management company

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<sup>148</sup> And yet at the same time, the artist has also shown an acute awareness not only of her surroundings but also of socio-political issues in Indonesia. In particular in her 2009 exhibition *Nakedness Reveals Life* in which she criticised the political situation and the hypocrisy of politicians in a series of biting satirical paintings.

whose projects reflect Tita's diverse interests in organising events from visual arts exhibitions to dance performances.

She has also worked across disciplines such as with the notable film director Garin Nugroho in *Opera Jawa* (2009) and most recently with Fitri Setyaningsih in a three-part dance repertoire *Selamat Datang dari Bawah* (2010). Tita worked in the capacities of collaborator and artistic director in both projects. Moreover, she is not only known for her diverse artistic explorations, which range from installation to performance art, but also for her dedication to the representation of gender issues in her works, most importantly through the representation of the body.

Titarubi's strong commitment to both her art and activism is well-known within the Indonesian art world. Yet in contrast to another artist who is also known for her activism, Arahmaiani, Tita's activism did not start during her study days at the Bandung Institute of Technology. During her student days in the mid 1980s to late 1990s, Tita's art works primarily explored clay and ceramics; a number of these early projects were focused on environmental issues. It was during the period leading to the fall of the New Order regime that her involvement as artist and activist increased. I argue that it was this turbulent time that shaped the development of political motherhood as a major theme in Titarubi's works.

### ***Women, Motherhood and Political Participation: Voice of the Concerned Mothers***

When the Asian financial crisis hit Indonesia in late 1997, the effect was devastating. As the value of the rupiah plummeted, prices rose dramatically and the New Order government failed to control the economy. Students began demonstrating and other urban dwellers also

took to the streets to protest alongside the students. Indonesian women began a politicised version of motherhood that had not been seen since the days of high inflation and political turmoil in the 1950s and 1960s (Wieringa 2002; Blackburn 2004).

The movement known as *Suara Ibu Peduli* (SIP - Voice of Concerned Mothers) resembled the 'mother-activism' commonly associated with Latin America, where women have felt driven by their maternal responsibilities to protest against state oppression (Gonzalez and Kampwirth 2001; Blackburn 2004: 163). Similar to the situation in Indonesia, in the Latin American context the feminine is cherished, the ability of women to bear, raise and nurture children is celebrated. Nonetheless, the contradictory effect of using motherhood to justify women's political participation is obvious in both the Indonesian and the Latin American context.

*Suara Ibu Peduli* was formed by a group of women intellectuals in Jakarta in response to the economic crisis. Inspired by the Mothers of the Plaza Del Mayo in Argentina, the women behind SIP argued that women's political awareness could be heightened by starting with a focus on the failure of the state to meet their maternal need to provide for their families (Jurnal Perempuan quoted in Blackburn 2004: 163-4). SIP began by focussing on the rapidly rising prices of goods and services and organised funding to provide women with half-price milk-powder, one of the items that was in short supply and skyrocketing in price. Blackburn (2004: 163) has noted that this act in itself marked the movement as one of middle-class women, as only they can afford formula milk or think it is essential for babies, children and pregnant mothers.

Sen (2002) argues that middle-class Indonesian women using the *ibu* persona for their political agendas – a tool heavily used by the New Order regime - sidelines alternative forms

of female subjectivities. However, proponents of the movement such as Budianta (2002) argue that the use of the *ibu* is important to emphasise the non-violent nature of the movement as well as to reconstitute the meaning of motherhood in Indonesia. The *Ibu* (mother) persona during the New Order was heavily constructed around the self-sacrificing mother; however this notion was soon challenged after the fall of the regime. Budianta stresses that Indonesian women were able to reclaim their voice and most importantly re-emphasize the specificity of motherhood through SIP. The movement embraced the roles of women as mothers and wives as a strategy to criticise the law and conditions that threatened to prevent them from fulfilling those functions. Furthermore, the group used the *ibu* persona to reconstitute the image of motherhood for their political agendas and oppose the masculine paradigm of the Indonesian military.<sup>149</sup>

The contrasting opinions presented by Budianta and Sen highlighted the contradiction and ambivalence of Indonesian women's political ideology in the Reformasi era. Through this issue, feminine identity underwent a conflicting transformation – on the one hand, the *ibu* as a tool, a function to be reclaimed and on the other hand, the passive, ideal womanhood as previously endorsed by the state. While the latter is no longer valid as Indonesian women are starting to break from traditional gender roles, many still strive to achieve ideal womanhood, thereby creating a sense of ambivalence amongst middle to upper class Indonesian women towards motherhood in contemporary Indonesia.

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<sup>149</sup> Titarubi in fact used this strategy in her performance during the height of the protest movements in 1998. The artist joined a group of protesters that was marching to the Parliament house when they were stopped by a phalanx of soldiers. Knowing that they would hesitate to act aggressively towards women she then kneeled down and started kissing the boots of the soldiers to indicate the powerlessness and peaceful nature of their march. Here Tita adopted a kind of strategic essentialism for her performance by cynically emphasizing the dominance of the military. While the performance worked – the soldiers retreated slowly and awkwardly – thus opening the path for the protesters to move forward, other protesters were less impressed by Tita's performance. Tita claimed that the others disliked the idea of bowing down to the military, non-symbolically or symbolically as well as exposing themselves to the enemy (Titarubi 2009, pers. comm., 15 January).

### ***Political Motherhood in the works of Titarubi***

Titarubi's works reflect this shifting paradigm on the issues of women, motherhood and political participation in Indonesia. SIP later shifted its focus of activities towards the missing student activists who had been abducted in May 1998 (Blackburn 2004: 164). These kidnappings also left a deep impact on Titarubi. Even though she was not directly involved with the movement she began to create works that both directly and indirectly referenced this issue.

The 2004 *Missing and Silent* is an installation piece that represented this issue through a juxtaposition of fetuses with photos of the missing student activists. In the first version of the installation, the small fetuses - made of stoneware - were placed on top of a light box covered by earthenware bricks, and the photos were placed around the sides of the base. There was no direct connection between each individual figure with individual photographs. The figurines appeared to be strewn carelessly by the artist, and yet the random placement in fact emphasised the fragility of the figures ("fetuses") (Fig. 40).

In the second version of the installation, the artist recreated the fetuses into even smaller dimensions. The figurines were red in colour and the artist placed them in transparent plastic bags filled with clear liquid. The containers were hung along a shelving system to which the artist also attached photographs of the missing activists. The viewers were invited to walk into a small space where they were confronted by the representation of the floating figures. While they were still within their amniotic protection the installation nonetheless evoked a strong sense of loss but, perhaps most importantly, the loss of children from the mother's perspective.





Fig. 40 Titarubi *Missing and Silent* (1998-2010, mixed media installation, dimension variable).

Moreover, the small figures no longer represented what was previously hidden within a woman's body. The artist placed them within the public space and the wider discourse of human rights violations, thus simultaneously opening up the private space and pushing forward maternal subjectivity. The title itself *Missing and Silent*, while referring to the political silencing of the missing activists, also refers to the silent voices of the mothers. Blackburn (2004) has stated that despite the valorization of motherhood in Indonesia, Indonesian mothers have yet to assert their rights within the public realm. Thus Titarubi's installation can be seen as an attempt to place Indonesian women as active agents in asserting their socio-political rights within the frame of motherhood.

Tita, who is married to artist Agus Suwage, gained public attention through her second solo exhibition in 2003 titled *Bayang-bayang Maha Kecil* (Shadows of the Tiniest Kind) in Cemara

6 Gallery, Jakarta. The exhibition presented several works, namely etchings, glass installations and a ceramic installation, titled *Bayang-bayang Maha Kecil* which became the main focus of the exhibition. The installation comprised ceramic busts modelled after the artist's youngest daughter; each bust was accompanied by a pair of hands that were turned towards the viewers and the busts and hands were inscribed with Arabic scripts and illuminated by lamps from above. The strategic juxtaposition of the busts and the narrative of the installation evoked a sense of memory that resonated well with most of the viewers thus making it the focus of the exhibition (Fig. 41).

According to the artist, the exhibition *Bayang-bayang Maha Kecil* was a statement of her anxiety (*kegelisahan*) as a daughter, wife, and mother (Swastika 2004: 39). She explored this anxiety throughout the exhibition and used the ceramic installation as the main narrative. The artist stated that the installation was a criticism of religious education in Indonesia where young children are being pressured to learn Arabic texts by heart at school without truly understanding the meaning. The artist represented her criticism in the installation by placing the hands outwards facing the viewers; the figures are thus 'rejecting' the pressure brought down on them by external factors.

The nine stoneware busts and the hands were etched with several Arabic texts joined together within one body of 'text'. The inscription that covered the surface of the busts appears like a web of threads and a protection blanket. The association with protection is appropriate as the texts are Islamic prayers that the artist took from an Islamic book of common prayers. They can be identified as a *Qunut* prayer (performed during the early morning and night prayers) and the Prophet Ibrahim's prayer amongst others. All the prayers have a similar meaning, namely to seek protection and safety from harm.



Fig. 41 Titarubi *Bayang-bayang Maha Kecil* (Shadows of the Tiniest Kind, 2003-2009, ceramics and mixed media installation).

Apart from the artist's critical stance towards religion, the installation seems to underline several issues, namely the missing figure of the mother and the notion of shadow (*bayang-bayang*), which forms a recurring thread in Titarubi's body of work. The installation's social message was cleverly hidden behind the strong presence of the absent mother in this work. The narrative of anxiety, of loss and separation appeared quite strongly as represented by the ambiguity of the inscribed texts. According to the artist, the texts represented the compulsory prayers that the children have to learn by heart, and yet at the same time these are the prayers of protection. While it is quite common in religious classes to learn Qur'anic prayers by heart, it is optional to learn the common prayers as they are perceived to complement the Qur'anic prayers. The installation thus emphasized the maternal desire to protect as well as a criticism of religious education in Indonesia.

The installation was lit from above by a series of conical lamps, punctured with small holes and small, sharp-looking barbs attached to the outer part of the lamps. The lamps not only functioned as the main lighting for the busts, but also appeared as a significant part of the installation, even though the artist did not specify the importance of light as part of this work, apart from a brief reference from the curator in the curatorial essay (Effendy 2004: 12).

I argue that light, in fact, is a crucially important aspect of Titarubi's body of work. The artist used Arabic text convincingly as the main component in shaping the meaning of the *Bayang-bayang Maha Kecil* installation. However, perhaps unwittingly, the arrangement of lighting in this installation added another layer of meaning. The notion of light or *nur* in symbol and substance is fundamental to Islam and the essence of Islamic architecture. Light is identified with the joy of the soul, with the functioning of the intellect, and as an ordering and sacralizing principle. Light defines space and infuses it with the Word; Word as light reverberates and sanctifies (Weightman 1996: 64-66).

Light was used strategically to highlight the representation of purity and innocence of the children. The warm effect of the lighting gave the work a yellow tinge that further evoked the notion of sacredness. Significantly, in the 2006 version of the work the artist changed the lighting so that the light source now came from below the busts. The artist explained the change as an attempt to signify that the light now comes from 'within' the children (Titarubi 2011). Furthermore, the busts were now encased within transparent acrylic boxes, giving the piece a museum-like quality.

The alteration is interesting to note, as it appears that the artist shifted the focus from the representation of innocence and sacredness to that of preservation and protection. Within the darkened room of the exhibition space in 2004, the installation and other works were bound together by an invisible thread within an amniotic space, thus giving a strong voice to the maternal. However, in the 2006 version there was a sense of maternal distancing as the pieces now stood on their own since the artist encased them within the boxes. Thus it appeared that, with the distancing, she has replaced the maternal with the symbolic.



Fig. 42 Titarubi *Bayang-bayang Maha Kecil* (Shadows of the Tiniest Kind, 2002-2004 version (detail).

Another work titled *Bral Geura Miang* (Now is the time to depart, 2004) (Fig. 43) represented the idea of leaving, loss and also the invisible bond between mother and child more strongly. The work depicted a figure sitting behind a large metal tub with both feet firmly planted on the handles. The figure was cloaked in white cloth while a pair of gloved hands

emerged from the cloak, each hand holding a pair of scissors. The figure was in the process of cutting what appeared to be an umbilical cord that was linked into a small foetus in the middle of the metal tub. The skin of the foetus was pink, and it was encircled by a white and yellow light against the dark background. A pair of black heels on transparent wheels was placed in front of the tub.



Fig. 43 Titarubi *Bral geura miang* (Now is the time to depart, 2004, digital print on vinyl, 200 x 150 cm).

The act of cutting the umbilical cord directed the viewer to read this image as a representation of a symbolic farewell between a mother and her child. The artist states:

*...this work evolves from the long process [of creating] BBMK and Sesaji ... it is about the bodies of the mother and the child. [The work seeks to question] the relationship between both [mother and child, in a biological and a social sense. [The work] speaks of separation and also about power relations ... 'Bral' is a word that denotes time, time of arrival or departure. [It] is a point in time where an event happens. "Geura Miang" [means] to leave immediately, but it is not meant to chase [someone] away,*



rather as the [right] moment to say farewell.<sup>150</sup> (Titarubi 2011, pers.comm., 13

October)

But the fact that we cannot see the figure's face and with the hands being covered in gloves suggests a deliberate physical distancing from the foetus. It is left unclear whether the use of the word 'power relations' suggests that both mother and the unborn child (for it appears to be relatively unformed) are subjected to interventions by medical authorities or whether the work represents the moment of separation between mother and child.

The artist explains in her blog that *Bral Geura Miang* evolved from two particular installations, namely *Lindungi Aku dari Keinginanmu* (Protect me from what you want, 2002) (Fig. 44) and *Sesaji* (The offering, 2004) (Fig. 45) (Titarubi 2010). The continuous exploration of a single subject matter into several versions of different art works is one of the key signatures of the artist. It arguably reflects her in-depth research into her subject matter and a strong desire to keep her artistic explorations as open-ended as possible.

*Lindungi Aku dari Keinginanmu* consisted of three translucent female torsos made from porcelain.



Fig. 44 Titarubi "Lindungi Aku dari Keinginanmu" (Protect me from what you want, 2002, mixed media installation, 200 x 90 x 100 cm approx.)

<sup>150</sup> ... karya ini lahir dari proses panjang pameran BBMK dan Sesaji ... Ini adalah tentang tubuh ibu dan tubuh anak. pertanyaan-pertanyaan tentang relasi keduanya, secara biologis maupun secara sosial. berbicara soal keterpisahan dan juga relasi kekuasaan..."Bral" adalah kata yg mengatakan tentang saat. saat datang atau saat pergi. satu titik masa di mana kejadian berlangsung. "Geura Miang", segera pergi tidak dalam arti pengusiran tetapi moment pelepasan.

Within each torso there were small fetus figures encased within round-shaped, clear material. The torsos were placed in the middle of a half circular panel painted in dark blue. The panel was interspersed with naphthalene balls and in another version of the work (2004) the artist placed eggs on the floor space in front of the panel. Exhibited in her solo show *se(tubuh)* (One Body) in the now-defunct Benda Art Space, Yogyakarta, in 2002 the installation was about the pressure on women and their children to conform to the demands of patriarchy (Brands 2002). The naphthalene balls functioned as a protective olfactory screen whilst the eggs served as reminders of the fragility of touch.



Fig. 45 Titarubi, *Jazari Sesaji* (The offering, 2004, performance, performed in Kedai Kebun Forum, Yogyakarta).

*Sesaji* emerged from the above installation with the artist utilizing the eggs on the floor space with additional materials and collaborators to create the performance piece.

Performed in Puri Art Gallery, Malang, 2004 the photo documentation showed the artist



and two other male collaborators mixing the eggs with flour and water to make bread. Wearing white aprons, the artist and her first male collaborator, Jazari, kneeled in front of a large aluminium basin in which the other male collaborator curled up in a foetus-like position. Titarubi and Jazari proceeded to mix the ingredients inside the basin, showering the other performer with flour and eggs until he was completely covered with the medium. The artist then covered her head with her apron before she tipped out the basin and the figure inside it with the help of Jazari. The dough was then baked in an oven and distributed to the audience.<sup>151</sup> The artist states that the bread not only served as an offering but also as a sign of commitment, that whoever took the bread was then asked to commit themselves to the protection of children (Titarubi 2012).

According to the artist, *Bral Geura Miang* evolved from *Sesaji* and the image certainly shows traces of the performance: from the use of objects, the pose of the main figure to the head and face cover. The three art works share a common theme of symbolic protection and the strong bond between mother and child. I argue that in addition to the social message of the artist, these works and especially *Bral Geura Miang* are a reflection of melancholy in motherhood, or the original separation between mother and child.

The melancholic female artist is fixated on a lost ideal – on the umbilical connection she once had with her mother, and subsequently on other intimate but unsustainable relationships (Baillie 2011). Refusing to sever attachment to the lost object, the melancholic artist instead becomes haunted by it.<sup>152</sup> This haunting often inspires women artists to be

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<sup>151</sup> The artist has actually made a different version of this performance. It was performed in KKF (Kedai Kebun Forum), a cafe/exhibition/performance space and in this version she mixed the ingredients by herself. The ingredients were mixed inside an aluminium basin in which Jazari sat facing the artist. The basin was placed on top of a large Indonesian map.

<sup>152</sup> Tita's admiration of her hard-working, self-sacrificing mother was expressed repeatedly during the various interviews. She recalled during an interview that she and her siblings were often left in the care of their

obsessed with their own body by repetitive self-portraiture or visualisation of the body's interior. While Laksmi's works are much closer to the notion of the melancholic female artist, Tita's work also reflects a sense of haunting by the original separation between mother and child, as exemplified in the above mentioned works.

The cause of melancholy is the original separation from the mother's body and its reminders can take the form of watching lovers leave or children grow up (Baillie 2011). The artist visualises the interior of the female body, displaying the womb and foetus inside it and, most importantly, the moment when the umbilical cord was cut. Furthermore, in highlighting this particular moment throughout the above mentioned works, the artist was perhaps still haunted by the separation as exemplified by the other works in the same year.

*Tentang Sesuatu yang Disentuh Cahaya/The Lightness of Being* (etched glass, 2003) and *Guratan I*, *Guratan II* and *Guratan III* (etching, dry point, 2003) (Fig. 46-47) which depicted the artist's two daughters juxtaposed with papaya leaves (the *Guratan* series) underlined the maternal emotion and bond between the artist and her children.

*Tentang Sesuatu yang Disentuh Cahaya* is a two-dimensional work of mounted etched glass plates; the artist used the shadow cast by the etched lines on the glass to form the images on the paper beneath it. The images thus waxed and waned in line with the availability of light as well as from the shadow cast by the viewers. The *Guratan I* and *Guratan III* series depicted the artist's daughters, focusing on their facial expressions and the palms of their hand. *Guratan* (lines) is word play that references the technique as well as the depiction of lines on the children's palms.

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neighbour in the middle of the night because her mother who worked as a midwife had to deliver babies. (Titarubi 2011, pers. comm., 02 March).

The lines on the palm of the hand as well as the shape of the hand are believed to determine one's fate, to read the owner's character as well as to predict the owner's future path in pseudoscience circles. Herewith, the artist represented her anxiety about her children's future (Swastika 2004: 39) through a reference to the unpredictability of the future. The artist depicted a different view of motherhood namely through a representation of maternal subjectivity that explores its psychic dimension.



Fig. 46 Titarubi "Guratan I" (Lines I, 2003, etching and dry point on paper, 10 x 10 cm approx.)

The *Guratan* series also represented the artist's children. The open palms are interspersed with the images of their faces. Focusing on frontal and close-up views, the images conveyed a sense of ease and trust of the children's expression and body language towards the creator/viewer. *Guratan I* represented the images of the artist's eldest daughter, Carkultera, playfully grinning and peering into the frame while *Guratan II* represented the images of her youngest daughter, Gendis, and beautifully captured the innocence of an infant.

*Guratan I* juxtaposed the images of Carkultera with the images of the palms of her hand on nine small squares. The images of the young girl were placed at the centre of each row with open palms flanking on the left and right sides. *Guratan III* also had similar arrangements albeit with a different girl. In comparison with the *Guratan II* series, *Guratan I* and *III* represented not only a concern for their future but they are also a record of their distinct identities by the artist/mother. *Guratan II* represented the images of the children interspersed with papaya leaves. According to the exhibition essay (Effendy 2004: 10-11) the



Fig. 47 Titarubi "Guratan III" (Lines III (detail), 2003, etching and dry point on paper, 10 x 10 cm approx.)

artist chose papaya leaves (*Carica papaya*) to represent its healing properties.

*Tentang Sesuatu yang Disentuh Cahaya/The Lightness of Being* and *Guratan I*, *Guratan II* and *Guratan III* highlight the tension of motherhood, as the artist's representation of her children was surrounded by symbols of protection and healing. In the

exhibition essay, this tension was noted by the curator through a reference to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*:

... [S]he feels that she is surrounded by waves, radiation, mystic fluids; she believes in telepathy, astrology, radiotherapy, mesmerism, theosophy, table-tipping, clairvoyants, faith healers; her religion is full of primitive superstition: wax candles, answered prayers ... [H]er

*attitude will be of one conjuration and prayer; to obtain a certain result, she will perform certain well-tested rites.* (Effendy 2004:11 original de Beauvoir 1984: 610)

Furthermore, the curator linked the artist's reference to the symbols of protection and healing with the use of amulets and sacred cloths for protection in traditional societies (Effendy 2004: 11). Problematically, by linking de Beauvoir's above text with traditional beliefs, the writer implied that motherhood is an experience fraught with irrational and quasi-religious actions.<sup>153</sup> The reading by the curator provided a stark contrast to what the artist tried to communicate through her works, namely the experience of motherhood that is linked to her identity as artist and producer of texts.

While her exhibition was indeed a statement of the tension within the artist's experience of motherhood, I offer a different explanation, namely that the works in the exhibition represent what Sara Ruddick (1989) termed the preservative love of mothers. Preservative love is one of three demands of maternal works as outlined by Ruddick (the other two being nurturance and training (1989: 17)). As a species, human children share prolonged dependence and physical fragility, therefore prolonged dependence on adults for their safety and well-being. In all societies, children need protective care, though the causes and types of fragility and the means of protection vary.

*To be committed to meeting children's demand for preservation does not require enthusiasm or even love; it simply means to see vulnerability and to respond to it with care rather than with abuse, indifference or flight. Preserving the lives of children is the central constitutive,*

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<sup>153</sup> De Beauvoir's unsympathetic views towards marriage and motherhood are well-known. In Patterson (1986) she still equated a woman's decision to marry and have children as selling herself to slavery.

*invariant aim of maternal practice; the commitment to achieving that aim is the constitutive maternal act* (Ruddick 1989: 19).

Ruddick went on to argue that many women engage the concept of 'nature' in the protection of their children. 'Nature' in Ruddick's conception is a set of given attributes of children, from their physical condition to temperaments that are inherited genetically (1989: 76). While mothers strive to protect their children from various external influences such as diseases, germs, and natural disasters (everything that is also called 'natural'),

mothers cannot deny that the growth of their children in itself is a working of nature – within particular socio-historical and culturally interpreted contexts (1989: 76-77).



Fig. 48 Titarubi "*Sesaji*" (The offering, 2004, mixed media installation, dimensions variable)

Tita's use of symbols from nature such as papaya leaves and bread in *Sesaji* (Offering, 2004) (Fig. 48)- the artist placed bread in front of the images of her children - conformed to the notion above,<sup>154</sup> for both bread and papaya leaves not only represent the act of nurturance but also an act of preservation by the mother. Nature in this regard is not about symbols of irrationality and protection but is seen as

a source of positive energy and at the same time of tension.

<sup>154</sup> This is a different art work from the *Sesaji* performance, although closely linked. In *Sesaji* (Offering, 2004, installation, mixed media) the artist placed a piece of bread inside tin boxes, which were etched with the faces of the artist's daughters. Part of *Benih* (Seeds) exhibition at viavia cafe gallery, Yogyakarta, 2004.

As a mother and artist, Titarubi is well aware of the tensions within motherhood as they are continuously explored in her works. Through the strong political content of her other works as well as the point of view that she uses, the artist has placed what is considered to be a woman's private domain into the wider discourse of narrative public space. Not only is Tita attempting to redefine what is considered to be merely the domestic sphere, she has also opened up a discursive space on maternal subjectivity in Indonesian contemporary art.

### ***Maternal Subjectivity: women reading women***

A solo exhibition by Theresia Agustina Sitompul (b. 1982, based in Yogyakarta) in viviyip art room, Jakarta, 2009, brought the theme of motherhood to the attention of the contemporary art public. Tere, as she is colloquially known, is a graduate from ISI Yogyakarta majoring in printmaking. The only female member of a printmaking collective, *Studio Grafis Minggiran* (Minggiran Print Studio), Tere has participated in various group exhibitions with the collective since 2000 but not until 2009 did she have her solo exhibition, in which she exhibited prints and three-dimensional works.

Married to an artist, S Teddy D, Tere gave birth to their daughter Blora in 2008. In her first solo exhibition her works showed a direct engagement with her experience as a new mother (Supriyanto 2009). Indeed, during an interview in August 2010, the artist stated that she had deliberately worked on the theme of motherhood for the previous two years (2008-2010), as this was the issue that preoccupied her mind and heart (TA Sitompul 2010, pers. comm., 16 July). *Babyboom* (2009) (Fig. 49) was a large-scale installation depicting the experience of childbirth. The installation was comprised of a pair of freestanding poles with half-circles on top to represent stirrups in a birthing chair; in front of the poles was a large red slide where



twenty-nine baby figures made from aluminium were arranged in various positions to represent the movements of the baby as she slides through the birthing canal.



Fig. 49 Theresia Agustina Sitompul "Babyboom" (2009, mixed media installation, 180 x 300 cm approx.)

The installation was both evocative and unique in its reflection of an intensely personal experience of a woman. The artist depicted the experience through a series of interrelated signifiers that are connected to the female body and specifically to this experience. The external element (stirrups) and the internal element (birthing canal), as parts of parturition, were represented in simple but effective visual metaphors. The artist also circumvented the usual romanticism of representing a newborn baby; instead of representing the baby realistically, the artist chose to depict the visual signifiers of a baby through a figure with a larger head-to-body ratio.



What made this exhibition unique was the artist's use of metaphors and medium. The independent curator Alia Swastika, reviewing the exhibition in her blog, noted that despite the new approaches, the choice of medium rendered the works in this exhibition 'cold and sterile' (Swastika 2009). Certainly in comparison with the expressive and visceral painting by Kartika Affandi on a similar subject as previously discussed, Tere's installation appeared to be clinical and even distant.

Swastika's review, however, reflects a certain difficulty for the reviewer in linking subject matter with the choice of medium for women artists. By claiming that Tere's works look clinical and sterile, she is suggesting that the artist's choice of medium (e.g. aluminium) is lacking the emotional connection with such a deep subject matter. Significantly, in Western feminist art discourse it has been argued that the choice of art medium is also political. Many feminist women artists prefer to use medium, techniques and even forms that are seen as distinctively feminine (e.g. fabric, embroidery, soft sculpture) as a response to the masculine visual forms (e.g. canvas, metal, bronze etc). However I offer a more nuanced reading of this installation.

Tere celebrated the birth of her first child through an art installation; in this context, the artist used different types of material to change the perception of space in a site-specific, three-dimensional work. In this installation, the artist recreated maternal space by using symbols that alluded to parturition. The measured tone of the work suggests a distancing attempt by the artist to visualise the memory of childbirth, specifically the original separation from the mother's body. The work thus was tinged with a sense of melancholy as it served as a remembrance of this important moment in a child's life and also for a new mother.

Paradoxically, the medium of polyester and aluminium allude to various 'masculine' languages in sculpture. Thus as viewers we have 'difficulties' in reading the feminine voice in the work. As the Indonesian art world is dominated by the masculine gaze, the reading of art works typically has been framed through a patriarchal perspective. As discussed in Chapter 3, gender-neutrality is assumed and masculinity is the norm in the Indonesian art world. Thus analysis of works by Indonesian women artists tends to be biased towards their gender and limited in scope.<sup>155</sup>

Swastika's reading reveals the difficulties encountered by an Indonesian female art critic in reading Tere's works using a (Western) feminist perspective; it is a 'feminine' subject matter yet it is using a 'masculine' medium. Implicitly the artist is expected to use a 'feminine' medium when depicting feminine subject matter. Yet awareness of the medium in art as a political tool has never been particularly well-developed amongst Indonesian women artists. While there is no framework in Indonesian art discourse to read the work as a specifically feminist work, as an artistic strategy the various objects in this work are located within the female embodied experience.

Swastika's reading thus reflects Griselda Pollock's view (1999) that it is almost impossible to create a feminist reading within the mainstream, patriarchal art world. In order to create a feminist reading, it is not enough just to insert a feminine heroine or valorise the feminine; instead the reader must read the spaces-in-between and in the margins in order to point out the weaknesses of the masculine canon. I am not suggesting that Swastika's effort to read Tere's work is ineffectual: her reading in fact reveals the multiple and conflictive

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<sup>155</sup> Certain subject matters such as representation of the female body, personal issues, and/or domestic life are considered to be 'typical' of women artists. At the other extreme, works by women artists who are considered to be outspoken are considered to be a feminist work – a label which often does not sit easily with the artists.

responses in reading female subjectivity in Indonesian visual arts, specifically in the themes of motherhood and maternal subjectivity.

### ***Conclusion***

The works by Laksmi Shitaesmi, Titarubi, Emiria Sunassa, Kartika Affandi, Theresia Sitompul and Caroline Rika Winata all point to a trope of women artists depicting pregnancy, parturition and motherhood in Indonesian art. Despite the still prevailing attitude towards the representation of the female body in Indonesian art, the works by these artists challenge existing notions about femininity and motherhood.

By proposing to read the representation of motherhood and maternal subjectivity in the works of Indonesian women artists from the formative period of Indonesian art to works by contemporary artists, I do not seek to create a female/mother lineage in Indonesian art history for reasons that I have outlined in Chapter 3. Rather, in this chapter I have sought to reveal the inscription of the feminine as a way to include alternative representational possibilities by women artists in Indonesia.

In differentiating between motherhood as the lived experience of daily chores and pleasures for women as mothers on the one hand and maternal subjectivity as a site of psychic dimension of emotion and feeling on the other hand, I attempt to open up a discursive reading of what has been considered a purely feminine subject matter. While both male and female artists have represented mothers and motherhood as lived experience, with careful reading we can see that the representation of maternal subjectivity has the potential to create rupture in hegemonic masculinity in Indonesian visual arts.

Titarubi's body of work emphasised the positive connection between a woman artist as a producer of text and motherhood. The artist's works provide the antithesis of the patriarchal mother through an exploration of maternal subjectivity in a wider context. By situating her personal experiences within Indonesia's changing socio-political context, the reading of her work provides an alternative to the traditional maternal depiction of domesticity and self-sacrifice. Here we have an active, political motherhood in the public sphere.

Laksmi's body of work is more ambiguous than Titarubi's. Her self-portraits can be seen as an attempt to regain control of her representation, yet they hover between essentialist/maternal embarrassment and empowering images. On the one hand, Laksmi's depiction of her pregnancies offers representational possibilities for women artists in Indonesia, namely that the stages of motherhood cannot be rendered invisible or reduced to muted allegory. This strategy in itself challenges the prescribed notion of femininity and motherhood in Indonesian visual arts. And yet, in representing the half-naked/female body within the mainstream art/masculine gaze, the artist risks confirming the suspicion of the mainstream art world - that when women artists speak, they speak only of (their) sex.

In this regard, the mainstream's view of the female body is not dissimilar in the perception of IGAK Murniasih's treatment of the erotic/female desire, previously discussed in Chapter 5. Yet, by representing the female body/desire through the lens of the abject and grotesque Murniasih's works are more open to various interpretations than Laksmi's straightforward self-portraits.

The work of Tita and Laksmi also represents the tension of women who have to make career choices as working mothers. In fact, their works have illustrated what has often been

ignored or denied by the patriarchal world. They are able to visualize that by becoming a mother, ambiguities are the norm - between asserting one's mother self or one's professional and sexual self. Titarubi's concept of her installation *Bayang-bayang Maha Kecil* has evolved from the initial representation of maternal fear and protection into a sense of maternal distancing and melancholia. Laksmi's work is similar to that of Titarubi, and to some extent to that of Theresia Sitompul, in representing a sense of melancholia, of the original separation between mother and child.

The difficulty in reading maternal subjectivity in the works of Indonesian women artists, as exemplified by Swastika's reading of Sitompul's work, reaffirms the hegemonic masculinity in Indonesian visual arts. Perhaps more importantly, it also reflects the challenge that every reader must face when trying to read an inscription of the feminine in Indonesian art.

## Chapter Seven

### Performing Feminism/s: Performance Art and Politics in the Works of

#### Kelompok PEREK and Arahmaiani<sup>156</sup>

In this chapter I discuss women's performance art in contemporary Indonesia, focusing on works by an individual artist, Arahmaiani, and the practices of an artist collective known as Kelompok PEREK. The chapter explores the link between feminism and performance art in Indonesia, two fields that are still being redefined and challenged by their own practitioners.

Performance art has been an important artistic strategy for many feminist artists in Europe and the USA, especially during the 1960s and 1970s. Performance art was (and still is) seen as a medium capable of challenging the ways in which the female body is represented in visual arts and popular culture. Using the artist's own body as the primary medium, performance art is able to include diverse perspectives. As feminist politics is also politics of the body, the particular political and social issues with which feminist artists engage tend to be issues of visibility, and their work provides a clear analogy between the experience of the female body and women's position within visual arts.

Arahmaiani has built an outstanding international career by using performance art as her primary medium of expression. When she first came to international attention in the 1990s as a 'feminist' Indonesian artist, it was due mostly to her strong performances that addressed women's issues in Indonesia. Performers from Kelompok PEREK predominantly

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<sup>156</sup> Part of what follows has been published in a different format in Encyclopedia of Women in Islamic Cultures, an online encyclopaedia published by the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Davis, CA, USA, [http://sjoseph.ucdavis.edu/ewic/ewic-news/Online\\_Supplement4\\_TOC.htm](http://sjoseph.ucdavis.edu/ewic/ewic-news/Online_Supplement4_TOC.htm), accessed in 14/03/12.

used performance art in their early years as a tool to undermine the patriarchal discourse in Indonesian society. Their performances explored the perception of femininity as a feminist strategy in post-Suharto Indonesia.

In this chapter I investigate to what extent and in what ways Western models have influenced Indonesian women's performance art practices. I also analyse what local differences arise given the nature and roles of performance art in Indonesia's socio-political environment, and I examine understandings and interpretations of 'feminism' in this context.

### ***Feminist Art and Performance Art in the West***

As discussed in Chapter 1, 'feminist art' is still far from clearly defined in the discourse on Indonesian art; likewise the nature of 'performance art' itself is also still undergoing discussion and debate (Ruangrupa 2002; Wijono 2003; Berghuis 2006; Listyowati 2006).

Performance art could be defined as an art form that is based on representation by action (Bock, Haghighian et. al 2005: 15). It is generally executed by an artist or a group of artists in front of a live audience at a specific time and specific place. In contrast to theatre, performance art does not present the illusion of events but rather presents actual events as art (Bock, Haghighian et al. 2005: 15).

In the Indonesian context, we need to look at a more restrictive definition of performance art, one that sees the body as the centre of its artistic investigation and expression and is encompassed by the term 'body art' (Jones 1998b; Bock, Haghighian et al. 2005), since this

is the definition generally espoused by Indonesian performance art practitioners.<sup>157</sup> The term evokes some of the classic performance works by European and/or American performance artists such as Marina Abramovic, Vito Acconci, Bruce Naumann and Carolee Schneemann. Their performances heavily emphasised the body as an object and consequently the term 'body art' has come to be associated with performance clichés such as beaten, abused and naked bodies.<sup>158</sup> In actuality body art reaches far beyond these clichés and may include anything and everything that is connected to one's identity. Even in its narrow conception body art has a strong appeal in Indonesia, especially in its use by women artists to emphasise their subjectivity.

A strong link between feminism and performance art was established in the 1960s and 1970s when feminist artists in Europe and USA used performance art as a powerful critique of Modernist formalism (Jones 1998a). Formalism argues that art works should solely be judged by visual elements in the work; a square is a square and a line is a line, and art exists outside historical and contextual backgrounds. The 1960s was one of the most fecund decades for art innovation – it was then that many artists created works that challenged the Modernist notion of art for art's sake, and included issues from socio-politics to popular culture in their body of work. Genres such as Minimal art, Pop art, Conceptual art and Land art all appeared during this decade. Feminist artists were explicitly inspired by political activism and saw their art as contributions to the advancement of that activism (Phelan 2007).

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<sup>157</sup> See for example essay by Nirwan Dewanto (2012 (orig. 2002)) on the problems of performance art in Indonesia. Dewanto argues that Indonesian performers are too fixated on themes rather than exploring forms (*bentuk*).

<sup>158</sup> See also essay by Iwan Wijono (2003) essay about the stereotypical visual texts in Indonesian performance art such as bandages, bonding and self-inflicted pain to represent the suffering of the common people.



The feminist critic Lucy R. Lippard argued persuasively that ‘feminist art was neither a style nor a movement’ but instead ‘a value system, a revolutionary strategy, a way of life’ (Lippard 1976: 124). What was revolutionary about feminist art was not only its form but also its content. Feminist artists who were active during the 1960s such as Carolee Schneemann (USA, b. 1939), Marina Abramovic (Serbia/USA, b.1946) and Yoko Ono (Japan/USA, b. 1933), whose practices can be encompassed by the term ‘body art’, also shaped the notion of how women artists use their body in visual arts.

Performance art by women artists is sometimes summarily dismissed as narcissistic or exhibitionist spectacles of pain and self-mutilation due to its direct and confrontational nature (Phelan 2007: 355). However, these performances have also been credited with highlighting the sensuous and ‘explorations of touch’ elements in visual arts. These elements also contribute to the significance of feminist performance art within feminist art in general.

### ***The role of documentation in performance art***

Auslander (2006) has suggested that there are two categories of performance documentation, namely documentation and theatricality. The first category is seen as the traditional relationship between performance art and documentation in the conventionally understand sense of a record of an issue or events. Documentation can provide a record that can serve to reconstruct the event and as a proof that the event has occurred. The second category is ‘performed photography’ where the events were staged solely to be photographed or filmed. The only entry point to the events is through the space of the documentation (2006: 1-2).

Most of the writing and research on performance art has been done through various forms of documentation, from photographs, videos to still images. Some art historians have argued that physical attendance at a live art event is necessary to understand and experience the event in its context. By contrast, Jones (1997) has suggested that for researchers and scholars working in the field of performance art, it is possible to do the research post-event through the available documentation. She further argues that reading performance art through documentation is equally intersubjective as reading from the live performance. Moreover, Jones sees the body-in-performance as fully dependent on the ways in which the image is contextualized and interpreted in the documentation after the performance has occurred (1997: 14).

The discussion of the artists' works in this chapter relies on photographs, recorded events, interviews with the artists and eyewitness accounts. The artists themselves often do not keep any kind of documentation of their own works, especially of performances during their early years - as in the case of Kelompok PEREK - so I have had to rely on their memory to reconstruct the performance. Their recollection of the events, however, is selective; therefore when possible I cross-questioned their collaborators or eyewitnesses to write the description and reception of the performance. Auslander (2006: 9) suggests that 'the authenticity of the performance document resides in its relationship to its beholder rather than to an ostensibly originary event: perhaps its authority is phenomenological rather than ontological'. I perceive the documentation as a performance in itself, reflecting the artist's aesthetic project or sensibility.

The women performance artists to be discussed in this chapter explore the concepts previously discussed within their specific contexts in Indonesia. Given that Indonesian

performers are mostly male, Arahmaiani and Kelompok PEREK similarly emphasize the kind of challenges that other women artists are facing in the West. These artists explore the issues of the body, gender and politics through their works and in doing so they make use of the most intimate medium in art, their own body.

### ***Performance art in Indonesia***

Most scholars agree that the *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru* (GSRB) movement was a catalyst for a new direction in Indonesian visual arts, including the emergence of performance art (Supangkat 1993; Soemantri, Supangkat et al. 1998; Hasan 2001; Spanjaard 2004). This anti-establishment movement in art sparked some of the most furious polemics in Indonesian newspapers about art, aesthetics and the role of artists.<sup>159</sup> The young artists who started the first controversial GSRB exhibition influenced their generation to challenge the art world by bringing economic, political and social content into their works. The movement also opened up new possibilities in artistic expressions, from using found objects to installation art to using the artist's body as a medium of art.

Performance art has been typically defined as being motivated by a 'redemptive belief in the capacity of art to transform human life', as a vehicle of social change, and as a radical merging of life and art (Jones 1998a: 13). This notion is echoed in Indonesia's performance art practices, which tend to have strong socio-political content (Hujatnikajennong 2002). Even though the proto-performance art practices pre-GSRB started as a critique of the rigidity of academia (all members of GSRB were art students) and established artistic practices, the content of most early performances was primarily drawn from social, cultural

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<sup>159</sup> The polemic between the two art critics Kusnadi and Soedarmadji in *Kedaulatan Rakyat* newspaper was documented in Supangkat (1979). See Chapter 3 for discussion about GSRB.

and political situations. Using the artist's body as a crucial site for protests and political statements, this generation of artists opened up a discursive space for resistance at the height of Suharto's authoritarian regime.

Like so many other art forms in Indonesia though, performance art with socio-political content has always been a predominantly male occupation. The most notable exceptions are Arahmaiani, Marintan Sirait, Mella Jaarsma, Kelompok PEREK (Wijono 2003) and more recently, Melati Suryodarmo. The following section will critically analyse the works of some of these women artists, beginning with Kelompok PEREK, Indonesia's first and only feminist art collective, which for a short period of time between 1998 and 2001 successfully challenged the dominant discourse in Indonesian performance art. The short lifespan of the group and its subsequent failure to reconstitute itself in 2009 illustrate some of the complexities that characterize efforts by women artists to leave a mark in Indonesia's male-dominated art world.

### ***Kelompok PEREK: Kelompok Perempuan Eksperimental (1998 – )***

In unspecified month in 1998 on Malioboro Street, Yogyakarta, amongst street sellers, hawkers and tourists a group of female artists asked random men on the street if they could measure the length between their thumb and index finger. The men were asked to stretch their fingers out and a group member measured the length from tip of the index finger to the tip of the thumb. The measurement was cut into a strip of paper accompanied by the identity of the owner.

The row of white strips of paper waving merrily on the side of the pavement in main thoroughfare of Yogyakarta was Kelompok PEREK's first performance/installation piece titled *Penyalur Laki-laki* (Male Deliverer, 1998, performance and installation). PEREK was founded in 1998 by a group of women artists and students of mixed nationalities in Yogyakarta. The name of the collective is a *double entendre* taken from the street slang to describe young women who are willing to engage in sexual experimentation (*perempuan eksperimen*), i.e. easy, of loose morals. The collective appropriated this as [*kelompok perempuan eksperimental*] or experimental women. In their artist statement they explained the choice of PEREK as follows:

*"Women as the locomotive of Indonesia's economic wheel"*

*The world's system cannot be said to be friendly towards women. The global capitalist economy together with patriarchal cultures are ruling over women's body ... sexuality has become the product of the cosmetic and diet industry etc. The politics over women's body is also implemented in the patriarchal language structure, such as terms that bind women in these categories, WTS (Wanita Tuna Susila - women of no morals [sex worker]), WIL (Wanita Idaman Lain – the other women), WK (Wanita Karier- career women), TKW (Tenaga Kerja Wanita – women migrant worker), PEREK (Perempuan Eksperimen – experimental women)*

*Why [do we] choose the term "PEREK" when it has a negative, exploitative and discriminative connotation towards women's sexuality? We "Experimental Women" are challenging the context of experiment from something that is bad and objectifying women towards a context where women become a subject in the positive sense. Thus "PEREK" demands the right to self definition in order to open a new discourse on women who are courageous in behavior,*

*attitude, [belief] in their own abilities as well as critical of society's values.*<sup>160</sup> (Kelompok PEREK 2001)

According to Lenny Ratnasari Weichert, the leader of the collective, PEREK was founded in response to the events of May 1998. The fall of Suharto had prompted discussions within the group of friends about what they could do as women artists to contribute to the momentous changes around them.

As indicated in the aforementioned artist statement, the collective espoused some radical ideas such as questioning masculinities and breaking certain political taboos (Stevie 2002).

Lenny further described their activities as a form of local feminism. She spoke of their projects as forming an alternative aesthetic and a form of 'gender equality' education for the general public (LR Weichert 2010, pers. comm., 21 July).

PEREK's reference to local issues is exemplified by *Penyalur Laki-laki*. Using humor and interactivity, the idea behind the performance was to mock the myth that 'size does matter' amongst Indonesian men - a Javanese folk belief that the length measured tip of the index finger to the tip of the thumb will represent the actual size of the penis. While this idea has no scientific basis, according to two members of the collective, Heidi Arbuckle and Irene

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<sup>160</sup> "Perempuan sebagai Lokomotif roda perekonomian Indonesia"

Sistim dunia sekarang ini memang belum dikatakan ramah terhadap perempuan. Ekonomi kapitalis global bergandengan tangan dengan struktur budaya patriarki menguasai tubuh perempuan...seksualitas dijadikan produk industri kosmetik, diet, dsb. Politik tubuh perempuan juga diterapkan dalam struktur bahasa bersifat patriarki seperti istilah membungkus perempuan dalam kategori-kategori yang kita pakai seperti, misalnya WTS, WIL, WK (wanita karier), TKW, PEREK (perempuan eksperimen).

Mengapa memilih istilah "PEREK" yang dalam artian sebenarnya memiliki konotasi negatif, eksploitatif serta diskriminatif terhadap seksualitas perempuan?

Kita "Perempuan Eksperimental" ingin menggugat konteks eksperimen dari sesuatu yang jelek dan mengobyeikan perempuan kepada konteks dimana perempuan menjadi subyek dalam arti yang positif. Dengan begitu "PEREK" menuntut hak atas definisi tubuhnya sendiri untuk membuka wacana baru tentang konsep perempuan yang berani dalam bersikap, bertindak, atas kemampuan masing-masing serta kritik terhadap nilai-nilai yang tertanam dalam masyarakat.

Agrivinna, most men seemed happy to participate in the performance (I Agrivina 2010, pers. comm., 20 July; H Arbuckle 2011, pers. comm., 08 March).<sup>161</sup>

PEREK's premise of local feminism is further underlined in their performance in a major all-women exhibition titled *Perempuan dan Diseminasi Makna Ruang* ("Women and the Dissemination of Space") at the National Gallery of Indonesia in 2001.<sup>162</sup> According to Arbuckle, the collective wanted to represent the demonization of GERWANI during the New Order regime through performance art. They had planned to cook *genjer* (a type of water plant) whilst singing the controversial folk song '*genjer-genjer*' before finally serving the cooked plant to the audience.<sup>163</sup>

However, the performance was nearly banned and, in the end, not performed in its entirety. Arbuckle relates that when the head of the National Gallery, Wati Moerany, found out about the upcoming performance the artists were summoned to a meeting in which they were given a stern warning about their performance. It was unclear from Arbuckle's description whether the content of the performance was explicitly discussed in the meeting. After discussing the situation amongst themselves, PEREK performed the piece whilst taping their mouth to represent the censorship. They merely hummed the song *genjer-genjer*

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<sup>161</sup> However, in the collective's another performance in 2001, Lenny stated that the performance was viewed as subversive and that they were approached by local youth Muslim groups and asked to stop the performance (Ingham 2007: 213). See also in IVAA (2002).

<sup>162</sup> The exhibition was curated by Tommy F. Awuy, a lecturer in philosophy at the Indonesian University. The curatorial framework was to invite women artists to redefine and challenge the notion of space, specifically the domestic space often attributed to them. See the curatorial essay in Awuy (2001).

<sup>163</sup> Genjer is the local name for Yellow Burrhead (*Limnocharis flava*) a type of water plant commonly found in rice paddies in Java. The song was initially created to highlight the suffering of Indonesians during the Japanese occupation in 1942-1945 when most of the starving population were reduced to eating plants that were considered to be weed. It became wildly popular because of its catchy tune in the 1950s. During Indonesia's Guided Democracy period (1957-1965) the Indonesian Communist Party often used the song (and a dance) in the background of their public campaigns, which lead the song to be firmly associated as a communist song.







Fig. 51. Kelompok PEREK “Mabuk Sampah” (High on Waste (video still), 2009, performance, 40’ performed at the Yogya Biennale).

The significance of PEREK therefore lies in their formative years when they entered uncharted territory in Indonesia by openly addressing critical gender issues in post-New Order Indonesia. Up until then, the only other Indonesian artist who had dared to do that in a similar fashion was Arahmaiani (to be discussed below). However, in contrast to Arahmaiani, who enjoyed a reputation as an internationally acclaimed artist, PEREK’s focus was the local scene in Indonesia. In this context, it was remarkable how openly their performance in the National Gallery exhibition indicated an affinity with the left previously banned during the New Order regime – as an expression of a new-found freedom in art in the post-authoritarian era. According to the artists, the collective’s radical strategy in the beginning was considered to be necessary in order to highlight the mere existence of women artists. In essence then, it was a consciousness-raising effort, both for women artists and the female audience.

By the time this chapter was written in early 2013, Kelompok PEREK had not created any new projects. The members still meet socially or participate in exhibitions, yet they do so in individual capacities, not as a collective. Today, what was once a radical collective that appeared to have all the right ingredients to create a major feminist ripple effect in the Indonesian art scene appears to thrive primarily as a sisterhood/support group. In view of this development, it is perhaps not surprising that Arbuckle, one of the founding members of the group, says that as a feminist project PEREK has failed (H Arbuckle 2011, pers. comm., 08 March).

This failure perhaps can be attributed to the collective's lack of focus and commitment, especially after the group ceased its activities in 2001. During the long hiatus from 2001-2009, the group not only lost Heidi Arbuckle, who was largely credited as the collective's (feminist) instigator, but also other members such as Lashita Situmorang and Gemaila Gea Geriantiana. Yet from what the other members have said, it would seem that a key reason for the abandonment of radical feminism was not the fluctuation within the group but rather the fact that some members shifted their priorities to establishing their (mainstream) careers as individual artists and, in some cases, marital life. The resulting transition to a 'mature' collective effectively spelt the end of PEREK as a feminist collective (I Agrivina 2010, pers. comm., 20 July; LR Weichert 2010, pers. comm., 21 July).

### ***Challenging the Status Quo: the performances of Arahmaiani***

Arguably the most outspoken and well-known female performance artist from Indonesia is Arahmaiani. Matching male artists such as Heri Dono, Dadang Christanto and Nindityo Adipurnomo in international reputation, Arahmaiani criss-crosses the world through her

performance and installation works in various biennials, festivals, exhibitions and public lectures. Her performances often attract controversy due to her commitment to connecting her art with her fight for social justice and her willingness to engage with what some consider taboo issues, namely gender and religion. Her impact on the evolution of Indonesian feminist art, however, has been surprisingly limited. As the remainder of this chapter will demonstrate, it is in fact precisely Arahmaiani's international fame (or notoriety, depending on one's viewpoint) that accounts for her failure to inspire more Indonesian women artists to problematize gender issues in their works and to exhibit a more openly feminist approach to art.

Arahmaiani was born Arahmayani Feisal in Bandung, 1961. Her artistic output is mainly performance art but she has also created installation and two-dimensional works, mainly paintings and drawings (Fig. 59). She is widely known in the international art circle where she has appeared in various biennales and triennales, often as the only female artist representing Indonesia.<sup>167</sup>

Arahmaiani's international career took off in the mid-1990s, although she had created and performed works in Indonesia since the 1980s. Due to her provocative performances and installations, she was briefly imprisoned and received death threats during the New Order. Her subject matter includes social injustice, gender, sexuality, critique of capitalism and, more recently, the image of Islam. In addressing these issues, she draws largely on her own personal experiences. This section will focus on two major themes in Arahmaiani's work, namely gender and religion.

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<sup>167</sup> Ingham (2007: 352-353) has commented that Arahmaiani's high visibility in the international art circle as the token Indonesian woman artist has obscured the fact that there were in fact a number of other women artists active in Indonesia during the New Order period. Mella Jaarsma is perhaps the most well-known of these other women artists.

Describing herself as coming from a stable middle-class background, Arahmaiani was raised in a religious Muslim family (Arahmaiani 2003: 166).<sup>168</sup> In a 2003 interview, she provided a sketch of her childhood where she gave the impression of having been a critical and precocious child. For example, her *cita-cita* (dream, ambition) was to become a prophet (*nabi*), however her father quickly dismissed this dream as he said that ‘only men can be prophets’ (Arbuckle 2008b: 81). Ingham (2007: 354) notes that she developed sympathy towards the underprivileged and marginalised after noticing the inequality between her family and their house maid.<sup>169</sup>

Against her family’s wishes, she entered the Faculty of Fine Art and Design at the Bandung Institute of Technology in 1979, majoring in painting. She quickly became involved in student activism and also with the experimental body art group *Sumber Waras*. Bianpoen (2007: 43) states that this group was greatly influenced by the avant-garde spirit of the Fluxus movement from Europe and North America in the 1960s and the GSRB (Indonesian New Art Movement) in the mid 1970s.<sup>170</sup>

*Sumber Waras* critically explored socio-political issues through happening art or installations, often in the streets of Bandung. Arahmaiani’s first solo project was an installation and performance on one of the main streets of Bandung, H. Juanda Street, in the late 1970s. The performance titled *Kecelakaan* (Accident) was intended to raise awareness of the rising number of traffic accidents in Bandung. She wrapped the lamp posts along one

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<sup>168</sup> Her father was a prominent Islamic scholar and a board member of ICMI (*Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia, Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals Association*); in 2000 he represented a major Islamic party in the People’s Consultative Assembly. See Marianto (2000).

<sup>169</sup> When she turned fourteen, Arahmaiani lived on the streets of Bandung and Jakarta until she turned twenty; the experience shaped her views on social injustice and gender inequality. See *ibid.*: 142, Ingham (2007): 354-5

<sup>170</sup> While the influence of GSRB is undeniable, Bianpoen’s statement that the group was greatly influenced by Fluxus movement is quite bold, given that there is no extensive research yet on the artistic influence and adaptation of Fluxus or other avant-garde movements in Indonesia.

of the main arteries of Bandung with bandages smeared in fake blood, while she also stopped the traffic and distributed flyers with details of accidents and statistics on the busy street over two days and nights (Harsono 2001: 76; Bianpoen, Dirgantoro et al. 2007: 43). The happening caused much controversy in the university as she was considered to be too radical. The university later suspended her and excluded her from participating in school exhibitions.<sup>171</sup>

Even though her suspension meant that she did not complete her undergraduate degree, Arahmaiani was able to continue her study in the Paddington Art School in Sydney between 1985 and 1986 and subsequently at the Academie voor Beeldende Kunst, Enschede, in the Netherlands between 1991 and 1992 (Bianpoen, Dirgantoro et al. 2007: 41) thanks to various scholarships and grants.<sup>172</sup>

More recently, Arahmaiani has also become known as a prolific writer who has published essays, exhibition reviews, opinion pieces and poetry in various newspapers in Indonesia. She positions herself as a critical voice against what she sees as the mainstream and the status quo. Arahmaiani sees the mainstream as a male-dominated environment where women are often relegated to the margins. Regarding the position of women artists in Indonesia she wrote:

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<sup>171</sup> On 17<sup>th</sup> August 1983, Arahmaiani was arrested after her performance titled *Perayaan Kemerdekaan* (Independence Celebration) which was regarded as subversive by authorities. Arahmaiani and two other male friends had drawn images of tanks, weapons and other military objects on the street with chalk. The drawings were meant as a criticism against the military during the New Order regime. She was immediately arrested by military intelligence but released one month later after signing a form which stated that she was mentally disturbed – a ruse organised by a friend. Interview, Arahmaiani, Yogyakarta, February, 2013.

<sup>172</sup> She also states that most of her learning in art and gender issues was acquired through informal gatherings and friendship with various visiting international artists and gender activists. She credits Toety Heraty, Indonesia's leading feminist scholar and poet, who took her under her wing and allowed her to access her personal library, with giving her the information she needed. Interview, Arahmaiani, Yogyakarta, June 2010.

*Women artists are situated within a small circle outside the mainstream. Their position is not considered to be equal with male artists who tend to be more powerful and know the rules of the game. Although this is a post-Siti Nurbaya era where women are allowed to play the game, this is only the case if they follow the prescribed rules from the 'master' that monopolizes the game, namely the masculine element. If she speaks from her own perspective (for example revealing things that should stay covered) then she would be considered as brazen because [she] has transgressed the taboos. (Arahmaiani n.d.).*

She chose performance art as her main form of artistic expression because of the freedom that it offers her: "I like the freedom and the radical nature of performance art. Other qualities that I like are its confrontational nature and its interactivity (which are characterized by its critical nature)." <sup>173</sup> Her decision to use performance art as her artistic tool can also be seen as fundamental to the themes that she developed throughout her career, as performance art has the potential to immediately deliver her political messages and, most importantly to her, allow for interaction with the audience.

Her performance piece titled *Dayang Sumbi Menolak Status Quo* (Dayang Sumbi rejects the status quo, 1999) (Fig. 51), first performed in the French Cultural Centre in Bandung, shows the artist's commitment to gender issues in her works, as well as her strategy to interact with the audience. More tellingly, the performance piece is also quite provocative because, in an echo of Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, Arahmaiani exposes herself to physical intervention from the audience by inviting the audience to write on her body.

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<sup>173</sup> Saya menyukai kebebasan dan sifat radikal yang ditawarkan performance art ini. Kualitas lain yang saya sukai dari medium ini adalah sifat konfrontatif dan interaktifnya (yang sering diidentikan [sic] dengan pembawaanya [sic] yang kritis.

From the video recording of the performance we can see that the performance starts with the artist vocalizing to the tune of an Islamic devotional song (*shalawat*) while playing a handheld traditional drum (*rebana*). Wearing a red lace *kebaya*, she then stops her singing and proceeds to address the audience. She states that [as a woman] she is always ‘required to appear beautiful’ (*dituntut untuk tampil cantik*), so she puts on a light make-up whilst narrating her action to the audience.

When she has finished, she states that she is quite dissatisfied [with her make-up] and she then draws a thin moustache with the eyeliner. Declaring that she is done with her make-up, she proceeds to drink from a bottle of Coca-Cola and then provocatively asks the audience to give her ideas on what she should do next on the stage. The video then cuts into the next scene where the artist has taken off

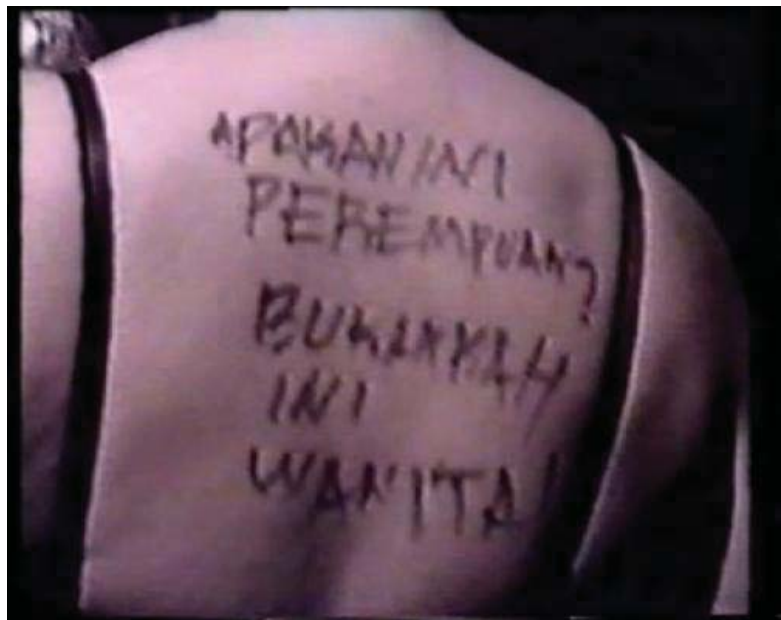


Fig. 52 Arahmaiani “Dayang Sumbi Menolak Status Quo” (Dayang Sumbi rejects the status quo (video still), 1999, performance, performed at the French Cultural Centre (CCF) Bandung).

her *kebaya* and is only wearing a dark corset. As the artist stands with both arms outstretched, a male audience member is seen to be talking to her while holding a pen, which he later uses to write on her chest. Several members of the audience then come forward to write on different parts of her body while she encourages them to write freely about their thoughts; some participants also put the *kebaya* back on the artist while others

take it off again. At the end of the performance the artist's *kebaya* is torn apart and her hair looks dishevelled.

According to the artist the performance was a statement about the sacralisation of the female body. Referencing the Sundanese myth of Sangkuriang, the artist also evoked a similarity with the Greek myth of Oedipus; in both myths the protagonists fall in love with their mothers.<sup>174</sup> The performance was also a critique of the subordination of Indonesian women by a deeply patriarchal society. In the performance the artist situated her body as a site not only of repression and control but also of liberation.

The artist intentionally allows male participants to touch her body (and most of the participants are male) during the performance. Even though it is not widely practised in Indonesia's predominantly moderate Muslim societies, in a stricter interpretation of Islam, women and men are forbidden to touch each other if they are not related either by blood or by marriage; thus the content of this work straddles the (in)visible markers of the political and the personal. She states that by exhibiting her body and letting other people touch her, she is crossing invisible boundaries, something that is not normally done in everyday life; moreover to her it is an emotional journey into an unknown territory.<sup>175</sup>

The boundaries of which the artist spoke are indeed not only personal but also material, echoing the focus of Yoko Ono and Marina Abramovic's performances addressed, namely

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<sup>174</sup> Dayang Sumbi is a mythical female figure in Sundanese culture. In the Sangkuriang mythology she cast out her wayward son and in her sadness she acquired eternal beauty. Twenty years later, her son Sangkuriang came back and fell in love with his own mother, Dayang Sumbi, who returned the stranger's amorous attention. When she realised the mistake, she tries to break off their relationship by ordering him to build a dam from River Citarum and a boat to cross it, all within one night. Having acquired mythical powers in his travels, Sangkuriang nearly completes the task when Dayang Sumbi then orders her workers to create an illusion of sunrise, thus making the roosters crow early. Believing that he has failed the task, Sangkuriang kicks his boat in anger which creates a massive dam and the mountain Tangkuban Perahu is created out of the hull of this boat. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tangkuban\\_Perahu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tangkuban_Perahu), accessed 26/11/12.

<sup>175</sup> Artist's statement. Personal archive of the artist. Accessed January 2009.



the fragility of (women's) body under the threat of invasion and violence. And yet, in contrast to their performance pieces, Arahmaiani actively encourages the audience to participate in the performance, thus sanctioning the transgression on her body. Moreover, through the performance she also rejects the passive Asian female stereotype by standing as a speaking subject. By adding *menolak status quo* (rejecting the status quo) as a statement of intent, the artist subverts the embodiment of the feminine through this performance.

Nonetheless, as a speaking subject, the body in this performance is not without its complexities. During the performance the artist blurs the gender marker by painting a moustache on her face after she puts on her make-up. She seems to be stating that to make her presence visible on the stage she has to take on a masculine identity. Borrowing from Judith Butler (2003: 392) the belief in stable identities and gender differences is in fact compelled by social sanction and taboo, so that our belief in 'natural' behaviour is really the result of both subtle and blatant coercions. Gender, according to Butler, is by no means tied to material bodily facts but is solely and completely a social construction, a fiction, one that, therefore, is open to change and contestation:

*Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis (1990: 273).*

Butler's illustration of the artificial, conventional, and historical nature of gender construction and her critique of the assumptions of normative heterosexuality (social,

familial and legal) that force us to conform to hegemonic, heterosexual standards for identity are apt to describe Arahmaiani's *Dayang Sumbi* performance. The performance can simultaneously be seen as an embodiment of a feminist speaking subject, while through the various inscriptions on her body the artist perhaps unwittingly demonstrates that gender identity is, as Butler suggested, constructed from the hegemonic interventions and even coercions.<sup>176</sup>

The artist's body can be seen as a receptacle of the thoughts and visions of the participants, albeit an ambiguous one. This theme continues in another performance titled '*His-Story*' (2000-2001) (Fig. 53) performed at the Jakarta International Performance Art Festival (JIPAF), Nippon International Performance Art Festival (NIPAF), Japan, and in Dresden, Germany, the performance further highlights the artist's exploration of social, political and gender issues in her work.

Sitting in front of a small table facing the audience, the artist wears a dark long sleeved top and a dark pair of pants. She slowly pulls out a piece of tissue from a tissue box on the table, covering her face with the tissue which she then blows repeatedly. She continues to breathe underneath the tissue until a hole appears over her mouth. She repeats this action several times until her movements became more frantic. She later pulls out a red rose and slowly pulls of the petals before she stops and takes her shirt off.

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<sup>176</sup> Reflecting on the performance, fourteen years later, the artist states that the performance laid the groundwork for her current project. In a 2013 interview, she explains that she is now doing critical research about the myths and tropes of the feminine in Javanese history. Interview, Arahmaiani, Yogyakarta, February 2013.

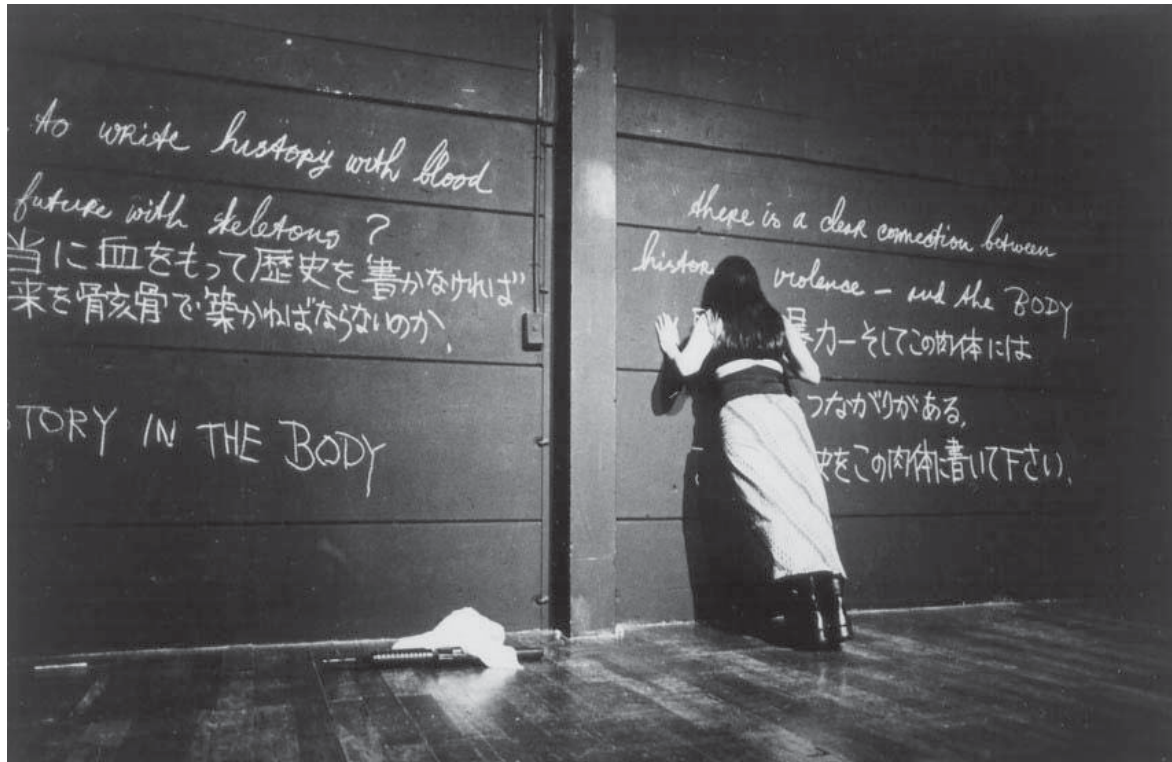


Fig. 53 Arahmaiani "His-Story" (2000-2001, performance, performed at the Jakarta International Performance Art Festival (JIPAF), Nippon International Performance Art Festival (NIPAF), Japan, and in Dresden, Germany).

She continues with the word *exploitation* on her inner right arm before she finishes with the words *abuse of power* on her chest. She goes on to light a cigarette and smoke it on stage while appearing to contemplate the cigarette between her fingers. Slowly the artist stands up, takes a handgun from the table and aims it on the right side of her head. She stands in this position for a few minutes before slowly closing her eyes, places the gun on the table and then exits the stage. In a different version of the performance, the artist does not sit on a stage but stands against a wall full of written texts, some of which read 'there is a clear connection between the history [of?] violence - and the body'.<sup>177</sup>

<sup>177</sup> The performance was subsequently retitled as '(His)-Story on My Body' (2000-2001).

The artist's statement, which was written in English, is worth quoting in order to grasp the complex issues that she is trying to represent through this particular performance:

*Indonesia has been enduring deep crisis/multi-dimensional crisis in terms of politics, economic, social and cultural for at least this last 3 years. And improvement is very slow if there is any. There are more than 35 million new un-employee has to find work to survive [sic]. People are suffering, yet still struggling.*

...

*I try to address this complex issues regarding violence that merges into militarism, genocide, rape of women, abuse of the "weak", and anarchy in general – into my performance. I don't know how effective this kind of work and action will be. But I know that I got to do and to say something about it. (Arahmaiani 2000)*

The piece addresses the imbalanced relationship between the individual and the state in Indonesia. The text on the artist's body serves as a reminder for the audience that individuals, particularly women as represented by the artist, are both pawn and victim in a struggle for power in post-authoritarian Indonesia.

Arahmaiani further shifts the role of the artist's body from a receptacle of thoughts into a kind of cathartic medium. In earlier performances, the artist starts with themes that revolve around gender critiques and power play. In *Soho Baby* (2004) (Fig. 54) she opens up the

body into both a kind of cathartic medium and a mirror of contemporary, globalised lives.



Fig. 54 Arahmaiani "Soho Baby" (2004, performance, performed at the Second DaDao Live Art Festival, Beijing, China).

Performed at the 2<sup>nd</sup> DaDao Live Art Festival, Beijing, China, the performance begins with Arahmaiani inscribing *jawi* characters<sup>178</sup> on herself; she then invites the local audience to participate in inscribing words meaningful to them on parts of her body. The artist's body becomes a dense, living canvas, ridden with collective projections of societal values from across cultures, races and gender. And yet none of these values is imbued or specifically absorbed; all of them are only skin deep (Zineng 2008).

Arahmaiani's performances are raw and direct, relying on the semantic possibilities of the objects with little aesthetic considerations (Ingham 2004). But the images that emerge out of her performances are powerful indeed. Berghuis (2008: 13) states that the final photographs of these performances show how the sensibility of these works can become

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<sup>178</sup> *Jawi* is the Arabic script used for writing in Malay language. During the spread of Islam in the archipelago, *jawi* was used to relay religious contents.

transposed to the viewer through its inherent attention to the remediation of the performance.<sup>179</sup> There is certainly a strong sense of awareness from the artist to document the performances in order to be made visible, ‘... through the eyes of a photographer and through his tool this concrete action could be documented and made visible (because in real life we can hardly [be] aware of this kind of situations and able to picture it in a photographic manner)’ (Arahmaiani 2000).

Presence and visibility are thus important elements in Arahmaiani’s work as is the participation of the audience. She states that “there is a connection with the physical presence of the artist in the work.”<sup>180</sup> Borrowing from Peggy Phelan (1993), Arahmaiani is engaging the ideology of the visible through her performances. In *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance*, Phelan (1993) analyses the way performance artists engage with the politics of visibility, namely how their practices that rely heavily on the present can be remediated in the future through documentation.

According to Phelan, visibility is necessary to empower the minority and the under-represented community. However, she also argues that visibility can be a ‘trap’ because the represented image is placed under surveillance and regulation. She further observes that visibility provokes ‘voyeurism, fetishism, the colonial/imperial appetite for possession (1993: 7).’ She cites the example of the representation of women in the mainstream media/advertising. Even though women are highly visible in these areas, the representation

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<sup>179</sup> As previously discussed, performance art is often studied and analysed long after the event itself has already finished, either through a video or photographic documentation. While it means that the performance would lose its immediacy, some performance artists, including Arahmaiani, have been able to successfully convey their message through post-performance/photographic images. Arahmaiani, I believe, is one of the few performance artists in Indonesia who is fully aware of the power of the post-performance images in her work.

<sup>180</sup> “...memang ada hubungan dengan kehadiran ‘sosok’ (ataupun tubuh) si seniman di dalam karya.” Arahmaiani (n.d.)

does not necessarily empower them. Phelan then argues for a nuanced understanding of visibility, especially in how women artists represent themselves through their works.

However, Cheng (1999: 207-8) argues that within Phelan's definition of visibility there is often no distinction between what Phelan terms 'active vanishing' and the reality expressed by the truism 'out of sight, out of mind.' Any kind of presence – defined as representational visibility – still offers greater possibility than absence, for the subject to achieve momentary liberation and exercise individual will (1999: 208). Cheng proposes that in order to redress the problem the over-visualised but mute subject (e.g. women in advertising) should become a speaking sight (1999: 208).

Cheng's proposal in a sense is already put into practice by Arahmaiani, especially in her *Dayang Sumbi* (1999) and later on *His-Story on My Body* (2000-2001) and *Soho Baby* (2007). Here the artist as an actor uses her art work as a communication tool that operates in the realm of social context and human interaction rather than positioning itself inside private, self-referential space. One could say that these are the performances where Arahmaiani is most comfortable and which guarantee a high-level of interaction/participation with her audience. In a 2007 public discussion in Sydney, she stated that this type of work becomes the space for the audience to negotiate themselves and she becomes part of this audience as well (Langenbach and Arahmaiani 2007).

### ***Global feminisms and Arahmaiani's politics of the body***

Arahmaiani's engagement with the politics of visibility, especially in her works dealing with gender issues, can be read from her choice of medium. During the late 1990s and early 2000s when she was mostly focused on this theme, Arahmaiani used easily accessible, readymade materials to create her installations. She states that she wants her work to be 'less intellectual' and easy to understand for everyone. Furthermore,

*my art doesn't talk about composition, 'essential' line, 'harmonious' colors or 'matching' arrangements ... The focus of my attention is the situation, the forces which 'move the body' – that which is opposed to 'form'... Consequently, my art is not 'retinal'; its objective is not to please the eyes. What's of primary importance is the actual process of creation. (Arahmaiani quoted in Datuin 2000: 2).*

*Offerings from A to Z* (1996, performance installation) (Fig. 55) and *Do not prevent the fertility of the mind* (1997, installation) (Fig. 56) both presented in Thailand, exemplified the artist's use of readymade materials to deliver her critical message. The first performance installation was staged in a Buddhist crematorium. The artist arranged rows of military weapons interspersed with white plates on a path leading towards a temple. On the path itself she placed pornographic images on which she trod as she walked along it. During the performance she laid herself on various sites, first between the rows of weapons (covered with a white sheet marked with blood) and then on a second site, a stone table that was used for washing corpses. The artist placed various images from pornographic magazines on the walls that surrounded the table.



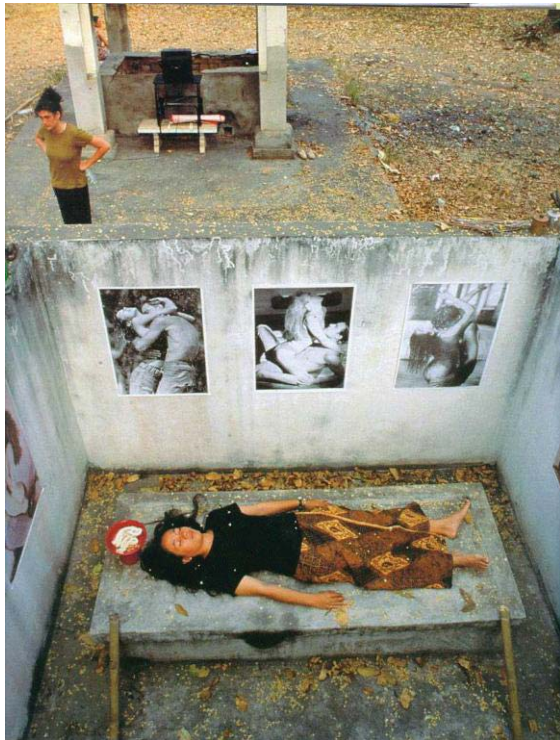


Fig. 55 Arahmaiani "Offerings from A to Z" (1996, performance installation, Chiang Mai, Thailand).

The performance installation was inspired by her own experience in 1983 when she was arrested by the military in her hometown;<sup>181</sup> the blood-stained sheet was to symbolize victims of military brutality, both men and women. The artist also distributed pornographic images from magazines in the second site to the audience, before she finally set them on fire as a kind of offering and purification ritual. The performance

installation, while it was initially inspired by her own experience, also touched on the issue of

the paradox of the female body. The female body is considered to be the source of fertility but during a certain period of the month, it is impure and thus not allowed to go into holy sites.

The second installation was shown in Womanifesto, an international art exchange program for women artists, in Concrete House, Bangkok, 1997. The installation consisted of unused sanitary napkins arranged in a grid bordered by light tubes. In the middle of the grid, the artist placed a picture of herself, wearing a sanitary napkin on her forehead (with a Red Cross sign) while holding medical instruments. In front of the installation there was a stool covered with a white gauzy fabric on top of which the artist placed a vial of blood.

<sup>181</sup> See n.5

Here the artist continued her exploration of the theme of the female body. The clean and bright juxtaposition of the sanitary napkins allowed the audience to see beyond the negative connotations of menstrual blood. The artist appeared to suggest that a woman's fertility cycle (represented by the blood and the sanitary napkins) is also linked to the freedom of the mind. In her artist statement she called upon women to free their mind and regain control of their own bodies.<sup>182</sup>

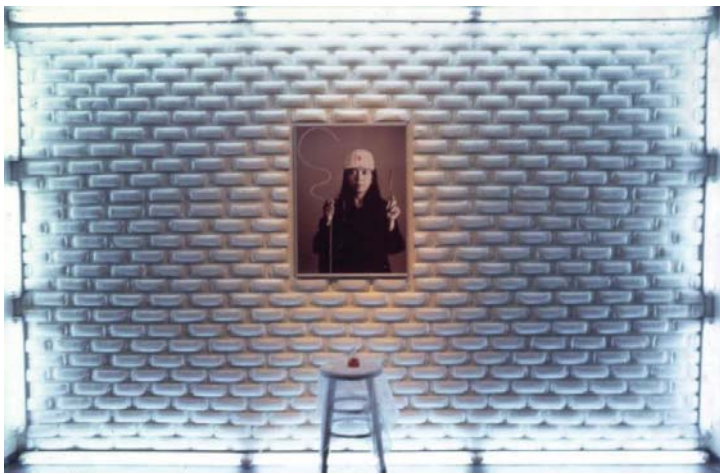


Fig. 56 Arahmaiani "Do not prevent the fertility of the mind" (1997, installation, part of Womanifesto festival, Bangkok, Thailand).

The direct nature of Arahmaiani's performances, her wish to be understood universally by selecting found materials for her installations, combined with her choice of subject matter appear to have ticked all the right feminist/activist boxes in the West. Renowned global curator Apinan

Poshyananda, for example, states that Arahmaiani's works deal with challenging issues such as religion but also the marginality of women/women artists in Indonesia's patriarchal society (Poshyananda 1996: 43).

And yet it is the (feminist) category itself that the artist actually rejects. She states that feminism in the West is incompatible with the women's movement in Indonesia.<sup>183</sup> She

<sup>182</sup> Woman is not a weak creature - nor even victim of man. But she is under constant pressure and threat (if not control) of the system, whether dynastic or imperialistic. Woman has to free herself: free her mind and get her body under her own control. See Arahmaiani (1997).

<sup>183</sup> Arahmaiani's viewpoint is shared by many other Indonesian women artists who tend to distance themselves from the 'feminist' label, fearing that the label will restrict their art making and exhibition

explains that the West's preoccupation with individual self-fulfilment and sexual liberation is vastly different from the unequal status of women in Indonesia as a result of colonialism and uneven modernisation (Ingham 2007: 355). Arahmaiani's reluctance to be categorised as a feminist might be interpreted as a plea for a level playing field between actors in the globalised art world. As explained by Kee (2007), the relationship between Asian women artists as a category and feminist objectives is a fraught one. Kee states that Asian women artists who began their career in the mid-1990s were faced with a relentless focus on their identity as non-Western artists outside the US and Europe.

Arahmaiani's view on feminism could be seen as a reflection of the problematic definition of Asian women artists as explained by Kee above. The inclusion of Asian women artists in an international exhibition was more or less bound to their national origins and not necessarily an acknowledgment of the complex factors surrounding the notion of national identity (Kee 2007). The preference by the international art world for women artists whose works focus on certain themes tends to displace works of art from their local contexts.<sup>184</sup> Thus Arahmaiani's antipathy towards the feminist label can be seen as an attempt by the artist to free herself from an all too strict categorisation of her works (and by extension her artistic vision).

The artist's view also echoes Shohat's (1998) conception of the 'colonised body', namely that white, first-world feminism itself is part of the problem and the critique. The powerful

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opportunities. While the discussion in the Indonesian art scene has moved beyond the labeling issue, some women artists still professed discomfort when their works are being read as such.

<sup>184</sup> Kee (2007: 111) noted that Arahmaiani's performances and her post-performance images often offer little possibility of other interpretations. She cited the example of the performance *Offerings from A to Z* (1996), in which the artist lay on a stone altar surrounded by images of men and women in erotic embraces. Kee argues that this type of image and performance are one of the key tropes in the international art world list of preference, namely artwork as a challenge to the systems that attempt to order women according to an imposed agenda. Ironically for the artist perhaps, this is one of the examples where her engagement with the politics of visibility has been successful.

critiques of 'color blind' feminist theory by women from non-Western backgrounds has established heterogeneity and difference as key conceptual strategies and new ways of thinking about a previously predominantly Western feminist project in reading works by non-Western artists.<sup>185</sup>

Arahmaiani's 'visibility' politics, while appearing to conform to a Western framework, at the same time also carries her deep identification with Indonesian women. Her subject matter emerged from her personal and cultural background and clearly sympathizes with Marxist feminism in the sense that she sees the struggle for women's equality also as a class struggle. She states:

*Most women scholars in Indonesia come from the middle class, which is problematic. The middle class has the power to move, to mobilize but can also create a new hierarchy that is a relic from the past only in a new form. Therefore, apart from raising consciousness of other classes they also need to raise consciousness within their own class. One might see it as a way of diminishing the arrogance of the middle class ...*<sup>186</sup> (Arahmaiani 2003)

Arahmaiani is also aware that her position as an artist (and public intellectual) can be interpreted as reaffirming the class characteristics that she criticizes in her above statement. Furthermore, having been born in and having to operate within the class structure that she

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<sup>185</sup> In her catalogue essay for *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* exhibition, Meskimmon (2007) proposes to shift the focus from the canon of feminist art (which placed Anglophone works firmly in the centre) to locating the distinct narratives and affinities of meaning in works by non-Anglophone artists. Such an approach will be able to acknowledge greater degrees and kinds of differences, even autonomy, in alternative articulations of female subjectivity, feminist politics and art.

<sup>186</sup> Kebanyakan pemikir perempuan berasal dari kelas menengah yang di Indonesia secara kelas masih bermasalah. Kelas menengah punya kekuatan untuk bergerak, untuk melakukan mobilisasi, tetapi kelas menengah juga bisa menciptakan hierarki baru, dan ini bisa berasal dari tinggalan masa lalu cuma dalam bentuk berbeda. Jadi di samping melakukan penyadaran ke kelas lain, mereka seharusnya melakukan juga penyadaran pada kelas mereka sendiri. Katakanlah sebagai cara untuk mengurangi arogansi kelas itu...

is trying to challenge, she has to negotiate her artistic strategy in order to deliver her message. Thus:

*As an artist, I use my art while considering the target audience: to the middle class I will use theories, while to other class I will use a different way ... in my gender bias theme I still prefer to 'shock' but apparently there is often a disconnection between the audience and the work. It means that I have to understand more about who my audience is.<sup>187</sup>*

The distinction between a middle-class audience and 'another' audience is significant.

Essentially, there is no 'other' kind of audience for Indonesian contemporary art. Indonesian contemporary art is predominantly made by and for the Indonesian middle to upper class, especially in light of the recent dominance of the art market.<sup>188</sup>

While it is not the role of the artist to bring about social change, it is important to consider how their art is placed within the context of its production, circulation and reception, especially in regard to what are considered to be feminist works. It is important to emphasize again the distinction between cultural interventions by women and feminist cultural interventions, as not all works created by women are feminist works.

Griselda Pollock argues that feminism is crucially a matter of effect. Thus:

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<sup>187</sup> Sebagai seniman, aku menggunakan seniku dengan melihat sasaran yang ingin aku tuju: pada kelas menengah aku akan banyak menggunakan teori, sedang kelas yang lain aku menggunakan cara berbeda...dalam konteks berkarya dengan tema bias gender aku tetap memilih untuk "menggedor", tetapi memang sering terjadi ketidaksinkronan antara karya dan penonton. Itu berarti aku harus lebih memahami lagi dengan siapa aku berkomunikasi. See Arahmaiani (2003).

<sup>188</sup> Thus while Arahmaiani's gender-based works bear witness to the gender inequalities in Indonesia's patriarchal society, their resonance as 'feminist art' is diminished by its limited circulation within Indonesia. They tend to be seen and read by the Indonesian middle class (though not necessarily accepted even amongst the female arts practitioners for reasons mentioned above) and/or the international audience only. The artist therefore clearly falls short of reaching her intended audience.

*To be feminist at all works must be conceived within the framework of a structural, economic, political and ideological critique of the power relations of society and with a commitment to collective action for their radical transformations (Pollock 1987).*

Shohat (1998) has written about the difficulty in representing ‘on the behalf I truly speak’ with the all-embracing cosmopolitan internationalism ‘which speaks for the all of us’. From upper middle class ‘Third World’ women representing working class sisters to diasporic feminists operating within First World representational practices, they are not immune to trying to ‘speak for sisters’ of the same race, especially when a First World platform offers privileged access to ‘global village’ media.

This certainly applies to Arahmaiani’s personal and international career background. Nonetheless, while her gender-based works have been shown mostly during her overseas exhibitions and presented to mostly middle class audiences, ironically, they remain the most successful works of the artist in communicating her message of gender critique and dialogue with her audience in Indonesia and overseas.<sup>189</sup>

### ***Religion and Spirituality***

Arahmaiani first explored issues of religion, spirituality and identity quite early in her artistic career. During the New Order regime her works began to attract controversy due to their

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<sup>189</sup> Arahmaiani appeared to have been more comfortable in delivering her gender critiques in written format in Indonesia. She has for example, critiqued an exhibition on Frida Kahlo (*Membaca Frida Kahlo*, Nadi Gallery Jakarta, 2001) arguing that the exhibition was celebrating Kahlo’s suffering and mere indulgence of the Indonesian artists and middle class without paying real attention to real problems of Indonesian people (Arahmaiani (2001). Her essay prompted a polemic with three male critics over the commercialization of art, socio-political issues, and gender critique in art. See Danarto *ibid.*, Supangkat *ibid.*, Wiyanto *ibid.*



sensitive subject matter. In 1994, she had her first solo exhibition entitled *Sex, Religion and Coca Cola* in an alternative art space, Oncor Studio, Jakarta.

Two of her works in the exhibition made the headlines, especially a painting titled *Lingga – Yoni* (acrylic on canvas, 1994) (Fig. 57). The artist painted a representation of a vagina and a penis on a background of Arabic, Malay and Hindi scripts to represent the concept of cosmic unity. The other controversial piece was an installation titled *Etalase* (Display Case, mixed

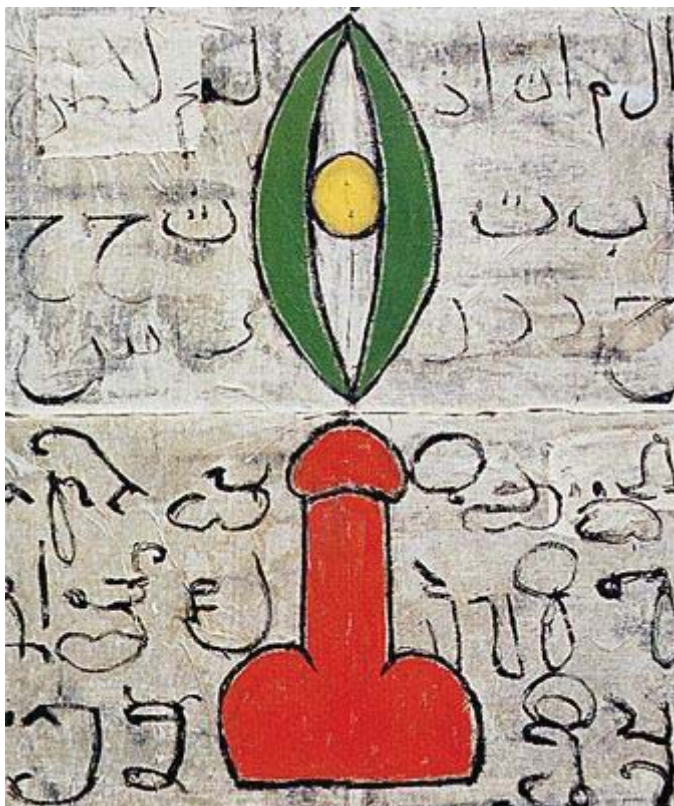


Fig. 57 Arahmaiani *Lingga – Yoni* (1994, acrylic on canvas, 182 x 140 cm).

media, 1994) (Fig. 58) which comprised a glass cabinet in which the artist juxtaposed some objects on a red velvet surface. The objects were a fan, a mirror, a bottle of Coca-Cola, a sculpture of Buddha, a photograph, sand, a packet of condoms and a Qur'an. The artist was critiquing the commercialization of religious icons, which she maintains are no longer seen as sacred and appear just like other everyday objects.

*Etalase* did not make it in its entirety to the opening. Arahmaiani was reported to have received threats from local Islamic hardliners and was forced to withdraw some objects from the installation. It is easy to perceive that a painting depicting male and female genitals would offend the hardliners, but in fact it was the installation that caused much

controversy. The problem was caused by the placement of the Qur'an next to a pack of condoms. The juxtaposition of the sacred text with the sexually connotative object was considered to be especially blasphemous. The two works were never exhibited in Indonesia again but were shown in the USA in 1996 and 2007 (Arbuckle 2008b: 85).<sup>190</sup>

These two works marked the beginning of Arahmaiani's exploration of the issues of religion, spirituality and identity. However, one particular incident prompted her to reconsider to what extent religion and cultural identity played a role in her artistic production. In 2002, she was invited to Victoria, Canada, for a workshop, which involved a stopover in Los



Fig. 58 Arahmaiani "Etalase" (Display Case, 1994, mixed media installation, collection of the artist).

Angeles. In the tense post-September 11 time when every Muslim travelling to the US was a suspect, she was arrested by US Immigration authorities for not having a visa for the stopover. After a four-hour long interrogation, she was detained in a hotel room before continuing her trip the next day. She was indignant that

for her overnight stay, a male guard was instructed to accompany her to ensure nothing would happen, i.e. that she would not escape from the hotel. The guard - who was a Muslim himself - was posted *inside* her room.

<sup>190</sup> Arahmaiani certainly is not the only artist who has explored the symbols of Islam in her works. Whilst Indonesian artists have been careful in responding to Islam as a critical theme in their works, noteworthy women artists who have explored Islam in their works include Titarubi, Mella Jaarsma, Yani Mariani Saptanegara as well as several others. For an overview of how modern and contemporary Indonesian women artists explore Islam and spirituality in their works, see Dirgantoro (2011).



The well-documented incident was then represented in a performance/installation titled *11 June 2002* (installation and performance, 2002) (Fig. 59) exhibited at the Venice Biennale.

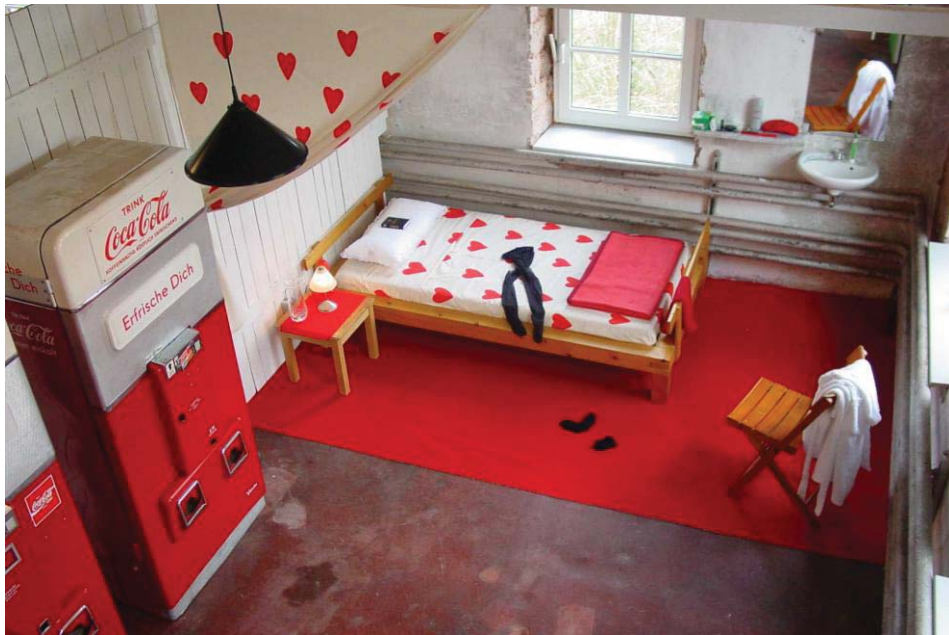


Fig. 59 Arahmaiani “11 June 2002” (2003, mixed media installation and performance, exhibited at the 50<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale).

The installation was arranged to emulate the hotel room where the artist stayed in Los Angeles. The audience were no longer spectators but now voyeurs as the artist enacted a series of day-to-day actions, such as grooming and changing clothes, as if the audience/guard were not with her in the room. The performance emphasised the banality of her situation as the artist enacted the sordid reality of her detention. The installation works as an unsettling series of prompts to the artist’s personal history, memory, injustice and violation, cultural and sexual. Arahmaiani stated:

*[because of] 9/11 my situation since became more complex, I have been categorised as a female Muslim artist, whereas before I was only an Asian or Indonesian female artist. To be placed in this category, through my experience so far, is not a good position – as a result*

*there are many complex issues and situations I have to deal with* (Langenbach and Arahmaiani 2007).

Even though Islam had never in any way defined her sense of self, she found the symbols of the religion nonetheless waving to her like flags. She found it a considerable challenge to balance her critical attitude towards Islam with a struggle against its stigmatization. The incident challenged the artist to rethink her identity as an “other” in the West versus Islam debate and thus shifted her focus towards this subject matter in her works.

Arahmaiani continued to explore Islam and its symbols in her subsequent projects. A project titled *Stitching the Wound* (2006) took her to Thailand, where she worked with a Thai Muslim community. She created a series of installations and performances with the help of the young girls in Baan Krua (southern



Fig. 60 Arahmaiani “Thread” (2006, mixed media installation and performance).

Thailand) weaving community. The project showed that there are significant localized differences in cultural approaches through the different kinds of Islamic identity that surrounded her project (Lenzi 2006).

As part of the project, Arahmaiani designed an installation consisting of ten soft sculptures made from silk in the shape of letters in Arabic scripts (*Thread*, 2006) (Fig. 60) in different sizes and colours. She then positioned the sculptures on the floor and hanging from the ceiling in a loose composition. The bright colours created a sense of ease and playfulness, enhanced by the soft sensuous feel of silk. According to the artist, the installation's aim was to bring back to the surface a different side of Arabic scripts, i.e. as a manifestation of culture and knowledge rather than of terror and violence.

Aesthetically, Arahmaiani's Islamic-themed work is a continuation of her exploration of text and symbols. From *Dayang Sumbi Menolak Status Quo* to *Stitching the Wound* and *Flag Project* (2004-ongoing) (Fig. 61) the artist uses the power of text to present her message to the audience. In the Islamic-themed works, however, the installations and performances emphasize the duality of such visual elements. She argues that the use of colors and soft materials that invite tactility can subvert the aggressive message normally perceived in the representation of Arabic scripts.



Fig. 61 Arahmaiani “Flag Project” (2004-ongoing, mixed media installation and performance).

Arahmaiani states that:

*... text always seems to appear in my work. Probably because I’m a writer and poet, sometimes things can be best expressed through text ... language has always attracted me. It probably has to do with the plural nature of being Indonesian, living with many different languages since childhood; and later, traveling and living in different countries ... (quoted in Teh 2008: 62).*

The extensive use of text in her body of work certainly accords with the sense of immediacy and directness of her art, which go hand-in-hand with her commitment to activism. Such practice recalls the use of scripto-visual (the interrelated presentation between text and

image within one exhibition space) elements in the works of Western women artists employed as a feminist strategy to challenge the Modernist position in art, especially in painting.

While the scripto-visual elements in Arahmaiani's works can be read within a feminist framework, I argue that these elements also point to the cosmopolitan nature of her works. Shaped by her personal and cultural background, text and language are seen as markers of her identity as an artist as well as her gender. Her knowledge of feminism through Toety Heraty's library, her strategy to use theory when addressing middle class audiences, her writings and the incorporation of text as visual elements in her performances and installations are all part of the artist's desire to communicate her message to a more globalised audience.

Text and language are often kept brief and direct to ensure the most effective exposure (and provocation). Arahmaiani's performances are intended to appeal in every geopolitical context. Moreover, her works that explore Islam and its symbols reveal the artist's deeper connection with her personal background, Indonesia's pre-modern history and a sense of belonging with the larger *ummat*. While Arahmaiani remains critical of the fundamentalist nature of religion, specifically Islam, in her works, as an artist she creates these works to appeal for understanding and acceptance of difference.

### ***Performing feminism/s in Indonesian visual arts***

Both Arahmaiani and Kelompok PEREK have pushed for visibility and representation of women in the contemporary art world in Indonesia and, in the case of Arahmaiani,

internationally. By using their bodies and gender as a medium for their performance art, their works attempt to undermine Indonesia's patriarchal art world. Yet their impact on the Indonesian art scene has been limited. In the case of Kelompok PEREK that may at least partly be a result of their short life span; perhaps the collective simply did not produce enough works in their brief period of existence to leave a major mark. Arahmaiani, on the other hand, has been a household name in the global art world for many years and her output has been nothing short of spectacular. But she appears to be somewhat removed from the local scene in Indonesia, a controversial and rather lone figure whose confrontational performances often tend to alienate rather than engage her Indonesian audience, particularly on the theme of gender equality. In addition, her critical attitude towards Islam and her refusal to engage with the burgeoning art market have made her unusual, not to mention unpopular, in her social circle, leaving her with the reputation of being 'difficult'.

The fact that neither Kelompok PEREK nor Arahmaiani have been able to redefine local feminism/s in Indonesia through their artistic practices underlines the challenges of feminist-based performance art in Indonesia. Despite performance art's strong appeal to feminist artists in the West, it appears that the same cannot be said for the Indonesian case.

Up until today, there are very few Indonesian women artists who decide to focus on performance art as their primary medium. Those who do such as next generation artists Mimi Fadmi (b.1979, based in Bandung) or Ferial Affif (b.1982, based in Yogyakarta) often identify themselves as feminists, but their performances are infrequent and tend to be



irruptive in small performance art festivals only.<sup>191</sup> Mimi, in fact, did not create any performance art between 2003 to 2013, citing family commitments (she is a mother of two children) as the main reason why she has less space in her mind to focus on performances (M Fadmi 2013, pers. comm., 07 February).<sup>192</sup>

Both Mimi and Ferial focuses on exploring the female body and femininity. Both performers are known for their direct and confrontational works, which is a reminiscent of Arahmaiani's works, but with more personal contents. Both artists's works also often questioned the rigidity of gender construction in Indonesia through their performance works.

In a work titled *et/e/poch/rna(me)l(t)* (performance, 2014) in Ferial's recent exhibition (*Mut(abl)e*, Jakarta, 2014) the artist was fully made up in make up and gowns. She stood on a revolving platform like a fashion model. Yet as the audience approached the artist they will notice that what looked like lipstick application gone wrong were actually small trickles of blood. The artist has sewed her mouth shut.

The artist commented on the sense of alienation that she felt growing up as a girl with Saudi Arabian background in Indonesia. People would comment on her different facial features and some times skin colour, to the extent that she feels alienated from her own body.

Ferial's recent body of work can be traced back to the close link between the abject and the female body in performance art.

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<sup>191</sup> Participation in international performance art festivals, residencies or workshops is the career path of many Indonesian performance artists. More recently, the Germany-Indonesia performance artist Melati Suryodarmo has started to establish a regular performance art festival and workshop in Padepokan Lemahputih, Solo, Central Java. See their website for details on the festival <http://www.lemahputih.com/undisclosedterritory.html>, accessed 23 October 2013. Melati Suryodarmo focuses on durational performance; her performances are heavily influenced by her mentor Marina Abramovic and the Butoh dance. She now regularly represents Indonesia in international art events.

<sup>192</sup> Mimi recently participated in the Brooklyn Performance Art Festival (4-28 July 2013) where she performed her first piece after a decade. Ferial is unmarried and based in Yogyakarta.

However, even though artists like Mimi and Ferial have demonstrated both a strong interest in feminisms and a strong commitment to performance art, they have been unable to sustain a productive career as performance artists. Their career trajectories are reminiscent of Kelompok PEREK, revealing the ongoing difficulties for Indonesian women artists to reconcile artistic ambitions with family commitments and socio-cultural/religious constraints.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

The careers of both Arahmaiani and Kelompok PEREK emerged out of a highly politicised context in Indonesia, mid-1990s and post-New Order respectively. Their engagement with feminist strategies clearly was born out of situations that allowed them to be critical of patriarchy. After 1998, there was a short period of time when gender issues surfaced on the Indonesian mainstream media. More exhibitions by women artists were organised across art spaces in Java and Bali, and national newspapers such as *Kompas* also dedicated a regular section called *Swara*, which focused on women and gender issues.

Similarly to the Balinese artist Murniasih, Kelompok PEREK and Arahmaiani gained support for their gender politics during this period, locally for the collective and internationally for the latter. Their visibility politics, however, has resulted in different framings of feminism in Indonesia.

Kelompok PEREK's shift towards a less overtly confrontational approach is marked with pragmatism; it shows that the group's notion of local feminism is fluid and subjective. Nonetheless, each member of the group appears to have been relatively successful in her



individual career while remaining committed to the ideas of feminism. Despite the commitment to local feminism, their sporadic projects as a collective reflect the group's hesitation to engage more openly with their politics. Perhaps to retain their careers they are aware that they still need to conform to the socio-cultural norms in Indonesia, more specifically in Yogyakarta.

Arahmaiani's brand of feminism, constructed from external factors, coupled with her critical attitude towards the West and Indonesian patriarchy, is less easy to define. Her visibility politics is somewhat paradoxical, in the sense that the strong representational nature of her performance works 'frames' her within a category that she rejects. Furthermore, it is still limited in its effect to push for change.

More generally, Indonesian performance art as a field of artistic practice still suffers from lack of critical writing and according to one curator, 'lack of experimentation' (H Hikayat 2011, pers. comm., 06 March), so it remains relatively marginal from the mainstream art practices such as painting, new media or installation.

The strong religious and socio-cultural issues surrounding the female body in Indonesia have often made it difficult for Indonesian women artists to explore them, let alone use their own body as their primary medium. Both feminist-based performance art and its visibility politics in Indonesia have been slow to change the (still) rigid perception of femininity in Indonesian visual arts after the New Order. Even though Arahmaiani has built a formidable career as a 'feminist' performance artist, quite possibly many younger performers find her non-conformist attitude, critical views and independent lifestyle too radical.

Among the few who dared to match Arahmaiani in her radicalism was of course Kelompok PEREK. In February 2011, Arahmaiani, ex-member and several members of what is left of the PEREK collective met in viavia cafe Yogyakarta to plan a joint event. I was invited to join the meeting between Arahmaiani, Lenny Ratnasari, Lashita Situmorang, Bonita Margaret, Nissak Latifah and Rismilliana Wijayanti (the latter two work at Kersan Art Studio and Valentine Willie Art Gallery respectively) to discuss the possibility of creating a women's biennale in 2013. Lenny, who initiated the conversation, stated that this was one of Kersan and Kelompok PEREK's effort to gain more support and input into their efforts to find and define local feminism. Despite the promising plan, however, no follow-up meetings had taken place by the time of writing.

Nonetheless, the plurality of these artists' views on what feminism/s is reflects the changing nature of feminist discourses itself. No longer fixated on theory-heavy practices and sexual differences as proposed by Second Wave feminists, the works and other sporadic initiatives by these Indonesian women artists have the potential to show how they can create a discursive space for (local) feminism/s in Indonesian visual arts within their own framework.

## Chapter Eight

### Conclusion

*Saya tahu siapa yang harus saya bela, karya-karya saya bicara untuk perempuan juga.*

(I know whom I have to defend, my works speak for women as well, Dolorosa Sinaga, artist).

*Aku percaya karya-karyaku nanti akan menjadi penting.*

(I believe that my works will be important one day, Titarubi, artist).

*Saya tidak dogmatis tentang feminisme.*

(I am not dogmatic about feminism, Mimi Fadmi, performance artist).

In this thesis I have explored the relationship between feminism and visual art in Indonesia. Focusing on works by Indonesian women artists produced from the 1940s until the present day, the thesis provides a new understanding of the history of Indonesian modern and contemporary art from a feminist perspective.

My aims were to analyze the actual works of Indonesian women artists and to illuminate the socio-cultural and political contexts in which they worked, within a feminist framework. I set out to explore several key issues that arose from a 2007 curatorial project titled “Intimate Distance: Tracing Feminism in Indonesian Contemporary Art” in the National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta. While the exhibition and the complementary curatorial essay focused on creating a thematic survey in the works of Indonesian women artists, they did not address the question of how feminist readings can provide new understandings of the history of contemporary Indonesian art. In addition, the 2007 event also fell somewhat short in its attempt to establish a new perspective for analyzing the works of Indonesian women artists,

a perspective that is fluid and context-dependent and rooted in feminist ideas. This thesis has attempted to address these shortcomings, thereby filling an important gap in the literature on Indonesian contemporary art.

The thesis is not an attempt to define what Indonesian feminist art is and/or who a feminist artist is. Despite frequent use in texts written by Indonesian scholars and non-scholars alike, the definition of the concept and even the term ‘feminism/s’ still lacks consistency in Indonesian art discourse. Indonesian scholars and writers have often dismissed feminism as something that is purely a Western import and therefore not relevant to the Indonesian context.

Feminists came to be caricatured as man-hating lesbians who refused family and Eastern/Indonesian values. Moreover, as was discussed in Chapter One, the long-established stigma is also related to the vilification of Gerwani during the 1965-1966 events, which the New Order regime used to discredit the association of women with political activism as something that is unnatural, innately aggressive and against their *kodrat*.

Women artists whose works represented any type of criticism of patriarchy tended to be labeled instantly as ‘feminist’, a label that usually entailed restrictions to freedom of artistic expression. Not surprisingly, for many years Indonesian women artists have avoided and/or rejected the label in order not to jeopardize access to exhibitions and the emerging art market. Even today, fifteen years after the end of the New Order, many Indonesian women artists still refuse to be called feminists.

Given that ‘feminism/s’ is such a contested and problematic term, the debate about what and/or who is an Indonesian feminist artist is likely to be counterproductive. It can lead to narrow categorizing and create endless ‘who should belong’ polemics. I have therefore

argued that by looking beyond the labeling but not rejecting the term itself, we can see that Indonesian women artists have in fact used feminist strategies and/or have been inspired by feminist thinking to produce their art works.

In the thesis I employed a dual approach of strategies of correction and interrogation to critically assess the patriarchal structure of the Indonesian art world and to analyze works by Indonesian women artists. Despite the limitations inherent in the strategies of correction in Western feminist art, namely that they often just insert women artists into the art history or canons, I argued that it is still necessary to apply these strategies in the Indonesian context, simply because the role of women artists has been largely overlooked in Indonesian art history.<sup>193</sup> Similarly, strategies of interrogation are crucially important in order to conduct critical enquiry into and revisions of the already existing reading of works by Indonesian women artists.

### ***Strategies of correction: Interventions in art history***

By looking at canons in Indonesian art history as a myth of genius and masculine ideals, I argued that feminist critiques can go beyond the issues of sexism and discrimination, which are often the main arguments of the strategies of correction. This is where I employed Griselda Pollock's term of differencing the canon, namely an active re-reading of what is already in existence in the mainstream consciousness in order to reveal what has been suppressed, namely the feminine other.

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<sup>193</sup> Due to the scarcity of research and documentation of Indonesian art history since its beginning in the 1940s, Indonesian art historians and researchers are continuously unearthing new findings on Indonesian art and artists. During this critical time of a growing discipline, it is thus necessary to create interventions to address not only the gender bias but also to reveal the masculine structure of Indonesian art history.

S. Sudjojono's writings and works are often referred to as part of the canon of Indonesian art history. In a Freudian reading, the artist is a symbolic figure where public fantasies - in the case of S. Sudjojono, masculine nationalism - take representational form. The fantasies are not gendered exclusively masculine, but still function to sustain a patriarchal legend. The rebellion by the young artists in Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia (GSRBI) reflects a struggle with parental or external authority before they eventually secure a place in the Indonesian art canon. Yet, as Pollock has reminded us, the nature of the canon is to secure the succession of the Father to the son at the expense of other voices, as well as to establish a masculine hierarchy in art history.

An interrogation of the reverence towards the artist-as-hero brings us closer to the structural nature of canon-making (Pollock 1999). Sarah Kofman (1988) has argued that people's attitudes to the artist have always been ambivalent, as the artist is often both idealised father and hero. Moreover, the artist's monograph, biography and *catalogue raisonné* represent a desire by art historians to be closer to the hero while on the other hand the art works must remain sacred, even taboo. Kofman noted that art historians are often implicated in the play of idealisation and identification, and also place the artist as something apart and special.

By re-reading the Indonesian canons I emphasised that what is perceived to be the tradition in the art historical context is in fact a set of gendered constructions and selective truths from a male, privileged perspective. Moreover, an active re-reading of the canons in this thesis has pointed out that the nationalist-masculinist approach in Indonesian art history is in fact a constitutive effect of colonialism as well as deep-seated cultural and religious norms.

By using feminist analysis I offered a kind of counter-discourse to the standard interpretation in Indonesian art history. Through an analysis of texts by Emiria Sunassa, one of the female members of Persagi, and Mia Bustam, activist/artist and Sudjojono's first wife, I argued that Indonesian art history is also haunted by an expression of colonial melancholia, specifically by the nation's inability to mourn after great traumatic events.

Emiria's depiction of the nation from the margin and her representation of the feminine in the early period of Indonesian art have underlined the limitations of the nationalist imaginings. The representation of both the primitive and the feminine do not fit the image of a unified, masculine nation and its patriarchal art world. I have suggested that the possibility of the perception of the artist and her works as 'mysterious' came from the rupture in the mainstream masculine perception instigated by Emiria's alternative representation of the feminine.

Mia Bustam's biographies revealed conflicting narratives behind S. Sudjojono's charismatic figure. The reading of Mia's memoirs also served to create a feminist framework to read women's position in the formative years of Indonesian art history. Mia's memoirs haunt the mythology of the great artist in Indonesia (and to this I also add Sudjojono's personal mythology) by suggesting that writing and observation of historical events are not limited to male authors or a focus on heroes. Mia Bustam's memoirs suggest that both men and women actively participated in the making of Indonesian art history, yet the latter are often undocumented and neglected in the collective memory.

### ***Strategies of Interrogation: Searching for the feminine***

In employing feminist analyses, the thesis explored the possibilities of finding a non-patriarchal expression of gender and subjectivity in the works of Indonesian women artists.

In doing so, I followed Griselda Pollock's view that feminist art historians need to look for 'the inscription in the feminine', that is to look at how their critical writings can provide a space for feminine desires, and at the same time expose politics of dominant discourses and ideologies. The representations of themes considered to be part of the private domain, such as female desire and motherhood, provided the perfect site for discussions of censorship, morality and the female body in Indonesian visual art.

This endeavour encountered several hurdles. First, it is very difficult to create a feminist analysis within the masculine mainstream framework as some of my reading still reflects the ongoing influence of hegemonic masculinity in Indonesian visual arts. For example, the legacy of the autobiographical approach, the stigmatised labelling of feminist artist and the challenge of constructing a suitable framework are issues that every reader must face when trying to read an inscription of the feminine in Indonesian art.

Secondly, there are still many hurdles and challenges to reading female subjectivity in the Indonesian visual arts. The danger of essentialism or valorising the feminine, in particular, is ever present in the feminist framework that I have tried to construct. For example, the analyses of abjection and the grotesque in the works of IGAK Murniasih as well as motherhood and maternal subjectivity in the works of Titarubi and Laksmi Shitaesmi are still open to a celebratory type of reading.

Nonetheless, I argued that the reading of Murniasih's works through the lens of the monstrous-feminine is one of the possible challenges to the male gaze in Indonesian visual



arts. Murniasih's grotesque bodies are not simply a representation of the artist's personal history but they are also an expression of female desire filtered through a Balinese context.

Murniasih's images of the grotesque bodies and the monstrous-feminine are positively accepted in the Indonesian art world and remains unparalleled. Yet acceptance rests either on her personal background or on valorization of the feminine in her paintings. The contextualising of Murniasih's aesthetic achievements, by mostly male critics, solely within her personal background, displaces the socio-cultural context of her works. The tendency to valorize the feminine by some female writers appears to confirm the mainstream view of women as being defined by their gender. Moreover, in order for her works to be accepted and read within boundaries of the patriarchal mainstream, they have also been categorized as naïve, unusual or childish. This refusal or perhaps inability to read Murniasih's works as a gender critique reflects the anxiety of the mainstream Indonesian art world towards expressions of female desire.

In the search for the inscriptions of the feminine, I argued that my reading of the works by Laksmi Shitaresmi, Titarubi, Theresia Sitompul and Caroline Rika Winata can provide a space for feminine desires, by underlining their works as a challenge to the existing notions about femininity and motherhood through their depictions of political motherhood and maternal subjectivity. However, by proposing to read the representation of motherhood and maternal subjectivity in the works of Indonesian women artists, I do not seek to create a female/mother lineage in Indonesian art history. Creating a female lineage would not only reinsert women artists within the masculine structure but could also work as a replacement of a masculine canon by a feminine one.

While both male and female artists have represented mothers and motherhood as lived experience, with careful reading we can see that the representation of maternal subjectivity has the potential to create rupture in hegemonic masculinity in Indonesian visual arts.

Titarubi's body of work emphasised the positive connection between a woman artist as a producer of text and motherhood. The artist's works situate her personal experiences within Indonesia's changing socio-political context. Moreover, the reading of her work provides an alternative to the traditional maternal depiction of domesticity and self-sacrifice.

Laksmi Shitairesmi's self-portraits can be seen as an attempt to regain control of her representation, yet they hover between essentialist /maternal embarrassment and empowering images. On the one hand, Laksmi's depiction of her pregnancies allowed stages of motherhood to be visible and not a muted allegory. And yet, in representing the half-naked/female body within the mainstream art/masculine gaze, the artist risks turning her empowering images into an object for the male gaze.

I have attempted to open up an alternative reading of what has been considered a purely feminine subject matter by differentiating between motherhood as the lived experience of daily chores and pleasures for women as mothers and maternal subjectivity as a site of psychic dimension of emotion and feeling. The artists' ability to render visible what is generally suppressed and marginalized is what make their works very compelling to read in a feminist framework.

### ***Reading Feminism/s in post-New Order Indonesia***

Murniasih's emergence and Titarubi's focus on political motherhood came within two years of the *Reformasi* era, when there was a lot of support for freedom of expression in Indonesia. It was also around the same time that many Indonesian women writers started to produce works that explored previously taboo issues such as sex, female desire and sexuality. There was also a degree of acceptance of gender/feminist-based approaches in many cultural arenas in Indonesia. Murniasih's rise in the art world during the early to mid-2000 period can be seen as part of this trend, alongside the formation of Kelompok PEREK.

The careers of Arahmaiani and Kelompok PEREK emerged during the New Order and the Reform period respectively. Their engagement with feminist ideologies was born out of criticism of and sheer frustration with patriarchal society in Indonesia. Their artistic strategies, however, have resulted in different framings of feminism in the Indonesian context.

The artists' use of performance art in an Indonesian context reveals how they incorporate feminist strategies into their political works. The influence of Western feminism is evident in the way Indonesian women artists create performance art by referencing iconic performances by Western feminist artists, and the use of their own body as the primary medium.

However Indonesian women artists' use of their body differs from Western feminist performance in its challenge to the premise of the women's body as something sacred, as an embodiment of their *kodrat* and of patriarchal socio-cultural values. In the absence of the Humanist tradition of the female body as an art form, performance art by Indonesian women artists such as Arahmaiani is shocking and confronting. This is further underlined by

the ever-present religious and social convention of Islam where physical contact between the sexes in public is discouraged or prohibited. It is noteworthy that Arahmaiani's label as *the* 'Indonesian feminist artist' by the international art world was built on her willingness to tackle difficult issues such as religion, ethnicity and sex. She was able to gain support and recognition from the global art scene, yet she remains a controversial and somewhat isolated figure in the Indonesian art world.

The other performance artists introduced in Chapter 7, Kelompok PEREK, tried to engage with visibility politics only during their early years before quickly drifting towards safer subject matter. Nonetheless, each member of the group appears to have been relatively successful in her individual career while remaining committed to the ideas of feminism. Despite their commitment to local feminism, their sporadic projects as a collective reflect the group's hesitation to engage more openly with their politics. Perhaps to retain their careers they are aware that they still need to conform to the socio-cultural norms in Indonesia, specifically in Yogyakarta.

The role of the audience was an important consideration when analysing performance art by Indonesian women artists. The Indonesian public's general avoidance and possible ignorance of gender issues often led audiences to see the gender-based works of Indonesian women artists as sensationalising women's issues or as an obsession with their own body. These views reflect the challenge in using the female body as a primary medium; they also limit the possibility of extending the discussion of the art works beyond the body itself especially when it deals with female desire or the erotic self. The use of performance art as feminist strategy has the potential to directly confront gender issues in Indonesian society; and yet it is the approach that is most open to misinterpretations. Neither an internationally

acclaimed artist like Arahmaiani nor a local collective such as Kelompok PEREK have been able to inspire the emergence of a new wave of female performance artists in Indonesia.

The artists' approach to feminism and feminist issues can perhaps be seen as their participation in a transnational feminist project, rather than an international one. The curator of "Global Feminisms" Maura Reilly argues that transnational feminist practice addresses the concerns of women across the globe in their particularized and historical relationships to multiple patriarchies and economical hegemonies (Reilly 2007: 31). She specifies the term 'transnational' to signify a movement across national boundaries and one that goes beyond the borders of the colonized world. Transnational projects are different from international ones, since in the latter case the West is always the assumed centre. We can see that both Arahmaiani and Kelompok PEREK's artistic practices are still grounded within local issues while acknowledging the influence of Western feminisms.

### ***Rearticulating feminine spaces in Indonesian art world***

The works by Emiria Sunassa, Mia Bustam, IGAK Murniasih, Laksmi Shitaesmi, Titarubi, Arahmaiani and Kelompok PEREK represent a trajectory of change in how feminism/s operates in Indonesian contemporary art: from danger to pleasure, and from the 'patriarchal' way women are 'looked at' to the new ways women negotiate 'images of women' and express parts of their lives and aspirations. They neither resist patriarchy in a 'politically correct' way nor revel in eroticism, but steer a course between both of these positions. Furthermore, they demonstrate how Indonesian visual arts can include difference and absorb ambiguity, thus avoiding the totalising and exclusionary practices that feminism has sometimes been guilty of implementing.

I argue that their reluctance to embrace the label 'feminist artist' is also a form of critique of Western and second-wave feminism, which not only homogenised women's oppression globally but also placed the West at the centre of feminist art practices. Through their own understanding of feminism, Indonesian women artists are creating art works that can contribute to a more nuanced perspective of the local version/s of feminism. Their art achieves this in feminist terms by being reoriented towards the production of positive images of the female body and adherence to certain universal principles such as erotic appeal and inclusiveness in attempting to formulate or convey a conceptual ideal.

Because such universals are very open to interpretation, however, part of the process of conceptualising the ideal entailed the contestation of existing definitions of these terms, and in this regard all of the works are deconstructive. They may not *embrace* contradiction and compromise, but they are at least built on a tacit acknowledgement that contemporary art thrives on ambiguity.

By highlighting the ambiguities I have argued that an understanding of the structure of canons and canon-making, coupled with the complexities of body politics, provides an important entry into the construction of strategic readings of art works by Indonesian women artists. Moreover, the new reading in this thesis emphasizes that instead of reducing women's diverse experiences into a common culture, the differences among women are as important as their cross-culturally shared common struggles.

The thesis also revealed that feminist-inspired texts can help to bring to life artistic practices of the present and thereby assist in identifying directions for future studies. Potential studies that can be generated from this thesis range from historical analyses of women artists and modernism in Indonesia to trauma and affect in Indonesian contemporary art

after 1965. Read as a whole, the thesis is a contribution to the transnational feminist project, rearticulating feminine spaces in Indonesian visual arts that have hitherto not been regarded as relevant to Indonesian art discourse in general.

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## **List of interviews**

Alia Swastika, curator, Yogyakarta, 22 July 2010

Arahmaiani, artist, 14 January 2009; 07 June 2010; 01 July 2011

Biantoro Santoso, Nadi Gallery, Jakarta, 03 August 2010

Carla Bianpoen, journalist, 13 January 2009

Caroline Rika Winata, artist, Yogyakarta, 18 July 2010

Dyan Anggraeni, artist and formerly Head of Yogyakarta Cultural Park, Yogyakarta, 27 July 2010

Dolorosa Sinaga, artist, Jakarta, 02 August 2010

Elia Nurvita, Dian Ariyani, Gintani Nur Apresia Swastika, Simponi [artist collective], Yogyakarta, 16 July 2010

Edwin Rahardjo, Edwin's Gallery, Jakarta, 25 July 2010

Endang Lestari, artist, Yogyakarta, 03 June 2010

Enin Supriyanto, curator, Yogyakarta, 21 July 2010

Farah Wardani, IVAA, Yogyakarta, 18 July 2010

Ferial Affif, artist, Yogyakarta, 03 June 2010

Heidi Arbuckle, Ford Foundation and ex-member of Kelompok PEREK, Jakarta, 08 March 2011

Hendro Wiyanto, curator, Yogyakarta, 21 July 2010

Herra Pahlasari, S14 Artspace, Bandung, 06 July 2010

Heru Hikayat, Platform3, Bandung, 06 March 2011

Inge Santoso, Canna Gallery, Jakarta, 02 August 2010

Ira Adriati, Faculty of Fine Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology, 13 January 2009

Irene Agrivina, artist and co-founder of HONF (House of Natural Fibre), Yogyakarta, 20 July 2010

Jim Supangkat, artist and curator, Bandung, 07 February 2013

Kartika Affandi, artist, Yogyakarta, 21 February 2013

Laksmi Shitaresmi, artist, Yogyakarta, 03 March 2011

Lashita Situmorang, artist and founder of Red District Project, Yogyakarta, 11 August 2010

Lelyana Kurniawati, artist, Yogyakarta, 20 July 2010

Lenny Ratnasari Weichert, artist and owner of Kersan Art Studio, Yogyakarta, 21 July 2010

Marintan Sirait, artist, Bandung, 11 January 2010

Mary Northmore, Seniwati Gallery, Ubud, Bali, 07 February 2009

Melani Budianta, Cultural Studies Program, University of Indonesia, 12 February 2013

Melani Gunawan, collector, Jakarta, 13 July 2010

Mella Jaarsma, artist and co-founder Cemeti Art Gallery, Yogyakarta, 20 February 2013

Mimi Fadmi, artist, Bandung, 07 February 2013

Nindityo Adipurnomo, artist and co-founder Cemeti Art Gallery, Yogyakarta, 14 July 2010

Nunung WS, artist, Yogyakarta, 14 January 2009

Theresia Agustina Sitompul, artist, Yogyakarta, 16 July 2010

Tiarma Sirait, artist, Bandung, 11 January 2010

Titarubi, artist, Yogyakarta, 15 January 2009; 18 July 2010; 02 March 2011

Toeti Heraty, scholar, Jakarta, 01 August 2010.

Prilla Tania, artist, Bandung, 07 July 2010

Siti Adiyati Subangun, artist, Jakarta, 09 February 2013

Sujud Dartanto, curator, Yogyakarta, 31 July 2010