



THE HERETICAL

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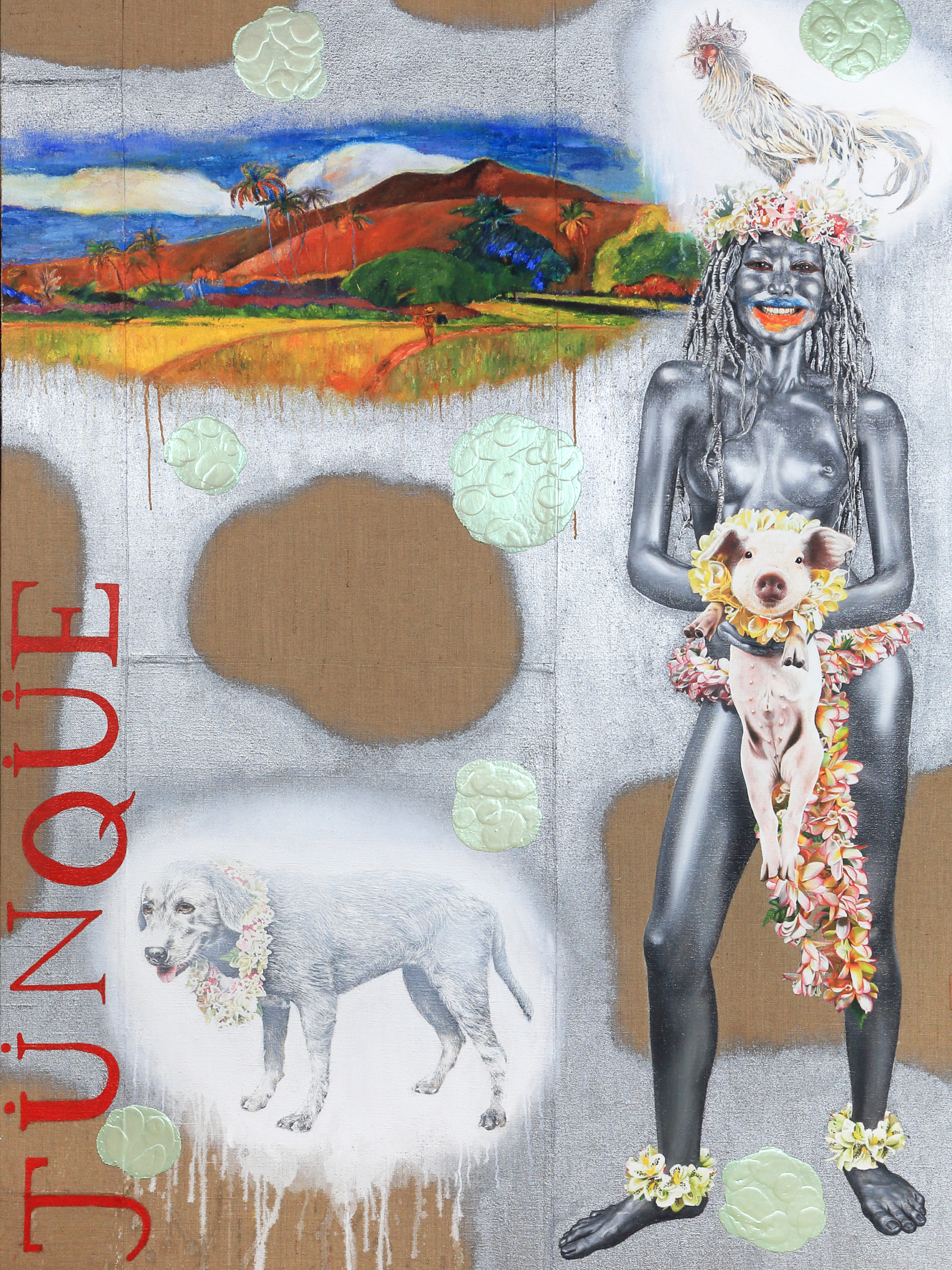
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Artists are dyed poodles dancing through fiery hoops for the one percent ...

an interview with Ashley Bickerton

by Naima Morelli

I was in Ashley Bickerton's studio in Bali, staring at a painting of a blue man and several colourful girls. I was having a hard time keeping up with the direction our conversation was taking. A short time ago I had suggested to the artist that we sit together and have an old-style interview, but he ignored me. He went on instead with a stream of conscious banter as we wandered towards his workspace.

In a bid to gain his attention, I asked what the blue man in the painting represented. He replied with the weary voice of a man who had been asked that question too many times: "What does it represent? There's plenty of literature on that out there. I don't know. His hair is a desert island, his skin is the sea, in a lot of paintings he wears a French sailor shirt, basically I described him as representing ..." Ashley went blank for a moment. "Forgot ..." He then mumbled something about Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys going blank during interviews because of the drugs the songwriter took. I was unwilling to venture any connection between the two.

I met Ashley Bickerton in 2012, during my research on contemporary art in Indonesia. He was an important figure in the East Village scene of the 1980s, and has been associated with the 'Neo-Geo' movement, which included artists such as Jeff Koons and Peter Halley. In 1997, at the top of his career, Bickerton unexpectedly left New York for a retreat in an eccentric villa situated in a remote part of Bali. The move didn't stop him from exhibiting around the world.

To fix an appointment with Bickerton was not easy. There were very good waves in Bali in those couple of months, and the artist would rather surf. I could understand that. Here was an artist from a small tropical island who had climbed to the ice-cold top of the International art world. What did that take? I wondered. And what had driven him from New York to that remote tropical island so suddenly? I suspected disillusion, deep cynicism at the very least, perhaps more. But once the date and time were finally set, and met, I must say he was extremely nice. In the press release of Bickerton's latest exhibition, *Junk Anthropologies* at Gajah Gallery in Singapore (until 25 May), there is photo of the artist sporting a large, stretched smile, so similar to the characters of his paintings. Despite the brash strength of his manner and his words, that is how I most remember him.

“... The town’s in equal measure genuflecting and ass kissing as it is ostracising.”

“So what the blue man represents?” Ashley continued, standing cross-armed in front of this painting: “When I made him up he was a sort of joke to represent the twentieth century man. When he was skinnier he represented an escapee from all that western literature, all that existential

anti-hero, blah blah blah. I don’t know what he represents now that he’s fat. Maybe he’s set adrift from the shackles of a particular belief system or literature? Originally it was a take on Gauguin. I’ve been in Bali for almost twenty years now, and I never wanted to confront the elephant in the room, you know, artist runs off to a tropical island. I never wanted to deal with it, because the reality here is not Gauguin’s reality, that’s ridiculous! I never came down here for that, I always thought that was silliness. Finally, after 14 years I decided to deal with it, but I deal with it my way. So I invented this character to represent all of that.”

You lived in New York and Brazil before you came to Bali, why did you come here?

“There’s many ways to look at it. I was tired of New York. I wasn’t built for New York, but as long as the town stayed nice I would stay. But the town doesn’t always stay nice. It goes up and down. So on one of the downs I just left. I didn’t want to stay around like a fart in a phone booth. The town’s in equal measure genuflecting and ass kissing as it is ostracising. It was nice to be formed there, but I don’t have the patience to sit around. I had other things I wanted to do. I’m not built for cold climates, I was born in the tropics, I grew up in the tropics. I don’t like to wear more than enough clothes, so New York was a place I had to get out of eventually. I was very much an insider in that whole world, so it wasn’t that hard to go away to literally the opposite point on the globe from New York City, as far as you can get from Bali. Being connected, being very much part of the inner circles of New York made it not impossible to function out here.”

How was living in Bali at the time?

“It was a different time, there were no computers then. Bali was much more of a provincial outpost with nothing. There was no middle class in Indonesia as there is now. There were no communications. There certainly wasn’t the traffic. In New York I had wanted to get away from fabricators and all the people who built my work; horrible boring trips to boroughs to visit some pokey, mangy fabricator who’s pissed off or trying to chisel you to make and build sculptures, playing havoc with deadlines and stress. I had just had enough, and so one of the reasons I came back here was that I decided to make my own paintings and not have any assistance, not have anybody working for me. I would just be alone and painting. I wanted the bloody peace and that was it.”

“This is not art, this is stupidity, and it’s maddening stupidity ... equivalent to trying to **handwrite the bible.**”

Has the geographic change influenced the way you work on your paintings?

“When I moved here I thought I was coming to a place that would be populated by painters, poets and writers. It ended up being a place populated by pains, posers, and write-offs. Bali expatriates. Lots of flashy entrances, fabulous presentations of self, and lots of fabricated histories, etcetera. I didn’t want much to do with it, so I didn’t let it mix, didn’t pay attention. I did my work. It’s not to say I didn’t love the culture of Indonesia, they are the reasons I live here, but that’s another story. It wasn’t until 2004 that I suddenly looked up at the paintings I was doing and thought to myself ‘God! I’ve shut it out, I’ve kept it at bay, it snuck in through the cracks and under the doors, through the half closed windows’. You know, Indonesia is suddenly in these paintings, completely. Gone are the colour schemes I used in New York, safety yellow, safety orange, black, white and silver. Just straight up, and suddenly they were all these grey-greens, green-greys, brown-greys. They looked like Batuan school paintings. It took it over ten years, just turning away from it, thinking I was ignoring or even fighting it, and then suddenly it just popped in. Now I play with it, run with it. I’ve come full circle. So now it’s all sort of humorous at this point.”

The first period you where in Bali you were still very much into realism...

“That actually went on for years until I realised I was making five paintings a year. They took so damn long, three days to do a hand that would look exactly like the photograph you copied it from. This is not art, this is stupidity, and it’s maddening stupidity. It’s equivalent to trying to **handwrite the bible** with a pen that doesn’t write properly. That airbrush was a nightmare in complexity, you are working this close and the damn thing doesn’t work! You spend the whole time fighting it, eighteen hours a day sitting there, six days a week, and you are thinking ‘this isn’t life, this isn’t art! It’s idiocy on a grand scale.’ That’s why I don’t make these anymore. I don’t care, I don’t have anything to prove technically, I’m not interested; I do this stuff in Photoshop. I’ll always remain technical in my thinking but certainly not in the execution. That’s boring.”

What does Bali represent to you? In Indonesia Bali is not the focal point for art.

“Not for art, more for crafts. Well, I just wanted to get the fuck out of New York. I’m a surfer, I like it here, and I’ve always liked it here. It didn’t matter where I worked. This was far away, I surfed, I didn’t want to care. I could live or be anywhere once I had a gallery established; the further, the better. Actually, further could be a problem. After a while you got kids looking around, ex-wives. Whatever, this is when you are stuck, then the traffic closes in, then you are even more stuck.”



BICKERTON



At least I can drive to the surf with no traffic. I don't have to go anywhere, I don't have a proper job. I guess this is fine for now. My girlfriend and I had to go to Sanur yesterday and it took us an hour and forty-five minutes. I don't leave my house, so this is, like ... my god, this place is utterly, completely, fucking fucked and corrupted and ruined. I just hold up in this little corner and I don't see it that much. Part of it I kind of enjoyed for the idea that Gauguin was after, the idea of the noble savages, and primordial Eden, all of that. Gauguin was a great truth seeker, but I speak a different language. I'd be closer to other artists in that sense, California artists who love that sort of stuff, going to school with Jim Shaw, Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy. How could Paul McCarthy do a Gauguin? I could see him do a Picasso. It's not un-similar. It's a different language now. Gauguin wasn't just a syphilitic paedophile who painted pretty things; he was actually a philosophical man seeking some essential truths in the universe. He was a seeker and we live in different times now. All I'm working on, all I do, is play YouTube discussions on various subjects. I go through phases. First was New Atheism, now it's Chris Hedges and the gutting of culture and American corporatisation of everything. So, different times to old Gauguin, maybe the end of times."

What do think of the Indonesian contemporary art scene?

"It's like saying 'what do you think of American artists?' Global art will always follow global economies; that's just a rule. If you want to break it down to individual artists, there are a lot of good individual artists here."

Do you reckon younger artists are influenced by western culture or you think they still refer to their Indonesian identity?

"Look, I'm a surfer, I'm a human being. Those breakdowns in-between cultures don't exist anymore. Everybody wears Gap or whatever the heck, it all looks alike. Everyone has the same suitcases in the airport. There used to be individual surf styles, there was a California look, a Hawaii look where I grew up. Those things don't exist anymore, that's long gone, the internet has broken it down. As the internet has broken religion down, it also destroys cultural variety."

We don't need gods or differences anymore, not in the same way. It's tribal in a different way now. There is a whole different epistemology at work. This is the fastest changing time in the history of the planet. Some might say we are cascading towards cataclysm, which, you know, when you go back and get stuck in the traffic you could tend to think they might be right on that one. Our ability to carry ourselves, even ... Maybe I'm bleak. The guy I'm listening to now, Chris Hedges – a brilliant ex-war journalist, ex-seminary student at Harvard, I think one of the more profound public intellectuals – believes we are headed into a pan global period, meaning hundreds of years of pan global barbarism, maybe thousands of years that we won't be able to back out of. Could be, could be, maybe not. I'm not a conspiracy theorist at all, not an end of times guy at all, but looking at the individual indicators, ecological and otherwise, it's as clear as day, and quite frightening. Make kids with caution.”

Your uncompromising way of seeing the world certainly influences your art. Does that represent an obstacle when it comes to dealing with collectors and the art market?

“Artists are just actually dyed poodles dancing through fiery hoops for the one percent. You could look at it that way, or look at us as plastic philosophers dealing in physical currency. There's always a balance between surviving with what you do as a professional, making it a viable means of self support, and the actual searching you do with that. You know, Thomas Kinkade just died, he was the favourite of the religious right. He did the cottages and the little cute things with the lights. He made millions and millions of them, and printed them out on canvas, and he had special people to do the light parts, and paint, and then he got computerised machines that do his signature on them. I think he actually was the richest artist in the world, richer than Damien Hirst, for a while. That's Damien by the way, in that painting over there. That's his family.”





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BICKERTON 13

Ashley looked at the painting for a few seconds, then his face grew upset: “Oh my god! That’s a trade I’m supposed to do with Damien Hirst ... that’s him and his family a few years ago, but he and his wife just split up ... Fuck me running ... Shit! That means he won’t trade. Uh oh ... I’m just going to have to stick his new girlfriend on there. That’s an issue, I’m going to have to text him right now and say: ‘Dude, your painting has your freaking ex-wife on it.’ What the fuck! So is our trade off? Or do you want to paste your girlfriend’s face over it, or maybe ‘This Spot Blank?’ This is going to cause some problems. This trade is outstanding ‘cause I did this painting in 2009, but I didn’t want to let it go ... and then, uh wow, it’s taken so long he’s split up. Whoops! ... I want my Hirst. I mean, he won’t trade value for value necessarily, he’ll trade effort for effort.” Ashley sighed: “It’s all over the gossip columns. She ran off with some guy who’s an arms trader, she does the Gumball Rally in America and drives Maseratis, Ferraris, Bugatis, American muscle cars ... She does it and met this guy who’s a notorious English arms dealer and a supplier of private security services in Iraq. I think a two hundred and something million pound defence contract ... That’s the new boyfriend, some English mercenary, nicknamed in the press ‘Dog of War’, so she ran off with him.”

I never did find out if the trade between Bickerton and Hirst eventually took place. What I can see from Bickerton’s new Singapore show was that, in the meantime, his style has changed. In *Junk Anthropologies* the paintings look more essential and rough than his previous work. His hallucinated figures with aluminium skin are painted straight onto raw jute canvas. The blue man has evolved as well. In the painting *Temptation in the Banjar* he has become a couple of blue snakes with human faces, enveloping a silver girl.

According to Ashley, his ideas still come from “the same old fortress”, from yet another devious angle. That is not surprising from an artist who looks at reality from multiple points of view: “Absolute truths are boring, unless it’s hard empirical truth. Cultural truths are boring, because all meaning is so slippery. Languages are just slang with an army and a navy, and so is history,” he says. “History is where the army and navy came down and when, and the rest is just gossip. History is just official gossip.”

Junk Anthropologies, Gajah Gallery, Singapore, 26 April – 25 May - gajahgallery.com



Naima Morelli is a freelance arts writer and journalist with a particular interest in contemporary art from Italy, the Asia Pacific region and art in a global context. She is also an independent curator focusing on Italian, Indonesian and Australian emerging artists. At the moment she is working on a book about contemporary art in Indonesia.



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