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Why must the East continue to be objectified? An Interview with Indonesian artist Eddy Susanto

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Have you ever been exoticized?

I have been exoticized by people and have exoticized other people quite a few times. People from South of Italy make jokes about people from North of Italy, and the other way round. I used to live in the Chinatown of Rome, so I had the exotic at my doorstep. Indeed, looking for the extravagant and the suggestive, I bought a silken-looking cheongsam for thirty bucks. You probably get the exact cheongsam I'm talking about—it's the same one you can find in all the cheap markets around the world. Poor naïve girl. That cheongsam was from China, true, but not from the finest Shanghai tailors as I was willing to believe in that moment of shopping spree.

If you're wondering what exoticism exactly is, it's a form of representation in which peoples, places, and cultural practices are depicted as foreign. For hundreds of years, the term exotic has referred to an inherent quality of the non-Western other. More recently, exoticism has been understood to require an imaginative act of representing, perceiving, and classifying on the part of the beholder. In its negative connotation, it corresponds to an approach to the foreign which is usually synthetic and chaotic.

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I could have easily expected an exoticist approach from my slightly racist landlady living next door. I could have expected it from an Oriental shop milking their faraway charms, even from some old Orientalist books in the library archives. Where I couldn't ever expect to find exoticism was an art fair in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. In the unfamiliar spaces of the pavilion of ART/JOG12 I was stuck by something very familiar. It was an ensemble of reproductions of Mona Lisa, framed in Mondrian-like rectangles and Da Vinci handwriting. To me that was like for an Indonesian to go to the Artissima art fair in Turin and seeing a work inspired by Wayang Puppets done by an Italian dude. It was startling. Then I read the title: "Occidentalism". I looked at the work again. And again. And then I realized it. I have been exoticized.

Obviously, I reflected on my way home, artist Eddy Susanto knew what he was doing. He was not the kind of person to exoticize people at a moment's notice. What Mr. Susanto was really doing with "Occidentalism" was to turn the tables. Now it was the West's turn to be romanticized and seen as mysterious by an Eastern artist – thus undergoing the same treatment Europeans reserved for centuries to pretty much the rest of the world.

Delving into the Susanto's work, you can notice a focus towards the key figures and moments of the history of interaction between East and West. Susanto's vast knowledge of history both of Europe and Asia and his philological attention for detail are not merely conceptual. His work has a very attractive formal aspect to it, conveying sensuality through colours and scents (like in the series Mata Hari and Sea of Spices) or surprising the viewer (like in "The Java of Dürer" where Dürer's "The Men's Bath" at a closer inspection is composed of a script from "The History of The Land of Java").

The art world first started paying attention to Susanto's intellectual and sophisticated art in 2011, when he was awarded with the Second Bandung Contemporary Art Awards. In his work he applies graphic design logic to contemporary art and to tried to revive text and typography as the foundation of a new visual tradition.

"I became involved in the contemporary art scene as an outsider, not quite understanding what contemporary art entails" he explains. "I believe that the path of art is direct and true, so we must be decisive in trying to chase after others and conquer them with true principles."

Tell me about your process, how do you begin a work?

I often begin the creative process by observing a particular issue, attending discussions, reading books, or drawing conclusions about things that I consider important to talk about, to archive, or to publicize. Then, we will discuss it in a team, and research them. We ponder whether the idea is relevant and has the ability to spark a debate. After collecting all data needed, I will begin to design its execution or application through art. Even if knowledge finds conclusion in certain things and locks it as a result, it is the art's job to set it free. After deciding on the concept, I begin to coordinate all aspects of the design.

The first work of yours I encountered was "Occidentalism, Speculation of Monalisa". The title seems to give a counterpart to Said's "Orientalism". Did you try to create an exoticization of what "Occident" is with this work?

"Occidentalism, Speculation of Monalisa" has a simple concept. At the art fair in Yogyakarta in 2012, the overall theme was "Looking East", so I tried to offer a new paradigm. Why must the East continue to be objectified? Will it always be that way, forever? Can't we, in the East, stand as "subjects"? Through this work, I try to complement the theme by "Looking West". I have taken a familiar and iconic image from the West as well as the surrounding debates regarding Leonardo da Vinci's "Monalisa". Then I combined it with Mondrian's style and Leonardo da Vinci's handwriting. Perhaps, it comes across as silly, but at least the spirit of Occidentalism will spur us to learn and then learn some more, until we can become equals. That even the East has ideas and viewpoints about the West. Because "exotic" is not just an Eastern purview.



I totally agree with that. Your “Sea of spice” is also very interesting work. Can you tell me more about the concept behind this piece?

The concept of “Sea of Spice” is a re-celebration of the meaning of spices. Spices changed the face of the world. In the classical period, they created a global trade route that was rich, sacred, colorful, and enduring. Spices give a romantic yet dramatic nuance, connecting the West and the East.

In the beginning, the spice worlds of the East might seem surrealist to the Western eyes. But it slowly changed when Western ships began sailing the Seas. With knowledge from Marco Polo, Vasco da Gama was able to arrive on the shores of Malabar and Kalikut, kneeling in front of the statue of ‘Devaki Nursing Krishna’, being grateful for his discovery of spices. Since then, Magellan – followed by Cano – sailed the world in the 16th century; and Francis Drake, Abel Tasman, and James Cook in the following centuries. They were all lured by the siren song of spices.

Why did you decided to tackle the history of spices through your art?

Because to commemorate spices is to engage in one of the most sacred celebrations of human civilization. Spices helped prove that the world is round. It had twisted and elongated the short Silk Road into the Spice Route, spanning the wide seas and oceans. Spices changed civilizations and served as the lingua franca of the maritime world.

In your analysis, why did spices become so central in commerce during the past centuries?

Who does not agree with the worth of spices? The ancient world compared them to gold.

Spices' magic properties were the reason for the West's exaltation of them. So flavorful, they gave an exclusive nuance to the Western table. They were the desires of aristocracy, as Martialis wrote in his poem in the first century Rome: the scent of pepper is as pleasing as the wines of Falerina—an expensive and luxurious wine found in Ancient Rome. In the second half of the 16th century, Enrique Leme, in the name of Jorge de Albuquerque who had sailed half the world and conquered Malaka, came to the mouth of the Ciliwung River and earnestly offered to build a fort to protect King Surawisesa's Sunda, in return for a thousand sacks of pepper. It was a fantastic promise indeed.

Spices became sexy and erotic in the hands of spicemasters and potionmakers. They became half-mystical elements in the hands of the 'alchemists', like Constantinus Africanus, or "The Cursed Monk" as Chaucer named him. He created electuaries from ginger, pepper, cinnamon, and cloves to help with Western sexuality and masculinity.

Their majestic sense finally culminated in the 16th century. Because of this "gold", the Dutch relinquished New York – was New Amsterdam – to the British, in exchange for the 400 times smaller area of Rhun Island in the Moluccas. But Rhun produced "gold", in the form of a valuable spice—nutmeg. Known as pala in Indonesian language, it has a magical nomenclature, *Myristica fragrans*.



One does not realized how many fascinating stories are around spices! You explored connections between East and West not just through spices, but also through historical parallels. In your "The Java of Dürer" you juxtapose the Renaissance in Europe and the

entry of Islam in Java. Why did you decide to focus on that particular moment in time?

“Java of Dürer” began when I tried to research the development of art in the Renaissance period, especially engravings. I was at that time curious about Gutenberg, who certainly bore a strong connection with text and prints. Then I found Albrecht Dürer. From there, I tried to draw a correlation between printing and fine art. However, what good would it do if I became awed by other countries’ masterpieces at the expense of my own nation’s? Then I tried to correlate both worlds, in terms of period, predisposition, and character. Subsequently, I began to conceptualize the technical aspects of the piece, by correlating Dürer with Babad Tanah Jawi in its original hanacaraka. I wrote the alphabets with drawing pens upon canvas with a background painted in acrylic, molding it in such a way as to recreate Albrecht Dürer’s graphic art work “The Men’s Bath”.

The concept of this work refers to the Renaissance spirit that has changed the cultural point of view at the time. Until finally it created a different way of thinking that diverged vastly from the spirit of the Middle Ages, when the Western world was influenced by a sense of memento mori.

It is quite difficult to pinpoint exactly when the Renaissance period began in Europe, just as it is quite difficult to determine the shift from Hindu to Islam in the island of Java. However, Jostein Gaarder concluded it to be 1400 AD. Babad Tanah Jawi similarly concluded that the fall of Majapahit in 1400 marked the Javanese ‘renaissance’.



Albrecht Dürer lived in a time of change in the way people were living their lives compared to the previous centuries. That clearly emerges from his art. Was it something that also happened in Indonesia at the time?

Dürer’s depictions of people with a humanistic soul, as the result of cultural development in port towns, changed the sacred order of religious life in his time. It is as though he was also re-emphasizing upon a similar change occurring in Java. The inflow of Islam made lasting changes to the face of Javanese coastal towns. They cultivated changes in the minds of the people living by the sea, who for so long had been ruled by gods. It was as though their living movements had been consumed. Sacred rituals gave way to the productive work of sea trade, opening the road to Islam in Java.