



Five Indonesian artists that help us rethink nature

An attraction to all things natural has become something of a global trend. Channelling the spirit of the times, contemporary Indonesian artists are tackling the theme of nature in a unique way.

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IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist

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When it comes to nature, contemporary art is a precious tool for experiencing it from a variety of points of view, spanning the philosophical, the scientific, the cultural and the environmental. Through art we can see the power structures underlying a seemingly peaceful landscape, the problematics of urban artificial greenery or the plague of deforestation.

Through the artist's eyes, we are able to see how connecting with nature can enhance our lives, whether it be through outdoor pursuits, travel or perhaps even our little army of cacti outside the kitchen window. An artwork can remind us that, even in our hyper-technological cities, we are ultimately part of a bigger ecosystem and nature is the primal source of it all.

Indonesian artists, in particular, can teach us a lot about nature. Environmentalism was at the core of the original Gerakan seni rupa baru, the Indonesian New Art Movement of the '70s. To this day, nature remains a recurrent theme in the work of contemporary artists. This is due to the diverse range of lifestyles in the archipelago – from traditional village life to stressful daily commuting in Jakarta, Indonesians can travel through the many layers superimposed onto the natural world in the space of a few hundred kilometres.

Here are five Indonesian artists championing some of the different attitudes towards nature.

Natural harmony: Arahmaiani

A pioneer of performance art in Southeast Asia, as well as one of the most iconic contemporary artists in Indonesia, Arahmaiani's work has often emphasized the relationship between the human and the nature.

The artist marvels at how mankind has the capacity to forget that "life is a beautiful garden" and then "fails to care for it." Her performance *Memory of Nature* sprang from this idea. In the piece, Arahmaiani chose not to view nature and the environment as specific issues, but preferred to focus on the values and life ethics that support harmony and respect for nature. Without these, Earth is seen as something to be exploited.

Central to the performance was the essential form of the Borobudur Mandala, reproduced in natural materials such as wood, soil and vegetation. The soil that formed the mandala was covered in the green shoots of young plants, which were grown, tended and watered for the performance.

Arahmaiani studied at Bandung Institute of Technology (BFA, 1983), Paddington Art School in Sydney, Australia (1986) and Academie voor Beeldende Kunst, Enschede in The Netherlands (1992). Among her exhibitions: *Traditions/Tensions*, Western Australia Museum of Contemporary Art; *Cities on the Move*, Louisiana Museum of Contemporary Art, Copenhagen and Hayward Gallery London; *AWAS! Recent Art From Indonesia*, Australian Centre For Contemporary Art, Melbourne; *His-story on My Body*, Hillside Terrace Gallery, Tokyo; *Upstream Project*, Amsterdam & Hoorn.

The cultural landscape: Jumaldi Alfi

Jumaldi Alfi is renowned for his large-scale paintings featuring a complex iconography of visual signs and existential figures.

His latest body of work is a re-reading of the Indonesian landscape, articulating his personal take on the Mooi Indies style, a kind of landscape painting popularized by the Dutch colonisers. These paintings depict the beautiful Indonesian scenery (the Dutch East Indies, as it was then called) in a romantic fashion devoid of any tension.

Studying these tranquil visions, we ask ourselves how much the romantic imaginary reflected Indonesia at the time. In the series, Jumaldi reflects on exoticism and memories of the Indonesian colonial past. Nature becomes a repository of memories and its depiction an instrument of power for writing history.

Jumaldi Alfi studied at the Indonesian Institute of Arts in Yogyakarta until 1999. Selected solo exhibitions include: *Mooi Indie*, ARNDT Singapore; *Melting Memories*, the STPI Singapore Tyler Print Institute, Singapore; *Nightswimmer* at the Metis Gallery, Amsterdam, the Netherlands; *Life/Art # 101: Never Ending Lesson* at the Sangkring Art Space, Yogyakarta, Indonesia; and *Derau-Noise* at the Bentara Budaya, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

Experiencing nature: Mella Jaarsma

Netherlands-born Mella Jaarsma is the founder, together with Nindityo Adipurnomo, of the seminal space Cemeti Art House Gallery in Yogyakarta, which has made huge contributions to the development of Indonesian contemporary art. Through installation, performances, and her trademark wearable works, Mella Jaarsma has frequently looked at the interaction between humans and their environment.

In an installation called *Laws of Nature*, part of a series about the senses, she shows us how our experience of the outside world is in fact filtered. The installation involves six pair of slippers shaped like feet and made of teakwood and fur. The public can wear them and walk through the gallery space.

By performing this action, the public realizes that beyond the superstructures we create to protect ourselves, the world surrounding us is fundamentally constructed by the laws of nature. For the artist, the key lies in activating the senses and consequentially connecting the body and soul – intuition (*rasa*) and thought.

Mella Jaarsma grew up in the Netherlands and studied visual art at 'Minerva' Academy, Groningen (1978-1984), IKJ (Art Institute of Jakarta/1984), Jakarta and at ISI (Indonesia Institute of the Arts/1985-1986), Yogyakarta, Indonesia and has lived in Indonesia ever since. Among her exhibitions are: *Suspended Histories*, Museum Van Loon, Amsterdam, Netherlands; *Soul Ties*, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore; *I eat you eat me*, Center of Academic Resources, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand; *ARS01*,

KIASMA, Helsinki, Finland; *Open2002*, 5th International Exhibition of Sculptures and Installations, Venice, Italy; *RE-Addressing Identities*, Katonah Museum, Katonah, NY, USA.

Urban bamboo: Joko Avianto

Reclaiming our cities and integrating the urban with the natural is a core theme for both art and architecture. Joko Avianto works at the intersection of these two fields, using a very peculiar material: bamboo.

Traditionally used in Indonesia, bamboo is today having a revival thanks to artists that sees it as an ecological and elegant material. Joko Avianto is at the forefront of the artistic exploration, creating site-specific installations which are both spectacular and environmentally-conscious. The artist stepped into the spotlight with the façade of the ARTJOG12 pavilion, and his talent has transferred to Europe thanks to his recent installation at Frankfurter Kunstverein, *Pohon Besar (Big Trees)*,

Pohon Besar incorporated 1,500 six-metre-long interlaced bamboo sticks set up over the course of three weeks. It is a great example of how nature can cohabit with modernisation in an aesthetic way, giving a metaphorical alternative to Indonesia's relentless industrial development.

Joko Avianto was born in Cimahi, West Java in 1976 and lives and works in Bandung. He followed the postgraduate programme at Bandung Institute of Technology, Art and Design Faculty and then studied sculpture at the same institution. His solo exhibitions include *S.A.M.O. (Social Activator Mobile Object)*, Bandung, Indonesia and *Astakona*, Benda Gallery, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

Denounce and conservation: Setu Legi

The rapid growth and the exploitation of natural resources has also been a central concern for Setu Legi. Seeing natural diversity being replaced with patterns of uniformity has brought the artist to question the idea of progress and the humans' willingness to make nature bend to their needs.

Setu Legi's reflections are articulated across different media, from terracotta sculptures to paintings, drawings and installations. He tackles specific environmental issues such as plantation-based systems of production and consumption, land exploitation, deforestation and the impacts on traditional communities.

While this might sound grim, there is always an underlying sense of hope in his work, which is drawn from traditional lifestyle and philosophies. Only when we establish a genuine relationship with nature we will be able to heal the land.

Setu Lagi was born in Yogyakarta and completed his studies at the Faculty of Art and Design at the Indonesian Institute of Art (ISI), Yogyakarta in 2000. In 1998 he and his friends established the Taring Padi art and cultural community. He is now more focused on his work as an individual, whilst collaborating with artists in other fields. His solo shows includes: *Black Lights*, Yogyakarta; *Social Realities*, Germany; and *Are You Ready*, Yogyakarta.