



DOSSIERS AFICIONADOS ARTISTS EXHIBITIONS @COBO SALON 1 WORK 2 MINS 

*Murni's art is bold and transgressive. The artist gave voice to her own passions and sufferings, which came from her turbulent life. The show Merayakan Murni brought her work into the spotlights at [Ketemu Project Space](#) and [Sudakara Art Space](#) in Bali.*

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IMAGES: Courtesy of Sudakara Art Space and Ketemu Project Space



IGAK Murniasih, 'Story of Bangkok', 2003, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 150 cm. Image courtesy Sudakara Art Space and Ketemu Project Space.

Sometimes listening to a song, you might start singing along the sweet and catchy melody. But as soon as you start paying attention to the lyrics, the words freeze in your mouth, and you realize the content is a bit weird: inappropriate to be sung in public!

That's precisely the feeling you get by looking at Murni's art. Don't be fooled by the pastel colours, the stylized figures and the Matisse-like balance of shapes. Murni's work is a tête-à-tête with pain, pleasure and obsession. To put it bluntly, there is a lot of sex. Although a lot of nice shoes are depicted on canvas, the sex is not the kind of glamorized eroticism of à la Jack Vettriano. It is rather a tough confrontation with a nightmarish and surreal dimension, sprouting directly from the artist's subconscious.



IGAK Murniasih (Murni). Image courtesy Ketemu Project Space.

The work of Balinese artist I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasih, simply known as Murni, has recently been rediscovered ten years after her death, thanks to the ten months long collaborative project *Merayakan Murni*, by Ketemu Project Space, which led to an exhibition at Sudakara Art Space, Bali, which just concluded this September.

*Merayakan Murni* saw 15 young artists reinterpreting and contextualising the work of Murni in the present. “We invited international and local artists to come to Bali and have conversation with Murni’s work, addressing her legacy,” explains Samantha Tio, co-founder of Ketemu with her husband Budi Agung Kuswara. “The issues Murni is addressing are very critical, especially in Indonesia today. Some of these are women’s sexuality, violence and abuse, disparity in socio-economic backgrounds.”



Citra Sasmita, 'Mea Vulva, Maxima Vulva', 2016, mixed media installation, 180 x 100 x 100 cm. Image courtesy Sudakara Art Space

and Ketemu Project Space.



Mella Jaarsma, "Pure Passion (After Murni)", 2016, mixed media, variable dimension

For some artists, you can't think of drawing a line between their work and their own life. What goes for Frida Kahlo, Amedeo Modigliani, Artemisia Gentileschi or Vali Myers definitely applies to Murni. The biographical element is key to understanding what pushed the artist to unleash such dangerous and disquieting imaginary.

Born in Tabanan in 1966, the 10th child of a farmer, Murni had a tough childhood, being sexually abused from her father. She got the chance of moving to Jakarta with a family she was working as domestic helper for. Later on she find employment in a fabric factory, she married, divorced and finally arrived to Bali. There she met the artist I Dewa Putu Mokoh, who taught her the Pengosekan painting technique, and Italian artist Mondo Zanolini, who became her partner.

The three were often working together, pushing the boundaries of self-expression. The result is work which is completely honest, not influenced by any kind of market conformism, pressure to produce or social constraints. It is raw and authentic.



IGAK Murniasih, 'Setiap saat aku berdoa', (every time I prayed), 2000, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 100 cm. Image courtesy Sudakara Art Space and Ketemu Project Space.

The artist's bio alone is far from providing a thorough reading of Murni's work. The show *Merayakan Murni* contributed to further a critical inquiry into the artist's legacy, already initiated by eminent art historians in Southeast Asia, such as Astri Wright. In the catalogue for the show art historian Paul Khoo's draws parallels between the artist's oeuvre and the psychic unease which followed the fall of New Order in Indonesia. It is a reminder that artists, as removed from society as they can be, are never operating in a vacuum.

At the same time, that doesn't mean that artists are necessarily militant either. Feminism is for example a word that can definitely be associated to artists who have the courage to express themselves fully, without fearing to scandalize the conformists, or "the ladies" (such was the worry of a gallery owner who rejected Murni's work).

It is true that Murni didn't have any lucid activist intent; her art is beyond good and evil and violence is depicted a matter of fact. She probably wouldn't have called herself a feminist or showed herself rallying in the streets. At the same time, through her work she taught the new generations of artists a whole lot about artistic courage, as well as showing how a sweet melody is the perfect concealment for unsettling lyrics.

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