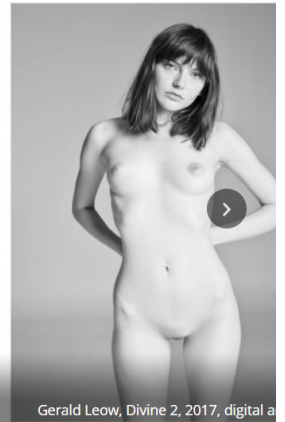


4 Southeast Asian Artists Reframing Ancient Folklore In The Context Of Colonialism, Exoticism, Sexuality And Death



Gerald Leow's performance for Loei Arts Festival, 2020. Photo by Arnuparp Jantakaew. Image courtesy of the artist and Loei Arts Festival.



Gerald Leow, Divine 2, 2017, digital a

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Naima Morelli

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Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for...

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Cobo Social's selection of four artists from Southeast Asia working with the mythologies of East and West, reframing traditional narratives in a constantly-evolving society.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of various

The dull thud of public statues being torn down is the most definitive sign of a change in values within the socio-primary relevance. They are the ones who know that history and mythology are not fixed entities. They know that each generation reinterprets traditional stories in light of updated societal values. They give new lifeblood to ancient images, filling orthodox symbols with contemporary meanings.

In Southeast Asia, several artists are looking deep into local traditions and narratives, giving the mythical and historical figures obscured by colonialism, patriarchy, and consumerism, their rightful place. Their works challenge Western-centric and patriarchal narratives, opening up new interpretations for the viewers. CoBo Social presents four artists, each bringing forth a different yet very relevant narrative.



Gerald Leow's performance for Loei Arts Festival, 2020. Photo by Arnuparp Jantakaew. Image courtesy of the artist and Loei Arts Festival.

Gerald Leow: The Cycles of Destruction and Rebirth

There is no other than Singaporean artist Gerald Leow to exemplify how the change of values can be explored in art. His visually striking installations are symbols of destruction and rebirth. They reference Hindu mythology mixed with heavy metal aesthetics. With these unexpected associations, Leow clears up rigid categories, revealing an underlying reality where everything is ultimately connected.

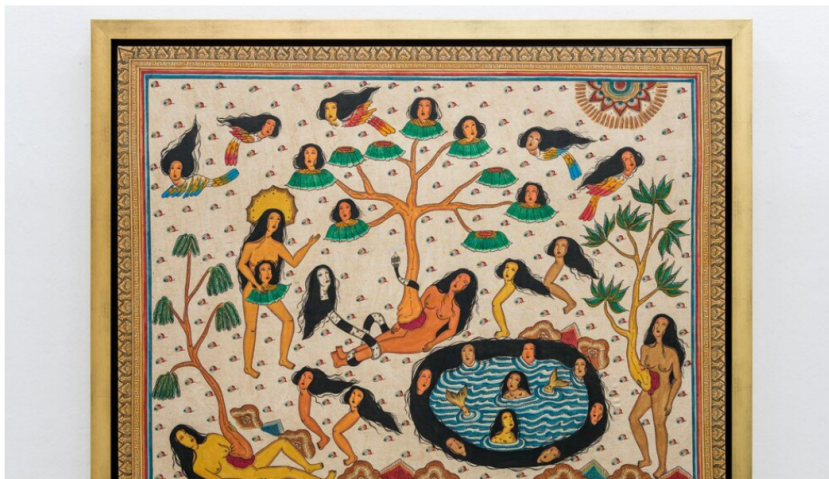
The idea of cycles of renewal was also the premise of his 2017 exhibition "I Am Time Grown Old To Destroy the World" in collaboration with Ivanho Harlim at Chan+Hori Contemporary in Singapore. It was centred around photographs of a Krishna figure in yogic and BDSM slave poses. The title is a quote from American theoretical physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer in the aftermath of the first nuclear detonation. It is also from the Hindu scripture *Bhagavad Gita*. "It was a line that Krishna uttered when asked by Arjuna to reveal his true form," explains the artist. "I like how in that one line, the author is able to express both the soft and violent aspect of destruction."



Gerald Leow, *Divine 2*, 2017, digital archival print. Image courtesy of the artist and Chan + Hori Contemporary.

As part of last year's Loei Art Festival in Thailand, Leow's installation and performance *Sticky Rice* (2020) looked at traditional folklore, serving as a contemporary response to the Phi Ta Khon Ghost Festival—the Northern Thailand equivalent of Mexico's Día de los Muertos. "This rural area is known for a ghost festival that's a very old, primitive agricultural rite," explains the artist. "In recent years the festival was heavily commodified by tourism and lost its original meaning. So the festival director wanted to bring back the authentic spirit, by having artists working closely with the community to create the works."

His new series of works "Spiritual Machines", to debut during Singapore Art Week in January 2022, will continue many of the concepts raised in previous works. In this series, featuring large kinetic sculptures, maquettes, and drawings, Leow will explore man's relationship with the external world he creates.





Citra Sasmita, *Season's Ballad*, 2020, acrylic on traditional Kamasan canvas. Image courtesy of the artist and Yeo Workshop.

Citra Sasmita: The Balinese's Feminist Reclamation of Sovereignty

"We grew up learning about male heroism. In traditional texts, female characters appear only as objects of conquest and sexuality. I'm creating counter-narratives to the traditional Balinese mythology by placing female characters as the protagonists in traditional stories," explains Balinese artist Citra Sasmita, whose practice is challenging the ground of the patriarchal societal order.

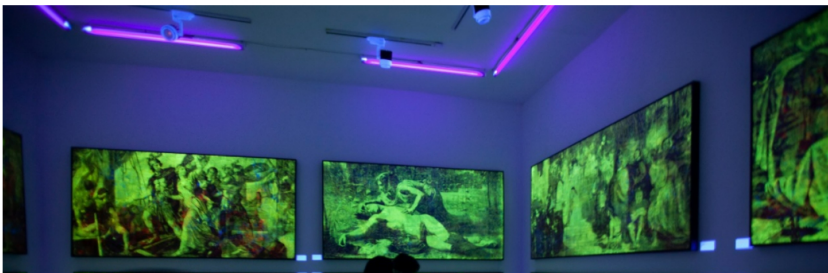
Sasmita's powerful work questions the woman's place in the social hierarchy and seeks to upend normative constructs of gender. Because of her interests, the artist's oeuvre often presents provocative themes that challenge the status quo through traditional Kamasan painting.



Citra Sasmita, *Timur Merah Project VII: Divine Comedia*, 2021, acrylic, Kamasan canvas, antique pillar. Image courtesy of the artist and ARTJOG MMXXI.

Her latest work for this year's "ARTJOG MMXXI: Arts in Common - Time(to)Wonder" is *Timur Merah Project VII: Divine Comedia* (2021). The artist found similarities between the Balinese old text *Bhima Swarga*, a folk epic about the afterlife, and Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* (1472), the journey through hell, purgatory, and heaven. "I worked on an installation of the ship, a symbol that in Dante, just like in Balinese culture, symbolise the human spirits transitioning to the afterlife," says Sasmita. "The narration of the journey through sea and land is a common trope in mythology, and one that I'm interested to explore."

At the moment the artist is developing a project—inspired by Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1503–1515)—to highlight and question the exoticised perception of Southeast Asia as a tropical Eden in European colonialism, which still often pertains to this day in the collective psyche of many Westerners. "In Bosch's painting there are allusions to this idea of the Orient in the depictions of fruits and spices," says the artist. "But I'm still in the process of researching that."





Installation view of Eddy Susanto's Renaissance of Panji Series at Art Jakarta 2019 in UV light, 2019, acrylic-phospor on canvas. Image courtesy of the artist and Lawangwangi Creative Space.

Eddy Susanto: Negotiating "The Other"

"Why must the East continue to be objectified? Will it always be that way? Can't we in the East stand as subjects?" asks Javanese artist Eddy Susanto. "This is what I have been trying to do with my work, giving our own perspective by looking West. So that the West is 'The Other', the one that is seen with the exotic eye."

When it comes to renegotiating a colonial vision, Susanto does it with flair, style, and a whole lot of research. Since his early days as the recipient of the Bandung Contemporary Art Award #2 in 2012, the Yogyakarta-based artist's philological work highlights a common human heritage: it draws comparisons and connections between legends, folk tales, historical events, and cultural movements in the East and the West.



Eddy Susanto, The Renaissance of Panji (detail), 2019, acrylic-phospor on canvas. Image courtesy of the artist and Lawangwangi Creative Space.

The series of paintings that exemplifies Susanto's vision is *The Renaissance of Panji* (2019), exhibited at the 2019 Art Jakarta. This was inspired by the Panji tales: a legend originating from the village of Gambyok in East Java, written in ancient local Javanese script. It chronicles the adventures, romances, and journeys of Prince Panji to the various lands of Nusantara—known today as Southeast Asia.

These tales are connected conceptually and visually by the artist to mythological stories in the West, as they were represented during the Renaissance. Within the space of the art fair, the artist created a room where scenes of the couples from the Panji tales appear when the lights are switched on. When viewed under UV light, the same canvases reveal UV Renaissance paintings of myth, presenting similar scenes of couples from Greek mythology.

His latest work, *Renaissance of China* (2021), will be featured in his upcoming solo show at Lawangwangi Creative Space in November. The series of canvases explores the meaning of the Renaissance in Europe—considered as a new age of progress following the Middle Ages—looking at the parallel and revolutionary developments in agriculture and medicine in China.

Susanto repainted the works made by Western painters in the era of 16th century Renaissance, trying to build a correlation between the ancient text *Babad Kawung*, also known as the *History of the Origin of Javanese and Chinese* [1]. This semi-fictional chronicle describes the Chinese migration through Yunnan before arriving at

Chinese [1]. This semi-fictional chronicle describes the Chinese migration through Taiwan before arriving at Nusa-Kendheng, arguing that Indonesians descended from Southern Chinese.



Richie Nath, Lovers, 2020, acrylic on canvas. Image courtesy of the artist.

Richie Nath: The Burmese's Revamp of the Queer

Burmese painter of Indian origins Richie Nath brings queer elements into Hindu mythology. "Growing up in Yangon, in a conservative society where homosexuality is seen as a crime, I wanted to re-appropriate my identity and cultural heritage as a Burmese gay man," he explains. The artist started to paint during his time in university, and as the general mentality started opening up, right before the February 2021 coup in Myanmar, he was able to exhibit his work in Yangon.

Nath's aesthetics uses a blend of traditional Burmese and Indian styles and techniques to portray powerful women, sensual men, and tender homoerotic scenes. Some of his paintings bear the mark of his studies as a fashion designer, evoking the flat sensibility of pop advertisements from the 1950s and 1960s. The focus of his latest series of paintings is the freedom of the bodies from heteronormative oppression. "I was heavily influenced by Egyptian and Greek mythology, which shaped my current conception of art. Ancient Greek statues in particular left a strong imprint on my artistic imagination, in terms of representing the male as an object of desire."

Currently based in Paris to escape the dire situation in his country, Nath's art is not merely a stylistic expression of the individual; after the coup, his painting subjects became overtly political. The series he is currently working on features characters taking a bold, pro-democracy stand against violence and persecution.

[1] According to the artist's press release

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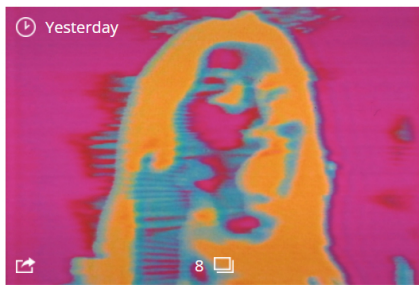
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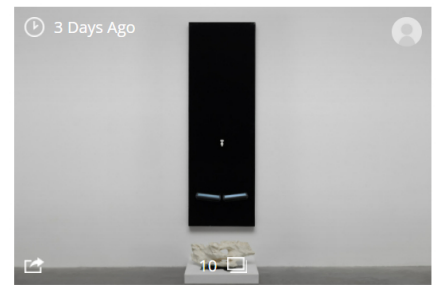
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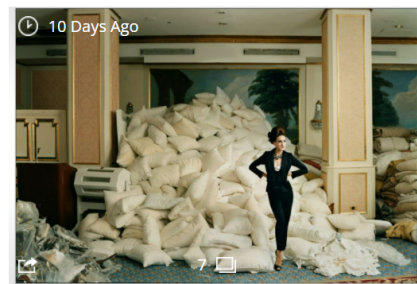
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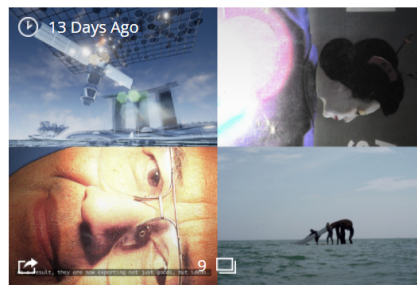
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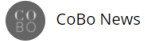
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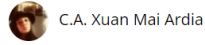
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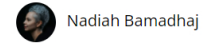
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