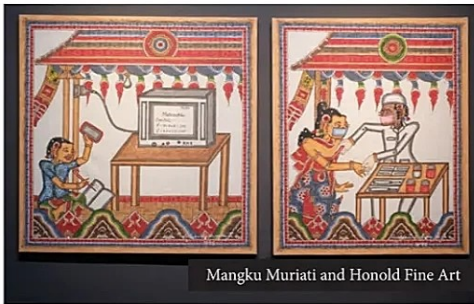


Art beyond tourism

Naima Morelli

A paradise island, an island of demons, a tropical haven; Bali is known as everything but the centre of the Indonesian art scene. Undoubtedly, there is more contemporary buzz in Jakarta, home to fairs, galleries and museums, Yogyakarta, where all the major artists have big studios, and Bandung, where new talents and critical discourses emerge. That said, Bali is still home to a thriving community of local artists with international pedigrees, all actively working from the island, opening their studios to visitors and fostering a local art community.

“The Balinese art scene is different from Jakarta, Yogyakarta and Bandung, as the Balinese art scene has long been supported and fuelled by its strong tourism industry,” says Suriawati Qiu Chunyang, founder of CushCush Gallery, which alternates between shows by local artists and activities geared towards the community. Given this link to tourism, it’s only natural that spaces in Bali tend to create ties between the local art scene and the international realm.



Mangku Muriati and Honold Fine Art

‘Connected’ (2022) and ‘The Year Of The Tiger’ (2023) by Mangku Muriati

Among them is V-Rooms, dedicated to showcasing the works of both established Indonesian artists like Heri Dono and artists, like female priestess and painter Mangku Muriati, who work outside the mainstream contemporary art circuit. The space was founded by Ubud-based Marco Cassani, in collaboration with Jakarta-born artist Fendry Ekel and supported by the Balinese gallery Honold Fine Art.

Among the recent group shows presented by V-Rooms and hosted by BIASA Art—one of the pioneering spaces in Bali—is *Face To Face*, displaying different conceptions of portraits as presented in visual art: from straightforward representation to self-reflection or projection, as an icon or as a symbol.

“Everyone from the art world is stopping by Bali for [their] holiday,” says Cassani, who explains that this was how the scene had initially developed. “However, the lack of tourism during the pandemic allowed for a more genuine and authentic expression of Balinese artistry, which is blooming in today’s post-pandemic times.”

The Italian artist Filippo Sciascia’s work revolves around the study of light through painting and installation. “I’m working between figuration and abstraction,” he explains from his studio in Ubud. “What interests me is to capture the transitional process from one medium to another, amalgamating pixels, lines and forms.” He has become an active participant in the local art scene, founding Gaya Gallery in 1998. The space ran for ten years, providing a platform for local Balinese artists while also providing residency opportunities for other Indonesian artists like Jumaldi Alfi, Ugo Untoro, S. Teddy Darmawan and Eko Nugroho.



Heri Dono and Honold Fine Art

‘Wayang Re-PLAY’ (2014) by Heri Dono

Bali also breeds original discourse on Southeast Asian art, thanks to feminist artists like Citra Sasmita and Satya Cipta. These two artists are challenging the norms of patriarchal Balinese and Indonesian society, providing feminist retellings of Balinese mythology. Their work, showcased regularly in galleries and fairs across Southeast Asia, contributes significantly to altering perceptions of the role of women within Balinese society.

“I see that Balinese women are not happy about their lives, because of the oppressive culture limiting their freedom and social obligations,” says Satya, who had her first big solo at Lawangwangi Creative Space in Bandung in November 2023. “My starting point is talking with the women here in Bali, whether they’re priestesses or farmers, asking about their life and then depicting the truth of their experiences using traditional painting techniques.”

A favourite at biennales around the world—from San Paolo in Brazil to Diriyah in Saudi Arabia—Citra is one of the most prominent Balinese artists today. Her work reinterprets traditional painting and Hindu epics.

“We grew up learning about male heroism. In traditional texts, female characters appear only as objects of conquest and sexuality,” says Citra. “I’m creating counter-narratives by placing female characters as the protagonists in mythological stories.”



Satya Cipta

‘Tedong Teken Langit’ by Satya Cipta

The feminist traditions of the island can be traced back to I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasih (Murni), an artist who died in 2006. Her art explores personal and gender issues, serving as a form of therapy and a retelling of her life—a history replete with beauty as well as trauma—with a colourful, fluid style.

Her work has recently been recognised as seminal in the development of contemporary Indonesian art, resulting in an acquisition by the Tate Modern.

Another line of exploration in contemporary Balinese art is the devastation of the local tourism industry as well as the environmental pollution that is destroying Bali’s beaches.

Made Bayak is a pioneer on this theme, particularly with his multimedia project *Plasticology*, associated with an educational campaign against plastic trash. “I started to make art related to plastic issues back in 2001,” he says. “The first plastic-related project, I imagined a future where plastic polluted the earth, and the artefacts that humans of the future will find won’t be stone tools, but plastic objects.”



JWD Artspace Loredana Pazzini Paracciani

‘Timur Merah Project VI: Tidings of The Heavens’ by Citra Sasmita

Today Made creates objects and sculptures using waste and ready-made materials, often shaping them into images of Balinese dancers and other symbols of the local heritage menaced by mass tourism.

The Canadian-Indonesian Ari Bayuaji has also devoted himself to the issue of pollution, especially with his artwork ‘Weaving the Ocean’ presented at the art fair ART SG in January, for which he collaborated with Balinese artisans to transform plastic waste into textile art.

“The issue of plastic waste first came to my attention in 2015 when I photographed a mangrove tree covered with plastic,” he says. “In Bali I observed coils of colourful plastic rope wrapped around vegetation on the beach, often entangled with other found objects or marine life such as corals.”

While addressing the pollution of oceans and the destruction of marine life the approach is to transform the “negative” into a “positive”, creating beautiful weaved artwork out of discarded material. In this way, he draws on the ethos of Balinese philosophy, which seeks to balance the energies of the universe.

“Whether artists or art workers, Balinese are learning that they can’t just rely on one single source, which is tourism,” says Suriawati from CushCush Gallery. “We are increasingly reflecting on how to make better moves for the future, and bring them into fruition.” □

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