

CITRA SASMITA ODE TO THE SUN

10 Jan - 29 Feb 2020



Be greeted by the scent of turmeric and herbs when you step in to the gallery, as part of an immersive art piece. Have all your preconceived notions about Balinese art upended as Yeo Workshop presents *Ode To The Sun*, a solo exhibition by the maverick young Balinese artist Citra Sasmita

Turmeric is traditionally used for rituals and its bright yellow colour symbolizes the sun, hence giving the exhibition its title. The artist used the spice to write text on the floor as part of her work entitled *Prologue*. The text is taken from the *Kakawin*, an ancient Balinese narrative poetry. The scents and text are accompanied by brightly painted traditional Kamasan canvases suspended in a large circular structure. A rare exception in the otherwise male dominated world of Balinese art, Citra Sasmita challenges the patriarchal nature of Indonesian society. Her artwork unequivocally rejects the ubiquitous aesthetic depiction of Balinese women as passive decorative elements that exist primarily for the gratification of the tourist gaze. Consummately utilizing traditional elements that have been selected from the ancient but vibrant cultural legacy of Bali, Sasmita endows her female figures with a powerful agency.

The artwork of Sasmita is motivated on a fundamental level by the need to forge a connection with her past. This sentiment is clearly manifested in her various artworks that incorporate narratives from classical Balinese literature, and elements of traditional Balinese aesthetic conventions. Nevertheless, Sasmita departs from the canon of conventional Balinese art by producing artwork that often castigates the pervasive sexual and social inequality that is so deeply ingrained in Balinese society. She wishes to trace marginalized narratives of women in particular, who once played a key role in Balinese societies and held influential positions.

The themes that frequently recur in her artwork stem from Sasmita's deeply rooted feminist convictions and her determination to resist what she regards as the overweening patriarchalism of a conservative society. Sasmita's paintings are frequently dominated by the figures of nude women. Depicted in bright and vivid tones, these female characters are often portrayed as the heroic protagonist in conjunction with potent symbols that have been selected from the primeval realm of Balinese mysticism. Sasmita paints on a variety of mediums, ranging from canvas to leather. However, as a versatile artist, Sasmita has also ventured into the realm of the three dimensional as evinced by her creation of installations. These installations incorporate discarded materials such as words written in turmeric, natural fibers, and pieces of meat, striving to convey themes linked with female solidarity and empowerment. At a previous solo exhibition entitled "*Under the Skin*", one such installation consisted of vegetable fibers that had been woven together. Representing a braid of human hair, it alludes to the story of Drupadi from the Hindu epic known as the *Mahabharata*. Dishonored in public by the Kaurava brothers, Drupadi undertook a vow never to braid her hair again until her tormentors had been slain. Sasmita hence uses this mythical reference to symbolize female resistance in the face of ongoing efforts to suppress women.

Ode To The Sun is the third part of the *Timur Merah Project* that Sasmita previously presented in *Biennale Jogja XV 2019*. The exhibition turns a critical gaze upon the world of traditional Balinese literature which has historically confined itself to celebrating the exploits of male aristocrats while excluding female voices. Invoking a Balinese past characterised by the existence of powerful female rulers such as the 19th century queen, *Dewa Istri Kanya*, Sasmita transforms classic narratives of war and romance by imbuing them with a female perspective.

BETWEEN TREES AND THE SUN, WOMEN DO STAND BY HERSELF

By Alia Swastika

Dismantling the narration of historical canon using a feminist perspective is not merely changing the existing important figures with women's body and thought. It is considerably a deeper process which tries to deconstruct the social system and people's way of thinking by referring to historical narratives instead of changing the existing figures and accommodating gender-based characters. Therefore, the artists who work to dismantle and re-write historical narratives usually re-read the unbalanced and raise new perspectives on women figures by acknowledging their agency.

Citra Sasmita, a Balinese artist, not only tries to re-read the historical canon on how women are positioned within a certain socio-political context, but also indirectly explores the path of art history—which is also patriarchy biased. She has been running this reading project for about five to six years, and during the last two years of the project, she intensified the process whose result was presented in Biennale Jogja XV Equator #5.

The historical canons in Indonesia are mostly produced by the highest power—written by kingdom poets or philosophers circulating around the power. One of the most referred canons is called Babad or Kitab. This kind of text is used as a historical reference for the next generation. It means those Kitabs have “institutionalized” a patriarchal system, and they are supported by the power to be considered the truth.

Citra is interested in Kitab Kakawin written during the Javanese Hindu era and brought to Bali as a canon. Preserved in kingdoms, up to now this kitab is also considered one of the highest achievements of Javanese Literature. Kakawin is often seen as a source of knowledge to study the life of ancient Javanese and Balinese. While actually a fiction based on the life in a palace, it is viewed as a depiction of life in the mentioned context. Therefore, exploring Kakawin as a main source to see women's position in the social life of ancient Balinese, Citra realizes that there exists a border: it's a social life in a palace culture written in men's perspective (the writers who wrote the canon).

One important reference read by Citra is Helen Creese's book, *Perempuan dalam Dunia Kakawin: Perkawinan dan Seksualitas dalam Istana Indic Jawa dan Bali*. Creese presents detailed and comprehensive readings and observations on the way Kakawin texts build a particular imagination on how women view love, body, and sexuality within the constellation of their politics of gender. Creese writes the narratives that look into power and control as the distinctive aspects in discussing male and female sexuality. In her point of view, in kakawin, outside the marriage, all women are victim of sexuality (in the understanding that all women are merely being the object of sexual desire for men, not in their social capacity), where all her gestures and stories are projected by men (either male figures in the story or the male writers). In the opposite side, the power of male figures was staged to represent the power of human to be able to control their self and their desire. Even though most of the narratives in Kakawin depicted the story of women within the life of marriage, relationship and sexuality, Citra chooses to go beyond the interpretation of those domestic life, and tries to look into more the core of human existence and its relationship with nature and cosmology. And from here, I would like to connect her projects with the discourse of post-human and Anthropocene within feminist perspectives.

Two projects in this Timur Merah series reinterpret the ways women build authority in their daily life practices. First series was exhibited in *Projek Perupa Perempuan* at the Cipta Gallery Taman Ismail Marzuki, Jakarta Cultural Center. This was the first encounter to discuss further on the role of women in creating the life and civilization and how human connected to the earth. The second series was exhibited in *Biennale Jogja XV EQUATOR #5* where she pays more attention to bring the feminist interpretation of kakawin and to connect this with her experience of doing research at Sabah, Sarawak, where she found the traces of how female citizen in indigenous community.

Now that she enters the third phase of the project, she brings together this relationship between the interpretation of kakawin with those two discourses I mentioned above. In the third series, women's authority and role are constantly highlighted within their profoundly strong relation with nature and sources of life. This authority of nature also shows how women think and develop knowledge on life. However, unfortunately, their acts to think and produce knowledge are not recorded or are categorized as irrational. Citra and I spotted this on, for example, how women's utterances are placed in a group of bad images categorized as evil—Intan Paramadita calls this "demonizing women"—such as in the context of Durga and Calon Arang. For Citra, foregrounding women who are aware of their agency means to get close to the image of free thinking human, Descartes' "I think, therefore I am."

Fragments in Citra's works start from diverse decisive points in the history of human civilization where women contributed to the building of a life system; from when human recognized fire to producing food. In her paintings, we can also see women's instinct to work collectively, affirming the shared role and knowledge that support them. She seems want to underline this spirit of collectivity, in contrast with patriarch system where the King become the only patron of power; in women's world, this power is shared and distributed.

Citra's paintings split those complex narratives up to several fragments. She focuses on how women become an environment keeper through their activities, practices, and knowledge. In *The Age of Fire*, for instance, a woman figure is surrounded by fire from the flow of lava. This shape of fire is also often being used by Citra to replace the visual image of vagina, which at the same time evokes a sense where vagina could also be the central point of cosmic history. The close relation between women and fire generates the image of women as a witch or evil. The deconstruction of meaning on this type of stereotypical image is an important starting point to unravel the relation between human and nature in the context of both historical canon and today's capitalism.

In the structure of knowledge on nature and cosmos lived by Balinese people, the role of women's knowledge is also marginalized because women are viewed in the pragmatic tradition of productivity rather than as a center of knowledge. The effort to uphold the rights of women's knowledge also means the effort to raise the relation between women's body and nature that has been repressed by the patriarchal system for a long time. Vandana Shiva's *Ecofeminism* written two decades ago is still relevant if not more relevant today. She said, "A model of capitalist patriarchy which excludes women's work and wealth creation in the mind deepens the violence by displacing women from their livelihoods and alienating them from the natural resources on which their livelihoods depend—their land, their forests, their water, their seeds and biodiversity." Citra's interpretation towards women's role in the cosmological narratives seemed to be the realization of this Shiva's utopia. Twisting the role of women in *Kakawin* as she does, in a way, become another manifesto of ecofeminism as idealized by Shiva.

For me, there are several intriguing questions to answer: how to visually express the ideas of "deconstruction and gender reposition"? Is incorporating woman figures already a progressive step? Let alone Citra wanted to reread how women are depicted in Balinese traditional paintings. How to make a "feminist twist" in a work? I then invited Citra to discuss women's body and how women's naked body are presented in various visual traditions. How does Citra take a critical position towards "nudity"? How to present agency in the replication of nudity in her works?

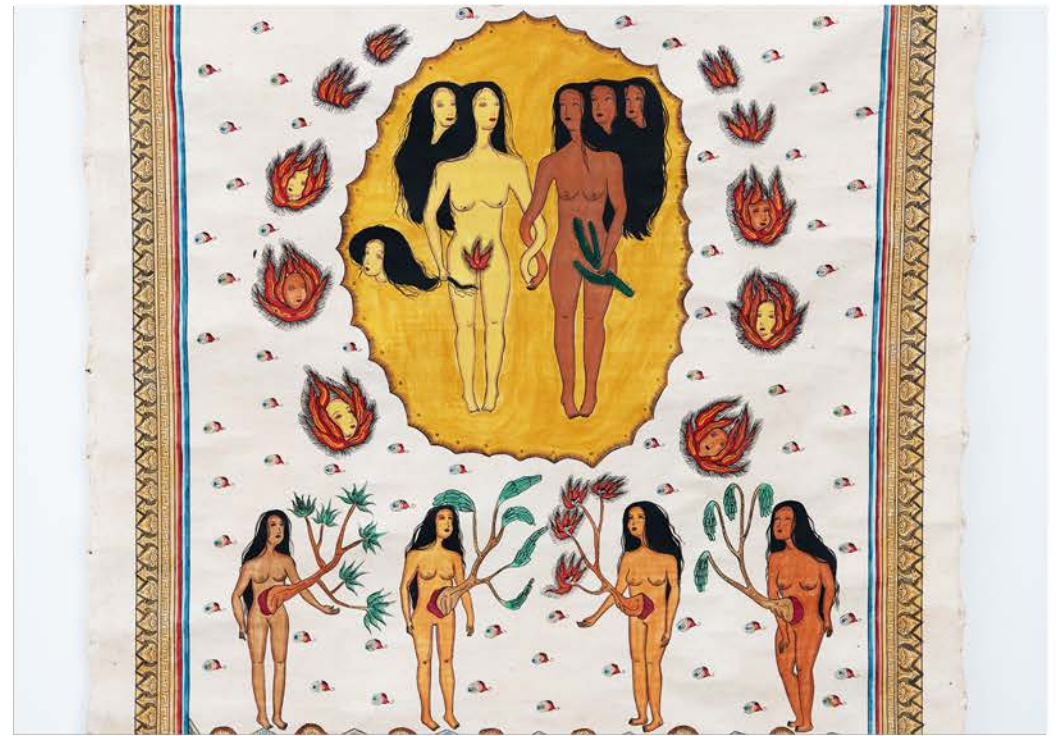
In various visual traditions around the world, women's body are presented naked to show men's sexual desire. In *Kitab Kakawin*, women's body is often associated with nature; one organ is associated with fruits, for instance, or a woman is wearing natural jewelry. Citra tries to break the body free from the connotation of sexual power and desire, and place it in a more anthropocentric context, designating a purer human existence. In some figures, their bodies are made as having a lot of organs, like with two or three heads, and several hands. While Citra might not mean what I interpret, her depiction of women's body with several heads and hands leads me to the image of post-human. There are recurrent symbols, like fire and trees, that direct me to think them as an effort to underline the relation between women and nature.

The complexity between the Anthropocene, post-human, and feminism continuously presents in this exhibition. The historical canon *Kakawin* and the images of Kamasan painting are the gate for Citra to discuss something bigger. In this context, Citra's paintings are indeed based on Kamasan tradition; yet, it is not about taking inspiration from the tradition. It is an inseparable part of exploring those bigger themes and by doing so, she successfully avoids exoticism. As a part of today's generation that continuously searches for the meaning of painting or drawing, Citra used her encounter with Kamasan tradition as a medium before going into the big idea behind it. During her research on Kamasan painting, Citra met Mangku Muriati, a well-known Kamasan painter in Bali, and her interest in exploring the historical context of Kamasan came at the same time with her re-reading of *Kakawin* texts, not to forget her background as female Balinese that have had to learn all these traditions. Of course, using tradition as source of inspiration, or to twist the interpretation of tradition as a working method is not something merely new. During 1980s, there was this wave of Indonesian artists looking into tradition as their artistic approach, such as Heri Dono, Anusapati, Nindityo Adipurnomo and many others, which most of them depart from question of identity. In Citra Sasmita's, three decades after that wave, I see different spirit in working with tradition. She does not use tradition only to answer her questions of tradition and cultural roots, but she also uses it for politically twisting the stereotype of women, something that surely becomes urgent action in her Balinese environment. By making tradition as political statement, Citra turns away from the nostalgic and romantic feelings that usually become the starting point for this kind of "reinvention" act.



Prologue

2020 | Acrylic on Traditional Kamasan Canvas | 300 x 90 cm





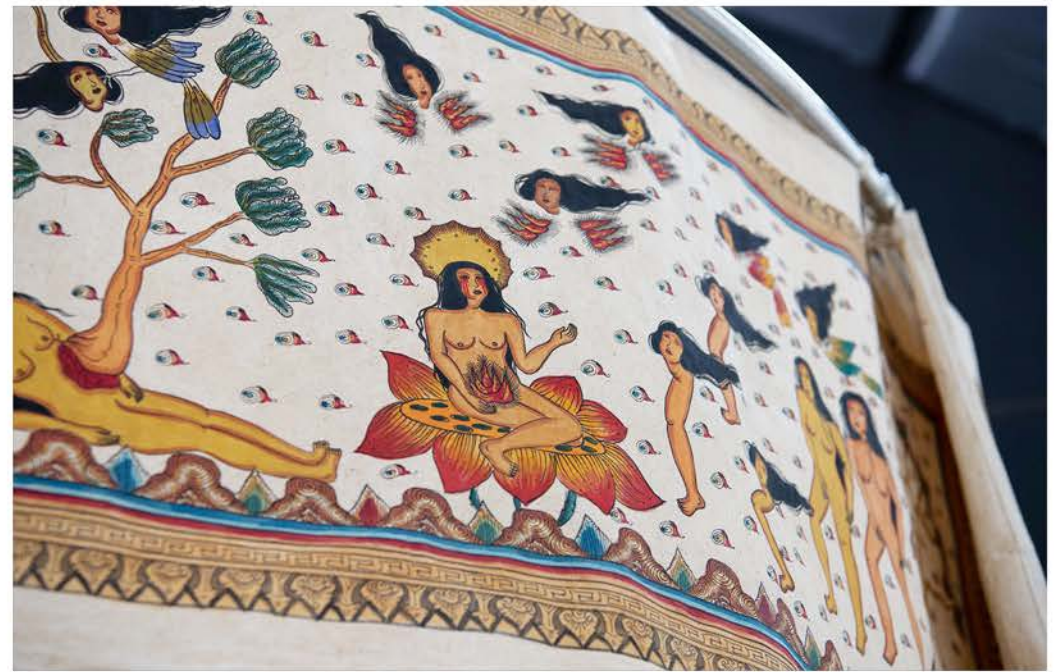
Ode to the Sun

2020 | Acrylic on Traditional Kamasan Canvas

First scroll 60 x 650 cm

Second scroll 60 x 450 cm

Third scroll 60 x 300 cm





Ya, ibu semesta dalam wujud yang tak terpikirkan sebagai Maha Pencipta segala kegaiban dan yang berwujud di muka dunia. Hanya atas restu dan anugerah-Mu maka kata-kata menjadi mata-air dan pengetahuan menjadi arusnya. Hakikat permulaan adalah keniscayaan, pada hari-hari yang tunduk akan waktu, pada sebuah adengan yang terampil dimainkan para penghuninya; antara memberi dan mencuri kehidupan. Tak ada banyak pilihan. Hutan dan gunung menyimpan musim-musim asing, yang menawarkan rasa dingin yang terlampau dingin atau terik yang menjadikan semua mahluk semakin fana, - semakin larut dengan usia dunia. Sedang hujan musim keempat bunga-bunga bermerkaran, semerbak dan larut dalam jingga pohon tangguli dirambati akar gadung yang bergelayut dan tumbuh subur. Musim terus berganti tanpa ada waktu panjang yang sia-sia, parah mahluk berbenih menjadi pepohonan, menjadi kehidupan yang menunggu untuk dinamai.

Thou Mother of Earth, Mother of Universe. The intangible unthinkable. As the almighty creator of all seen and the unseen above the world Only for Your blessing and grace. Then words become fountain and wisdom becomes the current The essence of the beginning is a necessity. As the days bend to the times In a scene which is expertly played by its inhabitants; Between giving and stealing lives, There aren't many choices. Forests and mountains keep the strange seasons. Which bring cold and brisk or sweltering heat. These make all beings mortal and dissolve with world lineage. Whereas the fourth season rains, flowers are blooms. Fragrant and soluble in the yellow of Tangguli tree. Inundated by the root Gadung tree that clings and thrives. The season continues without any futile time. All beings began to seed, into trees, into water, into fire. Into life that is waiting to be named



Song of Fire Blossom

2020 | Acrylic on Traditional Kamasan Canvas | 50 x 70 cm





Prophet and the Ghost

2020 | Acrylic on Traditional Kamasan Canvas | 50 x 70 cm





The Age of Fire

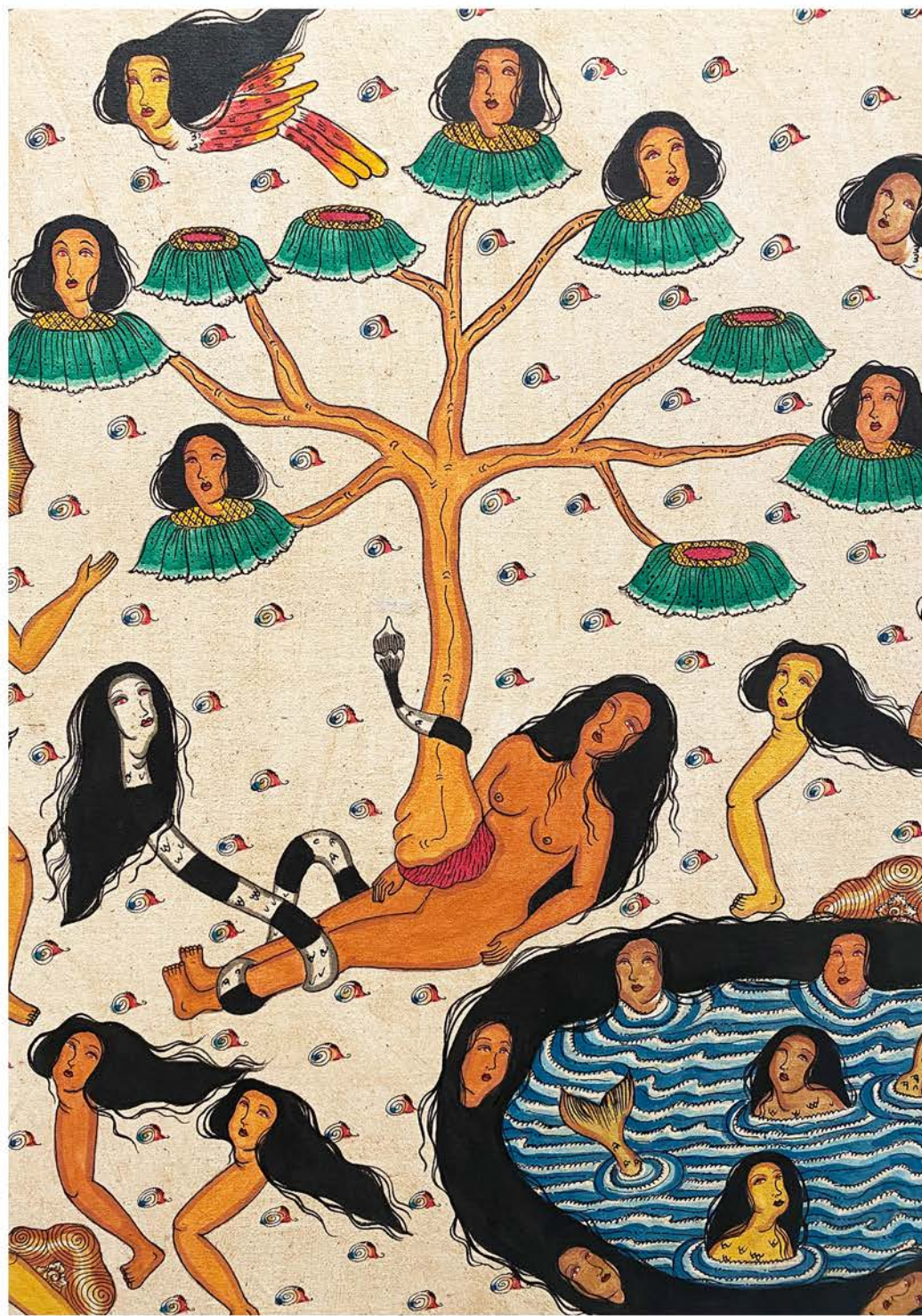
2020 | Acrylic on Traditional Kamasan Canvas | 70 x 90 cm





Season's Ballad

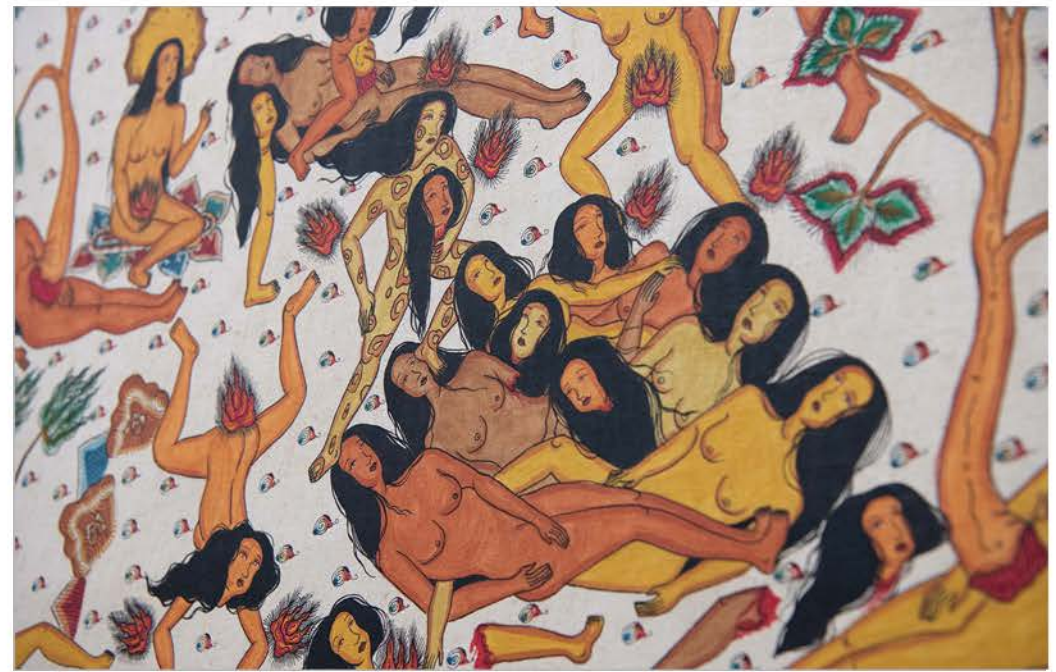
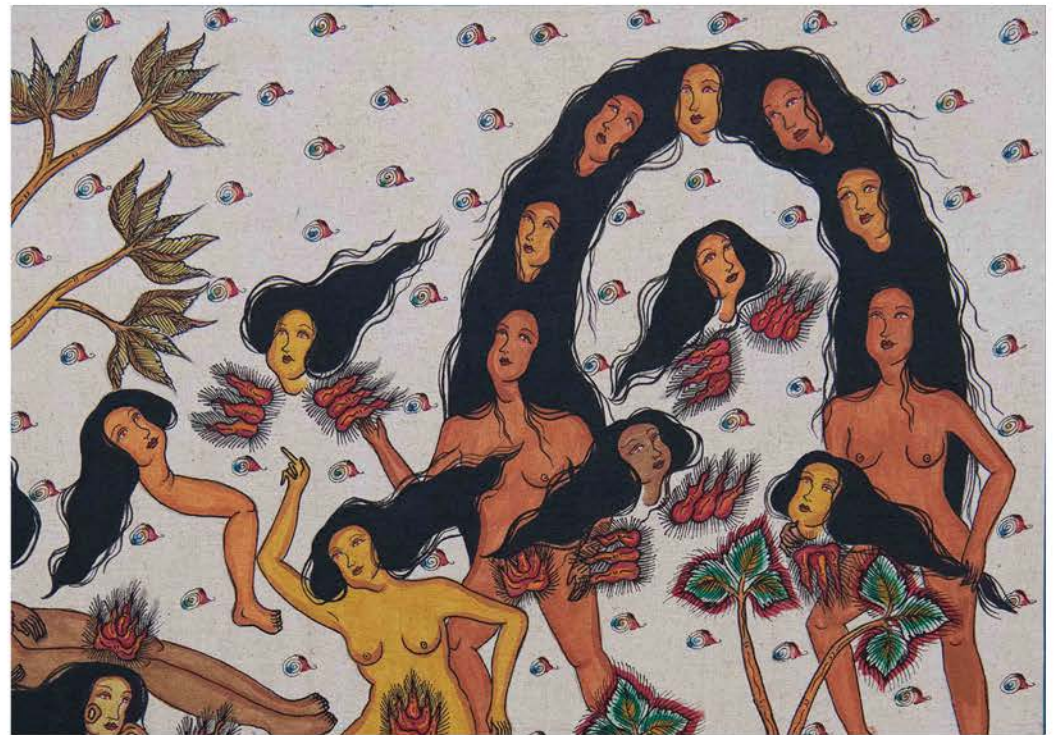
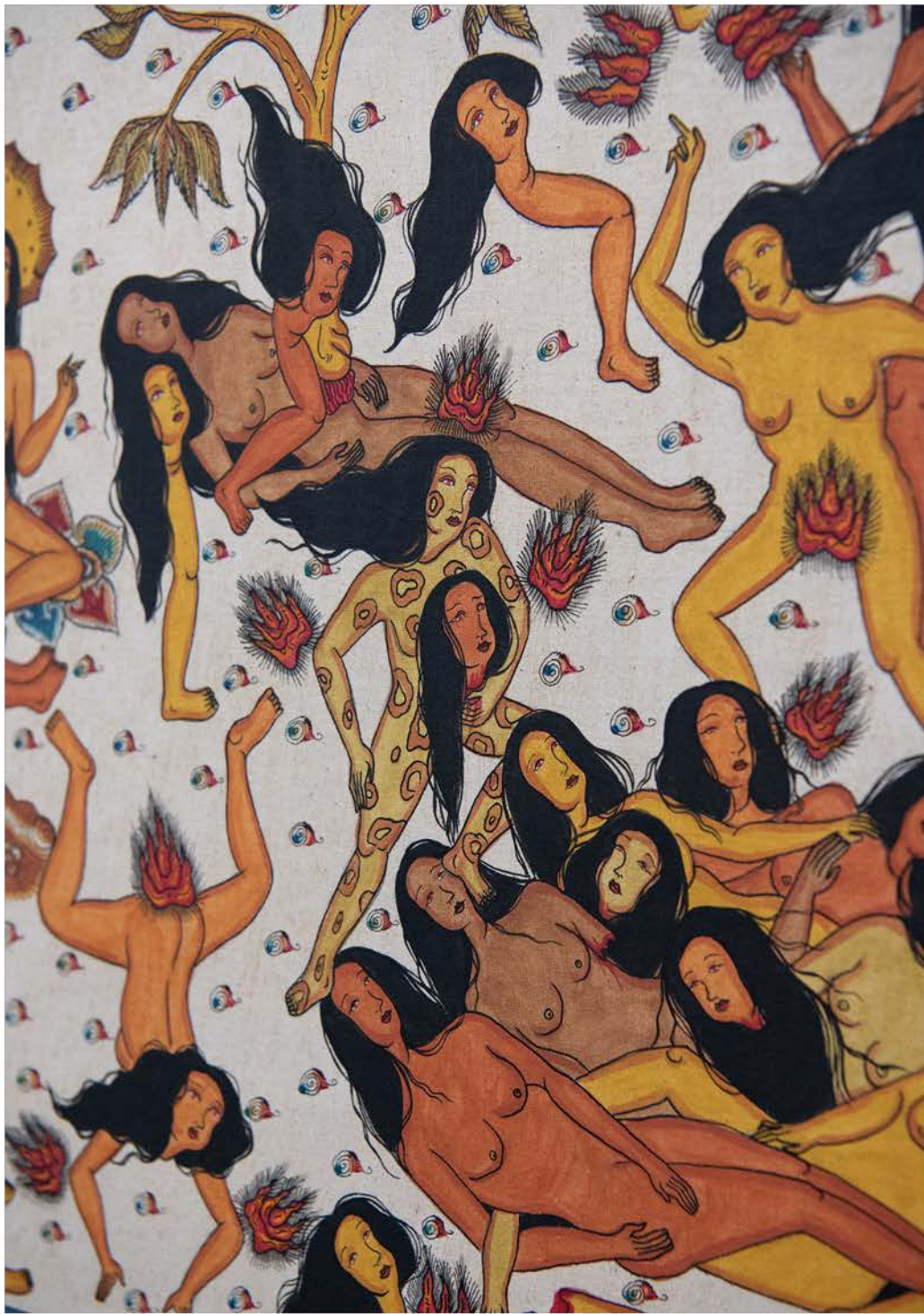
2020 | Acrylic on Traditional Kamasan Canvas | 70 x 90 cm





Limbo of the Mother

2020 | Acrylic on Traditional Kamasan Canvas | 70 x 90 cm



Citra Sasmita (b. 1990, Indonesia)

Citra Sasmita (b.1990, Indonesia) was born in Tabanan, Central Bali in 1990. Descended from a lineage of performing artists, Sasmita naturally developed a keen interest in art. However, she initially chose to study literature and physics at Udayana University and Ganesha University of Education respectively. But her interest in art was renewed when she chose to join a theatrical troupe as a university student.

Sasmita's subsequent occupation as an illustrator for the Bali Post provided her with the opportunity to develop her abilities as an artist and she soon began to participate in exhibitions. Her aforementioned immersion in the respective fields of literature and physics influenced Sasmita's decision to produce artwork that addressed contentious social issues. In 2016, she garnered the attention of art critics when she exhibited a painting that depicted a woman kissing the severed head of a pig. Intended to serve as an indictment of the widespread abuse of women in Balinese society, the painting affirmed Sasmita's credentials as a courageous and socially conscious artist who was not afraid to take on controversial topics. She thereafter went on to exhibit an installation entitled "Mea Vulva, Maxima Vulva" which featured an assortment of ceramic vaginas together with a set of scales. Embodying Sasmita's musings upon the entrenched social inequalities within Balinese society, the installation further augmented her reputation as an artist who was determined to explore the less savoury aspects of Balinese culture.

She has participated in various exhibitions such as Merayakan Murni, Sudakara Artspace Sanur Bali (2016), Mablesikan Project, Art for Social Change Presentation, Jakarta (2017) and Synthesis (Wonders of Indonesia), Bulgaria, (2019). Her most recent solo exhibition called "Under the Skin", was held at the Yogyakarta based Redbase art institution in 2018. In 2017, she was awarded the Gold Award after winning the UOB Indonesian Painting of the Year competition, a milestone that cemented her stature as a rapidly rising figure within the contemporary Indonesian art world.



CITRA SASMITA
ODE TO THE SUN

10 JANUARY TO 29 FEBRUARY 2020





Solo Exhibitions

- 2020** Ode to the Sun, Yeo Workshop, **Singapore**
2018 Under The Skin, Redbase Foundation, **Yogyakarta**
2017 Beauty Anatomy, Laramona, Ubud, **Bali**
2015 Maternal Skin, Ghostbird + Swoon, **Bali**

Group Exhibition

- 2019** Biennale Jojga, Do We Live In The Same Playground, Jogja National Museum
Bali Mega Rupa, Neka Museum, **Bali**
Siklus Buana, Gallery Cipta 2, **Dewan Kesenian Jakarta**
Nurture (Bumbon Project), Gallery Katamsi, **Yogyakarta**
I...Therefore I Am, Can's Gallery, **Jakarta**
Synthesis (Wonders Of Indonesia), National Gallery Kvadrat 500 Bulgaria
Self Field, Workshop, **Ubud Bali**
Exploration, Titian Art Space, **Ubud, Bali**
Tanda Seru, Uma Seminyak, **Seminyak, Bali**
Fundraising Bali Yang Binal, Cush Cush Gallery, **Denpasar, Bali**
- 2018** *Celebration of The Future*, AB.BC Building, **Nusa Dua**
Masa Subur; Efek Samping, Karja Art Space, **Ubud**
It's A Match By Indoartnow, **The Parlor Bandung**
Art Bazaar Jakarta, Booth A5 Presented By Uob Bank, **Pacific Place Jakarta**
REDRAW III: Ugahari, Edwin's Gallery, Kemang, **Jakarta**
Yogya Annual Art, Positioning, Sangkring Artspace, **Yogyakarta**
Form Of Diversity, **Redbase Foundation Yogyakarta**
- 2017** Finalist UOB Painting of The Year Exhibition, UOB Plaza, **Jakarta**
Kecil itu Indah #15, Edwin's Gallery, **Jakarta**
Yogya Annual Art #2, Bergerak, **Sangkring Art Space Yogyakarta**
Luwih Utamaning Luh, Taman Budaya Denpasar, **Bali**
Lady Fast Vol. 2, Spasial, **Bandung**
Imago Mundi, Bentara Budaya Jakarta, **Yogyakarta, Bali**
Mabesikan Project, Art for Social Change Presentation, **Salihara, Jakarta**

- 2016** *Crossing: Beyond Baliseering, 45downstairs, **Melbourne***
Merayakan Murni, Sudakara Artspace Sanur, **Bali**
Bhatari Art Project, Art For Social Change, Kedisan village, **Kintamani-Bali**
Mabesikan Festival-Art For Social Change, Desa Budaya Kertalangu, **Bali**
WOI (*Wall of Indonesia*), Bloo Artspace, **Bali**
Personal Line, Sudakara Art Space Sanur, **Bali**
- 2015** *Violent Bali*, Tony Raka Gallery, **Bali**
Makassar Biennale Trajectory, **Makassar**
PSOFA (Portable Sculpture Object Functional Art), Sudakara Art Space Sanur, **Bali**

Award

- 2017** Gold Winner UOB Painting of The Year
2016 Finalis Kompetisi Karya Trimatra Salihara, Jakarta
2015 Semifinalist BaCAA#4 (Bandung Contemporary Art Award #4)

Residency

- 2019** Residensi Jogja Biennale di Kota Kinabalu, Sabah-Malaysia supported by Bekraf, Jogja Biennale, and Vallentine Willie
2018 Artist in residence, Red Base Foundation Yogyakarta
2017 Festival Bangsal Menggawe (Kolaborasi Seniman dan Masyarakat), Pemenang, Lombok Utara *supported by* Komunitas Pasir Putih dan Koalisi Seni **Indonesia**

Performance Art

- 2018** Performance Art “Synthetic Apriory” Collaboration with Andita Purnama, Masa Subur; Efek Samping Exhibition, Karja Art Space, **Ubud**
2016 Performance Art “Pursuing Case of Identity at Censor, Ari Banyuaji’s solo exhibition, Red Base, **Jogjakarta**

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