

Narrating Balinese Contemporary Art:
'Women Who Carry the Mountain'
in the Art of Devotion



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First and foremost, the title of this essay, *Women Who Carry the Mountain*, is drawn from my solo exhibition in Singapore in early 2026. The exhibition featured paintings on Kamasan canvas as well as paintings on cowhide, which had previously been exhibited at the Hawai'i Triennial 2025 in Honolulu and on Kona Island under the title *Tribe of Fire*. Through the presentation of these works, I attempt to map the collective practices and esoteric configurations of societies living within the ring of volcanoes and the sea—two axes that shape both agrarian and maritime cultures. From this point, I examine the relationship between humanity and nature, particularly the vital role of Balinese women as guardians and inheritors of tradition and ecology. This knowledge has become a deeply rooted structure of thought, not merely on a practical level, but also within an essential realm closely tied to how Balinese society navigates religious symbols, myths, and spiritual ethics as manifested in ritual representations and sociocultural contexts. In this exhibition, I brought forth ancient narratives of cosmological creation, notably the mythology of *Bedawang Nala*.



Figure 1. *Timur Merah Project XIV: Tribe of Fire*. Painted cowhide with beads and charcoal, ALOHA NŌ, Hawai'i Triennale 2025, Honolulu Museum of Art. Courtesy of the artist.

Bedawang Nala, a giant turtle, planted its feet firmly on the earth. Supporting the universe, its form is entwined by three dragons that guard the sea, land, and sky: *Basuki*, *Taksaka*, and *Antaboga*. These dragon figures serve as guardians of cosmic balance, profoundly revered as sacred symbols and protectors of the earth from destruction. These mythological entites act as the foundations of the material world, *Bhur Loka*,¹ inhabited by humans alongside the uncertainties and mortal realities that constitute the inevitable fate of the world. In the Balinese worldview, when the turtle shifts, the earth quakes in response. The earthquakes that ensue often serve as an omen that the volcano is awakening from its dormant state to spew magma from deep within its belly. The release of *Bedawang Nala* from the binding embrace of the dragons is believed to foretell catastrophe for those who dwell beneath the shadow of the mountain.



Figure 2. *Bedawang Nala* statue at Puri Gde Karangasem. Stills from *Timur Merah Project VIII: Pilgrims, How Do You Journey?*, dual-channel video art commissioned by NTU CCA Singapore, 2023. Copyright the artist.

¹ In Hindu mythology, three interconnected realms form the cosmic order: *Bhur Loka*, the material world and human realm; *Bwah Loka*, the liminal realm braidging the physical world and the ancestral spirit realm; and *Swah Loka*, the celestial upper realm inhabited by gods and goddesses.

I have often heard stories about the catastrophic eruption of Mount Agung in 1963. At the time, the Balinese people were conducting the *Eka Dasa Rudra* ceremony at Besakih Temple, a cosmic purification ritual performed only once every century. This eruption became the largest in recorded history, darkening the island of Bali for several months, triggering crop failures, and claiming countless lives. Remarkably, when the explosion occurred, the traditional priests and spiritual leaders remained steadfast, continuing the ritual. To them, the dense ash clouds and searing lava were the divine manifestation of *Ida Bhatara*² arriving to purify the earth. The phenomenon was believed to be an answer to their prayers, as well as a signifier marking the beginning of a new cycle of life after the land of Bali had long harboured deep trauma from one historical upheaval after another.

Amidst this dark chapter in Balinese history, there lies an intriguing historical narrative regarding the King of Klungkung, Ida I Dewa Agung Gde Oka Geg (1897–1964). Possessing immense spiritual strength, he was believed to have negotiated directly along the path threatened by lava with the ruling deity of Mount Agung. According to oral histories passed down by elders in Klungkung, the king uttered a brief petition to Bhatara Gunung Agung, "*Mbok, tyang kari muspa, sampunang memargi mriki*" (Older sister, I am still praying, do not pass through here). This event demonstrates that a king's sovereign power was tested not merely within the sociopolitical realm, but was also proven through spiritual sovereignty. Miraculously, the flow of scorching lava and volcanic ash parted, turned, and redirected its course, sparing sacred sites such as Besakih Temple and the settlements of Klungkung, thereby saving the Balinese people from imminent danger and complete devastation. Ida I Dewa Agung Gde Oka Geg was seen as having performed a sacred service (*ngayah*) to protect the people of Bali from cosmic catastrophe. Consequently, after his passing, the Balinese community revered him as a sacred ancestor and bestowed the title *Ida Bhatara Mampeh*.

² A reverent title addressed to the Supreme God, guardian deities, or venerated ancestral spirits within the Balinese spiritual tradition.



Figure 3. Eruption of Mount Agung, 1963. Photograph by Božidar Pahor (*Po južni Aziji*, 1964). Public domain.

This spiritual reverence is deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of the Nusantara, particularly within Balinese Hindu cosmology, which perceives the universe and mountains as living entities possessing feminine characteristics, compassion, and immense power. Therefore, the relationship formed between humanity and the universe is often personified to resemble interpersonal kinship, including in the representation of royal politics. In this context, the universe is positioned as an unseen strategic partner centered around two primary coordinates: the mountain and the sea. This can easily be observed in the architectural axis of *puri* (the royal palace), constructed along the connecting pathway between the mountain and the sea, to solidify its position as the guardian of the connection between these two natural entities. Through this cosmological lens, the relationship between human rulers and natural forces is framed not as conquest, but rather as an intimate dialogue between a child and a spiritual mother figure.

Indeed, the affectionate term "*Mbok*" (older sister), uttered by the king, reflects a direct acknowledgment of the *Pradhana* aspect (the feminine) of the universal realm, embodied as a nurturing and protective maternal presence. Here, the king's sincere plea is able to appeal to nature's maternal instinct for the safety of his descendants on earth.

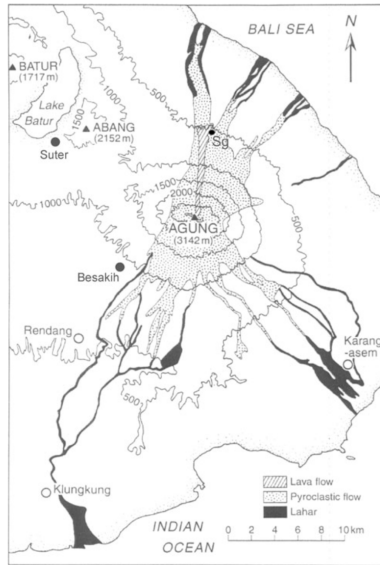


Figure 4. Map of the Mount Agung vicinity, eastern Bali, showing the extent of the 1963 lava flow (cross-hatched), pyroclastic flow deposits (stippled), and lahar deposits (dark shading) of the 1963–1964 eruption (after an unpublished map courtesy of the Indonesian Volcanological Survey). Reproduced from Self and Rampino (2012), *Bulletin of Volcanology*.

This cosmic intimacy with the mountain does not negate the maritime character inherent to the kingdoms of Nusantara, but instead complements it in a harmonious, complementary dualism. Within the historical and cultural landscape of Balinese maritime tradition, the feminine mountain is continually paired with the sea as the epicenter of dynamic political and economic power. If the mountain is revered as *hulu* (the spiritual stream) which flows with fertility, then the sea is both *muara* (the estuary) and cosmopolitan gateway where the tangible power of the kingdom is articulated through maritime trade networks and inter-island diplomacy. Accordingly, for Balinese *puri*

such as Klungkung, which inherited the supremacy of Majapahit, political authority rested not only on the ability to control ports and sea trade routes, but also on the royal leader's skill in preserving the sacred axis of *Segara Gunung* (Mountain-Sea). The king acted as a cosmic mediator, bringing together the fertility energy from *hulu* (mountains) with the material prosperity from *hilir* (sea). Through the alignment of these two realms, a maritime kingdom not only appeared mighty on the coasts and seas, but also gained solid spiritual legitimacy from the inland, affirming that the political sovereignty of maritime Nusantara has always been rooted in the sacred blessings of the earth and its volcanoes.

The reign of Queen of Klungkung Ida I Dewa Agung Istri Kanya in the mid-19th century marks one of the most crucial periods in historical accounts, as she stands as the sole female figure recorded to have ruled this kingdom. During that era, the political representation of femininity was not merely manifested through ecological symbols in every major royal ritual, but was also actively embodied in her leadership policies, which were oriented toward maritime culture. When Dewa Agung Istri Kanya ascended the throne in 1815, she inherited not just political authority, but also a formidable network of legitimacy drawn from two major royal lineages. Both of her grandfathers hailed from the power circles of Klungkung and Karangasem, two political epicenters that held significant influence extending as far as the Kingdom of Lombok at the time. As the sole grandchild of the official queen consort, I Gusti Ayu Pelung, she secured exceptionally strong genealogical roots. From an early age, she also received intellectual guidance from Ida Pedanda Pidada, a *Bhagawanta Senopati* who would later become her chief advisor and *guru nabe*³ upon her coronation as queen. From this background, Dewa Agung Istri Kanya emerged as a female ruler who possessed bloodline legitimacy, education, and political competence.

In her political strategy, culture served as a vital element in building knowledge and elevating the prestige of the kingdom. She expanded access for the general public to engage with literary traditions through the arts of *kidung*

³ A title bestowed upon a Balinese Hindu priest who holds the spiritual authority to guide, test, purify, and initiate a candidate into priesthood through the *diksa* ceremony. Within Balinese history, this role parallels the spiritual and political legitimacy bestowed upon Ida I Dewa Agung Istri Kanya. The bond between a *guru nabe* and their disciple is considered sacred and lifelong.

and *kakawin*. The *Kidung Wargasari* remains one of her legacies, transmitting ecological knowledge within religious rituals and cultural spaces across Bali. Within this same context, the ceiling paintings of the Kertagosa can be interpreted as an educational medium for the public to comprehend religious values. In that space, visual art functioned as a language of power to impart values, reinforce political order, and reignite the *taksu*⁴ of Kamasan painting, which had temporarily dimmed following the reign of the Gelgel Kingdom.



Figure 5. Ceiling painting of Bhima Swarga at Kertha Gosa, Klungkung. Copyright the artist.

During her reign, she established Puri Kusamba, situated along the coastal zone, as a political and economic hub, while the primary *puri* in the city center served as the core for cultural development. This policy orientation was grounded in the multicultural demographics of the Klungkung society, which comprised both indigenous Hindu Balinese and a Muslim community that had been established several centuries prior. For crucial state affairs, she even employed a descendant of the Banjar Kingdom—who represents the

⁴ Within Balinese artistic discourse, *taksu* represents a transcendental spiritual-aesthetic force. This power is believed to be a divine manifestation acquired through innate talent, rigorous discipline, and ritual sincerity. *Taksu* elevates an artistic creation beyond a mere aesthetic product, imbuing it with a magical presence, a sacred vibration, and a living soul that animates the artwork.

forebears of the Muslim community in Kusamba—as a translator of Malay and Dutch for diplomatic purposes. The presence of this translator demonstrates that the Klungkung court during her era maintained strong connections with the outside world through language, diplomacy, and trade.



Figure 6. Anonymous Kamasan painting depicting a Balinese trading scene, probably early 19th century. Collection of the Honolulu Museum of Art. Copyright the artist.

The ports under Klungkung's influence functioned as hubs of intercultural interaction, uniting seafarers from diverse regions while serving as vital transit routes for goods originating from Bima, Sumba, Lombok, and Sumbawa bound for Bali. These ports also functioned as the primary gateway for the import and export of agricultural and livestock commodities from Klungkung itself. For centuries, the waters of Nusantara had become a major thoroughfare for international traders seeking endemic commodities from the Indo-Pacific islands, including European traders such as the Dutch, Portuguese, and British. This policy reflected her political acuity in engaging with the economic and political power of foreign nations to leverage trade and diplomatic interests, while ensuring control over the port network remained firmly within the royal administration. The political situation in maintaining these relationships was not always stable; rather, it was marked by ebbs and flows that created tension on both sides.

In historical records, when confronting political pressure and threats of war from the Dutch, Dewa Agung Istri Kanya did not rely solely on armed forces. She also deployed ritual as a strategy to prevent the outbreak of military conflict between two sides, notably during the performance of the *meligya* ceremony for her father. *Meligya* is a grand ceremony to complete the funerary rites of a royal figure, requiring an extensive preparation period and the concentration of vast natural resources for ritual offerings. This ceremony demanded not only significant financial allocation but also presented immense difficulty in procuring the primary ceremonial offering: a rhinoceros.

Dewa Agung Istri Kanya subsequently set a condition for the political reconciliation between the two parties, requesting that the Dutch bring a rhinoceros from Ujung Kulon in 1839 as the primary offering for the series of rituals scheduled for 1842–1843. Furthermore, throughout the extended duration of the ritual preparations, the Klungkung court refused to engage in any political negotiations, maintaining that the kingdom's complete focus was directed toward spiritual obligations. In Balinese cosmology, during the timeframe of a ceremony, spanning from the initial preparation until the entire procession is fully concluded, it is strictly taboo to divert attention toward worldly matters, including politics. Such a distraction is believed to sever the chain of spiritual connection between humanity, ancestral spirits, and the deities. This event is recorded in the *Kidung*⁵ *Ligya Padem Warak*, which not only outlines the chronology of the ritual, detailing every stage from the preparation of offerings to the perilous strategies used to subdue the Javan rhinoceros as a substitute for the water buffalo in the post-cremation soul purification rites. The symbolic deployment of a wild beast far larger than a buffalo served to demonstrate the power and political strength of the Klungkung Kingdom. This event reveals that ritual was not merely a religious practice, but also a cosmological political language used to regulate the tempo of resistance and resilience against Dutch colonialism.

⁵ A sacred spiritual chant performed during sacred rituals, sung in Old Javanese (Kawi) or Ancient Balinese. Within the context of Balinese Hindu rituals, such as *Dewa Yadnya* and *Pitra Yadnya*, the chanting of *kidung* serves as an indispensable ceremonial invocation, creating a spiritual vibration that accompanies offerings presented to the deities or ancestors.



Figure 7. Fossilised rhinoceros cheek teeth from the 1842 *Meligya* ceremony, preserved by Puri Agung Klungkung and used exclusively for major rituals such as the *Rsi Gana* for the purification of *Bhuwana Agung*. Copyright the artist.

Ritual as the Transmission of Knowledge

From these two historical readings, it becomes evident that the Balinese people living in the Ring of Fire, surrounded by mountains and seas, do not view the natural reality solely as a seismic and volcanic threat. In this perspective, *Segara-Gunung* as a religious ideology serves as a benchmark for the interconnectedness between the microcosmic and macrocosmic bodies, as well as an existential marker for the Balinese people alongside the tragedies and wars of the past. It exists not merely as a geographic coordinate, but as a cosmological cycle that preserves knowledge, ancestral origins, and traditional technologies continuously practiced as a way of life. Within every ritual ceremony performed on specific sacred days, we witness how Balinese women transmit knowledge and life philosophies through the medium of ceremonial offerings. These rituals, repeated continuously across generations, serve not only as a means of expressing gratitude to nature for sustaining life, but also as a way of granting nature the space to heal itself. Therefore, according to specific calculations, the performance of *pujawali* ceremonies within the social system of Balinese society can occur up to thousands of times a year.

Repetitive transmission through ritual represents an effort by the ancestors to shape bodily memory so that the knowledge, essential values of tradition, procedures, and processes are remembered with utmost precision. Thus, knowledge is not merely comprehended on practical and theoretical levels, but is holistically embodied within daily life and the mindset of the community. The intrinsic bond between traditional Balinese society and nature is represented through a cosmological perspective that unites the realms of *sekala* (the physical) and *niskala* (the metaphysical). In this context, ritual functions as a liminal point bridging the human world with the ancestral spirit realm. This cosmology designates the mountain as a sacred domain where the deities reside. Meanwhile, the rivers, forests, and the earth are personified as spiritual entities guarding the sanctity of nature; these spirits are often envisioned in the forms of sacred beings or mythological animals endowed with mystical powers. On the other hand, the sea is positioned as both the ultimate estuary and a portal to the afterlife.

Growing up and experiencing the reality of this tradition firsthand as an artist, I realized that all these cultural activities represent an empathetic discipline in treating nature as an autonomous subject that must be safeguarded for the common good. This structure of harmonious living is rooted in the philosophy of *Tri Hita Karana*, a concept of living in harmony between humanity and the Divine, between human beings, and between humanity and the natural environment. Reflecting upon this philosophy, I invite you to imagine what might unfold in a decade or even a century into the future. In the *lontar* manuscript *Roggha Sanghara Bhumi*, an ancient Balinese Hindu text containing teachings on environmental signs, the causes of the earth's degradation, and spiritual reconciliation to neutralize peril, the division of world eras is recorded alongside the phenomena and situations faced by humanity.

My teacher, Mangku Muriati, a Kamasan⁶ painter, reflects this prophecy in a painting spanning the cycle of *Catur Yuga*.⁷ This visual narrative depicting the world's eras opens with *Satya Yuga*, a golden age filled with enlightenment, peace, and spiritual nobility, a time when humanity lived free from disease, suffering, or hatred. Gradually, that moral purity eroded upon entering *Treta Yuga*, an era when humanity began to succumb to worldly desires for power, and Pandora's box of greed swung open. This era is vividly captured in the Ramayana epic, where Ravana's defeat was not marked by the death of his soul. His physical body may have been shattered by Rama's arrow, yet his ambition fragmented into billions of air bubbles—an invisible manifestation of wrath that spread and infected human minds across the globe. The cycle then rolled forward into *Dwapara Yuga*, an era depicted in the Mahabharata through the Bharatayuddha war between the five Pandavas as symbols of virtue and the hundred Kauravas representing human evil and malice. In this phase, truth remained only half intact. Humanity became trapped within binary oppositions between good and evil, left with few choices other than to accept the fate of injustice, dishonesty, and diseases that began to spread continuously.

The culmination is *Kali Yuga*, presenting an apocalyptic portrayal of environmental destruction—such as volcanic eruptions, forest fires, and flash floods—appearing much like a judgment upon a humanity submerged in greed, materialism, hypocrisy, and endless conflict. Through her brushstrokes, cosmic destruction unfolds in parallel with the moral degradation of humankind. Based on the texts and wisdom studied by Mangku Muriati, the duration of *Kali Yuga* is said to span 1,200 divine years, with a single divine year equivalent to 360 human years. This means that humanity must endure this dark age for 432,000 years; a purgatorial state spanning hundreds of millennia that living beings on earth must pass before the world finally completes its purification and gives birth to the dawn of a new golden age.

⁶ A village in Klungkung that serves as the historic epicenter of classical Kamasan *wayang* painting, a style that has developed in Bali since the 15th century. These paintings traditionally function as ceremonial media and as a means of transmitting knowledge derived from ancient manuscripts and ancestral wisdom.

⁷ Derived from the Sanskrit words *Catur* (meaning four) and *Yuga* (meaning era or age), this term refers to the cosmological division of cyclical time within Hindu tradition. It conceptualises the creation of the universe, its progression, and its gradual decline toward the end of an age, before ultimately renewing the cycle.



Figure 8. Catur Yuga painting by Mangku Muriati, courtesy by Citra Sasmita

Throughout its historical development, Kamasan painting has functioned not merely as a visualization of sacred ancient texts, but also as an integral part of ceremonial appurtenances, where the values and knowledge depicted within serve as a guide to consciousness for the Balinese people undertaking the ritual and its extensive processions. Today, we witness that this art form has undergone significant transformations, particularly regarding the materials used and the nature of its appreciation. With the rise of the tourism industry in Bali since the colonial era, the production mechanism of Kamasan painting shifted from a primary ritual instrument to an antique object sought after by collectors, which subsequently led to the mass reproduction of Kamasan paintings to supply market demand from tourists. Paintings originally crafted by *sangging* and *pemangku* with sacred value began to be disseminated through artisans who duplicated them on a massive scale, featuring customizable narratives. Furthermore, in its origins, this art form represented the deeply rooted maritime heritage of Balinese society, as the knowledge contained within was the result of acculturation taking place over hundreds of years. Regarding materials, for instance, one of the primary el-

ements for coloring was *pere* stone originating from Sulawesi, brought by Bugis sailors as ship ballast and left near the ports around Serangan Island, it was retrieved by early generations of Kamasan painters and used as pigment. However, following the reclamation project on Serangan Island in the mid-1990s, the extraction site of the stone became inaccessible to the community.

Traditional Reasoning Amidst the Current Modernism

In the modern era, perhaps we have little reason to worry, since humans can take refuge in logocentrism, where knowledge is born to refine preceding knowledge. Today's society can celebrate modernity and be part of the progress of our times. The problem is that an irony has emerged: while local wisdom is continuously praised as a tradition to be nurtured and passed down, its material and spiritual references are breaking apart, as noted by Karlina Supeli, an Indonesian philosopher and astronomer, in her lecture on culture and our collective disorientation. How, then, can we clearly observe culture and traditional art as they gasp for breath? This condition mirrors the figure of *Bedawang Nala*, forced to bear the heavy burden of modern civilization—an overlapping reality that, on one hand, offers solutions for humanity, yet on the other triggers endless new problems that threaten the sustainability of nature. Through this essay, I encourage you not to debate these ideas solely from an academic ivory tower, where modern science has dominated our fundamental worldview. For communities that grow and live within the embrace of natural realities, they abide by a spiritual ideology, something frequently judged as abstract, mystical, and existing far beyond the reasoning of *logos* itself. Rituals are often reduced to mystical practices; nevertheless, the array of paraphernalia and organic materials required in a ceremony actually represents a significant indicator of ecological biodiversity. Consequently, the community actively preserves the continuity of these plant ecosystems as an integral part of fulfilling the requirements of cosmological rituals.

This tension arises because modernity often views tradition, ritual, and mythology as stagnant entities that are counterproductive to the dynamics of the era. Tradition tends to be seen as the antithesis of logocentrism, as if the two share no mutual reliance. This rigid assumption of separation is

deeply rooted in neocolonial worldviews that prioritize developmentalist⁸ thinking. As a result, traditional knowledge fails to be understood as an empirical repository of information regarding natural phenomena and sociocultural events whose narratives are continuously transmitted across generations. In the name of objectivity, the logic of *logos* frequently challenges myth by demystifying the autonomous power of nature. For instance, a volcanic eruption in traditional societies is interpreted as a deity's mode of communicating about human behavior in maintaining cosmic balance. Within a traditional cosmological framework, such a natural phenomenon is understood as a manifestation of divine wrath or blessing; whereas modern science tends to reduce that meaning to mere seismic events.

In light of this clash of paradigms, my reflections seem to find a parallel in Adam Bobette's book *Denyut Nadi Bumi: Geologi Politik di Jawa (The Pulse of the Earth: Political Geography in Java)*. He dismantles the misconception that there is a rigid division between modern science and local wisdom. Bobette argues that science and indigenous knowledge do not exist in isolation from one another; rather, they mutually shape, intertwine, and continually enrich a broader geological narrative regarding the history of the earth. Within this intertwined history of the earth, for the Balinese people, ritual manifests as a living pulse that flows tangibly. Coexisting under the shadow of the mountains and the sea, the Balinese perform rituals periodically throughout the year. These spiritual practices are not merely routines, but rather a way for human prayers and offerings to resonate with the ancestral realm—the source of all blessings and the sanctuary from natural uncertainties. Through this understanding, safeguarding the harmony of the natural realm (*niskala*) is believed to exert a direct impact on the harmonious order of the human world (*sekala*). The importance of nurturing this connection with unseen spirits represents ritual as a symbolic system tied to a powerful cultural reality. This system preserves collective memory across generations while acting as an instrument of cultural control. By channeling the power of cosmic order into the tangible world, ritual guides the living ethos of the community to remain forever bound and obedient to the order they hold sacred.

⁸ A paradigm that prioritizes linear historical progress, focusing on economic growth, infrastructure modernization, and material advancement. This worldview tends to evaluate local knowledge, traditions, and ecocentric spiritual practices as largely irrelevant or as obstacles to progress.

Geographical and geological knowledge within the traditional realm, implemented through these rituals, took root long before modern science began its development. As beings living along volcanic arcs and tectonic plate convergences, natural shifts serve as signals that the land we tread upon is a living entity that must be nurtured and counterbalanced through a wise way of life.

The Resistance of Art and Spirituality

This cosmology of coexisting with nature has shaped my perspective on and practice of art, even since the moment I first learned to assemble ritual offerings from my grandmother, who was a *serati banten*.⁹ As a child raised within a family of *pemangku* (Hindu priests), I perceive art through its essential and functional realms in distributing ancestral messages that remain relevant in confronting contemporary social issues. Because of these roots, I am not particularly comfortable with the “*art for art’s sake*”—a paradigm that views art as autonomous based solely on its intrinsic value, without needing to bear the burden of its practical functions. Ironically, it is precisely this Western perspective that has been considered the standard within aesthetic art discourse since the emergence of modern art institutions in Indonesia. Yet, such modern thought has dulled and marginalized the potential of traditional art that has been rooted for centuries—art born from the spirit of communal unity, *gotong royong* (communal work), and offered as the art of devotion, carried out through processes that lead both creator and beholder to the highest point of spiritual sublimation.

This phenomenon of ancestral practice was previously examined by P. J. Zoetmulder in his book, *Kalangwan*. He explains how a work of art is capable of yielding a transcendent aesthetic that is deeply absorbing (*langö*) and profoundly moving for all who experience it. This achievement of transcendental aesthetics can only be attained by an artist through the discipline of the *Kavyayoga* rite—a form of bodily discipline designed to continuously align with cosmic energy by means of meditation through the medium of art or literature. Through this sacred ritual, the artist continuously strives to connect their inner self with the Divine. From that union, the power of divination

⁹ An individual possessing specialized expertise and ritual authority in crafting, arranging, and preparing various types of *banten* (sacred offerings) required for Balinese Hindu ceremonies.

and the sanctity of the *niskala* realm manifest into physical form, transforming the artwork into a living medium of devotion for the community.

During the colonial era, the currents of modernisation and formalisation began to encroach upon the artistic realm of Balinese society. The arrival of tourism opened doors for a global audience to enter spaces of aesthetic appreciation, gradually shifting the orientation of art from sacred spiritual purposes toward commercial dimensions. The penetration of modern art knowledge forged a new direction in artistic practice while widening the rift between artists and the spiritual, communal spheres of their society. This generated a systemic violence that culminated in the impasse of modernistic thought and the anticlimax of the tourism industry, which had simultaneous impact on the sociocultural landscape of Balinese society through the threat of climate crisis and the shrinking of living spaces that constrain the continuity of tradition. These ecological and cultural pressures have driven artists and cultural intellectuals to rediscover ancestral wisdom that aligns with the spirit of environmental sustainability. Viewed through a historical lens, the transformation of the landscape sweeping across Bali over the past century has unfolded with extraordinary speed. The practice of massive industrialisation of tourism has not only altered physical spatial planning, but has also severed the transmission chain of traditional knowledge, replacing it with pragmatism in development. This predicament has given rise to a generation of Balinese who are disoriented in comprehending and living through artistic practices and traditions that are transcendental in nature.

This spiritual alienation is further fueled by the progressivity of global tourism in Bali, which operates aggressively to dismantle biodiversity and locality in favor of industrial standardisation. When tourism reduces nature and tradition to mere visual commodities, it uproots the essence of the earth as a sacred, feminine living entity. The remediation of this ecological crisis cannot be decoupled from efforts to restore spirituality in nurturing the relationship between humanity and nature. Art, in its pure form, is not mere aesthetic entertainment, but an implementation of spiritual dialogue and the stewardship of the earth's womb. When this chain is broken, humanity loses not only forests or rice fields as its living domain, but also forfeits its cosmic realm. Therefore, the movement to retrace traditional knowledge should not be dismissed as mere romanticism or past nostalgia, but rather understood as a rebuilding of an intimate cosmic creativity to heal the wounds of the earth and restore the human soul long fragmented by modernity. This step

represents an eco-spiritual consciousness that restores the orientation of art into a sacred act—serving as a medium of prayer for the community as well as an instrument of ecological advocacy for sustainable living. Through this worldview, the boundary lines separating culture, environmental stewardship, and transcendental practice dissolve seamlessly without distance, as embodied in the practice of Mangku Muriati. Although in her youth she pursued an education in modern art at the university level, she chose to answer her spiritual calling to continue the line of priesthood and the lineage of Kamasan painters inherited from her late father, Mangku Mura.

The Art of Archetypal and Environmental Activism

Unlike Mangku Muriati, who lives within the strict canonical discipline of Kamasan painting, my encounter with the traditional Kamasan style is that of a learner originating from a different cultural landscape. Although we both come from Bali, the cultural ecology of Kamasan along the coastal region of Klungkung differs fundamentally from that of my birthplace in Tabanan. Geographically and sociologically, Tabanan represents a cultural ecosystem rooted in the interior highlands, situated along the slopes of Mount Batukaru, an active volcano that serves as the lifeblood and agrarian backbone for the entire island of Bali.

Historically, Kamasan painting developed as an extension of the formal language of the kingdom bound by canonical guidelines and manuscripts to maintain its legitimacy. However, Mangku Muriati is fully aware that the exclusive right to access this sacred and historical knowledge has long been the prerogative of lineage kinships within Kamasan village. This is tied to the ability to read and interpret manuscripts, a skill passed down strictly through family lineages. This limitation, in fact, opened the door wide for me to apply a spiritual knowledge base rooted in my birthplace in the Tabanan highlands, where the mountain is revered as the center of a mandala that holds primordial feminine energy, much like a cosmic mother who constantly bestows the blessings of fertility, agricultural prosperity, and the breath of life upon the community. Within this in-between space, I present a new visual articulation that is no longer confined to the conventions of *wayang*, but rather embodied through feminine figures that symbolize nature as the origin womb of universal creation.

I decide to present paintings featuring entirely female figures as a radical gesture to unveil ancestral roots that are intricately intertwined with values of femininity. Through this visual deconstruction, I aim to project an alternative perspective to the masculine frameworks that have long dominated mainstream developmental narratives. This approach aligns with a perspective that emphasises the necessity of reclaiming the sovereignty of local knowledge from the traps of modern homogenisation. As modern development and the tourism industry collaborate to reduce Balinese nature to dead commodities exploited aggressively, the female figures in my works emerge as agents of cosmic restoration. They represent the living, breathing, and sacred essence of the earth, where tradition is no longer positioned as an oppressive dogma of the past, but rather as a generative womb that continuously gives birth to resistance, nurtures biodiversity, and sustains the livelihood of its people.

In terms of visual composition, I do not adhere to the standard narrative scene patterns of traditional Kamasan *wayang* painting. Instead, I choose to present these female figures in a sporadic, surreal, and repetitive manner, filling the spatial plane while maintaining a harmonious synthesis with the classic ornamental motifs traditionally used in Kamasan painting. Nevertheless, the presence of these figures frequently resonates on a profound level, discovering their archetypal patterns within other cultural landscapes where the paintings are exhibited. Allow me to share the story of the painting installation I presented at the 35th São Paulo Biennale in 2023, titled *Timur Merah Project IX: Beyond the Realm of Senses (Oracle and Demons)*. The painting narrates the shifting political and cultural landscape of Bali during the colonial era. Bali and Brazil are two regions separated by oceans, yet both reside in the southern hemisphere. These two regions share an equally long history of colonialism, which has led to the marginalization of indigenous communities along with their ancestral knowledge systems. There, I witnessed the anatomy of the female body merging with the trees and the natural landscape in this painting, speaking on the same wavelength as the visual narratives of indigenous communities deep in the Amazon. The female body is universally viewed as both an ecological sanctuary and a symbol of cultural resistance in the face of the lingering effects of colonialism.



Figure 9. Timur Merah Project IX: Beyond The Realm of Senses (Oracle and Demons 3), 2023

This experience brought me to the realization that traveling across continents is not merely an existential validation of an artist's career, but an opportunity to discover cultural reflections that, despite being separated by distances, endure the same wounds. The work found its path to become a language of solidarity among human beings who recognize their shared allegiance to Mother Earth. A similar archetypal pattern crystallized once again when I set foot at the Hawai'i Triennial. Through the series *Timur Merah Project: Tribe of Fire*, I realized that Bali and Hawai'i are bound by the same ancient memory: the Ring of Fire and a shared maritime-volcanic spirituality that reveres the land and mountains as a sacred, nurturing mother figure who must be cared for through principles of reciprocity. This cultural convergence proves that anywhere on earth, whenever capitalistic modernity attempts to uproot the sanctity of nature in favor of industrial standardization, the feminine archetype as the guardian of life will continuously rise in radical ways through the medium of art to collectively heal the wounds of the earth.

Amidst the relentless acceleration of modernity and the aggressive siege of the tourism industry reshaping the Balinese landscape, these works stand as both a critical mirror and a spiritual compass. Through the depiction of feminine figures that blend with the anatomy of nature, I seek to reawaken the collective memory of the Balinese people, guiding them back toward their ancient spiritual nature: a way of living that no longer positions nature as an object of exploitation, but as a sacred subject to be treated with justice, equity, and wisdom. By making art a social compass, we reclaim the true function of traditional art as part of the rituals that sustain life. When the Balinese people can once again perceive the image of the cosmic mother within the mountains, waters, and soil beneath their feet, blind subservience to industry will crumble on its own. It is at this point that my artistic practice transforms into a complete form of spiritual devotion.

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