

Kemal Ezedine Blends The Traditional With A Contemporary Perspective

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Inspired by the unique qualities of the Balinese art form called Rerajahan, which is a culmination of influences hailing from countries such as India and China with references from Hinduism, Islam and other local beliefs, Kemal Ezedine blends that with his own distinct style that echoes from a contemporary art perspective.

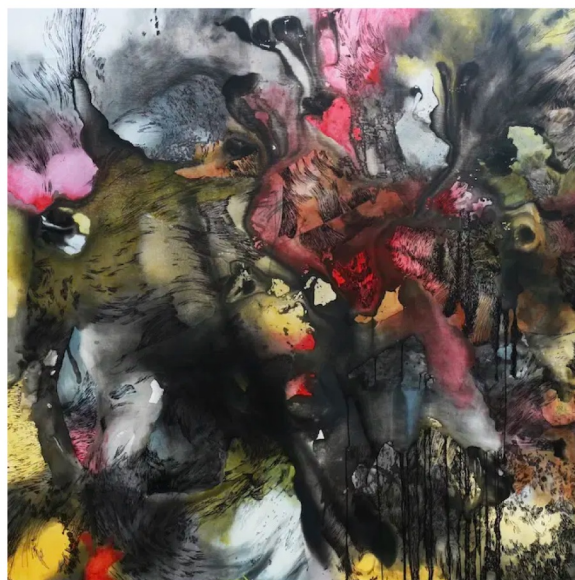
Ahead is an exclusive interview with the rising Indonesian artist.

You were born in Yogyakarta in 1978 and you graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts and Design at the Bandung Institute of Technology. Tell us more about your first steps as an artist?



Before becoming a full-time artist, I worked as a freelance designer, art director and producer for television programmes, commercials and video clips. In between work or during my spare time, I draw and paint for fun. I graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts and Design of Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB) majoring in Industrial Design. I've always wanted to become a painter since I was little. My childhood home was close to the Affandi Museum and one of my uncles, Helmi Azhari studied at the Indonesian Art Institute of Yogyakarta (ISI Jogja). I visited the museum quite frequently and learned how to draw from my uncle. Those were the two factors that inspired me to become an artist. In Jakarta, I grew tired of working for other people so I decided to quit and begin a journey as a full-time painter. I guess that was the moment I really got serious about becoming an artist.

In 2011, you moved to Ubud (Bali), what led you to this important change of life?



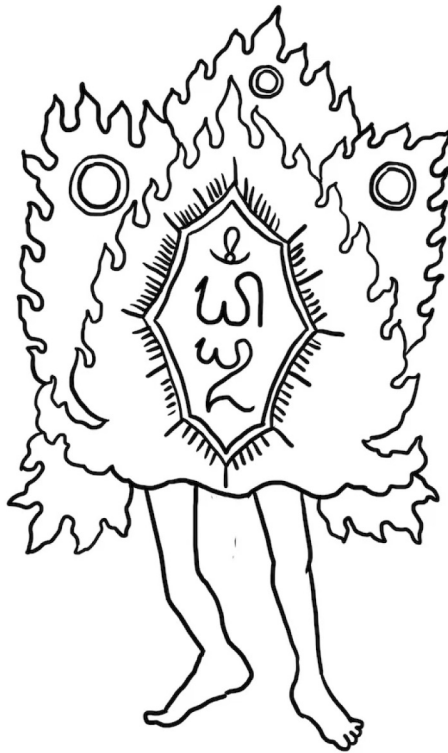
In Jakarta, I painted for some time, but the metropolitan environment felt like [it was] interfering with my ability to focus on my work. I wanted to live someplace quieter, more rural and I chose Ubud. There's no particular reason for my choice, it's just that this place seemed perfect for me as I often stayed here on my previous trips to Bali.

You have studied thoroughly the core and philosophical basis of Balinese art. Tell us more about your fascination for the Rerajahan, the so-called "Balinese sacred drawings"?



My knowledge of Balinese art actually might not reach the deeper philosophical aspects of it. For instance, I'm not too savvy on the spiritual concepts of specific Rerajahan. I mostly examine the technical context of the drawings and try to see them from the perspective of contemporary art. I distanced myself purposefully. All I capture is the core concept and the drawing behaviour of Rerajahan. In fact, philosophically I'm influenced more by Islamic art studies, which I then apply to my personal subjectivity. I purposely chose those aspects in my art. Apart from that, Rerajahan is related to the content and discourse of the Neopitamaha group that I created with my colleagues. Rerajahan is actually not the sole root of my work. I pick up my visual reference from all schools of Balinese painting ranging from Kamasan, Batuan, Sanur, Pengosekan, Keliki. As a group, we wanted to re-examine Balinese painting within the framework of contemporary art, from its history to techniques. Each of us then creates according to our own takeaways and interest. Personally, I like to explore drawing and transparent staining techniques.

By defending Balinese culture and art, do you see yourself as an engaged artist?



I really appreciate Balinese painting (besides other arts of course). For me, Balinese painting has a special appeal and is certainly a unique art deserving of study and cultivation. When I speak about Balinese art or culture, I am aware of its extensive scope. As a settler, I can observe the art and culture in Bali from a certain distance. This space is important for me in order to see what perhaps the native Balinese don't. Consequently, it becomes the subject of my work. I'm not sure if that counts as an important contribution in my social sphere here. Definitely, I'm hopeful of the many ways and opportunities Balinese painting can be explored. I share and discuss my thoughts with several Balinese painting artists in Ubud. Some seemed to show interest in the idea of exploring and expanding our work, but there are also others who seemed indifferent. This is actually intriguing for me. If everyone agrees readily with me then it means that I won't be able to test my theories and ideas.

In 2013, along with three other Balinese artists, you formed a new collective movement, the Neo Pitamaha. Can you let our readers know more about this movement and its declared goals?



We were initially a group of 15 artists. With time, only 7 of us remained (Gede Mahendra Yasa, Ketut Moniarta, Tang Adimawan, Ketut Sumadi, Wayan Mandiyasa, Agus Saputra and me) to actively take part in the discourse and experiment of Balinese painting. Our objective was to present Balinese painting within a contemporary art perspective. So we made various analysis of Balinese painting in relation to its history and techniques. This would encourage new interpretation on how to apply Balinese painting in our works and in turn, develops into a new collective awareness. One of the visible outcomes, for example, is the prominence of drawing in the works of Neo Pitamaha artists, also the scope and progressiveness of our exploration.

There are 2 expected general outputs from Neo Pitamaha regarding Balinese painting, namely conservation and exploration. Conservation of Balinese painting is important to make sure this significant part of the Balinese culture persists and thrives for future generations. Conservation is in part the responsibility of the central government and Bali provincial government. We are hopeful for new creative ideas to manage this conservation. Along with the conservation effort, exploration related to Balinese painting can be carried out by artists, native Balinese, or otherwise. In Neo Pitamaha, we refer to existing roots for exploration. We learn from the defining moments in Balinese painting history and past works by prominent artists to bring forth the present into Balinese painting. Therefore, conservation and exploration is a complementary unit in developing Balinese painting.

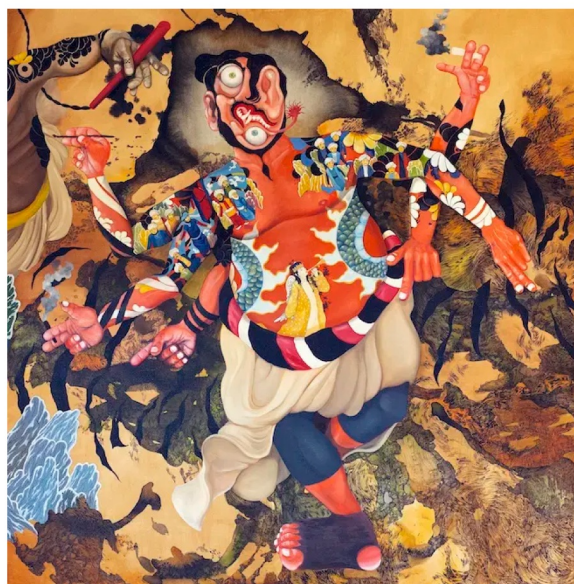
You favour abstraction over figuration. How would you describe our style?



Actually, I don't think I have a specific painting style. The various styles that I adopt are my visual language. I try to gain mastery of diverse styles to use as my vocabulary to talk about or respond to something visually. It's easier for me to speak using existing styles of painting. For example, it's possible I might talk about the deteriorating state of the world using neo-expressionism, etc. At present, I enjoy combining Balinese techniques with other painting techniques as my visual code or "language".

Speaking of abstraction, my friends and I also created an abstract movement as a commentary to another art movement that established itself on religion-based ideology which prohibits animate figurative representation. The prohibition of animate figuration is a recurring issue that affects Indonesian artists particularly those with an Islamic background. Many of them would convert to abstract-style paintings. Taking note of the political situation at that time, the ideological movement of one Islamic group tried to infiltrate culture through art. So at that time, we presented a juxtaposition of Islamic studies, history, laws and practices related to animate figuration, along with our understanding of how abstract paintings emerged and evolved in the history of art. These two art movements are embodied in my painting journey so far.

What is the role an artist plays in society? How do you view the current art scene in Indonesia? How important is the space given to artists in modern Indonesian society?



Hmm... That is a good question. I doubt it if society recognises an artist's role. It depends on the society itself.

However, in Indonesia's history, the role of artists was visible when Sukarno (our first president) used art as part of his cultural politics. At that time, artists had a significant role in shaping the nation's identity and their contribution must have been felt by society.

At present, I think Indonesia produces many good artists, many of whom tend to lean into the art market. There are very few art education opportunities outside the academic environment such as state museums which are directly accessible to the general public. In fact, we don't even have a state-owned art museum where people can approach and learn about art (historically and visually). The government seemed unsure of how to respond to the ideas and works of Indonesian artists. The effort to bridge the wider public and art is mostly carried out by the private sector. Their success however is limited to certain regions and mostly perhaps due to its commercial nature.

The five words that best describe your art?

Dynamic, intuitive, vibrant, progressive, surreal.

In which city can we expect to see your next solo exhibition?



My virtual solo exhibition in March was a resounding success and I am looking forward to my next one that's happening in December 2021 at CG Artspace, Jakarta.

Can you let our readers know which is your favourite art museum in Indonesia?

Macan Museum in Jakarta.

Where can we see some of your work online, are these for sale?



If you were to name one mentor who has inspired you in your life and path as an artist, who would that be?

Intan (my wife)