

# Artist Djirna a witness to the mood of his people

By Jean Couteau

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All artists long for recognition, but few achieve it. Made Djirna is among the handful of Balinese painters who has.

The 43-year-old artist is one of the country's most sought-after painters. At the opening of his recent exhibition at the Padma Hotel in Bali, half of the collection of paintings exhibited were immediately sold to a handful of collectors who specially came from Jakarta and Magelang.



Considering the state of crisis in the country, it is worth asking to which "needs" do Djirna's paintings respond? Is it enough to talk of taksu, Balinese for divine inspiration, as critic Agus Dermawan does, or of greget (irrational attraction), as does Oei Hong Djien, one of Indonesia's most serious collectors, and one of the organizers of the exhibition.

To this writer, Djirna's key to success lies in an uncanny mix of technical sophistication and thematic simplicity: the skills of the painter are put at the service of a simple vision of the world in which everyone, and each collector in particular, can recognize some of his dreams -- and nightmares.

Technically, Djirna pays much attention to background elements such as texture and color. The texture, often coated with a thin paste of wood or marble dust, has a gritty feel that broadens the enjoyment beyond the field of the purely visual into that of the tactile. But the pleasure is also aesthetic with regard to color.

Beyond the usual terra-cotta of his previous series, Djirna is now exploring various types of green and white. Even though the result may be somewhat too dark, the artist knows how to play with soft nuances so as to convey a general impression of warmth. To this color skill is added a broad variety of brush strokes: successively thin, massive, with well delineated contours or the opposite without contours; the forms then melting into one another to create an atmosphere of eerie unreality.

These various skills are combined in thematic series, whose message varies with the color mood or the features of the characters represented. Sometimes it gives the whole scene a ghostly, fearsome look. In other works it generates an atmosphere of angst. But most often it conjures up an idea of harmony and love.

Djirna likes to say that his figures are all distorted, but it would be wrong to conclude that

this deformation is systematic. It closely relates to the themes of the artist's works. In his "sweet" series, like those themes such as women and pastoral scenes, the figures may be rounder than nature and presented in a synthetic, anonymous way, but they retain a well-proportioned look that bears witness both to the artist's knowledge of academic realism and to his past as a Balinese village painter.

In the other series, however, the distortion is more accentuated, and, seen from a stylistic point of view, closer to Karel Appel and Dubuffet's works than to Balinese peasant iconography. At its maximum it exposes a world of subconscious archetypes, which express Djirna's deepest private fears or the ghostly monsters of the island's culture.

Djirna's favorite theme is that of women. But Djirna's woman is altogether different from that of non-Balinese (Hofker, Dullah, Le Mayeur, etc.), who depict her as an exotic and sexual object, always shown bare-breasted or carrying offerings to a temple. To Djirna, on the contrary, the woman is a symbolic archetype: the woman as mother. Her shape, round, conjures up the theme of the egg and, ipso-facto, of fertility, found also in the way she wraps her child in an oval composition.

This primacy of the mother is confirmed by the secondary position attributed to man. Even though his shape may be combined with that of his woman to make up an egg-shaped unit of the family, more often than not he impersonates the little people or is frankly featured as a negative influence. He then appears as a shadow threatening a group of women or goading them into immoral actions; is involved in drinking and debauchery (see illustration). No man ever assumes the position of the father figure.

Djirna's positive image of the woman, however, changes as soon as she gives up her function as mother. In a crowd, she stops being unique: she becomes a plurality of women exposed to sin and defilement, and/or threatened by modernity. From the state of balance symbolized in motherhood and fertility thus follows a state of disorder and evil, of which women are both victims and carriers. Their representation automatically changes. Their figures become thin and outlandish, when not frankly monstrous. Minions and ghostly animals appear at their back. Finally the witch shows up: The lord of black magic, the dark bloodsucker, is a woman. The witch replaces the mother.

This duality between the mother and the witch may be viewed as one of the manifestations of the Balinese concept that holds that all aspects of reality consist of complementary opposites. With Djirna, however, this worldview is wrapped in a personal language. To him man lives in a world dominated by visible and invisible forces, positive and negative ones, which are in constant flux and intermingling. On top is the mother, both real and mythological. Its symmetrical opposite is the witch, the woman as temptress and master of the negative forces. Ordinary women oscillate between the two roles: they are constantly subjected to temptations. As for man, he is either a threat or the woman's benign partner.

We can now understand where lies the appeal of Djirna's painting: honest, rooted in his own culture, yet artistically open to the modern world, the artist skillfully formulates Indonesian people's longing for a balanced world -- that of the fast disappearing "Beautiful

Indies" of their agrarian youth -- and their fear of chaos, that which is presently unfurling throughout Indonesia.

He is a witness to the mood of his people. If he may be sometimes too sweet, his latest works demonstrate that he is not reluctant to go against his collectors' mood and come up with exceptionally strong moments of expression.

All in all combining technical skill, love for form, multilevel richness of content and, most of all, sensitivity, Djirna is a reminder to the young generation that, beyond the faze of fashion, painting is still mainly love for one's work, simplicity of expression and, above all, sincerity in one's emotions.