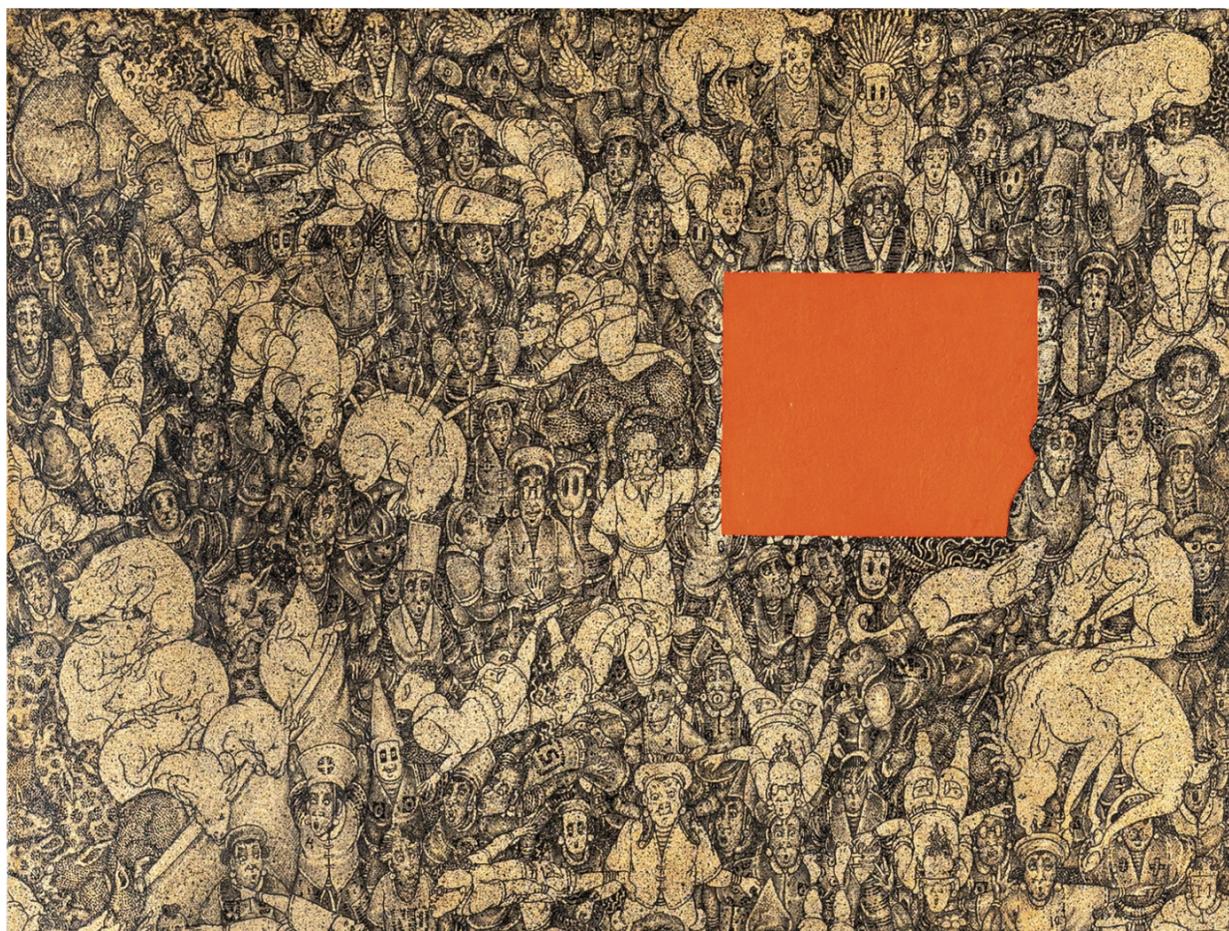


# I Nyoman Arisana's 'Bali Now' captures the overlap between tradition and modernity in Balinese painting

The works in this solo exhibition are expansive and capacious, populated by a cast of animals, mythical figures and manga-inspired creations.

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*Berhenti Sejenak #4 (Momentary Pause #4)* (All photos: Mizuma Gallery)

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What an idea — that Noah’s Ark, fleeing the noise and fractures of a confused world, sets sail from Bali, carrying the planet’s most extraordinary species across a backdrop of terraced rice hills, escaping before the storm arrives.

In *Mencari Tempat Baru (Searching for a New Place)*, there is an exhilarating sense of a painter in the making: humour, defiance, tension, restlessness, the quest to find where one truly “belongs”, and the embrace of the absurd. In **I Nyoman Arisana**’s “flotilla of the imagination”, we find an almost perfect encapsulation of what breaking from tradition means for a creative restlessness already constrained by it.

With more contemporary Balinese artists — most notably I Nyoman Masriadi — rebellion is overt: a radical departure from the quixoticism imposed on Balinese painting through decades of careful cultural cultivation. For them, defying tradition has paradoxically meant an exile into another “tradition” — Western painting.

What is Bali if not a destination of “voyage”? The cultural anthropology of *Dance and Drama in Bali*, an influential and persuasive project by painter Walter Spies and ballerina-choreographer Beryl de Zoete — born from their own cultural boredom and a desire to seek an “Orient” forcefully colonised — endures even today in the Bali “marketplace,” which must be clearly distinguished from the “unseen” Bali. This binary of visibility and seclusion is deeply rooted in the Balinese worldview of *Sekala dan Niskala* — the seen and the unseen.

Others would follow, including the American composer Colin McPhee, who wrote a poignant and sensitive recollection of his musical journey to the island, *A House in Bali*. Later came the extensive explorations of the Nonesuch Explorer Series, which produced several recordings of Balinese music, featuring the unique gamelan ensembles and the hypnotic *kecak* chanting.

Very notable was the anthropological film *Trance and Dance in Bali* by American anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, which raised critical questions about cultural construction and academic patronage in the

pursuit of “nativism”. This was not a privilege of the West alone. Romantic explorers from India, notably the choreographer Uday Shankar — elder brother of sitarist Ravi Shankar — embarked on an expedition to Bali in search of a “lost India”, rediscovered in the distant tropics, reassembled and presented to audiences in the cosmopolitan theatres of Paris.

If there is something laborious, tedious or seemingly endless about Balinese painting and culture, it lies in the weight of “tradition”. This burden has prompted a series of departures among contemporary Balinese painters, a disruptive generation intent on moving painting beyond the mysterious and mystical to forge a narrative that is unmistakably “contemporary” in posture, gesture and politics.



Details of 'Mencari Tempat Baru' ('Searching For A New Place')

For I Nyoman Arisana — young, tentative, meandering — the burden of tradition seems less a problem to be resolved than a negotiation to be navigated. “Bali,” he writes, “is known for its beautiful culture and traditions. This has consciously fuelled my unease about customs, culture and traditional life, which currently operates in a duality between traditional and modern life. I see many overlapping issues recently, between modern consumerism and traditional culture. It is as if they’re chasing each other, boisterously, without a pause ...”

Unease is perhaps the most immediate provocation in *Bali Now*. A critical departure from his earlier works, previously defined by careful layering and deliberate spacing, the paintings in this exhibition are expansive and capacious, overt in their attempt to evoke landscape — a very traditionalist approach to Balinese painting, yet executed in a distinctly different manner.

Astute curation by Hermanto Soerjanto takes full advantage of the splendid, expansive walls of **Mizuma Gallery**, while a separate room displays smaller works and a multipart painting, offering a glimpse of the “seen-unseen” binary central to the Balinese worldview.

Congruity is largely achieved in the curation of *Bali Now*: the dialogue between paintings — that delicate balance of logic and the sublime — is often the most elusive aspect of exhibition design, yet here it feels almost flawless.

Perhaps the most striking feature of I Nyoman Arisana’s “departure” in this show is his apparent willingness to let himself be carried along, “dancing through” the tension between tradition and modernity.

Dialectics are inherently forceful, and what often escapes the forceful is the element of “fun”. In a faithful homage to traditional Balinese painting, there is always so much happening. Yet, Arisana renders it lucid, lyrical, even playful, through the cast of characters that populate his works — mythical figures from Balinese tradition coexist seamlessly with manga-inspired creations; a Colonel Sanders-like figure, complete with a mustard-yellow beard, makes repeated appearances. And everywhere ... everywhere ... everywhere, there is animal life.

Modernity, with all its dissensions, is captured in a single frame — a high-rise rendered in a solitary colour within the “assemblage”. It provides striking contrast while provoking questions about the meaning of something that is not a tree, yet reaches skyward.



'Tentang Air' ('About Water')

*Tentang Air (About Water)* exemplifies the storytelling that permeates the *Bali Now* paintings. The drawings are masterful, the compositions sardonic and spirited, and the dialogue between works both lucid and evocative. Jungle impressions give way to visions of water and the sea, culminating in the marvellous *Mencari Tempat Baru (Searching for a New Place)*.

A persistent problem in how traditional painting is perceived is its confinement to the purely decorative. Yet, *Bali Now* is rich with subversion, unfolding within the bustle and coded through contemporary exigencies —

environmental peril, power struggles, the obliteration of animal life, politics — all held within the seemingly “decorative”.

Much of what is compelling in *Bali Now* lies in its art of questioning. In the traditional mode of creating “too much”, the eye often arrives at a point of comfort, a feeling of being settled. In Arisana’s works, that comfort is granted — but it is accompanied by a subtle rupture, prompted by a tradition that is both able and willing to laugh at itself.

This is achieved through a careful negotiation of form, a deliberation in craft and an implosion born of the work’s own raucousness. As the grandson of a painter and the son of a woodcarver and barong mask maker, I Nyoman Arisana understands deeply that the world functions through dualities, and that the disruption of tradition is often best pursued by returning to it. Or by returning, as he himself asserts, to the Tri Hita Karana — the Balinese Hindu trinity of harmony between ourselves, our God and the natural world.

*'Bali Now' is showing at Mizuma Gallery, Singapore until Dec 7. For more information, visit [mizuma.sg](http://mizuma.sg).*

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