

# INTO SPACES OF *Surya Subratha*

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**I** Made Surya Subratha (who is called Katok by his friends) is a young Balinese artist who progressively brings an awareness of his exploration in his works. Therefore, analysing the works of Surya Subratha today cannot be separated from alluding to a series of traces of his journey. The journey in question is one that gave a variety of aesthetic experiences to Surya, which greatly influenced his work. Starting with how Surya was introduced to art, especially the world of fine arts, until he decided to make art as his struggle; playing field; part of his life. This writing is the result of a casual dialogue with Surya whose main purpose is not only to introduce Surya Subratha but also to encourage the public to see his potential.

Surya Subratha, as mentioned in the numerous articles about him, is a young artist who managed to bring the spirit of modern Bali into his works. This opinion was further accentuated after he won the Titian Prize 2020 in the annual exhibition organized by

Yayasan Titian Bali. This award that he won at a young age was for a work titled 'Civil War #2', one of his many paintings that manage to portray strong emotional ambience and ambiguity at the same time. "What are Surya Subratha's works about? How is his work presented? What message is he really trying to portray?" These fundamental questions will only be answered once we enter the imaginary space of Surya Subratha, a space that is endless with no clear boundaries. To enter, the next few paragraphs will try to present piece by piece the memories that shaped Surya's attitude towards art today.

Surya was born on December 12, 1995 in Badung, Bali. As a child he liked to draw in his spare time. A lot of his childhood was filled with taking care of the art shop belonging to his father, a traditional sculptor by the name of Wayan Wirdana. His family's art shop is located in Batuan area, an area positioned as a modern and dynamic center by Pita Maha (an art collective). Surya said that he



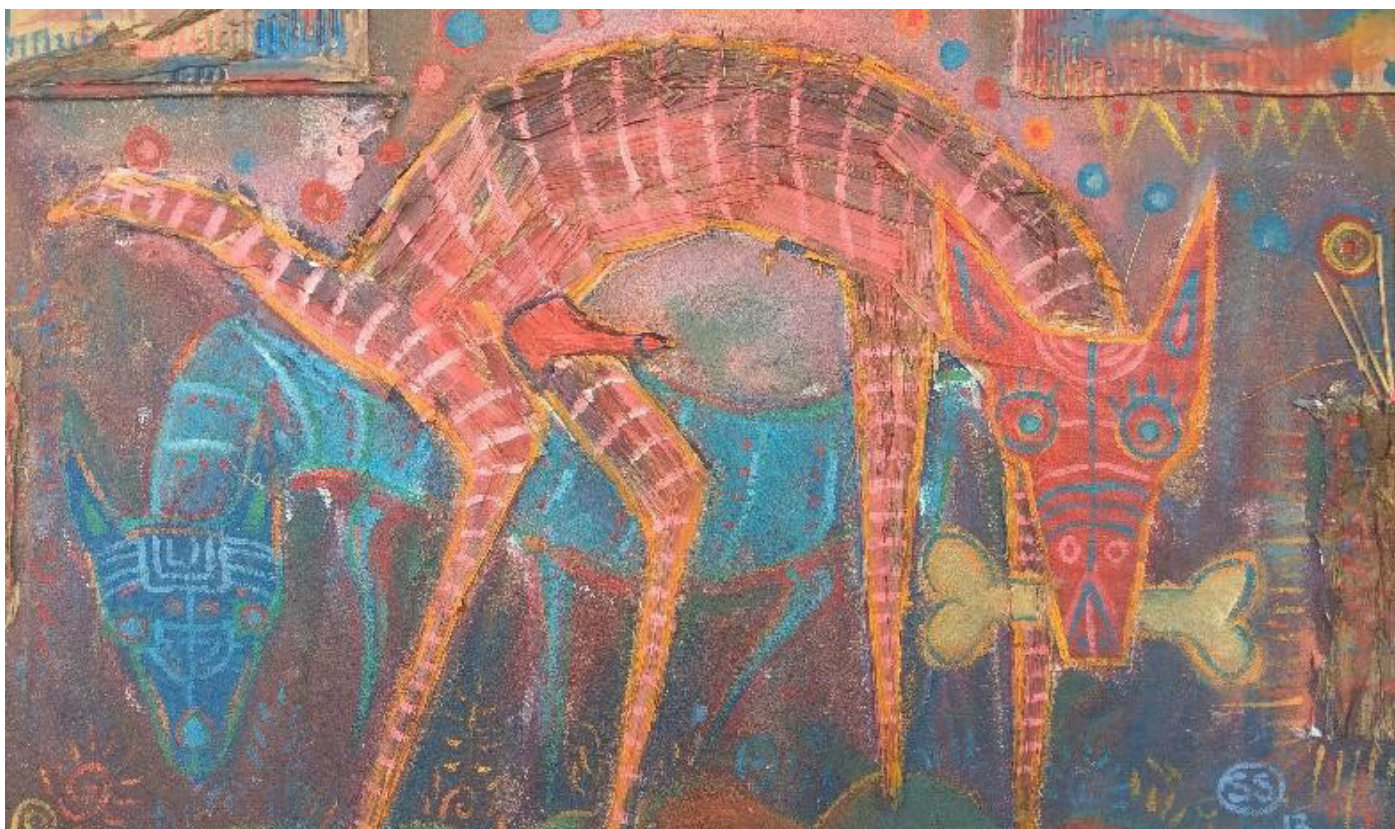
learned a lot about art through observing his father and grandfather when they were sculpting and painting. His observations were processed into his own style, which is uniquely different from the styles of his father and grandfather. As he did this many times, this pattern gave birth to a visual language that Surya uses in his creative process.



In 2011 Surya decided to learn to paint at a Sekolah Menengah Seni Rupa (SMSR, high school of fine arts) in Batubulan, Sukawati. Like most teenagers, Surya's motivation to join the art high school was not as serious as "wanting to be an artist". But as he participated in various activities and processes through the art school, his seriousness and curiosity for art grew unstoppable.

While studying at the art high school, Surya was introduced to various mediums such as canvas, oil paint, pastel, spray paint, and charcoal, along with different painting styles such as realism, expressionism, and deformative. It was there that he was required to explore these techniques and mediums. Most commonly appearing in his school works were human figures, or the landscape of markets, cities, and rice fields. Yet the result of his own exploration that he finds most interesting out of his school tasks focus on deformed shapes that are decorated with contrasting colors (See figure 2). To this day he continues to go back and forth fiddling with the visual aspect of his art while still exploring over various mediums.





In addition to receiving artistic influence through formal education at SMSR, Surya also joined a street art group in 2011-2014 that actively created murals together on the walls of the area they live in. This group called The Cobra Power (TCP) was formed organically and all its members are also Surya's peers from across classes in his art high school. Among them are Dwymabim, Nugraha Jati, Muk, Agung Agastya, Dodi Kotama, Lolit Made, Pibra, Acak, and Oga.

According to Surya, he enjoyed the full process of creating art in public spaces. Although initially inspired by a television broadcast that was playing coverage of graffiti artists, Surya gradually found himself in the middle of the activity itself. Surya and his group TCP began their collective career by painting on the walls of their school. Since then they have continued to challenge

themselves to create murals on street walls and participate in mural competitions. In 2014, the group won the 2nd place award in the Mural competition with the theme "Culture in Motion" held by STIKI Bali Campus. This achievement also marked their highest success during their time at Batubulan Art high school.

Although at first he claimed to not seriously take the subjects at SMSR, until he finished his learning period at his art school, Surya was recorded to have received several awards from various events organized by the school. In 2012 and 2013 his works successively won top 10 at the SMSR Gallery exhibition, he then won the 3rd consolation prize in the 2013 FANTASI event, a high school level caricature competition held at La Taverna Hotel in Sanur, Denpasar. In 2014, Surya won second place in the sketching competition at the SMSR 67th

Anniversary celebration, and his artwork was chosen as the best work in the Final Project exhibition at the SMSR Gallery.

After graduating from SMSR in 2014, Surya decided to continue his fine art studies at ISI Yogyakarta. This decision brought Surya deeper into exploring his potential. He spent the early period of his studies away from home observing the style and habits of the artists there, by visiting artist's studios, exchanging ideas and learning the experiences of these artists. Surya made use of the warm and friendly arts atmosphere in Yogyakarta to experiment and explore many new ideas in his works.

We can observe how Surya's work developed after he studied in Yogyakarta, at any moment it is always changing and developing. According to Surya, the results of his exploration in Yogyakarta were not only in order to fulfill the requirements of his study. More than that, Surya was trying to present himself as an artist in the field of fine art. Surya's attempts were received well by his classmates who formed a group together called "Anggur Merah" (Red Wine) in 2014. Through this small group, Surya managed to hold his first collective exhibition on the wall of Perahu Art Connection, Yogyakarta. They got funds to hold the exhibition in a fairly unique way, namely by ngasong or introducing themselves to artists there just to ask for blessings that are not infrequently tipped by getting offers of help in various forms. The support they gained indirectly shaped their

confidence so they managed to hold the exhibition together twice. But after that, this group was put to rest because all its members including Surya finally chose to focus more on the joint activities planned by their respective peers at the time.

In addition to joining the Anggur Merah group, in 2016 Surya also joined the young artist group within Sanggar Dewata Indonesia (SDI) with his classmates who are also from Bali, including Yusa Dirgantara, Piki Suyersa, and Suyudana Sudewa. The young artist group in SDI is another part of SDI that specifically aimed to accommodate young artists from Bali who are dynamic and brought the context of current thinking in their works. This group was also there to continue the ideals of its pioneers in SDI, namely developing contemporary art in Bali.

Surya felt that SDI had a big role in shaping his identity as a young Balinese artist. Although he had experienced cultural shocks at the beginning of his stay in Java, through this group of Young Artists in SDI, Surya was then able to explore the spirit of Bali in his work. Surya said that the spirit of Bali in his work is present through the lines he makes. He believes lines are the purest essence found in every traditional painting in Bali. His perception of lines then led him to perform endless forms of exploration.

In the period of his work since he joined SDI in 2016, we can observe the works that Surya presents began to talk about locality.

Some directly show the Balinese cultural environment, some present locality by elevating the visuals of Balinese traditional artworks. In this period Surya's focus on exploration was growing gradually. His style in his artwork grew bolder and more reasoned, the colors were getting sharper, there was an effort to familiarize the themes raised, and he began to master the mediums of his work. As a result, the artistic choices he makes in his work always bring pleasant surprises.

While actively participating in exhibitions inside and outside of Yogyakarta, in 2019 Surya also successfully completed a solo exhibition of his university final project at Fadjar Sidik Gallery, Yogyakarta. In the final project Surya chose to use fable stories as the theme for his artwork. He explained that he was touched by the exemplary morals contained in fable stories, commonly called *Tantri* by Balinese people. In addition to being considered to have interesting artistic potential to explore, the selection of *Tantri* stories was also Surya's effort to present deeper value in his works. *Tantri* stories themselves are intended to describe the character, nature, or character of man that can be used as an example in real-life context. However, Surya's *Tantri* stories were not presented in the normal way fables should be told. Surya adds his own interpretation in the artworks of his final project, so the scenes portrayed in his works appear slightly different from the original scenes in *Tantri* stories. For example, in one of his artworks illustrating the story of "Pedanda Baka" (See figure 3), the

stork priest is fighting over a fish with a cat that was not present in the original fable.

According to him, this cat represents the more extreme parts of human nature, more vile than the stork priest who took advantage of a bad situation.



*Burung Bangau yang Licik,  
Acrylic and spray paint on canvas,  
120 cm x 90 cm,  
2019*

After graduating from ISI Jogja in 2019, Surya decided to return and practice in Bali for a while, at the same time satisfying his homesickness. Surya participated in the Titian Prize 2020 competition initiated by Titian Bali Foundation, where his work entitled “Civil War #2” was selected as the best work among the other finalists, namely Satya Cipta, Ni Luh Pangestu Widya Sari, Putu Dudik Ariawan, I Wayan Sudarsana, Ngakan Putu Krisna Putra, I Gd Manik Danan Jaya, Nadira Zahra Ramadina, I Wayan Gede Budayana, I Gst Ngurah Agung Yoga Prawira Sutha, Alyssa Kusnoto, I Wayan Bayu Semadi, Ida Ayu Gayatri Dewi, Ida Bagus Ananda Prawinata, I Made Arcadia Devali, Putu Bagus Sastra Vedanta, I Made Danan Adi Laksana, Luh Pratiwi, I Wayan Dendy Permana, I Made Utama, Ni Putu Kiti Mulia Dewi, Ketut Wahyu Santa Pradnyana, Nyoman Bratayasa, Ida Bagus Oka Ananta, Putu Kusuma, I Made Ananda Krisnaputra, and Wayan Damar Langit Timur.



*Civil War #2, 160 cm x 115 cm  
Acrylic, spray paint on canvas 2019*

This achievement at a young age definitely opened up opportunities for him in the social and fine arts fields in Bali and beyond. Unfortunately, 2020 was not as cooperative.

Surya, who returned to Bali to dig deeper into his locality, was trapped inside his house for some time due to the pandemic that became increasingly troubling. Surya said that in the middle of the pandemic he was increasingly challenged to create artwork and explore. From the beginning Surya never liked just staying at home doing nothing. Therefore during the pandemic, Surya produced hundreds of sketches and dozens of paintings of various mediums and sizes. In mid-April 2020, Surya held a virtual exhibition titled “Close the Window” through his social media to provide positive support to the wider public as well as himself. When conditions in Bali improved, Surya took the opportunity to get out of the house and paint on the spot in some areas of Bali. This art activity greatly healed his longing for Bali and his habits.

Thanks to living abroad in Java for almost 5 years, Surya is now more sensitive to his surroundings. He began to get used to analyzing his social environment, then addressing it in the form of his paintings. Surya now continues to mitigate his anxiety in many ways, one of which is by discussing with his friends from various disciplines. It was from there that he came across many new perspectives that he could borrow to illustrate his anxiety.

At the end of 2020, Surya finally held his first physical solo exhibition in Bali entitled “Membentang Ruang” (translated to Stretching Space). Through Surya’s speech, he shared that this exhibition is intended to showcase the results of his exploration about the problems he faced during his return to Bali. In this solo exhibition, the works presented are very different from the ones Surya exhibited while in Yogyakarta. In his academic period in Yogyakarta, Surya’s works were more dominated by cheerful bright colors and central compositions, but now his works are presented simplified. The colors presented tend to resemble antique effects, compositions that are denser and more narrative, more spontaneous lines, and a more explorative way of presenting them.

So this was a little bit about Surya Subratha, who was very open and helpful to the author during the writing process. The next sub-article contains the curatorial writings for Surya Subratha’s solo exhibition which will discuss the issues encountered by him after returning home and working in Bali.

# STRETCHED SPACES OF SURYA SUBRATHA

The most dominant visual element in Surya Subratha's work are the lines, which then plot and create spaces. These lines are straightforward, sharp, rhythmic, and spontaneously form naïve figures that dominate the space of the drawing. So for him, no field is really too big, too wide, or too long for him to draw. In other words, space both in the general sense and as one of the crucial elements in fine art is Surya's main platform for releasing his creativity.

The spaces that we see through Surya's work are not only limited to real or visible space, but also invisible space, which implies its existence as an imaginary space or natural space of thought, as well as spaces in the conception of Balinese society that he often borrows consciously in his work. The kinds of spaces that are then revealed in our observations can be one of the doors that we enter to familiarize ourselves with Surya and his works. Surya's works are inseparable from its context, so as a work of fine art it is very interpretive and enjoyable.

Membentang Ruang (Stretching Space), as the theme of Surya Subratha's exhibition is closely related to the process of work,

medium choice, as well as his thinking concept that he is developing in the period of his recent works. Membentang means exposing, spreading, and opening wide. The Ruang (space) in question are the variety of spaces that are observed in Surya's works. So the expression "Membentang Ruang" (Stretching Space) can be interpreted as Surya's efforts in disseminating his explorative ideas on a piece of stretched fabric that presents various interpretations of space and meaning, those that are explicitly presented as an arrangement in the work, or those that are unconsciously expressed through artistic experiences and cultural backgrounds.

When looking at Surya Subratha's works in this exhibition, the first question that comes to mind is, "Why is the medium of fabric chosen?". Although he has created many large works, Surya was actually facing problems about space while working on his artworks. In the later period of his work, the exploration of fabric as a medium was one of the strategies to conquer the lack of space in his workspace which was not big enough to accommodate the size of his works, and therefore not big enough to accommodate his ideas. Fabric has a lot of flexibility, they can

be folded, worked-on part by part, centimeter by centimeter, and finally be stretched completely after all the finished parts are painted. This stretching process seems to be the part he looks forward to the most. During the process of creating he can only enjoy each part individually, so when the entire work is stretched, the full picture can surprise him.



*Ruang Kerja (Studio) Surya Subratha*

In addition, fabric is a medium that has been commonly used by Balinese artists for decades. Drawing and painting on fabric is not new in the journey of Balinese art. Surya's decision in choosing fabric as a medium for his work also arises from his awareness of the cosmological dimension. Starting from the visual points to how he presents his work in this exhibition, they can be interpreted as forms of exploration inspired by the distinctive visuals that have been preserved and developed by the Balinese community over generations. As Jakob Soemardjo stated,

“Every artist becomes creative and great because of what comes before them. This is what we commonly call “Tradition”—The so-called art tradition has always reflected simultaneous norms; art traditions that are in the context of a generation's present thinking (2000, 84-88).”<sup>1</sup>

His understanding developed further into his own visual language<sup>2</sup>, which we can observe by him exploring his cultural background. Surya was born and grew up in a Balinese environment that is thick with ancestral customs and traditions. Since childhood he enjoyed drawing and learning through his father, I Wayan Wirdana, who was a sculptor<sup>3</sup>. Then as a teenager he had the opportunity to learn traditional art styles and techniques more seriously at SMSR (High School of Fine Arts) Bali. After graduating in <sup>2014</sup>, he continued his art studies at ISI Yogyakarta and joined the Young Artist SDI (Sanggar Dewata Indonesia) community. It was there that he got the inspiration to raise the value of Balinese culture and Balinese spirit in his work.



These artistic experiences later became the roots of his art. Because of this, art for Surya Subratha is the path of interpreting the processes that he has gone through. Therefore for whatever reason Surya's works are purely something meaningful and valuable in his artistic expression.

Surya's visual language has a flat and decorative tendency, no element is much more prominent than the others, and as a result all the elements in his work are equally important and integrated with each other. All

these elements then build their own space over a two-dimensional medium. Sometimes space comes in layers as a field, sometimes it is also presented as an empty space. For example, in "Body Reflection", imaginary spaces are created through firm contour lines, contrasting color strokes, fine lines, and clashing styles. All of these are visual devices that he consciously used to split his image plane into several spaces, namely the space in the figure, the space in the background, and the space in the frame.

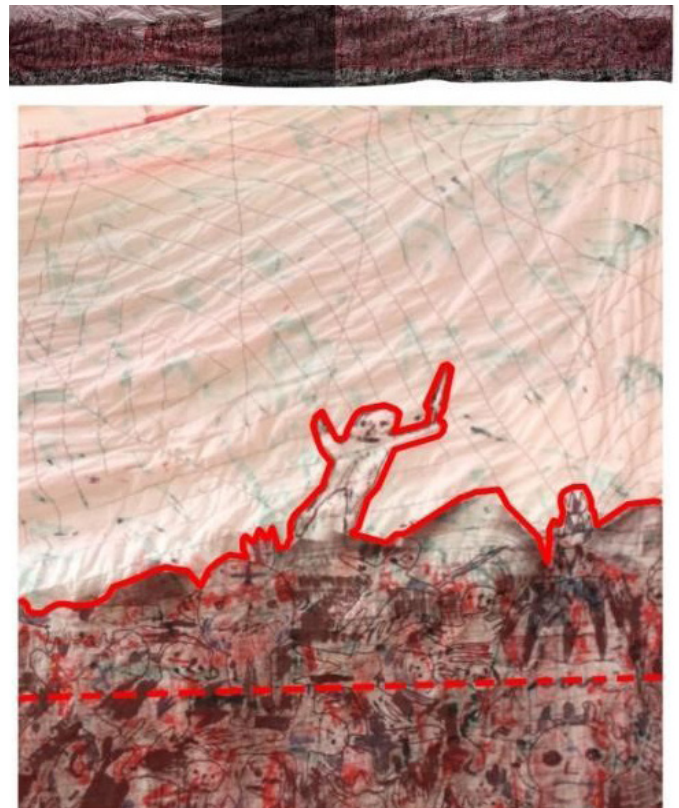


*Ruang-ruang dalam karya Body Reflection*

These spaces are present in an effort to realize his imagination about life in human being, about how each of the smallest elements also plays a vital role in life. This is in line with the concept of space in Bali's religious understanding—Space is defined as part of the human self, which translates in the balance of the cosmos in the form of macro space (Bhuwana Agung) and micro space (Bhuwana Alit).<sup>4</sup> In the context of Surya's work, the silhouette of the larger human figure can be interpreted as the macro space. While the small fields inside the large figure are the forming elements, or microspace. Thus, there is nothing more superior in his work, all of which are harmoniously arranged.

Another work titled "The Provocator," which spans 8 meters also presents a space with the arrangement of Tri Bhuwana or Tri Loka.<sup>5</sup> In the Balinese spatial philosophy, there are three layers of realities that make up the living universe: namely the underworld, the middle world, and the upper world. In this work the underworld appears to be depicted as the surface of the ground filled with several wild animals, simple heroic figures, complete with attributes in the form of symbols and ambiguous gestures. They appear to be fighting, and there are falling figures, severed heads, and blood spots scattered all over the ground.

In the middle world, a man who Surya described as the mastermind is cheering while holding up a sword-like weapon. While in the highest world, the space is left not as



*Konsep Ruang Bali "Tri Bhuwana"  
yang diadopsi dalam karya The Provocator*

crowded as the other worlds. It is filled with stripes created from lines of dark thread. The entire field of this image is then covered with a transparent red cloth, which further adds to the gripping, tragic, and magical impression of a war-like event.

This impression is supported by the way Surya paints areas of his artwork. The colors used are monochrome colors that occasionally contrast each other, which are brushed thinly, randomly, expressively, and stacked together. His pleasure in using techniques to present colors that are able to give an antique impression in his work is obtained through his father who is a sculptor. Since childhood he helped to paint the sculptures made by his father to be sold in their art shop. This explains Jakob Soemardjo's intentions in his statement that:

*Basically, an artist works based on his understanding of art found in the traditions of his community... his artwork will always bring up something that will show where he learned art from. (2000:234) <sup>6</sup>*

The previously mentioned works have the concept of building a space similar to those in traditional Balinese paintings. As mentioned in earlier paragraph, Surya consciously borrowed these patterns. For example, in the artwork titled, “All Beings are Connected”, the decision to darken the setting is reminiscent of the way the Batuan style painters present space. While in the work, “Collecting Memories”, the principles of kamasan painting style are visible. Spaces are created through the dividing borders made of firm lines, and the background is left unfilled. If a Kamasan painting is a light waiting for shadows, then a Batuan painting is dark awaiting for light. <sup>7</sup> Both of these principles of building spaces are often used in his works. It would not be complete if we do not discuss how Surya Subratha’s works were presented in his

solo exhibition. As mentioned earlier, Surya was inspired by the visual characteristics of Bali where he lived and grew. Because of sensitivity to his cosmology, Surya chose to present his works through the familiar forms that often appear in Balinese rites such as Kelir, Lamak, Ider-Ider, Langse, Umbul-Umbul or Lelontek, Kober, Leluwur.

If we analyse more in depth, what Surya did was not merely to satisfy the senses or display beauty in his work. It can also be seen as an attempt to infuse meaning and values of culture for the sake of his need to understand the rich heritage of his superior and noble traditions. In accordance with the explanation by Primadi Tabrani that, “in our tradition there are no artworks made solely for ‘beauty’, on the other hand, there is no functional object whose sole purpose is for its function, it is also ‘beautiful’. ‘Beauty’ is not just satisfying the eyes, but blending with the rules of customs, taboos, beliefs, religions, and so on. So it is meaningful as well as beautiful”.<sup>8</sup>



*Prinsip Batuan Menghadirkan Ruang  
(Potongan karya) All beings are connected, 2020*



*Prinsip Kamasan Menghadirkan Ruang  
(Potongan karya) Collecting Memories, 2020*

# THE FOLDED

Although built upon Surya's perception of the distinctive Balinese visual, these spaces do not fully display the canon of existing traditions. What he wants to present has already been abstracted in his spatial mind so that the elements that fill the space are objects that are imaginative and full of spontaneity. Often his strokes form wild animals, and flat faced heroic figures with drawn swords and certain symbols. The atmosphere displayed in many of his works throughout his artistic journey is one of war and chaos.

These representative images that are repeated in many of his works then seem to form a narrative that Surya himself admits he cannot fully explain. Naturally it becomes a question, "does this meaning or narrative really exist and can be read, or is it just a side effect of how the objects presented are arranged?". This is the folded part of Surya's work, which is hidden and implied at the same time.

According to Surya, the narrative comes after he finishes drawing his lines. But this narrative frequently departs from the simple initial idea of a phenomenon. For example, in the work "The Provocator", he sees social issues as the trigger which is then processed by his mind, he then firstly presents two figures who are fighting in the field. From the images of these

two figures, other objects were then came to him. Eventually the initial narrative he built became as if shrouded in another stacked and crowded image that he presented in the space. It's like reading reality today, how issues are often biased due to various opinions and views that overlap in obscurity.

Though ambiguous, the meaning in Surya Subratha's work can still be read and revealed in various ways, symbols and language being one of them. Because as with most decorative works, especially traditional ones, each sequence of a narrative can consist of a number of scenes and objects moving in space.<sup>9</sup>

Surya Subratha's works contain a distinctive feature described in the theory about visual languages by Primadi Tabrani. This feature can be found in all the works of Surya Subratha, which is a way of telling stories in a dream time. It doesn't matter what order the narrative is understood. After it is fully read, its meaning is revealed. All images are shifted either partially or completely to appear and therefore its stories can be told.<sup>9</sup> To discuss them, the work "All Beings are Connected" is enough to represent his other works.



*Surya Subratha, All beings are connected, 2020*

The artwork titled, “All Beings are Connected” illustrates several scenes in a 5-meter stretch of fabric presented similarly to *ider-ider*. However, the narrative contained in this work is not as easily understood compared to the narrative in an *ider-ider*. The story is told in dream time, meaning that it is derived from many parts of the painting, from various directions, various times, and various distances.

Surya’s intention was to share everything he encounters in his daily life which could have a connection to each other. This desire was manifested in several sequences divided into a few spaces, separated by stylized objects that materialize and are arranged vertically. In almost every space we can find objects that resemble the natural environment, animals, severed heads that are vertically piled up, and fewer human figures visible. All of these images become a metaphorical language in order to successfully convey the meaning that he wanted to share.

Like his portrayal of animals with sharp teeth, Surya wanted to describe the traits in a

savage human being. The artwork featured fewer human figures, but it may be intended to show that animal traits are now more dominating than human traits. Regarding the imagery of the severed heads of animals and humans scattered and piled up, it was a way for him to draw the presence of other objects; they don’t necessarily have to be presented intact or clearly, sometimes a deformed object is enough.

In the end, what is conveyed in this curatorial writing is not an aesthetic manifesto, but merely one of the doorways to understand the works of Surya Subratha. Whether the hidden meanings in his artworks are legible or illegible is irrelevant. On the contrary, this is characteristic of the works of Surya and other painters-- If comics rely on dialogue bubbles to communicate, then Surya’s work relies on symbols and his own visual language. In painting and other branches of art, the meaning is not always presented clearly or conveyed directly. Let the artwork always present questions, giving us room to ponder and contemplate.

- [1] Kutipan Jakob Soemardjo, Buku Kajian Seni Rupa Tradisional Ika Ismurdiahwati (hal.32)
- [1] Jakob Soemardjo quote, Ika Ismurdiahwati Traditional Art Study Book (p.32)
- [2] Bahasa rupa adalah suatu cara yang dipakai untuk berkomunikasi lewat bahasa gambar
- [2] Visual language is a way of communicating through the language of images
- [3] I Wayan Wardana adalah ayah Surya Subratha yang banyak memberi pengaruh pada kekaryaannya, khususnya pada teknik pewarnaan dan pemberian kesan tekstur; seorang pematung.
- [3] I Wayan Wardana is Surya Subratha's father who influenced his work a lot, especially on coloring techniques and giving texture impressions; a sculptor.
- [4] Drs. I Gede Mugi Raharja, Artikel Falsafah dan Konsep Ruang Tradisional Bali
- [4] Drs. I Gede Mugi Raharja, Philosophy Article and Concept of Traditional Balinese Space
- [5] Ibid
- [5] Ibid
- [6] Ibid
- [6] Ibid
- [7] Bruce Granquit, dalam buku Inventing Art, the Painting of Batuan Bali (hal.88)
- [7] Bruce Granquit, in the book called Inventing Art, the Painting of Batuan Bali (p.88)
- [8] Kutipan Primadi Tabrani, Buku Kajian Seni Rupa Tradisional Ika Ismurdiahwati (hal.34)
- [8] Primadi Tabrani Citation, Ika Ismurdiahwati Traditional Art Study Book (p.34)
- [9] Ibid (hal.39)
- [9] Ibid (p.39)

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## ABOUT DenPasar2020: REGENERATION

This article is the product of a writing workshop which is part of a series of activities from the DenPasar2020: Regeneration program. DPS2020 writing workshop provides free mentorship to 8 young people to participate in a series of workshops that focus on writing and creative reviews about artistic and cultural activities. The 6-week workshop covered a wide range of topics from arts curatorial, citizen journalism, photography, reviews and critique of performing arts. The 4 invited mentors are art and cultural figures known in Bali and Indonesia, including Anwar "Jimpe" Rachman, Farah Wardani, Made Adnyana "Ole", and Syafiudin Vifick.

DenPasar is an annual program organized by CushCush Gallery (CCG), an alternative creative platform located in downtown Denpasar that dedicates itself to multidisciplinary collaboration by bridging various creative fields including arts and design.

