

PENAWATI AND

Mother Earth's Energy

By : Oktaria Asmarani

Translated by : Sherrene Chua and Kanya Abe

Her eyes looked shyly to the side. Her body was seated with her hands crossed in front of her. Her hair fell past her shoulders. The flowers bloomed around her feet. Clouds were dotted in her hair. She was green and blue. She was both beautiful and majestic, one with the mountain.

I was captivated by this 120 x 80 cm acrylic painting, one of the works exhibited in the Bali Megarupa II 2020 exhibition at the ARMA Museum, in Ubud. My feet were stuck in front of her for a few moments. The painting was so mystical, as if there was a mystery that I could solve, but the figure also felt so close, so grounded. She was indeed the image of

Mother Earth, so calmly settled among the mountains that reach the skies and dig into the earth at the same time.

I glanced at the label that was stuck on the wall next to it. My guess was correct, the artist is a woman. I am not trying to name stereotypes, but I was somehow able to feel the female energy present in the work. Thus, I believed that it was a woman who carried and poured that energy into paintings.



“Pertiwi Jati”, exhibited at Bali Megarupa II, 2020. (Author’s documentation)

The painting is titled “Pertiwi Jati”, the work of Ni Wayan Penawati. I took a photograph of the work as well as the label. Who would have thought that this feminine energy would bring me to the source, to the artist Penawati herself. On a hot afternoon in November 2020, I made an appointment to meet her at her house in Celuk, Gianyar, to understand more about herself and her work, and to discuss the energy that brought us together.

UNCONSCIOUS LOVE

Ni Wayan Penawati was born in Amlapura on July 23rd 1996, to a family of artists. Her father was a carver, and her uncle was a dancer. As a child, Pena (her nickname) was often brought to visit many museums and art exhibitions with her father. She grew accustomed to seeing paintings before she could even understand them.

Her love of art, especially painting, grew slowly and unconsciously. She did enjoy drawing as a child, but she never realized that she truly loved the activity. In junior high school, Penawati's highest scores came from the art subjects, with other subjects being below the minimum criteria. It was her art scores that helped her achieve first rank in her class during her final year of junior high school.

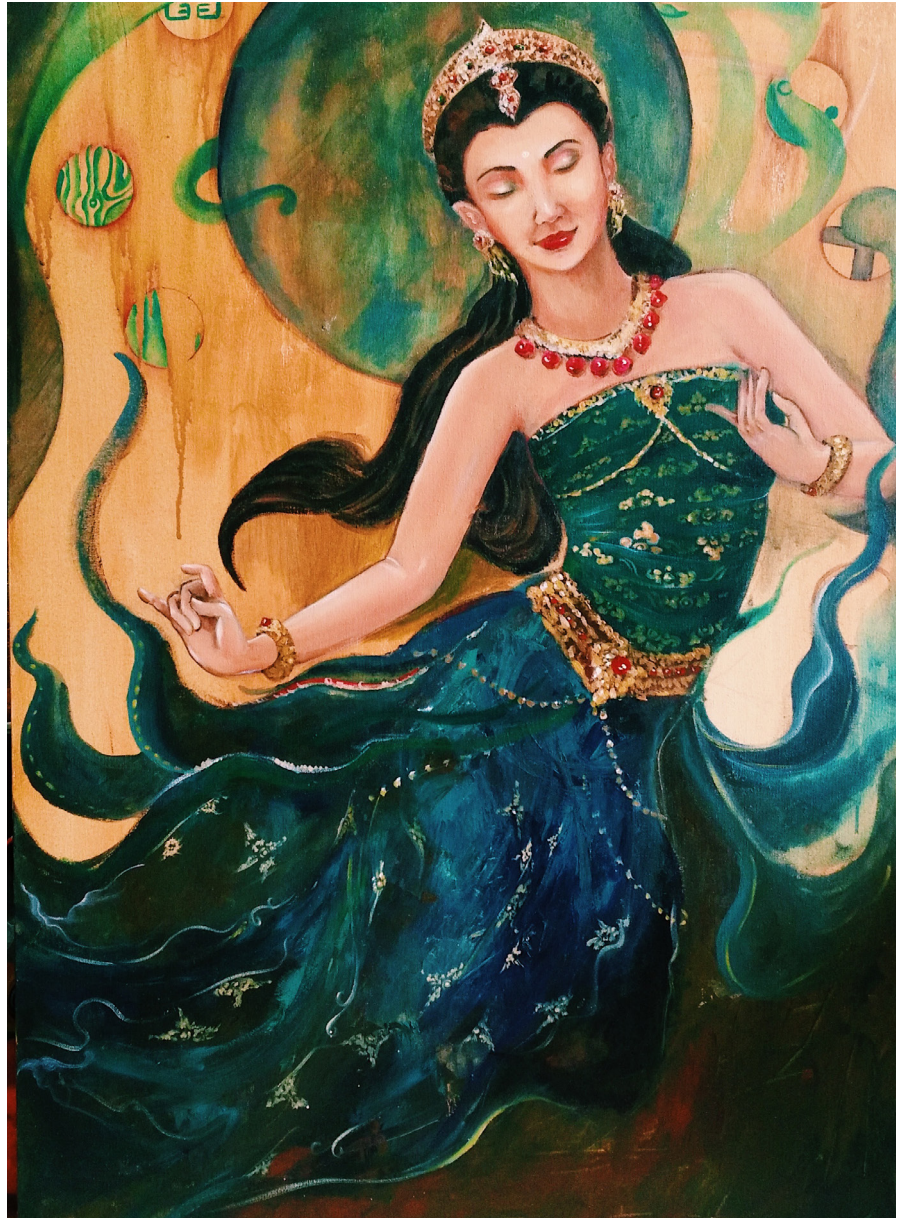
During that time, Pena had also started to compete in drawing competitions. Having lost the competitions and having been considered untalented by the school coach, she tried to enter another competition without representing the school, and without a coach. Unexpectedly, she won 3rd place in the competition. "I had no coach but I could still win?" little Pena wondered. It turns out that art was something that she loved, even though

she was unaware of her own feelings. It might be true what parents say: love grows out of familiarity.

So when her family gave her freedom in choosing her future, she chose art. After graduating junior high school, she continued her studies at SMKN 1 Sukawati, a vocational school that focused on fine arts and crafts. In this school that was previously known as Sekolah Menengah Seni Rupa (Highschool of Fine Arts), she studied arts more deeply. She began to explore new drawing and sketching techniques. After graduating in 2014, she continued her undergraduate studies at ISI Denpasar, Department of Fine arts, where she focused on painting, more specifically modern painting.

From the beginning, Pena was interested in painting female figures and feminine qualities. Before that, however, she was mostly drawing directly from observation, without any particular imagination. She discovered her love for painting women and their relationship with nature in 2016.

Pena was concerned by the environmental degradation happening on Earth, which is mostly caused by human actions. She began



*"Name of Motherland; Prithvi", 2017,
150x100cm, acrylic on canvas. (Private Doc. Penawati)*

to study the relationship between women and nature. In many different parts of the world, nature is often identified and represented with women. Even in Hindu Balinese tradition, the Mother Temple that unites several families is also related to Mother Earth.

WOMEN AND NATURE

Since 2016, Pena decided to paint women and nature. For her, the Earth has qualities that are unique to female characters. The Earth gives birth, nurtures, and preserves all that is alive and dead; she gives life. Nature, like a woman, is also able to bring disaster; she rages through earthquakes, and cries through falling rain.

Women and Nature were the topics that Pena raised in her final project of her undergraduate studies. She named the series of six paintings “Seri Ibu Pertiwi” (Mother Earth Series). Three paintings depicted the bad conditions faced by Mother Earth, namely forest fires, garbage build up, and marine pollution. The other three paintings depicted the beauties of Earth

that should be preserved, ranging from the beautiful mountains, forests and seas. The work “Pertiwi Jati” that was exhibited in the Bali Megarupa II 2020 exhibition is one of the paintings in the second category.

“The true Earth, for me, is green, blue and smooth; exactly how I painted it,” Pena said. She chose to use scrolls to frame the “Mother Earth Series”, like objects carried by messengers in kingdoms of the past. In this way, Pena wanted to assert that the painting is a message, and one that is not only text. She hoped that people who enjoyed her paintings would receive a message to respect the Earth, even though they might have to ask, or have different interpretations of the painting.



Outside of this project, Pena has also painted women and nature in other works. There are works that illustrate the energy of the Earth with different elements, and some depict the embodiment of Mother Earth in various places around the world. She claims that her works mix tradition and modernity. The bright colors represent the modern spirit and enthusiasm, and the brush strokes and figures are still in the traditional style. Pena is most comfortable working with watercolors, but she will continue to explore and learn about other techniques and concepts in painting.



"Earth's Energy; Element of Water", 2016, 170x100cm, acrylic on canvas. (Private Doc. Penawati)

“MOTHER EARTH”, PENA’S FIRST IBU PERTIWI

Pena’s first painting depicting women and nature was painted in 2015 under the title ‘Mother Earth’. That painting is the largest painting that she has made so far. In the painting, a goddess with a headdress plays a flute from which colorful strokes radiate. There are both polite and wicked faces. Giant trumpets befriend insects and leaves. Butterflies fly in the right corner, and flowers bloom in the midst of flying petals. In some of the flowers, places of worship grow such as mosques, temples, monasteries, and churches.

There are several distinctive Hindu symbols

in the painting “Mother Earth”. Lingga and Yoni, male and female symbols of creation, are also present among the colorful brush strokes. The head of Naga Basuki, symbol of balance in nature, carries a ball on its muzzle. Above the rest, the Acintya, a symbol of God’s omnipotence, radiates serenity despite its small size.

In this work, Pena wanted to explain that this great Earth was created because of God. The Earth is personified by a woman who gave birth to everything that exists; big, small, good, and bad. Regardless of beliefs, respect for



"Mother Earth", 2015, 100x180cm, acrylic on canvas. (Private Doc. Penawati)

the Earth is always there. It is fitting to believe that all beings are born from the earth, are sustained by the earth, stand on the earth, and will eventually return to the earth. This Earth that has given birth to everything; she is a mother.

This work is beautiful and so full of energy. When I looked at it and compared it to her other works, "Energy of Water" and "Energy of Air," this painting looked so realistic and majestic. However, it appears that in this work, Pena simply poured all elements of nature together into a painting. She admitted that

since this was her first work on the topic of women and nature, she had no specific goal in this painting, simply wanting to pour everything in. It was the beginning of her journey to something bigger.

EXHIBITING, CHANNELING ENERGY

Since 2014, Pena has exhibited her works in more than twenty fine art exhibitions. She first exhibited her work at the Final Project Exhibition at SMKN 1 Sukawati, the high school where she studied. Here, students were introduced to the concept of exhibitions and taking care of their own artworks when they are exhibited. Pena exhibited her work depicting a female legong dancer. At that time, she did not delve deeply into the concepts and issues of women, so she only painted women from observation. Nevertheless, she received an award for the best Final Project artwork in her class exhibition.

With her young age and limited knowledge at that time, Pena was very proud to see her work displayed in the exhibition hall and enjoyed by many people, even though it was still in the school environment. “However, since university, I began to understand that exhibitions are not just about displaying works. There is the responsibility to think about the message being conveyed to the audience, through both text and the context of the work.” she said.

Exhibitions are also places for Pena to meet people who are able to feel the energy she brings into her paintings. The Exhibition of Balinese Women Artists #2 “Vidyadiva”, held at the Taman Budaya Bali Kriya Building in 2018 is one example. In that exhibition, she met a visitor from Germany who greatly admired her work. “I’ve seen your work since the beginning, and I’ve had the chance to look around as well, but I’m very interested in this work. It is as if there is energy being conveyed to me,” Pena said, mimicking the visitor’s words.

Pena recalls being still in her hometown when the visitor asked her about her painting. The visitor was so curious about Pena’s painting that she was willing to wait for Pena in the exhibition hall for four hours. Pena then described the work entitled ‘Senja’ (Dusk) to her. ‘Senja’ represents the reluctance of nature and women to give up when they fall. However far she falls into the dark, she will eventually become light again, like the dawn of a new morning. “The visitor then told me that she was abandoned by her parents as a child. She wanted to take my painting as a



Penawati and her painting, "Bersemi". Featured in the exhibition of Balinese Women's Artists #1, "Luwih Utamaning Luh", Taman Budaya Bali Kriya Building, 2017. (Private Doc. Penawati)

reminder that there is a person who shares the same energy as she does," Pena said. As a kindergarten teacher, the visitor also wanted to share stories of Ibu Pertiwi from Bali to the children in her country.

'Senja' became Pena's first work that was sold. Pena said that she didn't think so much about the price of her work at that time because she believed that the visitor would properly value the painting. Now, she already has a price range for her paintings, even though she doesn't think that they are expensive. Nevertheless, she believes that the price of her artworks will continue to shift in accordance with her experience in art.

BALINESE FINE ARTS SCENE

Pena humbly considers that the Balinese art scene is still lacking in appreciators. For her, there are still many visitors who come to the exhibition just because they know the artist, not because of the works on display. Therefore, she often sees a lack of visitors at many exhibitions. “There are still many who come to the exhibition not because of the objects, but the subjects: namely the artists themselves,” she said. However, she is optimistic that this kind of mindset will change over time.

Just organizing an exhibition, Pena has encountered many difficulties both from fellow artists and the galleries. She gave me an example: there are five young artists who want to hold a group exhibition in a gallery. However, when the gallery approves the exhibition, four of them might back out at the last minute, leaving only one artist. On the

other hand, some galleries have thought of the young artists as ‘small’ because they were considered juniors in the arts scene. For Pena, it is a matter of communication, which is an essential part of any exhibition.

Maybe because a gallery has a certain reputation, they want to preserve their good name by not taking the risk of exhibiting works by young artists, she considered. However, young artists need to experience exhibitions and exhibiting as part of their experience as an artist. “Exhibitions are one of the occasions where we can show our identity through our respective works, and from there we can receive appreciation and feedback. If that space doesn’t exist, how can we complete our process of making art?”

WOMEN IN THE ART ECOSYSTEM

After exploring the Balinese Art scene in general from her point of view as a young artist, Pena decided to focus on the topic that she chose for her own work: women. Looking back, Pena realized that she had never thought of painting male figures. She only learned the process of painting them. “Maybe Sudjojono’s words were right, it’s better for women to be the painting models because they are more beautiful,” she said with a laugh.

Even so, she disagrees with exploration that leads to the exploitation and objectification of women’s bodies in fine art. Having an interest in drawing women doesn’t mean that women should be explored in every detail, from their face, to the form and shape of their bodies; it shouldn’t be like that. Pena rather chooses to take on the perspective of femininity within her work; women as more than their physical form. All that remains is how the artist interprets femininity itself, whether they emphasize the facet of tenderness, or other traits.

It is from reflecting on these topics that people can understand how women are so

closely associated with nature. She is able to provide tenderness and warmth, and is full of love. If not taken care of, she can also bring large catastrophes.

To this day, Pena still feels comfortable working with the theme of women and nature. However, she does not feel confident painting women’s issues and other socio-political topics like the issue of systemic gender discrimination. Her own experience surrounded by many male artists has been good so far.

When she was in her undergraduate studies, of the 60 students in the Fine Arts Department, Pena was the only woman. She wasn’t very interested in getting along with men, but inevitably had to compromise and adapt to a more male-dominated circle of friends. She did all of this because of her love of fine arts. “I was actually favored because I was the only woman in my major,” she recalled with a laugh. The lack of female students on campus is also directly proportional to the amount of female lecturers. Of the 30 lecturers who teach in their majors, only two are female.

Pena sees several factors that contribute to the lack of women in the Bali arts ecosystem, especially in painting, reflected in both the academic realm and practicing artists. From what she has seen and experienced so far, painters are expected to make art while working to make money. When women marry, they are given other domestic and traditional roles which are time-consuming and exhausting. Not all painters are able to continue painting productively while juggling these other tasks.

Pena shared that she had invited other female schoolmates in her major to join her. They talked about creating works together, meeting once a month and planning exhibitions together. However, in the end, they were filtered out by the circumstances she mentioned earlier: the double burden of a woman's life. Many of them eventually decided to stop exploring in the art world.

Pena also feels a lack of support from senior artists to younger artists. She believes that young artists need encouragement and a shot of confidence to work and network. Unfortunately, many well known senior artists do not try to embrace younger artists. "At least invite us, talk to us, or even organise a small event together. From there, we can be introduced as their younger siblings, or we can introduce ourselves," she said. Pena still feels that many artists stick to their own group, and are reluctant to mingle with others.

Facing these challenges, Pena believes that young artists, especially female artists, need to have courage and determination. If one is already in love with art, then they will always be able to find a way to keep creating works. She also insisted that male artists should be seen as friends for potential collaboration, not as opponents or rivals. Female artists should also be able to prove that they are capable of creating works matching or exceeding those of men.

Another issue that Pena observed in the Bali art ecosystem is the label of 'female artists' used to classify artists who are women. Why must female artists be labeled when male artists are just referred to as 'artists'? This label for women makes artists feel very exclusive to the title of 'female'. Even if unlabeled, women are often considered incompetent in the arts, always portrayed as the weaker counterparts. However, Pena thinks that if two anonymous works were compared objectively, both men and women's works have the same quality. Therefore, the most important thing to possess is determination and courage to stay true to oneself, because women can also achieve what men do. "I can take care of my own canvas and artwork without having to feel inferior or ask for help from a male friend. I can be friends with men without trying to be a tomboy," said this long-haired woman.

Although there is still a dilemma with the term 'female artists', Pena feels an urgency

for the collective of female artists. With the art ecosystem still very much dominated by men, unity of the female spirit becomes very important. If female artists do not gather and hold events together, Pena worries that their existence will be increasingly invisible. “That’s why women involved in the arts must go hand in hand and support each other,” she hopes. For her, it is very important to have a platform that embraces female artists, both young and old, to help each other.



PENA'S WORK, IN THE EYES OF HER APPRECIATORS

Pena's works do not escape criticism. She admits that she receives it often, but most of the criticism is not suitable. "Not criticism of my artwork, but of how it was displayed," she complained. For example, in the Bali Megarupa II 2020 exhibition, she received comments about the use of scrolls in displaying her artwork. "They said it was like curtains. I was also confused, maybe it reminded them of curtains at their home," Pena said with a laugh.

Pena said that she received quite painful criticism when she was still learning to paint in her arts high school. She and her friends often practiced on the street, painting everywhere. Later, some other high school students walked past and asked what Pena and her friends were painting for. "Pictures already exist, but you paint them again, even though yours are ugly," she said, imitating the student's words. She was quite shocked at that time because she and her friends had only just started learning. "But yeah, I kept learning, and we proved to them that what we were doing was not just playing around."

Pena tries to emphasize that a work of fine art should not be judged as a good work

simply because it is realistic and conversely, an abstract work is not necessarily something easy to create. In her opinion, if one really learns fine art, starting an abstract artwork is really challenging. The use of color and strokes are crucial and when an artist has to think about doing so, the work can no longer be considered abstract. This is because abstract works are expressive, and the expression of one artist is certainly different to another. In essence, all artwork has its own standards. Realistic and abstract-style works cannot be equated or compared.

In her journey creating artworks in the art arena, Pena considers her work successful when it has been completed and exhibited. Even better if the people enjoying her work are able to interpret the message that Pena wanted to portray. In essence, her work succeeds when her message reaches the viewers. Up until today, Pena considers the success of her work to be about 50:50; some people were able to capture the intent she was about to convey, some were not. Even so, Pena is not too bothered because everyone will have their own perception of a work.

FUNCTIONING ART

Pena has heard that art and design are distinguished because design focuses more on function. According to Pena, other than aesthetics, art actually has many functions, though many are not practical. Reflecting on the works of 'Seri Ibu Pertiwi' (Mother Earth Series), Pena felt that when her work was able to stir the viewers without speaking a word, that's where her art 'worked'. The artwork speaks through the energy that the artist imbues and the message that arises from it becomes the function of the artwork. Art's function in Pena's eyes is to help people introspect, question reality and enjoy beauty.

Art also allowed her to find love - even though the endless exploration made her almost go crazy - for Mother Earth. Although her previous project has been completed, Pena sees many mysteries about Mother Earth that she wants to discover. Art brings this closer to reality as something that dwells in people's daily lives: women and the earth.

Inspiration for her artworks often come spontaneously. When walking and looking around, she feels that she is being "shown" what nature looks like today. She feels an intuition that leads her to work, that directs her in sorting and choosing the message she wants to convey to the audience through her work. Pena's artistic process also depends on her emotions, because it affects the way she paints. Pena said that the mood must be continuously cultivated so that the feeling of love for the artwork and art itself is constantly maintained.



The process of coloring the artwork. (Private Doc. Penawati)

COLORS OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Of all the stages in the painting process, Pena most likes the process of coloring her work. Somehow, when her hands hold a brush and paint, she feels such strong excitement; just like a child coloring pictures. Pena feels something among the richness of colors.

Pena's sketching process is quite unique. She sketches with many different colors. For example, strokes depicting the eyes are in

red, and the nose should have some yellow. "If it's just one color, one line, it always feels unsatisfying."

The process of creating a work starts with an idea. When Pena comes up with an idea, she enriches her sketch references in online search engines because she often paints female figures. Then, she will draw a sketch on paper and transfer it onto the canvas with

pastels or colored pencils. Sketching is the most time-consuming process. Unlike most artists, Pena starts from the most detailed to the more simple parts. After that, the painting and color exploration process begins.

Her sketching process that starts from the details was inspired by the technique used by Pranoto Ahmad Raji, an artist based in Ubud. She was inspired by his way of working when she did an internship in Pranoto's studio while studying art at her high school. She chose to intern there because she saw Pranoto drawing his model directly. At school she was taught to see the subject of a painting as an object, but while studying with Pranoto, she learned to see negative and positive space. If she were to draw a tree against the sky, she would start by drawing the gaps between the leaves and twigs, not the tree itself. "It is the empty spaces that ultimately form the tree," she said. From there, Pena learned to be more sensitive to objects and colors that are not often perceived.

In addition to Pranoto, Pena acknowledges several other figures who helped in her creative process. Firstly, her father who introduced her to drawing and fine art. During her high school, Ketut Mara taught her how to sketch and use watercolors. He was also the one who guided her in the Gianyar and Bali provincial competitions, where she won twice. In university, she had Dr. Sri Supriyatini who guided her to believe in the concept of Mother Earth that she brought to her works. She also

helped her break down a concept that was so universally recognized in a more personal way. "Especially on campus with so few female lecturers. I enjoyed my meetings with her and always felt understood," she admits.

“

“Most importantly, it is open to young people to work on their art. I don’t want it to be like my experience, where it’s hard to find ideas, and even when I find one, it’s difficult to realize it in the form of exhibitions because there is no place,”

- Penawati

PENA TODAY AND TOMORROW

Currently, Pena is enrolled as a Master of Fine Arts student at ISI Denpasar and focuses on her fine arts studies. Having had knowledge and experience in the creation of fine art, Pena is now determined to complete her passion of fine art by learning to write. She sees that there are still very few female writers who focus on art reviews and criticisms in Bali.

In addition, Pena and some of her artist

friends are exploring tourist attractions in Bali that are now empty due to the COVID-19 pandemic. So far, they have visited several tourist attractions in Gianyar, Tabanan, Bangli, and Buleleng areas. There, they draw what they see in their own style and technique. This activity makes Pena relook at Mother Earth through a different perspective. Where she previously painted the green rice fields and the blue of the sea, now she learns to feel the



other energies from the places she visits. She tries to realize the feeling of coolness, freshness, rain, and heat, which may later become a new concept that she presents in her work. “Hopefully, this project will continue and develop into an online or offline exhibition,” she said.

Pena believes that art will never die, and the same for the people who live off art. Reflecting on the pandemic, Pena believes that artists and their work are very much needed. They are able to work from home and still earn income. Even such depressing times as the pandemic can be used as a time for artists to keep working. When art spaces, both large and small, reopened to the public, there were many exhibitions held. This suggests that art will not be stopped by anything.

Pena hopes that she will always continue the art she loves, either by creating artworks or writing. She hopes that the government can pay more attention to young artists and provide a platform to create art. She also hopes that young artists continue to strengthen their resolve and keep working. “If you’re sure, there will always be a way from Above,” she said, resolutely.

*Coloring, the most enjoyable process for Pena.
(Private Doc. Penawati)*



Speaking of ideals, Pena dreams of owning a painting studio sometime in the future. She hopes that she will have a studio at home that young people can use to hang out or hold exhibitions. “Most importantly, it is open to young people to work on their art. I don’t want it to be like my experience, where it’s hard to find ideas, and even when I find one, it’s difficult to realize it in the form of exhibitions because there is no place,” she concluded with a laugh.

===

The views expressed within this article are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of CushCush Gallery in Bali, Indonesia. CushCush Gallery does not endorse its content and accepts no responsibility for any loss, damage or injury resulting from reliance on any of the information or views contained within it.

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 Syafudin 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.

