

WOUNDS OF *Lontar Leaf Paintings*

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Avoiding wounds is like avoiding a plague. But, not for people who love wounds or for those who want to speak through wounds. This wound is not a tear that spews blood on flesh. Nor is it a feeling of pain or bruising on the human body. Putu Dudik Ariawan (24), an artist born in 1996 from Buleleng-Bali, said he was challenged by wounds, because: "To wound requires intention." He said this while displaying the motion of a small knife tucked between his fingers.

"Wounding" is the term Dudik uses for the process of etching lines on lontar leaves. In contrast to the brush strokes on canvas, making a line with a small knife called the *pengerupak* does not yield immediate results. This demands that the artist be intentional when considering the location of the wound on the lontar leaf. Lontar leaves that have been dried and processed in a certain way will not spew blood like a line cut on skin, but the scratched line becomes visible after being polished with black candlenut.

"The girl is the result of my wounding" said

Dudik with a chuckle and pointed to a painting he titled *Protection in Silent*. Nine lontar leaves arranged into a canvas that depicts a Joged Bumbung dancer wearing a mask. The 30x25 cm painting was exhibited in the Bali Mega Rupa 2020 exhibition which took place from October 31 to November 7 at Arma Museum, Ubud. On November 14, 2020, Dudik expressed his desire to share the Joged dancer girl to the wider public as his prayer for the pandemic to end soon.

However, the woman in Dudik's painting seems to evoke the deep wounds to Bali's tourism industry in the midst of the pandemic. Many people employed in tourism have changed their professions; the price of hotels and other lodgings have decreased drastically and many have lost their previous sources of income. The deep wounds to tourism this time have raised tensions. Even though the government is still campaigning for the growth of Bali's tourism, there is a hidden fear of an outbreak that cannot be controlled. "We live off tourism. While the outbreak is still ongoing,



Photo of painting; Protection in Silent

we do not know what to live from,” said Dudik who grew up in the Lovina-Buleleng tourism area.

He explains that Jaged dancers are representations of Bali selling its ‘exotic’ nature. Around 2017 the Jaged Bumbung dance that was considered very erotic began to gain popularity, so much so that it became banned. Dudik himself was worried about the decision, “There is no difference between tourism and what happened to erotic Jaged nowadays. The Jaged dancers can no longer rely on Jaged for their livelihoods, they try taking other jobs, but there’s nothing to do. It is quite worrying, isn’t it?” asked Dudik with wrinkles on his forehead matching the height of his tone.

The hands of a Jaged Bumbung dancer clasped in front of her chest resembles a hotel or villa employee welcoming guests. When visitors arrive, they are immediately greeted with clasped hands and an unexpected smile. A smile that seems friendly but no one knows whether it is sincere or obligatory. The clasped hands, combined with the mask-covered face in this painting, are like the viewing guests who want to see the scripts behind the dancer, the scripts that leave more of an ancient and mystical impression than its essence as a medium for teachings, knowledge, and so on.

Like most modern Balinese, Dudik feels distant from the cultural tradition of lontar. In general, lontar are understood as sacred items containing information regarding spiritual teachings, medicine, and auspicious days according to the Balinese calendar. Perhaps in older times, writing on lontar leaves was a customary method of recording teachings, much like a notebook today.

The feeling of distance around lontar causes some to elevate these objects even without knowing the content of their texts. On November 13th, Ida Ayu Sinta Oktariani (25), a Balinese language teacher, told the story of lontar through Whatsapp. She told the story to the people of a village that has an heirloom lontar. When the Balinese language teacher asked to read its contents, the local villagers delayed the occasion because they had not yet found an auspicious day for the reading according to the Balinese calendar. So the Balinese language teacher waited for the right day.

When the day came, a ceremony was held in honor of the lontar, and the villagers waited for the reading from the Balinese language instructor. As nervous as the citizens were waiting for the reading of the lontar, so was the instructor. She was nervous about choosing the right words to convey that the long revered lontar was, after all, a record of debts and cattle breeding times. The sacred status of the lontar had apparently prevented them knowing its substance.

Dudik was very interested in the unique medium of lontar leaves. He wanted to go beyond the myths that are still very much attached to the craft, and familiarize himself with lontar. In the process, he visited Gedong Kertya in Singaraja and found a book called *Mengenal Prasi* (Introducing Prasi) written by I Ketut Suwidja. "Drawing on lontar leaves or prasi art has actually been around for a long time," said Dudik, "But most of it is about Wayang (traditional shadow puppetry). The older prasi art had one picture per leaf, almost like a comic," he continued.

As a person who was introduced to the art of prasi during his university days, Dudik chose to learn the techniques of previous artists without dissolving into the old style. Dudik explained while holding his painting *Protection in Silent* that his style of drawing is different to the prasi art styles of the past. He proclaimed that he grew up with television and cartoon series that filled the television programmes on Sundays, "My time is different from that of previous artists, I have to get people closer to lontar in my own way," he said.

Talking about current issues through lontar leaves is one of Dudik's attempts to tear down the wall of mysticism around lontar within himself. It is also a way to invite many people to get to know the mystical wall that must be torn down in order to understand the true messages of the lontar. In addition to eliminating the mystical impression, his exploration of lontar leaves is an attempt to view lontar not just as an object of exoticism.



Photo of the painting; Two Sides

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Putu Dudik Ariawan is a young artist who explores lontar leaves as a medium. The mystical, ancient, and sacred nature of lontar has become another topic he wanted to address in his works. Dudik, who grew up in an era when electronic devices have already entered our homes, has a very different view of lontar compared to the people of previous ages. Dudik’s view on lontar is one which encourages learning from the knowledge, historical records, and artworks that are contained in lontar leaves.

Various achievements—from exhibitions to competitions, have colored Dudik’s career in lontar art:

2020	Pameran Titian Prize 2020 di Titian Art Space, Ubud Bali
2020	Finalist Titian Prize
2019	Pameran Prasi “CONTEMPORARY PALM LEAF WORK IN SOUTSH EAST ASIA” di Center For The Book Sanfancisco, Amerika serikat
2019	Juara 1 Drawing Contest Serangkaian dengan UN International Day of Peace Kategori umum
2018	Pameran Prasi “(O)P(E)Rasi” Di Santrian Gallery

Despite being familiar with prasi art already, Dudik strives for more precise techniques and forms, his artistic process is like a child who grows up and sees novelties throughout the day. His paintings and style are always developing. In his piece called 'Protection in Silent', for example, he observed that some technical aspects needed to be strengthened, such as the pattern of lines that form the shape of the hands, as well as the composition choice to place the dancer's hand in front of her chest. Perhaps there was a possibility that another position would have strengthened the message he wanted to convey through the image; even the eyes of the dancer held many unexplored possibilities. As a young artist in the prasi art scene, Dudik's drive to explore and be critical with his own art should be appreciated, along with his determination to break down the myths that are still attached to sacred objects like lontar, which sometimes makes us forget to ask "what is this object really for?"

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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.

