

Charm of Koni Herawati's ceramics and paintings

Koni Herawati may not be a household name, but she is quite popular indeed in the artistic circles of Yogyakarta and Bali.

Though in her forties, she looks about ten years younger, despite the prominence of her glasses. Bright in her gait and calm in her attitude, she looks rather modest in her daily appearance, in fact.

The painter-cum-ceramicist, lives in Batu Bulan, Bali, after happily residing in Yogyakarta and Jakarta. Following a successful solo exhibition in Bali, she displayed some of her works at a show at the Indonesian-French Institute in Yogyakarta, which ended on Friday.

Her constant thirst for new works has made Bali her ideal place in which to develop her creative side. Mother Nature and the social order in the Island of Gods have since provided her with plenty of fresh inspiration.

Last August, her solo exhibition, called *Hierarchy*, held at Seniwati Gallery in Ubud, aroused the curiosity of art observers, art critics, and visitors alike. The ideas and stories underscoring her works in the exhibition came to her thanks to her interaction with the Balinese.

This interaction, not confined solely to the artistic realm, is based on her critical stance as a female artist.

Her experience with what she has seen through her own eyes, captured with her senses and digested with her mind, have led to paintings and ceramics that assume shapes reflecting her own values as a thoughtful individual.

The title *Hierarchy* itself highlighted the patriarchy that prevails in Bali. This is a matter of gender, given that in a Balinese family, a son is deemed more valuable than a daughter, as a young man can contin-

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ue the family tree and, later, become a family breadwinner.

Koni finds it hard to accept this fact. In her opinion, men and women are created the same, and must be equally treated. So she utilized symbols using terra cotta in a conical shape with one of the clay cones hanging. The sharp-pointed ends of two ceramic tubes meet, and are close to touching each other.

In this respect, Koni questions the validity of caste as a social order. She finds it hard to understand why the feudalistic practice still exists.

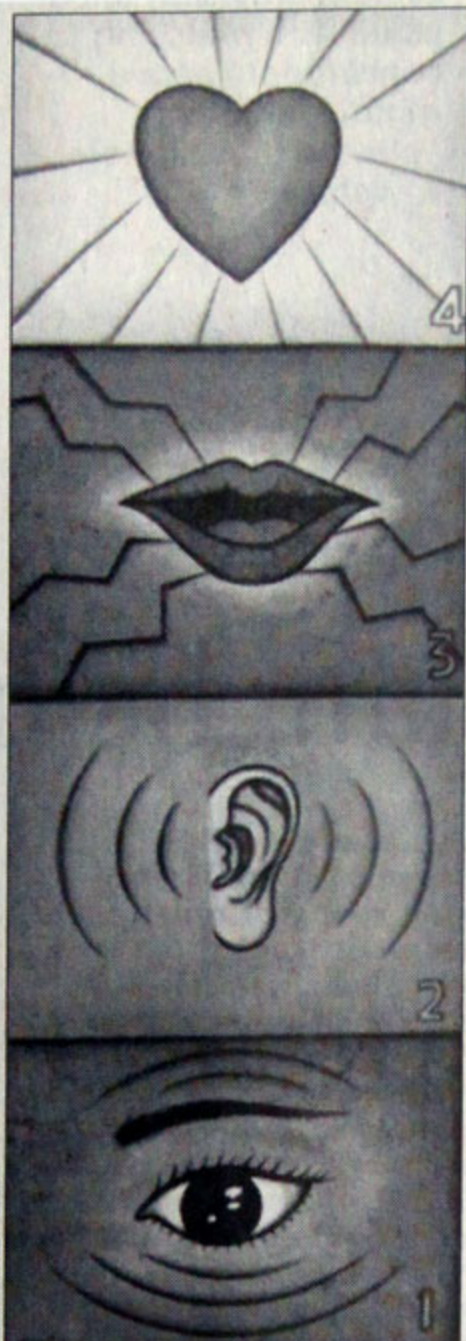
In her installation work, the sharp-pointed end of the conical shapes can never meet. To her understanding, human beings are equal in God's eyes: God, she says, will never discriminate against people in terms of skin color, beauty, or wealth.

Man is judged in terms of his behavior and sincerity in co-existing with his fellow human beings, as well as his ability to love other people, and be loved by them in return.

Koni, therefore, is hit by a mental conflict, and her heart is embroiled in an emotional tumult. So, she has titled this work *Hierarchy of Immanency*.

Another installation work also exhibited is similarly made of terra cotta and is called *Hierarchy of Power*. It takes the form of a cone around in which there are nails the color of gold. For her, this symbolizes the presence of bureaucracy in life and the repression of human rights.

A deeper interpretation of this work shows that actually Koni wishes to say that power is basic and that, once abused, it will turn

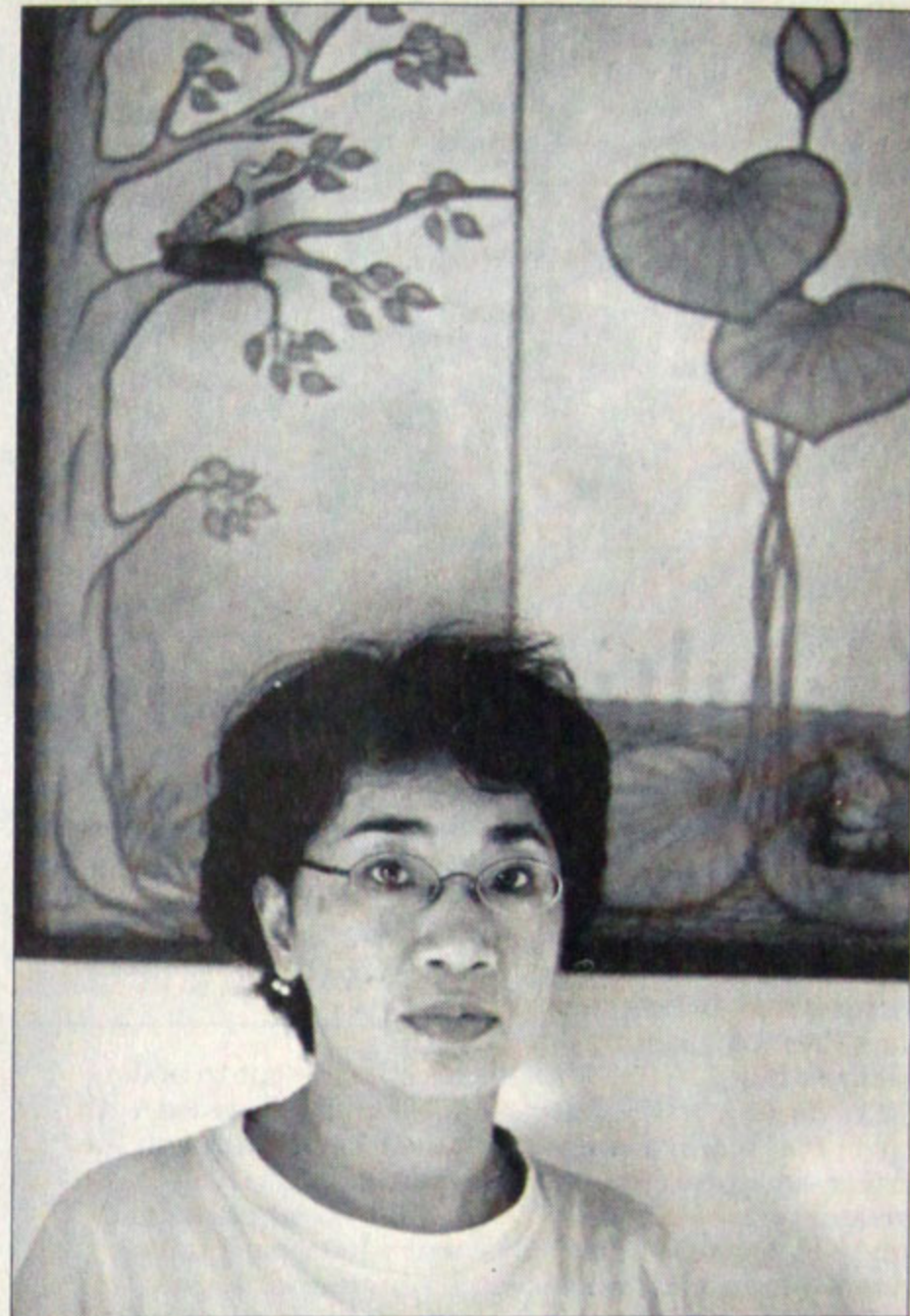


Hierarchy of Humanism

into absolute power. That's why, as Koni sees it, there are hierarchical levels in human life: The superiors and subordinates. The hierarchy somehow causes pressures in one's occupation that will invariably influence one's life.

Koni seems to suggest that this is the origin of social envy, and presence of a crown — a position or a social status — which again distinguishes men from women.

She also reflects on hierarchy in her painting called *Hierarchy of Growth*. It shows layers of soil forming a mountain. These layers contain magma bursting out of the crater of the mountain. Above it, leaves grow



Private collection

Artist Koni Herawati in front of one of her works.

as the symbol of life.

Clearly, she wants to say that the power of nature, such as water, soil and air, plays an important role in life.

In this painting, she seems curious about how these elements of nature have been sanctified. Water has become holy water for prayer. In the same way, the soil and the air that we breathe also have their holy aspects.

She realizes that all this has come about because the religious aspect of the Balinese society blends in with the Hinduism they profess in animism and dynamism, finally turning the Balinese community into one characterized by syncretism and

transcendentalism.

A similar view is also seen in her works called *Hierarchy of Nature* and *Hierarchy of Humanity*, where the symbolization is expressed with eyes, ears, the mouth, and the heart.

Koni, born in Magelang, Yogyakarta, is also curious about the fact of life that the tradition and mores in one region should differ from those of another.

This reality has given her reasons to get in touch with the religious atmosphere of Bali which means, for her, establishing contact with something new.

The third of four children, Koni was born into a merchant family, where art does not run in the blood. Her

family was not quite supportive of her when she studied graphic design at the Indonesian Art Institute (ISI), Yogyakarta. It's still the belief of many parents that taking up art equals a poor future.

Thanks to her own perseverance and strong will, she completed her studies at ISI in 1989. Earlier, she had completed her management studies at Atmajaya University in Yogyakarta.

After graduating from ISI, she moved to Jakarta to set up a graphic design bureau, along with some friends.

However, she did not stay long in the graphic design business. After some contemplation, she realized that she actually wanted to be an artist.

She wanted to create something, to express her ideas in her work and get the work exhibited. In 1994, she decided to learn ceramic techniques at Keng Sien in Jakarta, and then went to Bandung to learn more of this skill from Asmudjo.

Finally, she learned not only the ceramic techniques, but also how to make a ceramic kiln. After mastering the ceramic techniques, she began to make ceramic items such as necklaces, bracelets and other ornamental pieces.

There was something funny about her first ceramic items: an aunt of hers always criticized them, saying that few would like to put on these ugly items.

Koni, however, always said with a laugh that she was proud to put them out. She knew full well that most people would prefer gold necklaces and bracelets rather than ceramic pieces. These criticisms, however, encouraged her to produce even better ceramic items.

After spending a year in Bandung, she decided to return to Yogyakarta, where she and five other colleagues set up the Cemeti Art Foundation. In

Yogyakarta, she also set up a ceramic studio called Gentong Potter's in Nitiprayan, Bantul.

Assisted by four people, she found a lot of freedom to create whatever she wanted, using canvas and clay as both a painter and a ceramicist.

She began with souvenir items and then followed this up with her creation of her critical installation works. In 1999, she moved to Bali and has since stayed there. She entrusted a close friend to take care of her studio in Yogyakarta.

For two years in Bali, she learned the technique of Balinese traditional painting from I Dewa Putu Mokoh in Pengosekan village.

She went on to begin her solo exhibition at Seniwati Gallery and some joint-exhibition at various cities across the country from 1995 to 2001. She also won second prize in the Ethnic Design on Ceramic Tile competition in Jakarta.

With all that she has learned and achieved in painting and the ceramic arts, she always came to what her late father once told her: "Knowledge is an inexhaustible legacy."

Koni has found this statement true. Thanks to the management science she has studied, she can now organize her own exhibitions. The graphic designing skill is useful for designing her own catalogs. What she has learned at ISI and from art tutors has made her the artist that she is now.

Still single, she also hopes that someday that she would settle down in a married life. She also dreams of getting a scholarship to pursue further studies abroad. Nevertheless, Koni always keeps her optimism aflame. She never feels old. She never gets tired.

She has resolve to create — better yet, a resolve to create at the highest level of achievement possible to defy a societal hierarchy.