

# Artist Pranoto strips away pretension

The sign placed in the window of the Galeri Milenium, a small, hole-in-the-wall exhibition space in the crowded Diamond Plaza commercial complex on Jl. RS Fatmawati in South Jakarta simply said: "Nudes by Pranoto".

The exhibition, like the sign, says so little and yet so very much. There is no grand pretension here, no stated or written theory of art, no attempt to link the artist's work with any past or current "ism", and no effort to justify its content or lack of it.

Besides a short note that the artist "hopes this exhibition in Jakarta will enrich the world of art in Indonesia", the catalog carries only a somewhat cryptic commentary by Yulianto Liestiono, the owner and director of Galeri Milenium, on the controversial nature of the subject matter: nude human figures.

Nudes as a central focus of an artist's body of work are indeed a rarity within the history of modern Indonesian art. Pranoto, a self-taught painter born in Sragen, Solo, Central Java in 1952, but currently living and working in Bali, is one of the very few Indonesian artists to focus with such intensity on life or figure drawing in his work.

Although some local painters have occasionally exhibited one or two paintings of semi-nude or nude figures

within a context of a much greater number of portraits, still lifes and landscapes, whole shows of paintings of nudes are highly unusual.

Even Affandi's full frontal nude self-portraits, and Basuki Abdullah's seductive, semi-nude representations of an "ideal female beauty" are exceptions to the rule in Indonesia's world of painting. For that reason alone, Pranoto's current display at Galeri Milenium is notable and potentially controversial.

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## Margaret Agusta

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"Upon hearing the word 'nude', a person might automatically think of eroticism, genitals, pornography, lewd behavior or other impropriety," Yulianto Liestiono, who studied painting at the Indonesian Institute of Art (ISI) in Yogyakarta, commented. "But the same word can also call other impressions to mind, such as honesty, trust, submission or even love. This dichotomy is probably what stirs up confusion about what kind of stance to take on nudity. A community of people can become extremely polarized or even hostile to one another when the topic of nudity comes up. Nudity is not some-

thing that people can easily see eye to eye on."

In this context, the true significance of Pranoto's paintings is caught up in the inexplicable dilemma artists have struggled with since earliest man first scrawled images of bison on cave walls — the eye of the beholder. As when Pablo Picasso was once asked how he knew when a painting was finished — he responded that a

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given work was never truly completed, that this was the task of the beholder — Pranoto invites the viewer to ponder both the aesthetic and existential import of what he paints.

"Only God and Pranoto know why he focuses on nudes in his art. I only know that I learn something from his art. Nudity is never vulgar in his works. The nudity in Pranoto's paintings is not the kind that fishes for an

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erotic reaction. I find in Pranoto's nudes a specific artistic value; an aesthetic feeling that is not always easy to find in works by other artists. I believe that Pranoto elaborates on nudity on his canvasses to find something positive and meaningful; and he stands strong in that position."

Pranoto's nudes, like the ubiquitous cats of Popo Iskandar and the suns and roosters

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JP/Paul Agusta

*Two Women* by Pranoto.

Affandi repeatedly drew upon for inspiration, or Hendra Gunawan's colorful fish, are in part simply vehicles for the aesthetic concerns of the painterly mind: color, texture, composition, space and contour.

Pranoto clearly delights in creatively playing with the textural possibilities inherent in the combination of unusual materials, such as floor tiles and tinted cement in the painting titled *Two Women*, or oil paint on sandpaper as in the work titled *Sleeping on Blue Flowers*. His concentrated focus on exploring the aesthetic potential of space, color and the contrast of light and dark is also immediately apparent in *Floating Light*, a male nude done with soft pastels on deep green textured paper, and *Rest*, a painting of an ambiguously androgynous figure reclining on a boulder.

Yet, Pranoto's nudes speak of much more than painterly preoccupations echoing out of the artist's eternal cry of, "What if — what if?" The choice of subject matter alone articulates an intense interest in the human psyche, in the inner being enfolded within the physical.

As Yulianto Liestiono comments "Nudity is a very human condition, because there is no other creature that can be as truly naked as a human being." By depicting the models without the material attributes that define them

specifically in the unspoken language of human society, Pranoto strips away the imposed trappings of class, social status and occupation. He takes away the masks and allows a glimpse at the core of what it is to be human: to be separate and alone, to be fragile and vulnerable, to be mortal and transient.

In the painting *Two Women*, despite the proximity of the figures which are facing but not looking at each other, a sense of alienation or lack of connection is conveyed. In *Floating Light* the contrast of light and dark in the background, as well as on the figure itself, and the body language of the model convey a feeling of uncertainty and vulnerability. And in the work titled *Rest* the contrasting shades and textures of flesh and stone carry a feeling of the transience of human existence and experience.

There is displayed in this exhibition a strong comprehension not only of how materials work together to achieve a particular visual impact, but also how visual images convey concepts that spoken words could never properly define.

Nudes by Pranoto at  
Galeri Milenium, Jl. RS  
Fatmawati No. 15, South  
Jakarta, through June 30  
from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily.



The goddess whom the Javanese and Balinese call Dewi Sri is Nyi Pohaci Sanghiang Sri for the Sundanese, Indoea Padi for the Minangkabau of West Sumatra, and lives on by many different local names throughout the archipelago. She is the gentle and approachable mother, the mother of the universe, the gracious donor of wealth, fortune and success, the protector of harvests who destroys evil.

In India she is the Hindu Devi, a deity believed to be a cosmic force — destroying demonic forces that threaten world equilibrium — a gracious bestower of blessings, wealth, fortune and success, as a local protector of villages and towns, a semi-divine force manifesting herself through fertility spirits and other supernatural forms, and also coming down to earth as a model for earthly women.

In short, she is all in one, and renowned for her particular beauty

No other goddess can surpass Dewi Sri in the reverence she inspires on the Hindu island of Bali. Every day and seen everywhere is the *cili* (effigy) as her manifestation, made from neatly woven palm or lontar leaves to complement decorations or small offerings. In Central Java, she is worshiped as the protector of farmers, having the power to destroy evil and prevent pests.

The anima of rice cult, she is honored in many ways, including through her representation, such as an hour-glass figure made from rice stalks, or woven from coconut leaves, and the shrines made of bamboo or stone that are a common sight in the rice fields.

Myths and legends of old never fail to fascinate and inspire.

"For me, they were the bedtime stories that lifted me into the realms of dream and fantasy," said Widayanto, whose eight previous solo exhibitions were all inspired by Javanese mythology. However, creating the various guises of the goddess has been a different experience from the previous efforts.

There is no absurdity, no comical presentations, but figures that transcend into

the ultramodern without neglecting the goddess' traditional importance. And, though exaggeration of the breasts has been toned down, the sensual remains as prominent as in his previous works.

Widayanto says he wanted to make contemporary representations of the goddess that would be compelling in blending symbolic meanings with modern significance.

What better mode than having the goddess come down in the guise of 30 mannequins going over the catwalk amid ripening paddy! With different types and faces, the sculptures are wrapped, or semiwrapped, in intricate, fashionable and colorful outfits befitting a queen.

Recreating the atmosphere of the village and paddy fields at Galeri Nasional, where the catwalk is made from real growing paddy and with birds chirping in the background, will heighten the ambience — one may feel in a world of antiquity and the future at the same time. Adding to the authentic feel is the serving of snacks made of rice, as well as other refreshments, in the traditional Javanese village style on opening night.

Franciskus Widayanto is a graduate of the ceramic section of the School of Fine Art and Design at the Bandung Institute of Technology (1981). Noted for an equal commitment to supporting traditional art and expressing his individuality, he uses clay to materialize ideas derived from his fascination with the ancient, Javanese world.

Besides ceramics, the 50-year-old artist is also skilled in drawing and painting, as will be evident in a side exhibition at Galeri Nasional. In 1991 he set up PT Widayanto Citra Tembikarindo to produce functional and decorative items, including accessories.

*Dewi Sri - Nyi Pohaci  
Sanghiang Sri  
Ceramic Sculptures  
Fashion Show  
By F. Widayanto  
Galeri Nasional, Central  
Jakarta (Opposite Gambir  
Railway Station)  
Opening June 17 at 7  
p.m. until June 19.*

Noted ceramic artist F. Widayanto explores the myth of Dewi Sri the rice goddess in his latest exhibition. Each with their own characteristics and faces, the 30 figures are dressed in fashionable and colorful outfits befitting a queen (*photos left and right*).