



# FORBIDDEN ZONE

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KRISNA MURTI





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Mooi-moryscape, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 90 cm



Saya teramat gembira bisa berteman dan bekerja sama dengan Krisna Murti. Ia salah seorang seniman Indonesia yang telah dikenal luas, tidak saja di dalam negeri namun juga di tingkat dunia. Karya-karyanya mendapatkan apresiasi yang sangat membanggakan.

Krisna Murti adalah satu dari sedikit seniman Indonesia yang pernah berpameran di Havana Biennale, Venice Biennale (Indonesian Pavillion), Gwangju Biennale, dan Fukuoka Triennale. Tak terhitung pula pamerannya di beberapa negara Eropa, Asia, Australia, dan juga di Indonesia sendiri. Ia telah berpameran tunggal sekitar tiga puluh kali dan salah satunya di Youth Theatre Moscow.

Pameran tunggalnya kali ini – Forbidden Zone – berlangsung di tiga kota, yakni dimulai dari Semarang (Rumah Seni Yaitu) lantas ke Bali (Gaya Fusion of Senses) dan Jakarta (Galeri Nasional Indonesia). Krisna Murti memamerkan karya lukisan, cetak digital, dan video.

Selama ini publik mengenal Krisna Murti sebagai seorang seniman video. Sebagai salah satu seniman video yang pertama-tama di Indonesia, Krisna Murti menyaksikan dan mengalami sendiri perkembangan seni video yang sangat pesat di Tanah Air. Ia, saya yakin, punya kredibilitas yang sangat memadai, termasuk untuk menu-liskan buah pikirannya. Oleh karenanya publik acap merunut gagasannya – berupa esai-esai tentang video, terutama – di beberapa media massa Indonesia.

Dari pemikirannya, kita paham, Krisna Murti sangat menguasai dan hapal tentang praktik dan perkembangan seni media baru itu. Bahkan terasa benar ia makin menyu-

ruk ke dasar samudra filsafati genre seni visual yang akrab dengan perangkat teknologi itu.

Lantas, apa yang menyebabkan Krisna Murti, yang akrab dengan teknologi dan ideologi seni media baru, akhirnya, kembali menggeluti seni dua dimensional alias lukisan dan cetak digital?

Bagi saya, Krisna Murti hanya sedang beringsut tempat saja. Ia – secara sangat esensial, apapun tematika karyanya kali ini – sesungguhnya tidak jauh dari mem-perkarakan pokok soal realitas, representasi, dan membincangkan aspek kemewaktuan. Bukankah lukisan mimikri pemandangan, termasuk pula karya Krisna Murti, adalah sebentuk citraan yang menyoal fenomena tersebut di atas? Seandainya pun pokok soal lukisannya, oleh karena visualitasnya, dikaitkan dengan fenomena *Mooi Indie*, toh, kita yakin: gagasannya berbeda. Bukan tidak mungkin Krisna Murti sedang menafsir ulang dan memberi bobot lain pada fenomena itu.

Krisna Murti melukis dengan cara memindahkan citraan fotografi ke atas kanvas. Ditilik dari prosesnya itu, dia seperti sedang menyalin dan merepresentasikan (lagi): dari citraan ke citraan pula. Sepertinya Krisna Murti sedang menghasut: ia meminta kita untuk berpikir ulang tentang representasi realitas dan waktu yang terkompresi itu, di atas kanvas atau di dalam video.

Selamat menikmati karya-karya Krisna Murti dan membincangkan gagasan-gagasannya.



# Talking Back to the Landscape: Trajectories of an Indonesian Discourse in the Video Art of Krisna Murti

By Amanda Katherine Rath

Although diverse in its articulations, the development of contemporary art in Indonesia has in large part been based on a similar self-conscious engagement and weaving together of multiple temporalities and cultural traditions, techniques, materials and values. While some artists have set these in opposition to one another, thus creating a somewhat simplistic binary between tradition and modern, most artists articulate the simultaneity of these within Indonesian society. They explore and underscore a certain ambivalent relationship to modernity, among other things. In developing an artistic practice capable of articulating the complexities of Indonesian society, while also in a way that has universal appeal, installation has for many artists proven best suited to the task. Installation art initially emerged in Indonesia in the 1970s. Aside from certain artists taking such art in a particularly political direction, most artists combined objects from popular culture and in absurd ways as a means of rebelling against the aesthetic boundaries of modern art imposed on them by the academy. However, installation as a more critical practice did not seem to attract many artists until the late 1980s, and then in earnest by the mid-1990s. It was this second chapter of installation art in Indonesia that older artists such as FX Harsono and Krisna Murti, along with younger artists such as Heri Dono, Dadang Christanto, and Nindityo Adipurnomo began using installation in complex ways to make more sustainable arguments; as multi-layered net-

works of different discourses, cultural and religious traditions, temporalities, narratives, etc.

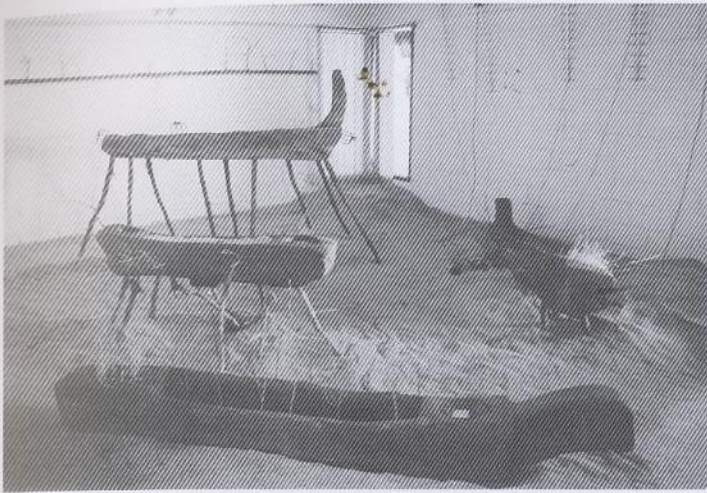
As one of the first installation artists and well as video art pioneer, Krisna Murti has continuously explored new ground. While this catalogue is perhaps directed more toward his new body of work, to which I turn later in this article, I want to first revisit some of his earlier installations to underscore and emphasize some of what I see as general patterns in his artistic practice and philosophy. The first section is to also allow the reader to see some of the ways his work has changed over the course of the last decade or so.

## **Krisna's Early Video-Installations**

Trained as a painter at the Fine Art and Design department in ITB in Bandung, Krisna moved away from painting in the early 1990s to become one of the first video installation artists in Indonesia. He was also one of the first to combine the possibilities of video technology with organic and so-called low art forms and the forms, techniques, and materials of traditional local culture.

*Objects from Nagrak Village* (1994) is one of his earliest video installations. Some have suggested that this piece speaks of the collision of high and low technologies, tradition and modern. Yet, it is perhaps also possible that the technology of video itself, the apparatus of video is not





Objects from Nagrak Village, 1994



Learning to Queue from the Ants, 1995

such a big issue in this work. Nor does the artist deal with it in a critical way. Rather, the piece can be read as a juxtaposition between different kinds of time and the possibilities of manipulating time: namely that of the natural growing process, particularly through the growth cycle of the rice plant, with the time of the video which itself is Krisna's recording of 24 hours in the life of Agung Rai, Balinese rice farmer and tradition dancer. However, such a relationship of different modes of time does not place these different modalities of experiencing time into a confrontational relationship, nor does it attempt, in my opinion, to place emphasis on any either side of the thorny and now moribund binary of tradition and modern. Rather Krisna puts to great effect the possibilities inherent in video with that of other artistic mediums to underscore the multiple and simultaneous temporalities of contemporary Indonesian society, and its diversity of cultural traditions, beliefs and values. In other words, typical of Krisna's work in general, it is a matter of both/and, not either/or.

Krisna's installations tended toward the monumental in scale. And in these works from between 1994 and roughly 2000, video plays an integral but *not* predominant role in the overall project. Video, both 'found footage' and that produced by the artist himself, at times provides the glue that binds together the other layers of narrative and metaphor; anchoring the intention and meaning of the overall piece. In other pieces, video provides only one of the streams or layers of the overarching concept.

In his 1995 *Belajar Antri dari Semut* or *Learning to Queue from the Ants*, as Agung Hujatnikajennong states, "make the viewer aware of the ideological powers that function behind technology's uses in Indonesia." This also entails the question of 'social engineering' through the use of television by the New Order government in its program of economic and social modernization. In this work, Krisna takes on such issues in an ironic way. Like his earlier *Objects from Nagrak Village*, among others, here he combines

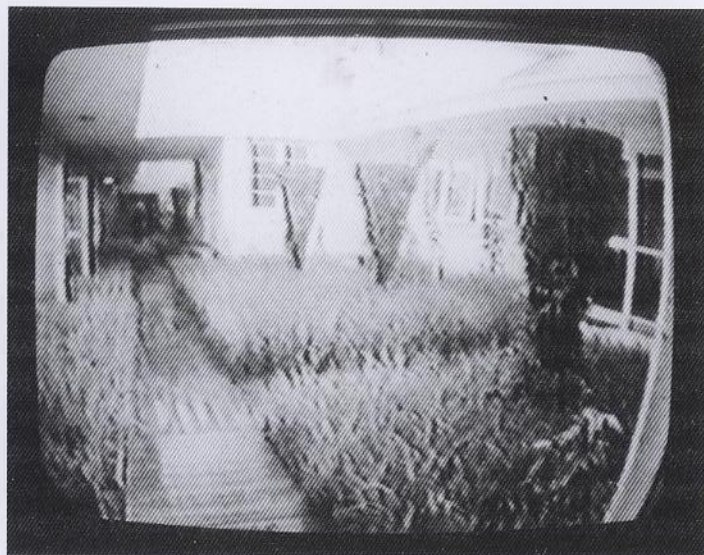


his own video footage transmitted through a series of television monitors with organic materials and traditional Balinese cultural forms to create a monumental installation work. Hujatnikajennong provides a useful discussion of this piece and is quoted as length here:

For this piece, Krisna reinterprets the *petulangan*, which he enlarged as sculptural objects in the form of fierce lions. Small television monitors were placed beneath the paws and in front of the face of each lion figure. The identical demonic expressions of the immovable figures were in sharp contrast to the dynamic movement of the ant collective. Each monitor showed footage of ant culture, their regimented and organized behavior of cooperation. This was intended to suggest that the ants are teaching the powerful lions how to behave. Krisna also covered the gallery floor with dried leaves. Hung from the ceiling, long skeins of cloth containing written Balinese aphorisms convey admonishments to leaders to learn from their subordinates. The entire space was diffused with the tranquil sounds of small traditional chimes.

As direct modes of criticism were dangerous, *Learning to Queue from the Ants* implies criticism through parody, intended as a veiled commentary concerning the current political situation in Indonesia during the early 1990s. As symbols of the power or status quo, the lions are confronted with and stand upon metaphors of the government's control over information.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Agung Hujatnikajennong, "Everything True Melts through the Screen: An Overview of Indonesian Video Art Practice," in *Taboo and Transgression in Contemporary Indonesian Art (Exhibition Catalogue)*, ed. Amanda Rath (Ithaca: Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University, 2004), 52.

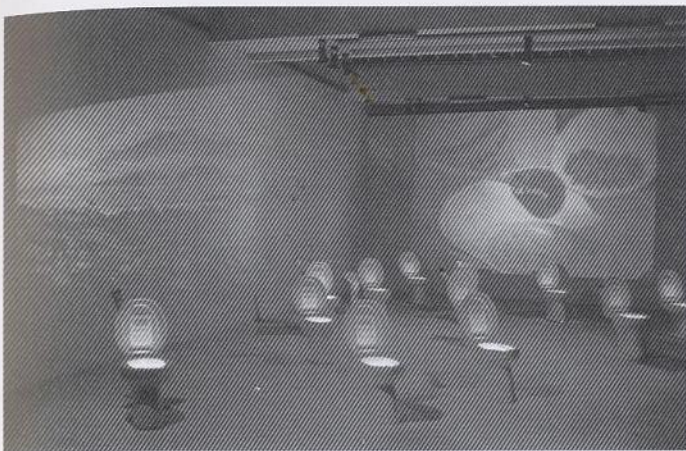


**The Growth, 1998**

Hujatnikajennong points to the use of video as a means of evoking and critiquing the uses of technology, in this case television, in social engineering during the New Order. This is reflected in the many television monitors, as well as in Krisna's choice of theme for his video.

However, from the above, we can also see that the video component is not primary, but integral to the overall structure and significance of the work. Another key aspect is process; process as part of the "work" that art does. Krisna does not merely appropriate the ritual form of the *petulangan* or lion-shaped sarcophagus used in Balinese cremation ceremonies. As part of the process of this work, he attempted to include the local people and their concerns over the use of their material and religious culture. For instance, he asked permission from Balinese Brahman and locals to





**Food Knows no Race, 1999**

take this typically ritual funerary form out of sync with its intended time and function, to shift its significance from the ritual of the funeral to the ritual of art. In *Learning to Queue*, the lion form for Krisna connotes power as such.<sup>2</sup> After obtaining permission to use these forms as material for a work of art, he hired local artisans to produce the many lion forms. Krisna's exhibited piece also has a ritual element to it: a Balinese dancer performed a traditional dance specifically for the opening of the exhibition.

### **Era Reformasi**

For a brief period during what in Indonesia is called *era reformasi* or the era of [political] reform, Krisna's work, like that of many artists in Indonesia, became overtly political and aggressive. Most of this art cannot be said to put forward a sustainable critique, but rather was an explosion of deep seeded anger and years of frustration at the abuses of power during the New Order. For about one year (between 1998 and 1999), artistic expression leaned toward

euphoric paroxysms and vitriolic indictment.<sup>3</sup> It was as if the corpse of Suharto's presidency was forcibly exorcised through vicious imagery, political satire, and propagandist art and literature. This was combined with attempts to come to terms with the ensuing racial and religious violence in the country that seemed poised to rip the country apart. It was during this period that Krisna made some of his most overtly political and aggressive work. This would include his *Presidential Brand Pantyshield* and *The Growth*, both from 1998. After this necessary period of collectively shared catharsis, many artists, like Krisna, began to weave constructive alternatives to the official version of national history and culture imposed by the New Order government. This includes his 1999 solo exhibition/installation *Makanan tak Tahu Ras* (Food Knows no Race). Again, in keeping with his earlier installations of the 1990s, the work is monumental in size, taking up the entire gallery space. Here, he deals with a highly contentious subject through the use of parody and visual play.

On one level, the piece alludes to and directly challenges the New Order concept of SARA, an acronym for *Suku, Agama, Ras, and Antara Golongan* or Ethnicity, Religion, Race, and Class. SARA was the New Order government's injunction against such issues in the public and political discourse. This of course included what could and could not be directly discussed in art. However, after Soeharto was forced to step down, all bets were off.

<sup>2</sup> Artist's statement, "Menelusuri Jejak Pikiran", 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Parts of this paragraph are taken from Amanda Rath, *Taboo and Transgression in Contemporary Indonesian Art, Exh. Cat.* (Ithaca: Herbert F. Johnson Museum, 2005), 14-15.



Krisna approaches the quite contentious issue of race in a seemingly light-hearted way by reproducing colorful images and descriptions – the type that might appear on food packaging or menus – of the variety of ethnically and racially specific foods that can be found throughout Indonesia. These are placed in a series of bright pink toilets, requiring the viewer to lean over the toilets in order to see the gastronomical delights therein. In this juxtaposition, Krisna underscores that although there are dangerous categories of such *pribumi* (native or true Indonesian) and non-*pribumi* (non-Indonesian, i.e. racially Chinese) which serve to separate society at the official and non-official levels of society, Indonesians in general engage in what is perhaps an unconscious cultural exchange by eating the foods of the various racial and ethnic groups which make up the Indonesian population without disparaging its racial or ethnic origins. The artist further underscored this by offering freshly cooked local delights by street hawkers directly outside the gallery. Krisna explains that he wanted the visitor to have a chance to “first taste/ experience the sensation of food before being invited to understand it.”<sup>4</sup>

The sea of pink toilets is framed on three sides by wall projections. On two walls, the artist projected enlarged images of Dutch East Indies style of landscape painting called *Mooi Indies* or Beautiful Indies (see below). During the New Order, the conventions of such landscape painting sold quite well in the fine art auctions. It was also inscribed

<sup>4</sup> Blu and Haryadi, “Lidah Kita Bersatu,” *Gamma*, 5 Dec. 1999. “Merasakan dulu sebelum diajak memahami makanan.” Also see R. Fadri’s review of the exhibition in “Ideologi Perlawanan Seni Rupa Video,” *Tempo*, 12 Dec., 1999: 72.

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent study of this film in the political and social context of New Order Indonesia, see Krishna Sen, *Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order* (London; Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Zed Books, 1994); Krisna Sen, ed., *Histories and Stories: Cinema in New Order Indonesia* (Clayton and Victoria: Monash University, 1988).

with the idea of *Indonesia Indah* or Beautiful Indonesia. For many contemporary artists during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the *Mooi Indies/Indonesia Indah* landscapes represented conservative aesthetic values, as well as an inherent hypocrisy: a dream sold to tourists but one neither experienced nor possessed by the Indonesian people themselves.

This comes further into relief in *Food Knows no Race* when seen in relation to the third projection, a video projection comprised of found footage. Here, Krisna brings two different narratives into direct confrontation, by splicing together footage taken from the national indoctrination film *Pengkhianatan G-30-S/PKI* and recorded daytime cooking television programs.<sup>5</sup> The film was originally produced as part of the official construction of the events leading up to, during, and after the failed Communist coup of 1965. In essence, the film was designed to embed within the national collective memory the image of General Suharto and his military as the savior of the country, as the embodiment of a New Order. It also heightened the issue of race. The Chinese were suspected for some time after the failed coup of Communist leanings more than were other ethnic or racial groups in the country. After 1965, Chinese culture and language were driven underground, effectively creating a culture of silence regarding the “Chinese question”.

By splicing the film together with scenes taken from various cooking programs, as well as distorting and overwriting portions of its original soundtrack with the chatty banter and cooking instructions from said programs, Krisna intervenes in and recodes the official version of national history, and through the taboo subject of race.

From the above, it is clear that non-linearity and intertextuality is the basis of his work. “At the moment that one texts



falls silent [or has been decoded by the viewer], another one takes on more meaning."<sup>6</sup> It is a constant process of revealing and concealing. As such, the space of the whole installation serves as the tableau that, like allegory, requires the viewer to unravel all the various layers, to read the one across the other simultaneously in order for its significance to unfold.

### **Forbidden Zone: Talking Back to the Landscape**

It was not until roughly 2000 that Krisna began to create video installations that used video as the primary medium in his work. He continuously experiments with the temporal possibilities of video, and experience of time, combining multiple aspects of a similar theme into one piece. In his new work, it seems that Krisna is once again anxious to try something different. In his work intended for exhibition in 2008, he explores the idea of landscape through the languages of painting, digital print, and video.

For the last decade, a few contemporary artists in Indonesia have reengaged the landscape in a variety of mediums. Some artists deal critically and ironically with the ideological moorings behind certain types of landscape painting, particularly that of the *Mooi Indies* style of the Dutch East Indies school. Others construct landscapes in video and digital photography, in which spiritual and perceived redemptive connotations of nature are stressed. Yet others emphasize the sense of alienation from nature, the ways in which we drive through or fly over it but never wonder through or come into direct contact with it. It can be said that since 2002, Krisna has created works across these trends.

At first glance, Krisna's foray into the concept of landscape

and images of landscape (moving and still) perhaps seems to participate in the ubiquitous eye candy that comprises much of the contemporary art in the glutted market of the international art exhibition, or Biennale-ism. Since the early 1990s, many contemporary artists participating in the international art exhibition have engaged in a quite market friendly project of recuperating the "beautiful" in art, which had fallen victim to the political and cultural wars that were waged during the postmodernism debates. One trend in this project has been to digitally reproduce or fabricate the "beautiful" image for its own sake that in-effect most often arrests critical thought.

On one level, the above state of affairs is the case with Krisna's new body of work, particularly his series of works in *Forbidden Zone*. In this piece, comprised of the works "Airplane", "Colloseum" and painted 'scapes' (urban, countryside, roadside, etc.), Krisna produces a series of different landscapes, in video, painting and the digital print. In other words, he engages the landscape through a variety of different technical conventions, each with its own rules. In this he professes to blur the boundaries between the discourses of high and low art, fine art and advertising, between high and low art. Such a supposed transgression is not in the theme or images but in the *manner* or way they are presented. The question remains: Does the artist merely reproduce the codes and conventions of dominant media? For example, his video "Airplane" becomes a "moving picture" in that he has framed this back projected video with a frame typically reserved for fine art paintings. The footage for the video, taken with a fixed camera, is of a seascape at the edge of a runway Changi Airport in Singapore. The line of vision toward the seascape is interrupted

<sup>6</sup> Artist's statement, "Menelusuri Jejak Pikiran", 2002.



with the airplanes that take off and land, that then also become part of the overall landscape. So while the artist points to the affiliation between painting and video in terms of how they are presented, i.e. hung on the wall as a flat surface, the duration of time emphasized through video also underscores its difference from painting.

Part of this experience of time, and one of the things that has consistently interested Krisna, is the length of time it takes for the viewer to go from being absorbed by an image or action to a state of daydreaming or boredom.<sup>7</sup> He once commented that he felt that the time it takes to go from one state to the other is significantly shorter when looking at a static image (i.e., photograph or painting). But this is a fairly recent phenomenon, one particular to a society intimately familiar with the rhetoric and time of cinema and video. In Krisna's "moving picture", it remains to be seen whether the viewer is actually aware of the cognitive oscillation between the rhetoric of video and painting, between the movie and the picture, between motion and stillness in his or her journey from direct engagement to boredom and daydreams.

For this writer, the main point of criticality in Krisna's new work derives from the artist's own ambivalent relationship to the legacy, discourse, and ideological moorings of the "landscape", particularly landscape painting, in Indonesia. As I suggested above landscape painting in Indonesia is a colonial legacy, and although it is still considered a secondary form of art, one associated with conservatism, nostalgia, and tourism, it continues to command high prices in the many auctions in the region, and is a staple of street painting stalls. Additionally, the aesthetic principles behind a "proper" landscape still influence the ways in which nature is seen and interpreted.

According to W.J.T Mitchell (1994), landscape is originally and centrally constituted as an imagery associated with a new way of seeing with the advent of industrialization, which greatly and irrevocably affected the ways in which people perceive and experience time and space.<sup>8</sup> He further points out that the history of the landscape, in both the West and elsewhere, is also deeply connected with conceptions of 'man's' ability to intervene in and control nature, to visually produce an ideal image of a balanced and harmonious world. In other words, Mitchell argues that landscape is not just a genre but a medium: a network of cultural codes; a "seemingly 'different structure' of nature [that] can be read as a symptom of alienation from the land; the 'reflective' and imaginary projection of moods into landscape [can be] read as dream-work of ideology."<sup>9</sup> The conventional Landscape had its required objects that go into making a 'proper' landscape; a formula that revealed some of the issues around which identities were being discussed."<sup>10</sup>

Although moribund as a genre of especially painting, seeing Landscape as a medium continues to have resonance

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with the author, Bandung, Aug. 2002.

<sup>8</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Stuart Hall, "When Was the Postcolonial? Thinking at the Limit," in *The Post-colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Ian Chambers and Lidia Curti (New York: Routledge, 1996), 7; Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," 13.

<sup>10</sup> Ann Jensen Adams, "Seventeenth-Century Dutch Landscape Painting," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1994), 66. Adams is specifically discussing Dutch landscape painting of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. However, the above notion can be extended to Indonesian landscape painting because the medium of landscape painting in Indonesia became a site of contested Indonesian identity.



today in relation to digital and video technology. Digital technology has allowed for not only new depth and detail in the conventional photograph, seducing the viewer with an unprecedented level of detail and color saturation. It has also made it possible to take the form of "landscape" to another level of fiction. Such images are still designed to trigger a sense of awe and desire in the viewer, a desire to commune with nature, a "captured" nature that may not exist in the "real world". In other words, such constructions underscore the old "chestnut" of "simulacrum", a signifier that has no referent in the "real world", data without knowledge.

In as much as the above conceptions of landscape-as-medium pertain to its history in Western art, it is also quite applicable to other cultural contexts, in this case Indonesia. This is particularly the case when taking into account its specific historical trajectory and discourse in Indonesia to which Krisna's new work speaks.

### Legacies of Landscape from the Dutch East Indies

*Without realizing it they had already climbed high into the terraced hills, and now spread below them was the wide spans of golden yellow rice, villages shaded by slender coconut trees that loomed high over head. Towards the horizon spread the blue of a lake, and opposite from this was terraced hill upon hill, fading into the tall blue mountain, the top of which was lost in a blanket of gathering white clouds.*<sup>11</sup>

While the above quote taken from a 1980 Indonesian novel describes a particular and actual scene that can be seen throughout mountainous Southeast Asia, as a landscape it had already become a *topos* (traditional theme developed in literature or rhetoric) by the 1920s. For example, Suma-

tran poet Muhamad Yamin suggested 1921 what should provide inspiration for a Malay-language modern poetry in what was still the Dutch East Indies: "Ah the high mountains, the thick jungle, the foaming rivers, the rolling sea, the steeply sloping hills, etc., are things urging you, as it were, to take up the pen and compose poems."<sup>12</sup> Such have been the formulaic elements required of an Indonesian modern landscape.

This is not to suggest that formulaic means of articulating images of the land did not exist prior to the modern period. Similar landscapes can be found in ancient texts<sup>13</sup> in the

<sup>11</sup> Mochtar Lubis, *Berkalana Dalam Rimba* (Jakarta: 1980), 15. "Tak Disadari mereka telah tinggi juga mendaki bukit-bukit yang berlapis-lapis, dan kini di bawah mereka terhampar lembah luas dengan sawah-sawahnya menguning dengan pohon-pohon kelapa yang ramping dan tinggi menjulang ke atas. Jauh ke arah kaki langit terbentang kebiruan sebuah danau, dan di seberangnya berjenjang-jejang pula bukit demi bukit yang menyelip ke dalam kebiruan pegunungan yang tinggi dan puncak-puncaknya hilang dalam selimut awan putih bergumpal-gumpal." The above passage refers in context to how the relationship people have to nature has changed in Modern Indonesia. See also, Arndt Graf, *Der Indonesische Regenwald Im Prozess Der Entmagsierung: Sum Wandel Eines Literarischen Topos' Bei Mochtar Lubis*, ed. Rainer Carle and Peter Pink, *Austronesiana: Studien Zum Austronesischen Südostasien Und Ozeanien* (Hamburg and Münster: LIT Verlag, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Keith Foulcher, "Perceptions of Modernity and the Sense of the Past: Indonesian Poetry in the 1920's," *Indonesia* 23, no. April (1977): 41. Italics mine.

<sup>13</sup> See for example the two chronicles *Sjair Perang Siak* and Mpu Prapanca's *Nagarakertagama* (14<sup>th</sup> c., Java). For a translation and analysis of *Nagarakertagama*, see Theodore G. Pigeaud, *Java in the Fourteenth Century: A Study in Cultural History. Nagarakertagama by Rakawi Prapanca of Majapahit, 1365 A.D.*, vol. III-IV (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962). The landscape was created through the poet's recounting of not only his own wandering, but also that of his master. In "'Landscape' in Java," Day (1994) claims that "every representation of 'nature' in early Javanese art is already a 'landscape' implying the king's implicit, ordering presence within the natural world." Anthony Day, "'Landscape' in Early Java," in *Recovering the Orient: Artists, Scholars, Appropriations*, ed. Andrew Gerstle and Anthony Milner (Switzerland, Australia and Belgium: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994), 202.



pre-Dutch period in Indonesia. This includes court chronicles written by court poets who recorded the ruler's wan-

<sup>14</sup> See Peter Worsley, "Narrative Bass-Reliefs at Candi Surawana," in *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th Centuries*, ed. David G. Marr and A.C. Milner (Singapore and Canberra: Institute of SEAS and the Research School of Pacific Studies, 1986). Bass-reliefs on temples such as Candi Trawulan (13<sup>th</sup> century) and Candi Surawana in east Java (14<sup>th</sup> century) depict flora and fauna, forests, giant demons, wild animals and the gods. Interestingly, on one of the walls at Trawulan, the conventional matrix of mountain, sawah and river have been depicted. In this section of the relief, a temple, the symbolic sacred mountain, is depicted as built over flowing waters, the sacred waters of life. Next to the temple, people plow the rice fields that are irrigated by the sacred spring. Surrounding the rice fields are what appear to be fruit bearing trees and behind them hills suggesting the mountainous and hilly terrain mirroring the natural environs of the region. Their place in the symbolism of these temples was to suggest a land rich in natural and human resources, the result of boon from the gods personified in the ruler. For, if the land was not fertile, it was a sign that ruler's power was on the wane. Images then served as both testament to and assurance of a world in balance, which in turn also signified political and social order.

<sup>15</sup> For an exhaustive study of the Hindu and Buddhist cosmological map, see for example, John Irwin, "The Stupa and the Cosmic Axis: The Archaeological Evidence" (paper presented at the South Asian Archaeology, Instituto Universitario, Naples, 1977). See also, Claire Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967); Judith Ann Patt, *The Use and Symbolism of Water in Ancient Indonesian Art and Architecture* (1979), microform.

<sup>16</sup> Many landscape artists from the Netherlands came to the Indies. This included artists such as Carel Dake Jr. (1884-1946), who came to the Indies in 1912. During his stay in Java he took on Indies born Leonardus Eland (1884-1952) as a student. Both Dake Jr. and Eland specialized in painting the environs around Java and Sumatra. These painters and other Dutch artists such as Wilhelmus Imandt (1882-1967), who lived in the Indies between 1908 and 1946, as well as other resident artists such as Gerard Pieter Adolfs (1897-1968), who was born in Semarang, Java, and Enest Dezentjé (1885-1972), who was born in Batavia (now Jakarta), are among some of the influential painters who helped to establish something of a "colonial school" landscape painting. Their imported aesthetic principles and exotic approach to the natural scape of the Indies heavily influenced the production of paintings by indigenous painters prior to World War II. For an in depth examination of Dutch landscape painting and its schools see Wiepke Loos, Robert -Jan te Rijdt, and Marjan van Heteren, ed. *On Country Roads and Fields: The Depiction of the 18th and 19th century landscape*. Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum and V+K Publishing, 1997.

derings and spiritual retreats, as a means by which to also imprint the king's power and ownership onto the land. There are also examples of landscapes carved in relief on the walls of some East Javanese Hindu-Buddhist temples of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>14</sup> Inherent in these landscapes, in which the world is in balance and harmony, rich and fertile, is also cosmological boon, political power, and spiritual communion with God through nature.

While landscape as an ideological medium and as cosmological map<sup>15</sup> has existed for centuries, such imagery, as seen through the lens of the urban poet, was heavily influenced by romantic Dutch poetry of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a time when the Netherlands and most of Europe was undergoing industrialization. Romanticism imbued in images of the landscape was transmitted not only through the required reading list in Dutch-language high schools and Dutch-language literary journals and expatriate writers. The same ideas were spread through the drawing courses that were part of the Dutch arts education curriculum, including the arts teachers training school at ITB (now the Fine Arts and Design Department).

The genre of landscape painting was also imported by Dutch artists who came to the Indies as tourists, as well as propagated by Indies born Dutch painters who shared similar cultural horizons.<sup>16</sup> Many of these usually second rate artists took on indigenous pupils who then started their own studios. Some of the elite from the region of Bandung and the Javanese courts, some were trained in the Netherlands, also became known for their romantic landscape paintings. Their sweetish, romantic style of painting came to be known as the *Mooi Indies* or the Beautiful Indies. *Mooi Indies* painters did not comprise a cohesive group, but their paintings consisted of the same combina-



tion of symbolic forms of those discussed above.<sup>17</sup>

*Mooi Indies* paintings typically demonstrate and communicate the individual painter's awe and wonder evoked in seeing "natural beauty" and the beauty of the cultivated rice fields. And herein lays the crux. Although such landscapes to perhaps the Javanese sensibility, for example, more than likely possessed and articulated certain spiritual beliefs about the harmonious balance of the landscape, modern landscape paintings are the individual expression of the artist's emotional response to something seen. Although preexisting ideas of the sacred and cosmological landscape may have persisted in these paintings, these were first and foremost works of art meant to be seen as such, and not as integral elements to another person's vision or cosmological map.

*Mooi Indies* paintings demonstrated a self-conscious expression on the part of the Indonesian painters<sup>18</sup> of the virtues of rural life, of which the artist (and poet) had little experience. Most artists, like their poet counterparts, lived in the cities and had little experience with village or rural life, at least not as peasant farmers.

### A Nationalist Trajectory of "Landscape"

In addition to nostalgic interpretations of the 'countryside', by at least the late 1920s, the landscape in poetry was also inscribed with the ideology of nationalism. Repeating Mohamad Yamin's call to his fellow poets in 1921, already quoted above, this time with a deliberate shift in emphasis:

...pour your thoughts out on to paper, express the feelings which fill your breast, squeeze the end of the pen with determination, and *enrich the literature of our na-*

*tion*. Do you have no reason to write, or nothing to say? Ah the high mountains, the thick jungle, the foaming rivers, the rolling sea, the steeply sloping hills, etc., are things urging you, as it were, to take up the pen and compose poems (*italics mine*).

It is not just any land, but that of *our nation*, that is the proper place for inspiration. Such land then was associated with the nationalist *Tanah Air Tercinta* or Beloved Homeland. As several scholars have pointed out, poets from mainly Sumatra and Java were quite aware of the burden of the landscape as a colonized image.<sup>19</sup> However, as a convention, it need not be eliminated. Instead, and at the very least, it had to be least disengaged from its Dutch locus of origination. This shift demonstrates what Kenji argues was a growing rupture, or "a separation of what was

<sup>17</sup> This does not mean that landscape painting was not practiced by indigenous painters before the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to most Indonesian sources, the first 'Indonesian' painter, and one who practiced landscape painting, was the nobleman Raden Salleh who was active in the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, he apparently had no students, and modern forms of painting basically did not gain popularity among Indonesian painters until decades later.

<sup>18</sup> The term "Indonesia" here is used for convenience sake. During the 1920s and into the 1930s, the idea of Indonesian involved issues of ethnicity and cultural differences that the idea of "Indonesia" had yet to be capable of transcending.

<sup>19</sup> Regarding these developments in poetry Cf. Michael Bodden, "Indonesian Local Color Novels and the Tensions of Modernity," *Coast Lines* 1, no. 1 (2002); Michael Bodden, "Utopia and the Shadow of Nationalism: The Plays of Sanusi Pane 1928-1940," *Bijdragen; Journal of the Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology* 3, no. 153 (1997); Foulcher, "Perceptions of Modernity and the Sense of the Past: Indonesian Poetry in the 1920's."; Keith Foulcher, "Some Considerations on the Approach to Modern Indonesian Literature," *RIMA* 2 (1968); Henk Maier, *We Are Playing Relatives: A Survey of Malay Writing* (Leiden: KLTU, 2004); Afrizal Malna, *Sesuatu Indonesia: Personifikasi Pembaca Yang Tak Bersih* (Yogyakarta: Bentang, 2000).



considered an indigenous possession from that of the Dutch."<sup>20</sup>

It is possible that the landscape paintings produced during this period of increasing nationalism in some way also reflect some of this nationalist spirit. If this is the case, then it would also suggest, borrowing from Mitchell (1994), "the possibility of hybrid landscape formations that might be characterized simultaneously as imperial and anticolonial."<sup>21</sup> The message of *tanah air tercinta* was still based on Dutch (European) models, much to the consternation of more leftist leaning artists such as Soedjojono.

Influenced by his own negative experiences as an apprentice to the landscapist Pirngadie, Soedjojono began to publicly voice his disdain for such types of paintings by the late 1930s:

The paintings we see nowadays are mostly landscapes: rice fields being plowed, rice fields inundated by clear calm water... or a hut in the middle of a ripening rice field with the inevitable coconut palms or bamboo stools nearby...with blue-shimmering mountains in the

background. This is not a healthy situation...What are the causes? First, the majority of painters here are Europeans, foreigners, who remain here two or three years only and are thus in a sense tourists themselves. Second, our local painters only want to serve the tourists. Third our painters only imitate the works of these foreign painters and serve the needs of tourists because they do not have enough force to create anything original...

They are the people who live outside our real life sphere. But fortunately a new generation is coming up...with new and fresh ideas...<sup>22</sup>

There is a number of underlying subtexts in the above passage that need to be teased out in order to better understand his position. First, he couches his disdain in nationalist rhetoric, viewing the artist of such paintings as a foreigner with little concept of life in the Indies, or as collaborative and complicit local artists who cater to tourists' tastes. In this regard, he also gives over to a romantic vision of the 'authentic' artist who does not 'sell out' to market expectations.<sup>23</sup> In this regard, the landscape became a second rate type of painting. Thirdly, *Mooi Indies* paintings were relevant to an elite class within the social spheres of Colonial life.

According to him, artistic inspiration should instead come from lived reality of the common people (*rakyat*). However, after the war of independence (1945-49) he painted landscapes that contained much of the same elements he criticized 20 years earlier.

Ever since that time, landscape painting continued to be associated with low or commercial art. Nonetheless, *Mooi*

<sup>20</sup> Tsuchiya Kenji, "Kartini's Image of Java's Landscape," *East Asian Cultural Studies* 25, no. 1-4 (1986): 79.

<sup>21</sup> Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape."

<sup>22</sup> Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change*, 195-96.. For the Indonesian-language text see Soedjojono, *Seni Loekis Kesenian Dan Seniman* (Yogyakarta: Indonesia Sekarang, 1946; reprint, 2000).

<sup>23</sup> Many painters indeed did churn out formulaic landscapes to a growing tourist and domestic market of mainly Dutch, and wealthy Eurasian and indigenous collectors. Such 'industry' painting has coexisted with other, more expressive and abstract, forms of the landscape in Indonesian art until today.





Do Not Over Take, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 110 cm







*Indies* era painting is heavily sought after by collectors, and training in landscape painting is still required in the art academies. The same formulae, conventions continued to be propagated, yet also dismissed as not 'serious' or 'original' art.

### Entering the Forbidden Zone

It is to this ambivalence toward the legacy and history of the landscape in visual art in Indonesia that Krisna speaks, and attempts to figure out his own position in such a history and discourse:

The theme of Landscape in "Forbidden Zone" is inspired by three things: namely, art education, *Mooi Indies*, and Sudjojono. I am an academically trained artist. When I was a student, I completed two years of studying landscape painting (and still life) as a method of art education. I realized that the system of education at ITB is a legacy from the Dutch (Ries Mulder, painter and pioneer of art at ITB). The Dutch gaze and education system has influenced my understanding, perspective, proportion, color, etc.; this, although in reality my instructors at the time never questioned Indonesian identity (in painting) or reality in Indonesia. Therefore, I had no other choice except to employ the Dutch discourse. In other words, since my student days, I [my identity as an artist] have been constructed by this concept. [...]

In "Forbidden Zone", I try to map or reconstruct this [identity constructed by the Dutch discourse and concepts of landscape], also what is currently happening to me personally. Where is my position in all for this right now? I suppose that the landscape in "Forbidden Zone" is only a small portrait of a cultural position, iden-

tity, or an attempt of the Indonesian people to understand this reality. It seems that in fact we have yet to really discuss and understand this reality.<sup>24</sup>

Between the conventions of landscape painting seen through the lens of the Dutch gaze that persist in the art education in Indonesia and anti-colonial nationalist sentiments made by those such as Soedjojono – which is the 'truth'? According to Krisna, both are the realities in Indonesian art history that continue to influence, confound, and shape certain discussions in the Indonesian art discourse.

Whereas "Forbidden Zone" seems more like the artist's personal questioning in the process of constructing his own artistic identity, in "Glare" and "Mirrorscape", the artist views the question of landscape from a different perspective. In these works, it is an act of rejection on the part

<sup>24</sup> Email communication, Jan. 18, 2008. "Tema landscape dalam "Forbidden Zone" diinspirasi dari 3 hal yaitu Sekolah seni, Mooi Indie dan Sudjojono. Saya adalah seniman akademis. Sewaktu saya mahasiswa, saya menghabiskan 2 tahun belajar landscape (dan still life sebagai metoda pendidikan seni rupa). Saya menyadari bahwa system pendidikan di ITB adalah warisan pendidikan Belanda (Ries Mulder, pelukis dan perintis seni rupa di ITB). Bagaimana memahami perspektif, tentang proporsi, mengolah warna, dan lain-lain saya kira semua banyak dipengaruhi cara pandang (pendidikan) Belanda itu, apalagi kenyataannya dosen saya waktu itu tidak pernah mempermasalahkan identitas Indonesia (dalam lukisan) atau realitas Indonesia. Jadi saya tidak punya pilihan lain kecuali memakai wacana Belanda itu. Atau dengan perkataan lain saya sejak mahasiswa saya sudah dikonstruksikan oleh konsep ini....Dalam "Forbidden Zone", saya mencoba memetakan (mapping) atau merekonstruksi itu, juga apa yang sedang terjadi pada diri saya. Di mana posisi saya sekarang? Saya kira saya berada di sana dan saat bersamaan juga tidak berada di sana (berjarak). Mungkin saya sudah meminjam, mengadopsi, mengadaptasi, atau totalitas dari itu. Saya kira landscape saya di "Forbidden Zone" hanyalah potret kecil dari posisi kultural, identitas, atau upaya manusia Indonesia memahami realitas hari ini. Tampaknya semuanya sudah jelas padahal kita belum pernah secara sungguh-sungguh membahas dan memahami kenyataan itu."







of the Balinese rice farmer to the tourist's gaze that becomes the theme. Aside from Bali being stereotypically known as a culture of artists, its immense terraced rice fields that are carved into the hillsides throughout the island have become iconic of "Bali"; a fantasy fueled by the tourist industry through sumptuous brochures selling the dream holiday package. People from all over the world came to see the splendor of the Bali landscape. Balinese rice farmers became the object for tourist photos for the international market, yet without compensation. They began to fight back in what Krisna calls a "silent protest", by placing reflective objects such as pieces of mirror and metal into their rice fields. These would capture the sun's rays, creating a glare, thus disrupting the surface of the desired landscape. It not only frustrates the 'perfect' photographic shot, but also the desired memories the tourist wishes to take back home with them.

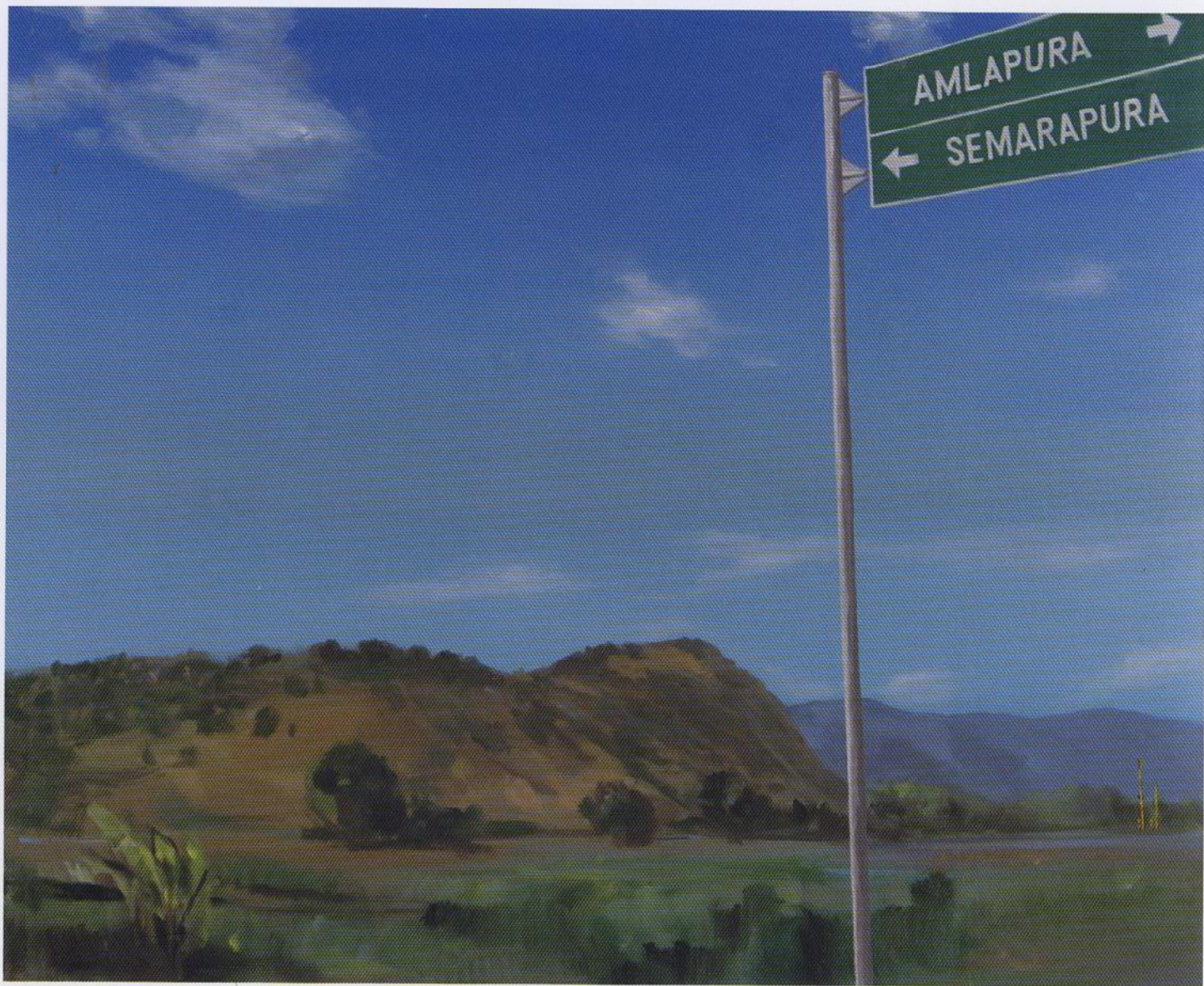
Krisna takes advantage of this glare as the very subject of his "Glare" and "Mirrorscape", to underscore precisely this idea of frustrated desire and memory, as well as the conscious rejection of being objectified. "I reconstructed this [glare] effect in the rice fields in the region of Blimbing, Kabupaten Tabanan in Bali. This involved working with the rice farmers there. In this work, I represent the aesthetic layers of beauty, exoticism, as well as the silent 'anger'."<sup>25</sup> However, a few questions arise: what happens to the agency behind such an act if it is reconstructed and reproduced, even though with the help of local farmers, as art; as an image also to be consumed? What are the critical implications of artistic acts of appropriation on the object? Does the artist mean his reconstruction also to be a part of the local act of defiance, or is it the objectification of that defiance?

From the above, it is clear that Krisna is constantly evolving artistically, experimenting with and not afraid to enter into risky territory. In his new body of work, he continues to present issues that connect on a universal level, while at the same time articulating his own ambivalence and questions regarding his own position to a particular aspect of Indonesian art history.

Throughout this new body of work, Krisna presents his various landscapes in a variety of ways. For some of these, he uses fine art frames to perhaps underscore the affiliation between video and painting. Certain images, particularly the digital prints are presented in ways that appropriate the language of advertisement displays. However, a question arises as to whether or not he critically questions the relationship between these different languages of representation, the boundaries between categories and particular discourses of representation. In any case, the landscape is there to be consumed in some form, to trigger desire. In underscoring this desire, by reproducing in some of these works the very aesthetic he wishes to critically engage, Krisna also runs the risk of the criticality of his idea being overshadowed by the seductive power of the image.

<sup>25</sup> Email communication, Jan. 18, 2008. "Saya melakukan rekonstruksi di sawah di kawasan Blimbing, Kabupaten Tabanan (Bali). Melibatkan para petani di daerah itu. Maka, jadilah karya-karya yang saya anggap menggambarkan lapisan estetika (keindahan), keeksotikan sekaligus "kemarahan" yang tersembunyi."







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**The Sky**, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 90 cm















## Krisna Murti's Forbidden Zone

By Iola Lenzi

Though undeniably central to Indonesia's complex social fabric, the expression of ethnic and religious pluralism was effectively suppressed in the name of national cohesion during the 31-year Soeharto regime. However, with the fall of the dictator in 1998, and the subsequent budding of democracy and easing of rigid political taboos, the polarisation resulting from this pluralism has re-emerged as a tangible and potent force shaping Indonesian society today. And though the fracture that has accompanied a loosening of state control has sometimes triggered divisive and indeed violent actions, the overall situation of flux now dominating the national landscape also lends itself to the opening of an important field of investigation for Indonesia's artists and writers. Thoughtful cultural players, many of whom are visual artists, are increasingly constructing a dialogue about difference and evolving perspective that, in the context of slowly changing Indonesia, is providing seeds of renewal and progress.

An Indonesian practitioner who has been examining the archipelago's cultural hybridity both from inside the nation's cultural boundaries, as well as from an outsider's vantage point, is Krisna Murti. Of mixed Javanese and Balinese heritage, Murti emblematically embodies the conflicts and divides at the heart of contemporary Indonesian identity. More importantly however, the Jakarta-based installation and video artist also embodies the uniquely sophisticated, rich, multi-dimensional and predominantly

comfortable meshing of the distinct strands at the foundation of Indonesia's cosmopolitan and tolerant civilization.

Despite straddling Muslim and Hindu cultures, Krisna Murti only began tackling his own split identity artistically in the years since sectarian tensions have flared in the wake of post-Soeharto re-building. Beyond his interest in this specifically Indonesian and purely parochial dichotomy, Murti also looks beyond his nation's borders and as an insider with outsider knowledge, scrutinises and contrasts the surface signs and deeper meaning of local narratives. An internationally-traveled artist, he applies his extensive knowledge of Western cultural perceptions to widen his multi-prismic view of his homeland, incorporating both native and foreign-tinged experiences. Thus the effects of post-colonial reality, relevant to regional intellectual discourse in the years following the European's departure from the archipelago and wider South East Asia, but milked dry in much banal and conceptually weak artistic practice of more recent times, are given a more subtle and nuanced reading by Murti's probing but never sanctimonious offerings.

Characterised by its multiplicity of perspective and understatement, Murti's practice of the last several years focuses on variable questions relating to specifically local concerns as well as how these change with outsider perception: the visible and invisible codes and conventions of Islam, the



ongoing exoticisation of Bali and her customs -a fixture of Balinese life for the islanders as well as for those outside for nearly a century-, Indonesia's relationship with foreigners, new forms of cultural colonisation, the place Indonesia gives itself in the world...

While some works such as his 2003 four minute loop single projection video *Beach Time* dissect the conceptual paradox of a given code's widely differing interpretation according to cultural, religious and gender positioning, others, such as the metaphoric *Video Spa* of 2004/5 juxtapose indigenous and foreign readings of appropriated and vulgarised local spiritual and cultural practices. Yet other pieces, including those with an activist bent that take art into the realm of politics, seek to engage with ongoing socio-political problems linked to internal conflicts between different local or external interest groups.

The 2007 digital print work *The Glare* is such a work. Comprising images of Balinese rice terraces, their utopian perfection disturbed by the aggressive reflection of a mirror positioned to capture the powerful rays of the tropical sun, without slogans or aesthetic hard edges *The Glare* conjures violence and discord. The confrontation at the heart of the series opposes Bali's rice farmers whose entire way of life and source of livelihood centre around the rice crop and

harvest, with intrusive 'others' -tourists, be they Western or Asian- who are only concerned with 'capturing' the beauty of the idyllic Balinese landscape on film while contributing nothing to either the land or those who labour it. The peasants install mirrors in their fields to spoil the tourists' photographs in an act of silent protest. But beyond this act of defiance, the artist refines the conceptual power of the series, underscoring both the potency of non-violent protest as well as the ultimate empowerment of the Balinese farmers. Though effectively documenting a specifically Indonesian issue, the work can be read in the broader South East Asian context where the rural/urban divide<sup>1</sup> and the metaphoric distance of new-urbanites from the land they have abandoned have been a pan-regional source of friction since the early stages of modernisation dating to the post-war period.

Yet another installation, *No Hero* of 2006 evokes the ambiguous status of Indonesian women working as domestic helpers in foreign countries such as Taiwan and Singapore. Though the theme has been explored before, Murti's filmed interviews of the women dwell less on their physical hardship than their duality of existence, their feeling part of an alien family, yet pining for home. Again, Murti's concern, beyond the obvious critique of a country that though relatively rich in resources, is run such that its own women must leave home and family to find employment, centres on the women's double vantage point of insiders and outsiders, both relative to Indonesia, as well as to their new family environment. Relevant to the region as a whole, where migrant workers are a commonplace, the video piece broadens out from its original social core to become a universally engaging and thoughtful piece about identity and perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> Mashadi, Ahmed, 'Some Aspects of Nationalism and Internationalism in Philippine Art', *Modernity and Beyond: Themes in Southeast Asian Art*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore 1996, p. 52 for comments concerning the gulf separating urban and rural populations in the wider Southeast Asian context. Cf. also Iola Lenzi, 'Formal Cues and Historical Clues in the art of Sutee Kunavichayanont', *Inflated Nostalgia*, Atelier Frank & Lee, Singapore 2001, pp. 8-9, for a discussion of Thai city-dwellers' romanticized perception of the country-side as a rural idyll and a preserve of 'authenticity'.







Thus whatever Murti's choice of media, theme and form, his works of recent years all share a sharply-focused presentation of multi-prismic viewpoints, an interrogation of received and conventional meaning, and a keen awareness of the power of sensory evocation in the articulation of complex and possibly divisive issues. And though sometimes steering close to documentation -No Hero and The Glare are two works that use documentary investigation as visual starting points-, his montages always expand conceptually to become art.

Forbidden Zone, made this year, moves well beyond the documentary and may well be Murti's most conceptually mixed and topically wide-ranging multi-media installation to date. Including video, photography and acrylic on canvas, Forbidden Zone incorporates a commentary about the on/off status of Indonesia as a no-go zone for international travelers due to the perceived threat of terrorism, with the examination of cultural criticism instituted by one of Indonesia's pioneer modernist painters in the post-colonial period.

Whereas a work such as Beach Time is characterised by its visual as well as conceptual simplicity, expressing a single but potently delivered idea, the meaning of Forbidden Zone only sinks in gradually as the viewer absorbs the piece. And while the work is not enigmatic, a certain amount of background knowledge is necessary for a full comprehension of the installation's layered commentary and references.

Starting with his choice of media, before even getting into the installation's subject, Krisna Murti sets his piece up to interrogate received notions associated with the hierarchical relationship between photography, paint on canvas and

video. Meshing the three habitually autonomous forms into a single work, he establishes a discomfort that is responsible for a low-voltage tension that disturbs the viewer as he begins to decode Forbidden Zone's deeper iconographic significance. But far from divorced from the work's conceptual aim, Murti's deliberate challenge to conventional associations -the cliché of painting as traditional medium, video as contemporary, and photography situated somewhere in-between the first and the second-, leads his audience into the piece's multi-tiered vision.

Initially Forbidden Zone's coded signs seem disjointed: still images of perfectly formed emerald-green terraced rice paddies, a video of an aircraft flying at various times of day over tropical landscape, and realistically painted landscapes of Bali and Java. Soon however Murti's mixed-media collage comes into focus as a whole, its various components speaking in different registers to the viewer pondering Indonesia's complex modern identity as a nation.

The work is in fact a four-dimensional (time the fourth dimension) critical allegory of Indonesian reality, incorporating insider and outsider perspectives today, as well as over time.

Analysing Forbidden Zone chronologically, or starting at the allegory's beginning, the viewer takes in the paintings, naturalistically rendered in acrylic and depicting the indigenous, unpopulated landscape. Though the canvases are not anachronistic -i.e., modern life is in peripheral evidence here in the form of power-lines, high-rise buildings, roads, airplane landing strips, buses and boats-, they nonetheless mainly evoke the sublime beauty of the Indonesian landscape so dear to 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Dutch



painters bowled over by the idyllic splendour of their colony's physical attributes. Desert islands, sunsets, exquisite pastel skies, mist-shrouded volcanoes, all idealized visions of the exotic tropical land are portrayed as perceived and desired by the colonial outsiders who then made it their own. Searching further, the viewer will note that the landscapes, even those showing contemporary life, are devoid of people, or more particularly of Indonesians. Here Murti can be seen to be tersely re-stating the standard discourse of the post-colonial period holding that the colonists were interested in the land and her wealth rather than her indigenous inhabitants. But beyond this simplistic reading, and aware of the artist's willingness to ponder situations from multiple viewpoints, the viewer is prompted instead to think more deeply about the idealism associated with all natural, non-concrete-dominated landscapes in today's rapidly modernizing, and urbanizing Asian societies. Finally, digging yet deeper into local cultural history, -and here, some knowledge of Indonesian aesthetic history is pertinent-, the paintings reference a debate sparked by pioneer modernist Javanese painter Sudjojono<sup>2</sup> who, as anti-Dutch sentiment rose in the 1930's<sup>3</sup>, and as a spokesman for the Persagi movement<sup>4</sup>, reacted to the traditional European aesthetic canon by criticising local painters reproducing what the senior artist perceived to be *mooi Indie*<sup>5</sup>, or 'the exoticised, and idealistically beautiful Indonesian landscapes of the colonisers'. This part of the installation therefore poses sensitive and, in this day of incessant post-modern appropriation, highly relevant questions about the ownership of aesthetic interpretation and ideas, and the altered meaning of borrowed stylistic genres.

As a counterpoint to these reference-packed canvases, Krisna Murti's composition includes a still photographic

image of lush Balinese rice terraces. These are so perfect and symmetrical that he assimilates the pristine view with man-made architecture, calling the vista Colosseum. Again, an awareness of the contradiction between perception and reality depending on context dictates his choice of frame and name as the conventionally beautiful but real landscapes of his paintings -this real-life perfection so disliked and viewed as a 'forbidden zone' by former generations of artists- collide with the natural but seemingly artificial paddy-fields. This collision, however allusive its staging, prompts the viewer to consider whether there can ever be only a single rightful owner of an image and its interpretation.

A third component of the installation, the video airplane, links the first two forbidden zones, the canvases depicting the faithfully reproduced but seemingly exoticised version of the indigenous landscape, and today's Indonesia as perceived by the outside world, a no-go or forbidden zone due to recent international terrorism-inspired travel bans. Beyond their role as a transition, the video images of an aircraft taking off, flying and landing over the tropical

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<sup>2</sup> Sudjojono, Sindudarsono (1914-1985) is considered one of the forefathers of indigenous Indonesian modernism. His non-idealised iconography includes village scenes, rural poverty and old people.

<sup>3</sup> Indonesia garnered its independence from the Netherlands in 1949 after several years of war.

<sup>4</sup> Persagi, from Persatuan Ahli-ahli Gambar Indonesia, was the Union of Indonesian Painters established by Sudjojono and others in 1937. Sudjojono was the group's spokesman.

<sup>5</sup> Members of Persagi, and particularly Sudjojono, as part of their ongoing mission to develop Indonesian modernism, encouraged local painters to abandon the romantic and colonial *Mooi Indie* (Beautiful Indies) style in favour of a truer approach to Indonesia's landscape and people.



landscape contrast the encroaching visitor/tourist with the unsullied and perfect natural environment of the South East Asian paradise. The iconography, generic in terms of locale, again suggest the traffic between geographic points that leads to different perceptions and experiences of a same time and place according to the viewer's cultural identity.

How should the real Indonesia be perceived, as a forbidden or most desirable zone? And where does the artist stand in relation to his country: outsider looking in or rather, insider staring out? Again, Murti positions himself simultaneously on both sides of the divide such that his work operates both as a critique of internal dependence as well as of external paranoia.

Though easily deconstructed, Forbidden Zone as a whole is greater than its parts, functioning as an integrated piece because it speaks intimately of Indonesia on several different but related levels. Evoking the archipelago's complex and much fought-over cultural history, the installation recalls both that history's colonial distortions, as well as those perpetrated by the Indonesian intelligentsia as a reaction to the colonists' perceptions. Through the suggestion of these discourses from the archipelago's past, the artist provokes the viewer to question assumptions concerning the validity and truth of the construct of Indonesia, present and future. Meaning, like beauty, is in the eye of

the beholder and the thoughtful, multi-tiered art of Krisna Murti ultimately empowers the viewer to ponder and decide for himself.

November 2007

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**IOLA LENZI**, A lawyer by training, is a Singapore-based art critic and independent curator. She is the author of *Museums of Southeast Asia* as well as the Singapore correspondent for the *Asian Art Newspaper*, London, amongst other visual art publications.











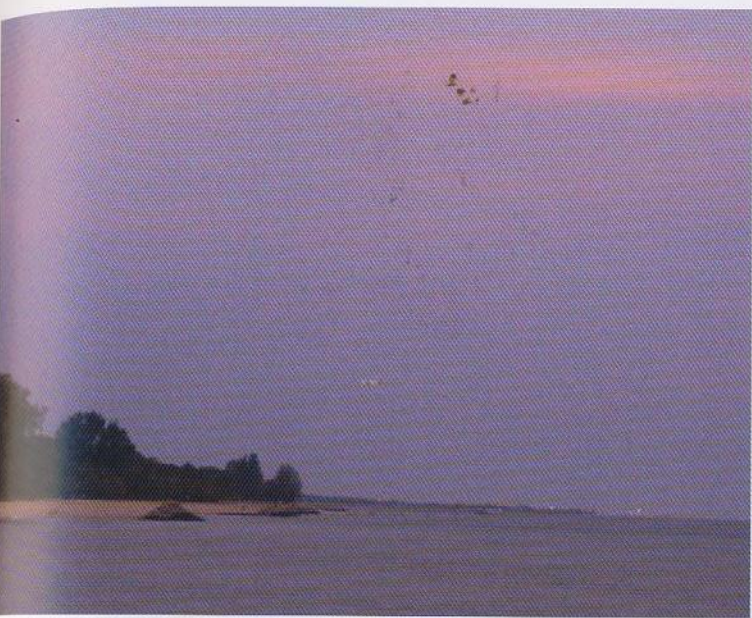


Dawnscape No. 2, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 90 cm





















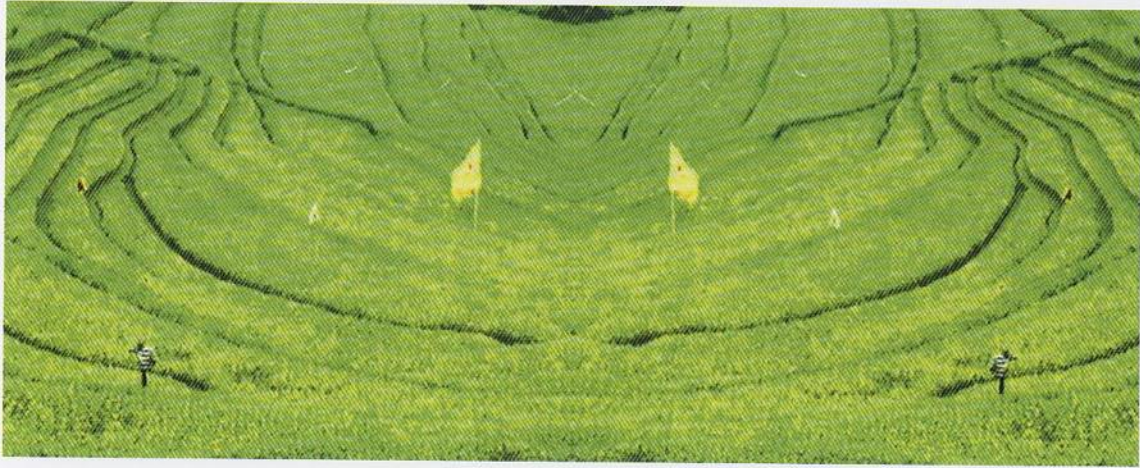








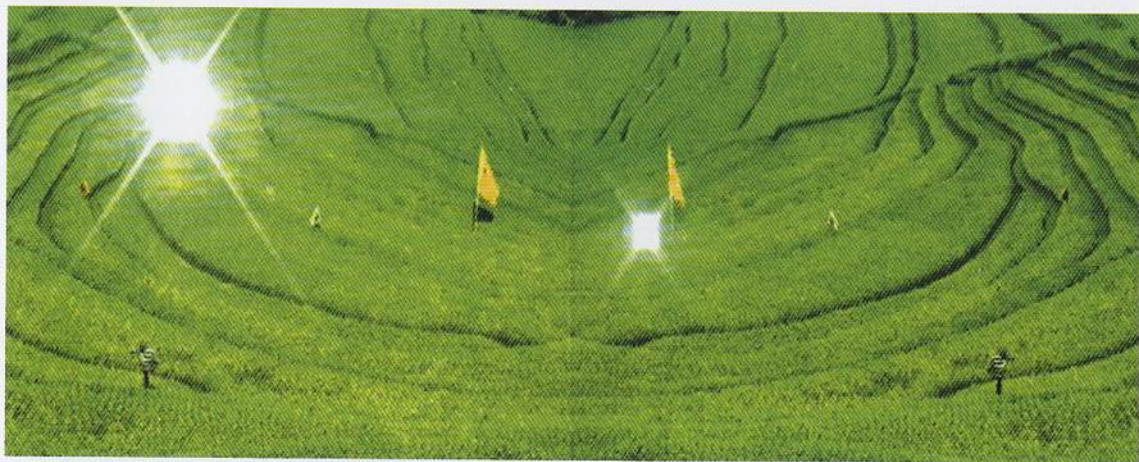
















## Krisna Murti

Born in **1957**, lives and works in Bandung/ Jakarta

### Education

**1976 - 81** Faculty of Art and Design – Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB), Bandung

### Working Experience

**1981-82** Assitant to Prof. Ahmad Sadali for art philosophy studies, Faculty of Art and Design, ITB, Bandung **1999** Artist in Residence, Art Exchange Program (AEP), Fukuoka, Japan **1996** Workshop on Asean Art, La Salle SIA College of Art – Singapore Art Council, Singapore **2002** Founder of the first International new media art festival in Indonesia: bavf~NAF #1 (The Bandung Video, Film and New Media Art Forum) **2002 - 04** Supervision of Master of Visual Art - MVA - Candidate, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Australia **2003** Guest Lecturer of Master of Visual and Performing Arts Program (New Media Art Studies), Indonesia Institute of Arts, Yogyakarta, Indonesia **2006** Artist in Residence, La Salle College of the Arts, Singapore.

### Selected Solo Exhibition

**2008** "Forbidden Zone" painting, digital print and video, Rumah Seni Yaitu (Semarang, March 14<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup>); Gaya Fusion of Senses Gallery (Ubud-Bali, April 5<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup>) and National Gallery of Indonesia (Jakarta, April 29<sup>th</sup>-May 11<sup>th</sup>) [catalogue] **2005** "Video Spa", video installation, Gaya Fusion of Senses Gallery, Ubud, Bali **2004** "Video Spa", video installation, National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta **2002** "Wayang Machine", video installation (5 projections), Japan Foundation, Jakarta and Centre Culturel Francais, Yogyakarta **2000** "boo it yourSELF" Sound/Video Installation, National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta **1999** "Foodstuffs are Ethnic, Never Racist", video installation, Cemeti Art House, Yogyakarta **1997** "My Ancestors are Sangiran Man", video installation, TBS Surakarta; Lontar Gallery, Jakarta; RedPoint Studio, Bandung • "Of The Dancer: Her Neglected Sketches", video art, Youth Theatre, Moscow **1996** "Learning to Queue Up to The Ants", performance video installation, Soemardja Gallery, ITB, Bandung **1993** "12 Hours in The Life of Agung Rai, The Dancer", video performance-photo installation, Studio R-66, Bandung

### Selected Group Exhibition

**2007** "Neo-Nation", Biennale Jogja IX, Jogja National Museum, Yogyakarta • "Thermocline of Art, New Asian Waves", Centre for Art and Media ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany **2006** "Going Digital", Festival Oversteek, Theater de Kikker, Utrech, the Netherlands • "Beyond", Jakarta Biennale, Jakarta **2005** Venice Biennale, Indonesian Pavillion, Venice, Italy • "Taboo and Transgression in Contemporary Indonesian Art", The Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Ithaca, New York, USA • "Asia Video art Showing" (Avicon), Kyoto Seika University, Institute for Media Arts, Kyoto, Japan • "Xeno-Tech" (curated by Deanna Herst), Transmediale Media Art Festival, Berlin **2004** "SENI: Art and the Contemporary", moving picture, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore



(Oct) • "Pathiharn Electron", switch media, Art Museum of Chiang Mai, Thailand • "Identities vs Globalisation", organised by Heinrich Boll Foundation, Art Museum of Chiang Mai (Feb) and National Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand (May), and Dahlem Museum Complex, Berlin (Sept-Oct 04) **2003** Asia Videart Conference (AVICON) 2003, organized by VC Tokyo, POLA Annex Museum, Ginza, Tokyo • "Interpellation", CP Open Biennale, National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta • "House", 10 Video Artists of Indonesia, Plastic Kinetic Worms, Singapore • "TRANSIT 8 Views of Indonesia", multicultural Indonesia new media art show in Australia: Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts, Townsville, Queensland (May-June) and 24 HR ART, Northern Territory Centre for Contemporary Art, Darwin (September) • "15 Tracks: South East Asia Contemporary Art", organized by Singapore Art Museum, Tama University Gallery, Tokyo (July) and Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, Japan (December) • "Human Beings as Part of Nature", 2<sup>nd</sup> Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial (Short Video Festival), 7 cities of Echigo-Tsumari region (24 public spaces), Japan **2002** "Spice Routes", ifa Galerie, Stuttgart, Germany **2002 - 03** "36 Ideas from Asia, Contemporary South East Asia Art" (organized by Singapore Art Museum) in German (Duisberg), Hungary, Rupertinum Museum of Modern Art (Salzburg-Austria), National Museum of Abruzzo (L'Aquila, Italy) **2001** "Unfolding Perspective ARS 01", Kiasma Contemporary Art Museum, Helsinki, Finland • Osaka Triennale, Osaka, Japan • Zwischen Tradition und Moderne: Junge Künstler aus Indonesien, Museum for Anthropology, City of Cologne and Dahlem Museum Berlin, Germany • "Awas! Recent Art from Indonesia", Amsterdam W139, Pruess Ochs Gallery, Berlin and Ludwig Forum for International Art, Aachen, Germany **2000** "7<sup>th</sup> Bienalle of Havana", Havana, Cuba • Centre National d'Art Contemporain de Marne la-Vallee – Fermée du Buisson, Paris, France • "Invisible Boundary: Metamorphosed Asian Art, Travelling Exhibition of Kwangju Bienalle 2000", Niigata & Utsunomiya Museum of Art, Japan • "Impakt Festival, Media Art" Utrecht, the Netherlands • "3<sup>rd</sup> Gwangju Bienalle", South Korea **1999** "Undabdie Post Experimental Art", Actions Galerie & Asian Fine Arts Factory, Berlin • "First Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale", Fukuoka-Japan **1997** "Two Wonders", Mikhail Abakumov and Krisna Murti, Embassy Hall, Moscow

#### Artist Talk/ Art Presentation

**2001** "3 Artists", Havana Biennale, Che Guevara Hall, Casa America, Havana, Cuba **2002** "10 Works of Krisna Murti 1993-2002", Complejo Cultural "San Francisco", Caceres-Spain, organized by Asociacion Cultural Arte Abierto and sponsored by Diputacion de Caceres **2003** "10 Works of Krisna Murti 1993-2002" at Institute of Modern Art IMA and Queensland Art College (Brisbane); Griffith University, Brisbane; Charles Darwin University, Darwin; and James Cook University, Townsville (Australia) **2004** Art Forum and Visiting Lecturer: "New Media Art in Indonesia" at University of Tasmania, Hobart and Launceston, Monash University, Melbourne and 24HRART Contemporary Art, Darwin, Australia

#### Public Collections

Hakataza, Kabuki Theatre, Fukuoka City, Japan • Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan • Art Council of Singapore/ Singapore Art Museum

#### Bibliography

**2006** "Apresiasi Seni Media Baru" (The Appreciation of New Media Arts), Direktorat Kesenian RI, Jakarta • "Media Baru, Kultur Gerilya hingga Seni Gadget" (The New Media, from Guerilla Culture to Gadget Art), Jakarta Biennale Catalogue, Jakarta Art Council, **2001** "Caring for Mickey, Collage Works of Krisna Murti", exhibition catalogue, Bandung **1999** "Video Publik", Krisna Murti, Kanisius Publisher, Yogyakarta **1997** "My Ancestors are Sangiran Man", exhibition catalogue, Krisna Murti, Bandung • Writing media arts articles for Kompas newspaper, Visual Arts and Art Asia Pacific magazine

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# COLOPHON

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