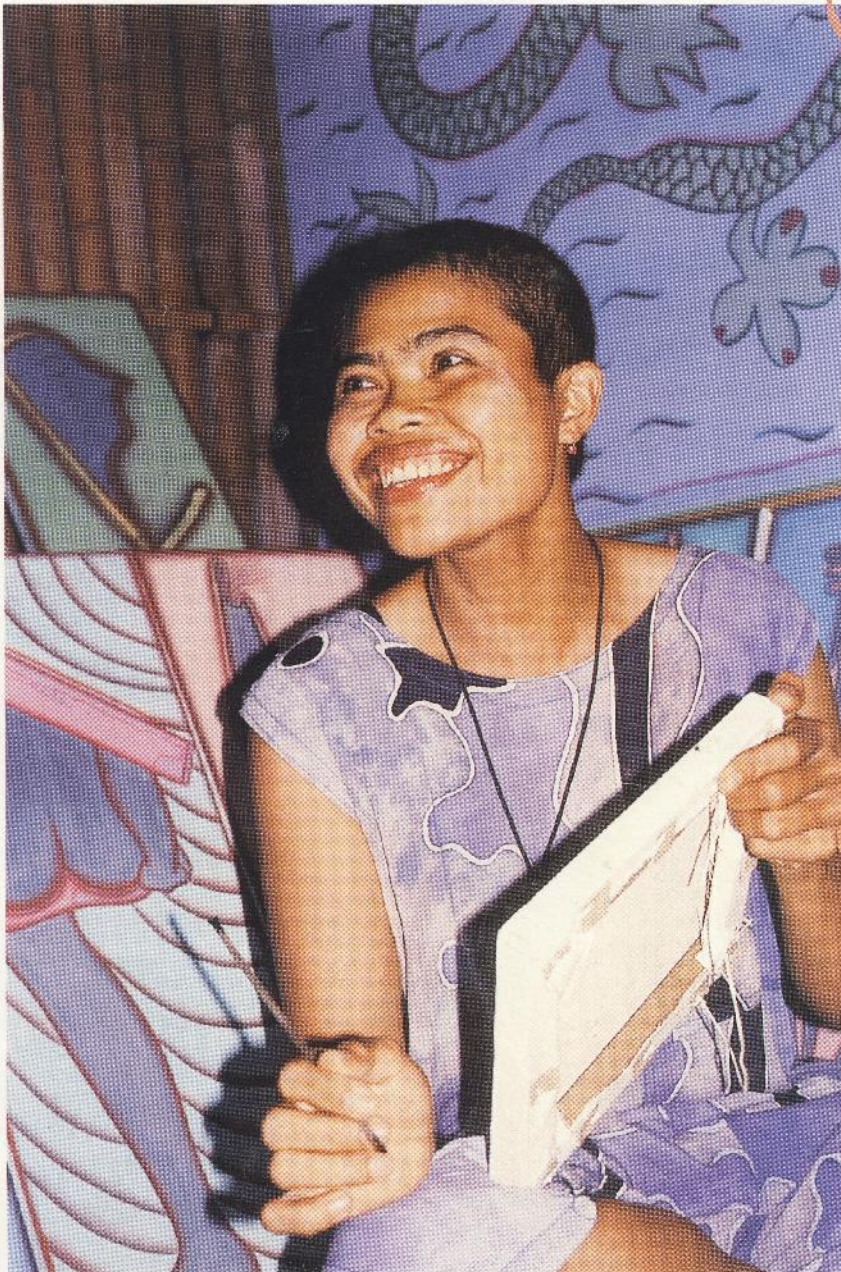


PURE INSTINCT

In October, when she stages her solo show at Hong Kong's Fringe Club, painter Murni will be the first Balinese artist to exhibit at the rigidly selective venue. Inspired by an childhood of poverty to develop a unique style, Murni's success derives from her determination to follow her own heart. By Wayan Suardika.



The Oriental woman is bound by tradition. Her life centres on the kitchen, and she is not prone to rebelling against the power men hold over her. Well... so goes the stereotype.

But there is at least one Balinese woman who challenges this stereotype. This woman's name is Murni. At first glance, Murni looks like a typical Balinese village woman. But she favours a profession as a painter - an unusual choice for a Balinese woman - over spending her life in the kitchen or other such traditional women's domains'. If Balinese women are known for an artistic endeavour, it is generally for dancing, not painting. But Murni is a league apart.

This is in spite of the fact that Murni, who was born in Tabanan on May 21 1966, is not descended from a family of painters, which is usually how Balinese painters learn their craft. In fact, there is nothing at all artistic about Murni's family - neither her mother, her father, her grandmother nor her grandfather were artists. And neither did her family ever encourage her to become a painter. For generations, they have been farmers: planting rice and tilling the soil. Murni's desire to paint is purely instinctive.

This is not to suggest that Murni has had no mentors. And in her formative years as a painter, Dewa Putu Mokoh was the most important of them. Born in 1934 in Pengosekan, near Ubud, Mokoh's unique style draws strongly on the world of Balinese shadow puppetry. Mokoh, who has exhibited in Australia, USA, Holland, Denmark, Italy, Germany and Japan, was Murni's first guru,

and instilled in her a solid mastery of the Pengosekan-school technique. Her subsequent proficiency and success can therefore be partly attributed to him. But for the most part, it results from the richness of her own intellectual wanderings. Like most painters, it is her soul-searching attempts to know herself that motivate her and inspire her in her work.

But before beginning to paint seriously at 22, Murni - whose full name is I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasih - was busy sketching the black picture of her life, as the childhood and early adulthood of this dark-skinned woman could be described. Growing up in a poor farming family, Murni was forced to drop out of school after her first year at junior high - not a level of education that these days would be considered to 'get one anywhere'.

When Murni was born, her parents had been farming the same tiny plot of land for years, and they weren't getting any better off. "When he heard of the government-sponsored transmigration program, (which, in the name of alleviating overpopulation, allocated poor Balinese and Javanese farming families with new plots of land to cultivate wet rice in the archipelago's Outer Islands, ed.), my father immediately registered his interest. Pretty soon, we found ourselves bound for Sulawesi," recalls Murni rather dismally. It was only by moving to Sulawesi, reasoned Murni's parents, that they would ever get a chance to improve their economic welfare.

Murni's parents were forced to sell their rice paddy, their house and the land on which it stood in order to raise the funds to 'transmigrate'. Drastic measures indeed in Bali, where continued access to one's birthplace is of utmost spiritual and religious significance. That Murni's family gave it up, therefore, attests to the severity of their condition, a condition Murni refers to as "her family's fate, which she had no choice but to follow."

On arrival in Sulawesi, Murni was placed with a Chinese family in Ujung Pandang, for whom she worked as a domestic servant. Fortunately for Murni, her employers were generous people, and they sent her to primary school. To reach school from the house where she worked, Murni had to walk for five kilometres. "It was exhausting," exclaimed Murni on recalling her bitter past. "Imagine how tired I was after finishing all my domestic chores. And then I still had to walk five kilometres to attend



school! And when I got back home, I had to do more work. I didn't sleep until 11 at night, and had to get up again at around three or four in the morning. It was completely exhausting. And I was still so little!"

When the father of the Chinese family went to live in Jakarta, Murni was sent there with him. There, she no longer attended school, but was employed as a tailor in a garment factory owned by her employer. But she didn't stay long in Jakarta, and by 1987 she was back in Bali. "I asked the family who had employed me in Jakarta and Ujung Pandang to release me on good terms. Until now, we still communicate with each other, via the phone and letters," said Murni when I interviewed her at Seniwati Gallery in Ubud, as curator Mary Northmore, who sat in on the interview, nodded in affirmation.

On returning to Bali, Murni chose to return to her village in Tabanan and live with her older cousin. But she soon realised that there was little to occupy her there, and on the advice of her cousin she moved to Celuk, a village about 10 kilometres from Denpasar in the district of Gianyar, renowned for its silverwork. Murni was all too happy to heed the advice, and on settling in Celuk she started working in a silver factory, where she made silver jewelry.

Balinese silverwork consists of a number of established patterns and designs. It is unusual for Balinese silversmiths to stray from these established patterns in creating a piece of jewelry. They usually select one of the ready designs and just start churning out as many pieces as possible. But Murni found this bor-

Opposite: " Murni in her Ubud Studio. "

Above: " Nuki before she died. "



“When I paint, I just surrender to the flow of images that pass through my mind. I never begin



with a concept or a pattern, except for the shards of my dreams remain in my consciousness.”

ing, and it was in the Celuk silver factory that her artistic insinct began to germinate. She began coming up with completely new designs for silver jewelry, designs that were unique, artisc and unlike anything else that existed. “I just used my creative instincts to come up with new designs,” claims Murni. But she didn’t stay working in the silver factory for long. “After two years of silversmithing, the work began to have an adverse effect on my eyesight, so I stopped.”

It was also in Celuk that Murni met and fell in love with a man from Payangan, near Ubud. They married soon after meeting eachother. But after several years of marriage, they remained childless and Murni’s husband asked permission to take a second wife who was capable of bearing his progeny, so to speak. Unable to accept the request, Murni demanded a divorce. “It’s the first time I know of that a Balinese woman has demanded a divorce,” asserted Murni, proudly. At first, her request was turned down. But she kept battling, and was finally granted a divorce. “How can he call it love when for three whole years I was left to find my own means with which to live?” poses Murni. “Is there still love if just for the sake of progeny a man turns to another woman? I will never accept that. Never, never, never,” repeated Murni, shaking her head

emphatically.

Soon after divorcing her husband, Murni decided to base herself in Ubud. Living alone gave her more free time, and Murni found herself drawn again to artistic pursuits. Peppered with galleries, museums and studios, Ubud offered a congenial environment that urged Murni to begin cultivating her hidden talents, and to start painting seriously.

“Stylistically, my early paintings differ vastly from my more recent ones,” explains Murni. “In the early days I was painting in the Pengosekan-school style (Pengosekan is renowned for its classical style-paintings, ed.). Then one day I realised how many thousands of painters were painting in that style, and how little I could express or contribute by joining their hordes. Then, I started to develop the style that you can see in my paintings now.”

With the help of some other women painters, Murni made contact with Seniwati Gallery, the Ubud-based collective women’s gallery. Firstly, Murni showed some of her works to Seniwati curator Mary Northmore, who was so intrigued by them that she included them in Seniwati’s 1995 exhibition entitled ‘Unveiling the Goddess’. And only several months later, Murni staged her first solo show at Seniwati, and she hasn’t looked back since. Murni went on to stage another one-woman

Top left:
“ Murni Imagining. ”

Top right: “ God Gave
me Something. ”

show in Kuta's Strand Bar (1996), participate in an exhibition of paintings at Ubud's Puri Lukisan (1996), as well as the ISWALI exhibition in Paon Mas, Nusa Dua (1996), and her work was first shown overseas in Melbourne in 1997.

As Murni is quick to stress, there is no denying the importance of Seniwati Gallery's role in boosting her painting career. According to Murni, the Gallery, which refrains from exerting control over painter's artistic freedom or meddling with their creative processes, has similarly supported other local women's painting careers. At the time of writing, Murni was exhibiting in two places - in Bali and Italy - and both these shows have been coordinated by Seniwati Gallery.

Not only is Murni's marital status single. She is also alone as a woman in the long list of Balinese painters of her generation who have clinched international recognition and success. Having endured all the bitterness life served her, Murni discovered painting both as an escape and a way to express bits and pieces of her complex psyche. So what appears on this woman's canvases are images that are extremely individual, strange, shocking and laden with childhood fantasies. Her work is shocking not only because of the oddity of being a Balinese woman painter but also because in it are portrayed

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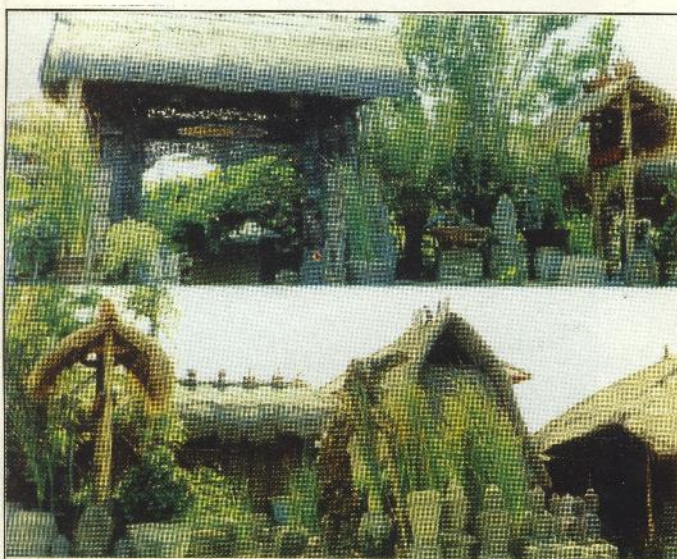
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unusual objects, perspectives and compositions, and an eternal search for beauty in the physical world. Most other Balinese women painters seem to be content with following one of the established Balinese painting schools, and with depicting fairly conventional subjects, such as dancers, landscapes or Balinese ceremonies and ritual activities. But Murni's rebelliousness and her liberated imagination have driven her to paint her dreams in a style that is naive, surrealistic and sometimes cartoon-like. When quizzed on the meaning of 'Music Drives Out Buta Kala' (acrylic on canvas, 100 x 150 cm), which depicts three

Egyptian women - a country she has never visited - Murni has no ready explanation. "When I paint, I just surrender to the flow of images that pass through my mind. I never begin with a concept or a pattern, except for the shards of my dreams that remain in my consciousness."

Murni's canvas functions to capture the freely expressed outpourings of her imagination. It is the space onto which she allows her 'artistic courage' to spill over. As evident in many of her works, Murni is quick to embrace the beauty of objects considered morally taboo by mainstream society. She has no qualms, for example, about depicting a vagina as an object of beauty such as in 'Control Again' (acrylic on canvas, 50 x 50cm), the main focus of which is a woman's genitals. depicted in Murni's trademark expressive style. "When these kinds of works were first shown at Seniwati, I was criticised by some of my colleagues, who confessed to feeling shame and embarrassment when they saw the painting. I just laughed at them. In my opinion, if my paintings happens to touch on so-called taboo subjects, why should I be ashamed? I don't want to place any limits on the creative process," said Murni, expelling the last of her laughter.

Another theme which comes through in Murni's paintings is her hesitance to discard her "as-yet-incomplete childhood". Her longing for a carefree childhood is expressed in naive works on small canvases such as those entitled 'Clever Make-up', 'Sepatu Roda', 'Happy Menyanyi', 'Senam Pagi', to name a few. Considering the story of her life, it is hardly surprising that she has arrived at an aesthetic which hints at a longing for family and for a childhood which she never really had a chance to enjoy, destroyed love, desire for some unattainable thing, and the bitterness of the female experience. And it is also understandable why the most important source of inspiration for Murni's creative process is dreams. "I never painted one particular object, or made time to find a certain object to draw," says Murni of her creative development. "Dreams and my past are the source of my ideas in painting. One day I was awoken from my sleep, and then I began to paint. Once the painting was finished, I was sur-



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prised to see that the images in it were similar to what I had just dreamed," remembers Murni.

Dreams, when incorporated into a creative process, tend to become very unusual indeed, except for those few people who are familiar with the thought of Freud and can understand the threads that link dreams to reality. But Murni is a painter with minimal school education, and for that matter knowledge of art and psychology. She boasts the attributes of a typical Balinese village woman - sun-darkened skin, a hard worker, somewhat bashful and softly spoken, unimpressably dressed. But, as her paintings show, the contrast between the outer and the inner Murni is a stark one. It is this contrast that amazed the likes of Mary Northmore and Jane Carnegie (a specialist in Oriental art from Melbourne, Australia who coordinated an exhibition of Murni's work in Melbourne in April this year) when they saw Murni's work for the first time. Because she bases her work on dreams, the reality of Murni's work is a distortive reality that would cause many people to place her firmly in the

surrealist camp. For example, a portrait of her grandfather entitled 'My Grandfather' (acrylic on canvas), painted from memory after his death, portrays an old man with a large frame and a large head surrounded by fish.

"When I start painting crazily," tells Murni, "I lose all track of time. I pass the night chainsmoking and drinking endless cups of coffee, and I paint and paint." Her total commitment to painting has recently begun to bear fruit. Murni has collected at least 400 paintings of various sizes. Most of them are stored in her expansive, un conventionally-designed house-cum-studio in Nyuh Kuning, Ubud, and some in Seniwati Gallery. Over the past six months, Murni has exhibited in Melbourne (April, 1998), Italy (August, 1998) and Hong Kong (October 1998). Her Hong Kong exhibition is to take place at the highly selective Fringe Club. And, as Mary Northmore boasts: "Murni is the first Balinese, and perhaps even the first Indonesian artist to have gained entry to the venue." May many follow in her footsteps.

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