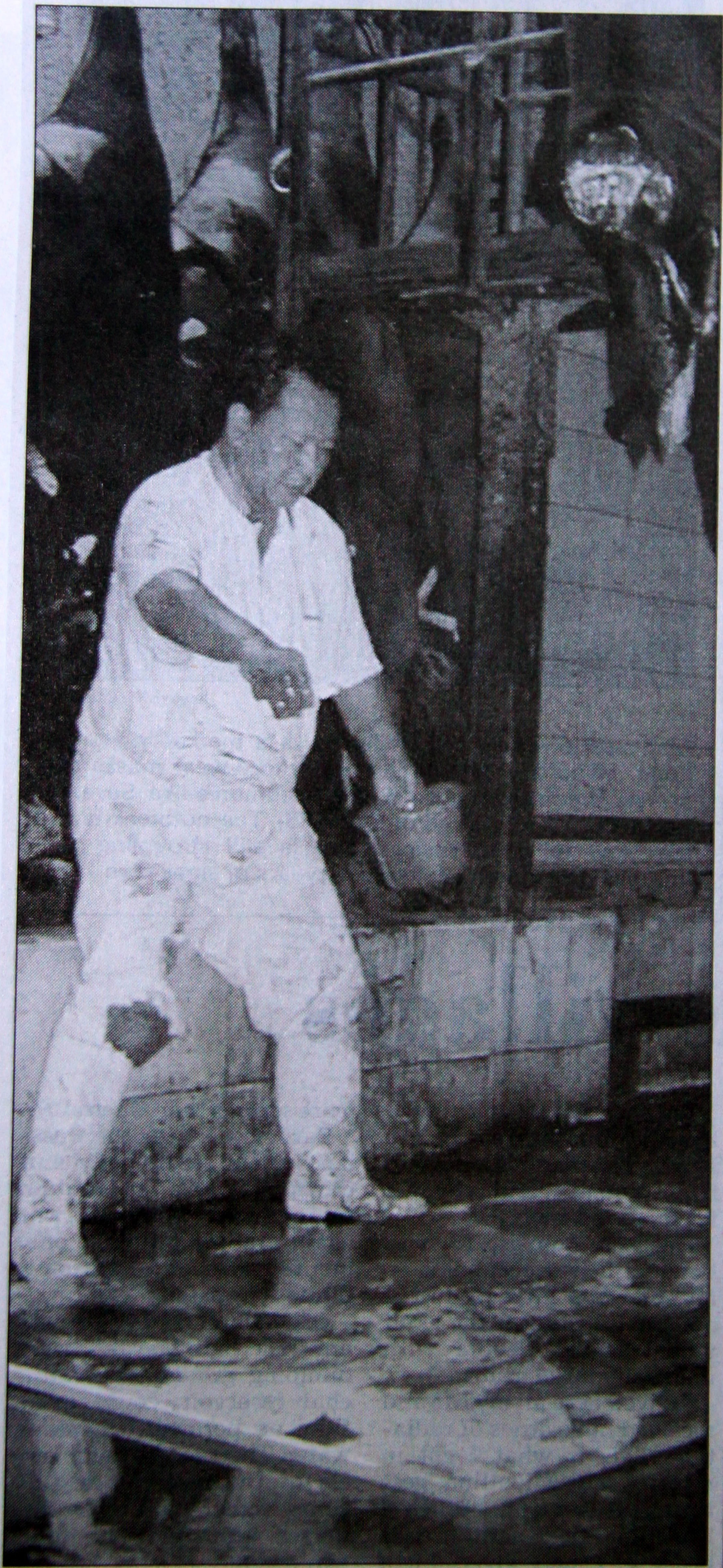


Wianta's 'Dream Land':

A show in blood



JP/Ema Sukarelawanto

Wianta's exhibition at Gaya Fusion of Arts Gallery in Ubud, Bali, is at first glance a strange show indeed.

One enters the place in total darkness, a torch in hand, hesitating, the walls black. Then, as the beam pierces the darkness, the elements of the show appear one by one. On the ground a large mound of rice, shaped in the form of the island of Bali, with skeletons scattered over part of it, and with two Balinese bamboo shrines standing at its other end.

But this is nothing compared to what appears next. Red "paintings" are hung on the walls. At first, they look abstract, in the manner of "classical" action paintings, but as the torch focuses on them, one after the other, horror appears.

These paintings have been painted not in any old red pigment, but in blood — in the blood, I was told later, of cows slaughtered at the Denpasar abattoir, blood spread by Wianta himself on his waiting canvas. And,

hold your breath! The paint is a transparent wash beneath which appear real scenes of horror: aggrandized photographs of the October bombing in Kuta.

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Not just any photographs, these, but the kind that one doesn't see on TV or in newspapers, which censor them out of a "sense of decency".

Presented hidden, yet visible in semi-transparence behind the wash of blood, they illustrate the sudden eruption of death: a burned, blackened limb sticking out of a car window; limbs, heads and bowels heaped on each other in the corner of a hospital room; a calcified corpse on a stretcher; the sprawled body of a dead man. Wianta thus purposely selects the photographs that represent "instant" images of horror



JP/Ena Sukarelawanto

Artist Wianta splatters blood (*photo left*), taken from slaughtered cows at a Denpasar abattoir, on a photograph for his newest exhibition Dream Land. Photographs of the October bombing in Kuta, Bali, are awash with blood (*photo above*) illustrating the sudden and gruesome death. The atmosphere that awaits the visitor to Wianta's exhibition is unique (*photo right*). The area is in total darkness and, with torch in hand, you can see the elements of the show appear one by one in the lamplight.

and picture in the most unbearable way the consequences of "Evil" incarnate, and he paints them in blood.

On one level, such a show can be construed as a statement — a statement of repulsion — about the real and symbolic presence of blood in Bali. The island of Bali, the artist's birthplace, has been suddenly transformed from an imaginary "Dream Land" into a land of pain and death in the wake of the Oct. 12, 2002, terrorist bombings. Blood has become a real presence, and it looms over the future. The artist uses blood as a way to protest, warn, and cry in awe.

There is also a Balinese aspect to Wianta's installation. To the Balinese, the shedding of blood is a sign of cosmic disorder. This disorder is ritually treated in a "reversed" use of violence: by the shedding of blood as offerings (*tabuh rah*). Blood, which heretofore symbolized death then becomes, through the offering, the blood of life. To this reference to offerings must be added the two shrines set on the mound of rice. Yet, in spite of these Balinese allusions, the installation is more than the duplicate of a rite of exorcism. It is, by its very daring, a gesture of distancing, and hence an act of "modernity", not of faith.

Wianta is in fact featuring a simulacrum of an exorcism to invite us to think. Laying bare the impotence of his tradition — the Balinese offerings — to deal with actual violence, he seems to be telling us that the recourse to rites and religion may indeed be fine and well intentioned, but it is bound to fail. To cope with violence, he suggests, one

has first to acknowledge its presence, and then expose its ills if need be by using outrageous allegories such as blood and suffering. Thus Wianta is inviting us to face the bloodied reality of Bali, of Indonesia, and indeed of the world, and to confront it in the only realistic and efficacious way open to us: through consciousness. Only then will healing follow.

What about the exhibition of photographs of death? These photographs are not there to simply create a moral sensation. They can be construed as a questioning of, and protest against, the way representation and reality are dealt with in the media.

By taking the obscenity of the images to its utmost limit through the visualization of the unbearable, Wianta is telling us that the media don't represent "the" objective reality. Rather, they select the images and henceforth create a new, autonomous "reality", the product of politics and marketing as well as of our unquenchable thirst for images.

It eventually becomes a de-dramatized show of non-reality, or rather, borrowing Beaudrillard's word, a "hyperreality". As reality thus disappears behind its mediated construction, authentic horror continues to be allowed to occur, and to go on unnoticed, or to wait to burst into the open, as tragically illustrated by the situation in Iraq.

Indeed, watching Wianta's exhibition the humanity in us protests. It leaves us disgusted, haunted by nightmarish images, perhaps even physically ill. We ask whether such a show is immoral, then wonder

whether morality is even relevant to an evaluation of such art. His exhibition is indeed violent and provocative, but it is also clear that Wianta has extracted morality from horror itself and that the usual sense of the word doesn't fit easily here.

A moral evaluation is all the more problematic because perception and the medium through which the horror is viewed are an integral part of the exhibition. The artist exposes himself within his work as both a denunciator and a manipulator of the media.

As previously suggested, the media thrive on horror and create a second degree of horror, that of its banalisation through hyperreality; the artist thrives on this representation of horror created by the media. But here the reality is too powerful. Neither the media nor Wianta's addition of a third degree of horror — that of the manipulative artist who will use anything, including horror, to enhance his media recognition and satisfy his narcissistic obsession — can wash this reality away.

The result is a strange clarity, a view of the nude narcissistic creator who dares to denounce all the levels of horror with which he is faced. It is precisely through his ambiguous use of horror for expressive purposes that Wianta is able to generate enough clarity to denounce the media's use of horror and the reality of horror itself.

Wianta's show should thus be construed as a loud, daring, lonely, scream among all the hushed men and women stricken by the terror of evil. His is an absolute scream, in which he forgets that he should be human because he



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can't be; he suddenly discovers, and then uncovers, evil itself.

But Wianta's scream is more than protest. It is symbolic art at its most vivid. Here the Balinese side of the work rejoins the contemporary one.

The world Wianta represents is made of rice and is therefore life itself. The bones and human remains are symbols of death and represent the natural, cosmic opposites of life. The blood with which he paints the horrific photographs is the blood of the awareness of blood, and hence the blood of life.

The message is therefore cosmic, in a Hindu sense, but also in a universal one. The blood of awareness is also the blood of hope. To darkness will succeed light — as fireflies released on the opening day announced; to impurity purity; and to death life, as the artist's show itself should make clear to us. Ultimately Made Wianta is an artist and a demiurge.

His show is an attempt to create meaning out of the horror of reality and the deception of hyperreali-

ty. He teaches us how to scream and to live as humans must.

Well rooted in the artist's culture, relevance, imagination, and most of all earnestness, Wianta's Dream Land has all the hallmarks of a great contemporary artistic event. The artist, to this day often controversial, is reaching in this work the peak of his career. His show should draw much public attention at the Venice Biennale, where it is scheduled to be exhibited.

The exhibition runs until May 15 at Gaya Fusion of Arts Gallery
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