



## Women's Art/Space - Bali

**Paintings in Bali have been and are produced mostly by men. What about women artists, you ask. Soraya Merican visited the Indonesian island, and made a discovery.**

The next time you go to Bali, pay a visit to any of its art galleries and count the number of paintings by women artists. The discrepancy is stark. Researching on the state of women's art on the island of Bali may turn out to be an impossible exercise, for the simple reason that almost no Balinese art gallery showcases works by women. Except one.

For the past twenty years, the walls of the Seniwati Gallery of Art by Women have been adorned by artworks created only by women.

This gallery provides local women artists with a unique space for them to express themselves.

Gallery founder and director Mary Northmore said problems faced by local female artists led her to set up the showroom.

“They face numerous challenges which stem from the traditional roles they’re expected to play. Balinese men are more visible within the public sphere – they own businesses, they travel more. Women, on the other hand, are bound to their homes,” she said.

The biggest problem encountered by local women, she explained, was that they have no time to paint.

“Their time is taken up by cooking, cleaning, feeding the children and taking part in religious ceremonies. All these come before her painting, which traditionally, has never been part of a Balinese woman’s life.

“If she’s lucky, she’ll have an hour a day to paint. None of the artists in the gallery [Seniwati] are prolific, but it’s the very best they can do. They’re not interested in churning out art to make money. They do it because they love it,” she said.

Unlike their fathers or husbands, Balinese women have limited access to the art world.

“Men can easily enter a gallery with a painting and say, this is my art, you should buy this and represent me.

“It’s extremely difficult, if not impossible for women to do that. It’s not in line with accepted Balinese female behaviour, which is to be subservient, to not push yourself into society, to not be egotistical,” added Northmore.

Balinese women who want to paint have to go out of their way to do so. Northmore recalls a young woman from a remote village who wanted to paint the sea.

“She lived far from the coast, so she had to cycle to the beach. This meant she had to borrow a bicycle. But because she had to cycle, she had to make a pair of trousers, when all she had were sarongs.



*Mary Northmore*



*Seniwati Gallery*



“Every little thing presents a challenge for a local female artist, and it doesn’t help when they’re not seen as potential art producers,” she said.

Northmore first started looking for local female artists when she arrived in Bali twenty years ago. Two male Balinese art experts told her there were none.



“One of them said: There aren’t any women artists here. Balinese women have no sense of colour.’ The other man said, ‘Balinese women don’t like to get dirty.’ I found that extremely unacceptable, and decided to look for them by myself,” she said.

She soon managed to track down some women artists after visiting a few villages, and with the help of her late husband, famous Indonesian artist Abdul Aziz, set up the gallery.

Women artists, according to Northmore, appear to have a style different from men.

“They never portray themselves as sexual objects. They paint subjects like nature, motherhood, children, pregnancy. These are things that a man can never understand and therefore, depict.

“Their art is also easily understood – they paint straightforward things. It is great to look at a painting and understand immediately what the artist was thinking.”

Bali’s younger artists are also benefiting from the gallery. For the past 12 years, Seniwati Gallery has held annual workshops for



*Paintings on display at gallery*

schoolgirls. Forty of the most talented girls in Bali are selected to join their workshops, which are conducted by two established women artists.

“We provide the girls with materials such as paint, crayons and paper, and take them on painting trips once a week. They’re happy just being able to paint. I find it very satisfying that they get to do what they love doing, because they might not have the opportunity to do so at home,” said Northmore.

The children’s paintings are hung in the foyer. The paintings are colourful, vibrant and full of minute detail – the *batik* print on a mother’s sarong, the checks in a father’s shirt and the different shades of green in a rice field. Few visitors leave unimpressed when they discover that the youngest artist featured is six years old.

The gallery’s scholarship fund has also helped finance the education of a few young women in university and art school.

The fund is financed by sale proceeds from the children’s artwork, which includes paintings, painted umbrellas, a colouring book and royalties from a book called ‘The Balinese Dream’, which was illustrated by children.

Half of the proceeds of a painting go to the artist, while the other half goes into the scholarship fund.

Northmore is happy but not content with how Bali’s women artists have progressed.

“There’ve definitely been positive changes. Many of our artists have developed, they’ve sold many paintings and shown their work overseas, but I measure the gallery’s success by the extent to which we’ve changed people’s way of thinking.

“Women artists should be recognised globally, and we hope that other groups around the world will see this, and pick this up wherever they are,” she said.

Seniwati Gallery of Art by Women is open daily (except Mondays) 10am - 5pm, and is situated at Jalan Sriwedari 2B, Banjar Taman, Ubud, Bali. Except for the gallery’s permanent art collection, items available for sale include paintings, calendars, bookmarks and umbrellas. For details, contact 0361-975485 (phone & fax) or [emailseniwati@dps.centrin.net.id](mailto:emailseniwati@dps.centrin.net.id). Visit the gallery’s website at [www.seniwatigallery.com](http://www.seniwatigallery.com)

### **New human species?**

Scientists are now arguing that the famous skeleton of a human species – dubbed the “Hobbit” – does not belong to a modern pygmy with a brain disease. A detailed study of the hobbit’s brain suggests that it is a new human dwarf species, but detractors persist in supporting the theory that it was merely a small human being with a disease.

Last year, an Indonesian-Australian team of archaeologists and scientists discovered a skull and bones belonging to a new tiny species called *Homo floresiensis*, that lived on the Indonesian island, Flores, until 12,000 years ago. The sensational find of the 18,000-year-old remains were made at a limestone cave in Liang Bua.

Indonesia’s most prominent palaeoanthropologist Teuku Jacob and other researchers have contended that the remains were those of a modern human (*Homo sapiens*), rather than a different species. They believed it was a pygmy, and that its brain – smaller than a chimpanzee’s – was diseased by a rare brain-shrinking disorder (microcephaly).

The new study, published in the *Science* magazine, weighs in on the controversy generated by this astounding discovery. Scientists involved in the study explained that *Homo floresiensis* possessed features of more advanced brains, and were able to hunt with sophisticated tools which indicated advanced intelligence. Researchers are also hopeful that the remains might provide DNA as they are not fossilised.

The stunning find may rewrite the history of human evolution, with scientists calling the species “the most extreme” figure of the extended human family... and the shortest. This year, the team that found the *Homo floresiensis* remains is planning to resume their search for more evidence in the many limestone caves where the discovery was made in September 2003.

### **Blame it on the stone**

An art work in the museum of Carlisle, England has been accused of bringing misfortune to the northern English city.

Councillor Jim Tootle proposed a motion to destroy the 14-tonne stone, which is inscribed with a 1,069-word curse, but the city council rejected it. Written by the Archbishop of Glasgow in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the inscription as a curse against criminals in the region, who blackmailed, raped, and plun-

dered. The boulder was displayed in a museum since 2001, and floods, foot-and-mouth disease, sporting failures and job losses have been afflicting the city ever since.

The controversy arising from whether the stone should be destroyed has generated a debate beyond parochial interests. It has made news in the international media.

### **Batanes**

They say that for more than a hundred years, time has stood still in Batanes, a group of islands in the north of the Philippines. Idly as the situation may be, it is about to change soon when the Unesco World Heritage list is finalised this year, possibly including the Philippine islands.

There are no condos, entertainment complexes or Seven-Elevens on these isolated islands which form the smallest province in the country. However, visitors are arriving and the local authorities are pressed to cope with its growing attraction for tourism or restrict the number of tourists because of inadequate capacity and facilities, and the risk of damage to preservation sites.

As the Unesco nomination becomes more widely known, foreign and local travellers are descending on the islands where they can enjoy white-sand beaches, limestone cliffs, pristine forests, rolling hills, ancient architecture, and archaeological sites, etc..

Consisting of three inhabited volcanic islands, the Batanes is 860 kilometres north of Manila, and can be reached by 60-seater turboprop airplanes. The islands are populated by about 15,000 inhabitants known as Ivatans, whose main livelihoods are in fishing and farming.

### **Screaming or hearing a scream**

Stealing a Munch art work seems to have become a favourite sport in Norway. In March, three more Munch were hauled away, seven months after ‘The Scream’ and ‘Madonna’ were stolen from the Munch Museum in Oslo.

‘The Scream’, a masterpiece of Norwegian artist Edward Munch, has become a recognised symbol of fear and anxiety, portraying a surreal scene of a figure screaming or hearing a scream with a swirling sea of stark colours in the background.

Munch himself has written about the painting, saying that he was walking with friends when the sky became blood red, causing him to stand there "trembling with anxiety," and sensing an infinite scream passing through nature.

It is believed that experts know the place in Oslo that inspired the scene in the painting, and that the slaughterhouse or psychiatric asylum close by might have provided the sound that Munch managed to express in his now famous painting.

### **Oldest biped found**

Paleontologists have announced the discovery of the oldest biped skeleton ever found. An Ethiopian-US team of researchers said in a news conference in Addis Ababa on 5 March 2005 that the find will "revolutionise the way we see human evolution".

The bones, dated to between 3.8 and 4 million years old, were unearthed at a site about 60 km from Hadar (where Lucy, one of the first hominids, was found in 1974) in the Afar region, northeast of Ethiopia.

Scientists discovered twelve hominid fossils, complete tibia, parts of a femur, pelvis, clavicle, scapula, vertebrae and ribs.

### **Botero's fat figures**

Sculptures and art works of Colombian artist Fernando Botero are part of a huge exhibition in Singapore that has been attracting much attention.

The 72-year-old Botero was on the island to launch the show of more than 70 paintings and drawings, and 36 sculptures created over the course of three decades. The paintings and 14 smaller sculptures are displayed in the Singapore Art Museum.

Twenty-two of the monumental bronze sculptures that probably contribute most to his fame are installed at Changi Airport, and in various outdoor locations around the Esplanade arts centre by the sea.

The phenomenal exhibition came about with the Singapore government's support of over US\$120 million for the next five years for the creative sector. Following significant events held for other famous foreign artists on the Southeast Asian island, Botero's corpulent nudes are helping Singapore in its attempt to become a global arts city. The exhibition ends on February 27.

### **Renaissance copycats?**

British artist David Hockney is facing a barrage of challenges from scientists for his theory that Renaissance masters projected images onto canvases to trace over them.

He suggested that artists of that period used a projection technique (the camera obscura, a pin-hole device) to achieve realism in their work, but art historians insisted that lenses sharp enough to capture a precise image were not available then.

David Stork, a Standard University physicist who opposed Mr. Hockney's theory, will hold a conference on electronic imaging in San Jose, California, in January to prove that it would have been impossible for the lenses and concave mirrors at the time to be used for projecting images onto canvases. He will analyse Georges de la Tour's 1645 painting 'Christ in the Carpenter's Studio' as part of the demonstration.

### **Bringing Bangkok to Barcelona**

Inside an historical church in Spain, a tall steel construction presents photo images of buildings in Bangkok that were uncompleted or abandoned. Nearby is a ludicrous set-up of a Thai television talkshow studio, with replicas of windows and kitsch furniture. Displayed in the same area is a compilation of photographs of everyday life, a collage of Asian and Western faces. La Capella, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century church in Barcelona, has become a venue for edgy and idiosyncratic art that brings Bangkok to the city of the Catalans. For this unprecedented event, two Thai curators Gridthiya "Jeab" Gaweewong and Klaomard "Meo" Yipintsoi co-operated in an exhibition, 'Bangkok, Bangkok' to present in Europe the works of artists such as Manit Sriwanichpoom, Jibby Yunibandhu, Wit Pimkanchanapong, Propon Kumjim, Kornkrit Jianpinidnan, and Thasnai Sethaseree.

In an effort to offer various interpretations of Bangkok that may counter the "exotic" image it exudes in the mind of an European, the exhibition shows complex perspectives of the chaotic capital of Thailand. With themes that are critical, detached, and melancholic, the art works offer views of the artists' experiences of the city, and also reflect on the character of its residents.

From 'Dream Interruptus', Manit Sriwanichpoom shares his bleak view of the physical scars on Bangkok in the black and white depictions of

towering constructions in the city that were left in limbo as a result of the economic troubles in 1997. Artist Thasanai, for his part, interviews tourists from Barcelona on their impressions and feelings after having travelled to Thailand. Carried out in a talk show, the interviews ('Thailand Is Not My Idea') are exchanges between dwellers of the two cities, and also an expose on the how we generalise and exoticise cultures and places foreign to us. A collection of photographs taken by Barcelona residents while they were in Thailand is on display in contribution to this discussion.

The exhibition includes the screening of two motion pictures, made by some of Thailand's most intriguing film directors. Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Michael Shaowanasai contribute 'The Adventures of Iron Pussy' (a nostalgic comedy and critique of male dominance and irresponsibility); and Pen-ek Rattanaruang's 'Last Life in the Universe' adds a poetic melancholy about Bangkok life.

'Bangkok, Bangkok' raises the urban issues of political manipulations, alienation, cultural changes, and identity, a source of many of the artists' work. The exhibition is one aspect of an interaction process between the two cities, which has been initiated by Marti Paren, who will also curate an exhibition of Barcelona artists in Bangkok later in the year.

### Thai royal regalia

A government official of Thailand announced that the country will request the United States for assistance in retrieving an ancient royal Thai crown which sits in an art museum in San Francisco.

There have been reports that the centuries-old treasure, dating from the Ayutthaya period (between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries), is now displayed at the Asian Art Museum in an exhibition that features a large number of works from the Ayutthaya period, which came to an end when the Burmese sacked the former capital.

The Thai government did not mention the justification for the crown - owned by a private collector - to be returned to Thailand, and Thai archaeologist, Srisakara Vallibhotama, advised that Thailand would have difficulty proving its claim to the piece, which is yet to be determined as genuine.

He said that a huge amount of royal regalia was looted from the Ayutthaya ruins during the time

of Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsonggram, and were sold. The thieves were finally caught, and treasures retrieved are now exhibited at Chao Sam Phraya Museum of Ayutthaya.

### Mammals fed on dinosaurs

A stunning discovery in China may prove that, more than a hundred million years ago, mammals ate small dinosaurs. Scientists reported that the fossil unearthed in Liaoning, northeast of China, is the specimen of a primitive carnivorous mammal similar in size to that of a large cat. The Early Cretaceous mammal, known as *Repenomamus robustus*, is no more than 60cm long, and weighs about 7kg.

Inside its stomach contained the remains of a small dinosaur, *Psittacopsaurus*. The find challenges the commonly-held evolutionary notion that early mammals were timid animals, about the size of squirrels, hunted by huge reptiles.



Also unearthed in the same location was the fossil of an unknown species of mammals, now called *Repenomamus gigantus* or *giganticus*. It measures 90cm long; weighs over 13kg; and is considered the biggest of early mammals ever found. Fossils of mammals from the time that predatory dinosaurs roamed the earth are usually not much larger than rats or mice. *R. gigantus* is the size of a dog today, a staggering twenty times bigger than most mammals which existed during the early Cretaceous. More fragmentary evidence from Liaoning prompted researchers to suspect that there were even larger mammals. Coupled with the discovery of fossils of little dinosaurs in the same area, specu-

lations emerge, such as whether mammals dominated reptiles in this part of China?

It has been held for a long time that mammals were small because larger dinosaurs hunted them. After the extinction of dinosaurs some 65 million years ago, mammals grew bigger. A question being asked now is: did mammals drive small dinosaurs to grow larger, and also off the ground? The Liaoning area in China has yielded an abundance of small feathered dinosaur fossils and that of early birds, fish and mammals. The Yixian rock formation in the region is a class of rich fossil beds containing river sediments and volcanic ash.

### **The Opera Gallery**

Adding to Singapore's growing allure as an arts destination, the Opera Gallery on Orchard Road offers European masterpieces for view and sale. Gilles Dyan, French, opened the gallery in 1994, and it has since become a prominent spot in the art scene of Southeast Asia. One of its recent exhibitions included works of Renoir, Picasso, Chagall, Modigliani, Miro, Botero and other famous artists. It was the biggest show of masterpieces displayed for the first time in the region. There is a perception that collectors and enthusiasts in Asia have developed an appreciation for European art, and subsequently interest as well as demand have increased. The gallery also promotes Asian art, showing and selling the works of emerging and established Asian artists. Early this year, Opera Gallery opened in Hong Kong to enhance its niche position of responding to the need for and interest in European art within Asia.

### **Scanning Tutankhamen**

The Egyptian mummy of King Tutankhamen was removed from its tomb in the Valley of the Kings for the first time in 83 years – for a CT scan. In 1922, Howard Carter, British archaeologist, discovered the remains of boy pharaoh Tutankhamen, believed to be the 12<sup>th</sup> ruler of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty of ancient Egypt. The young Tutankhamen ruled Egypt about 3,300 years ago, ascending to the throne when he was approximately 8 years old. He died circa 1323 BCE in circumstances that are not established. Tutankhamen was 17, and was buried in a hurry, adding to the mystery of his death that some suspect could be a murder. In January this year, scien-

tists placed the mummy in a box, and put it through a CT scan. The CT machine, brought from Germany, was inside a special vehicle parked near the tomb. During the 15-minute scan, 1700 images were made that may provide more clues or even determine the royal lineage of the Egyptian ruler, his precise age at death and its cause. The team involved in the operation consisted of researchers, doctors, antiquities officials and restorers, who will carry out restoration of the mummy after the CT scan.

### **Differences on cultural diversity convention**

A majority of members, France and Canada prominent among them, is pressing for the right to protect their cultures from foreign competition, by way of a binding convention safe-guarding cultural diversity from the free trade regulations of the World Trade Organisation. The United States, leading a minority of countries, insists that trade barriers, and the lack of free flow of investment and knowledge prevent the open exchange of cultures, and thus do not help create cultural diversity.

China, African countries, a large proportion of South America, and the European Commission (which represents the 25-nation European Union in trade negotiation) are behind France and Canada. Japan and India are among countries supporting the US position for free trade of cultural contents and expressions. While the US insists on a free and open exchange of information and cultures, countries such as France want protection for, e.g. their film industry. The French have the only thriving film industry in Europe (65% of box office goes to Hollywood, for the others in Europe, Hollywood commands 90%) Agreeing on the benefit of cultural diversity is easy; but behind the vibrant catchphrase lurk political and economic issues that make it difficult for countries to agree on a convention for protecting it.

A hundred and ninety Unesco members have, since 2003, been drafting an agreement on the protection of the diversity of cultural contents and artistic expression. The convention should be ready for approval at the end of this year, but there has been so much diversity of ideas that the members could not yet achieve consensus on how to officially title the convention.



It is symptomatic of the differences that afflict this multi-national effort to promote cultures and traditions. Free flow of ideas, fine. Preservation of customs and indigenous languages, yes. Equal status for cultures of rich and poor nations, definitely. But as soon as the politics and money matters creep into the discussion, agreement sneaks out through the back door.

Germany, Spain, England and Denmark are reported to be seeking assistance to their movie industries. The US on the other hand, can easily foresee the disadvantages of restriction on cultural exchanges, as it is the largest exporter of audio-visual products, films and TV programmes.

There are expectations that amendments and more amendments to the draft convention will be made, and that the document may end up unratified by the US. Many nations may not be too concerned; once they have signed on to the convention, they would be able to legitimately protect their culture and cultural products.

However, attention should be given to whether countries, which are economically unable to protect their culture, will be helped by the adoption of such a convention.

### Art for heart's sake

In what seems to be a perfect match, enterprisers of art institutes are bringing singles together in art tours and events. The Guggenheim Museum in New York is now offering special tours of the museum for singles. Natasha Schlesinger, an art historian, organises these visits called 'Art Date' so that small groups of people can interact and get to know one another.

The Metropolitan Opera, Roundabout Theater and San Francisco Opera have also gotten into the act of helping out the lonely hearts. Metropolitan's 'Meet at the Met' is an event which consists of a performance and two drinks for US\$95. It operates on the basis that if you buy more than one ticket for the show, you may be separated from your companion, sitting next to a stranger, as a way for people to meet. The success of the event has encouraged other theatres in America to organise similar opportunities.

Sources: AP, AFP, Science, Bangkok Post

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