

My first encounter with Mangu Putra's work was a set of fish, or at least images of fish, mackerel or one of those related species caught along the coast of his native Bali. These fish were presented with a realism that was both intense and unreal. Mangu Putra's graphic training rendered the fish tangible, at the same time depicting them as mutilated, decayed and damaged; this was the series *Exploitation I to III*, dating from 2000.

The person who introduced me to Mangu Putra's work was the late curator Thomas Freitag. Thomas's appearance on the art scene in Bali was momentous. He started quietly, holding a series of small exhibitions at the Griya Santrian Gallery in the hotel of the same name in Sanur, Bali's original beach resort area. His intervention into the art scene came through his rigorous approach to selecting and promoting artists. Working from a reading of theories of aesthetics and contemporary art, Thomas chose artists who combined originality and ability with potential to develop a body of work that continued to develop and evolve. Mangu Putra, by the early 2000s, had all these things, and his body of work shows the importance of Thomas's judgements about which Balinese artists could be part of contemporary art on an international level.

Mangu Putra, like many of Bali's modern and contemporary artists, was trained in Yogyakarta at Indonesia's premier art school, ISI, the Institute Seni Indonesia (originally ASRI, the *Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia*). Unlike many others who emerged through painting, Mangu Putra was trained in graphic arts and design, and his original career was in advertising. The sensibilities he developed in presenting the mundane to the world meant that he is attuned to the affect power of images. He turned to problems of how such images should be made to work in the world in a more critical fashion.

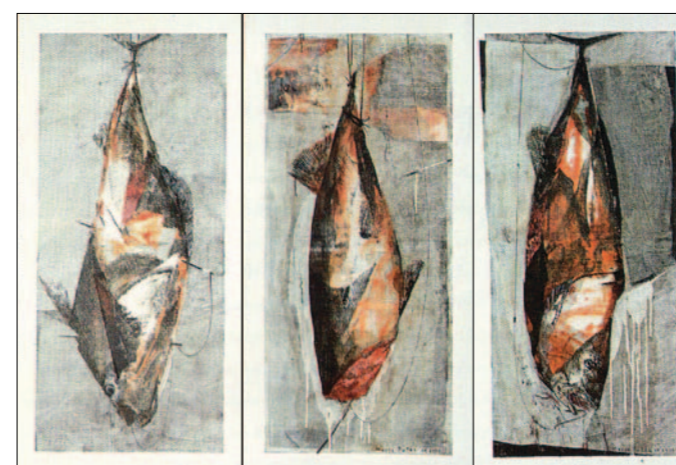
*Exploitation I to III* were part of the first works of Mangu Putra's that sought to move beyond the commercial superficiality of advertising. During the 1990s, he had already decided on the medium of painting, depicting aspects of Balinese culture, particularly its pervasive ceremonies. The first of Mangu Putra's major exhibitions was Jezz Gallery in Bali's *Nature, Culture, Tension*, in which the *Exploitation* works were shown alongside depictions of ritual and a series of landscapes, called *Erosion*. Both series show his concern with the environment: the fish once abundant off the coast of Bali have now become scarce, and what remains are mutilated and rotten, just as the

physical space of Bali - once the lush subject of romantic green landscapes, is being eroded and in danger of being rendered grey and arid. As the late Thomas Freitag put it, here Mangu Putra was 'figuring the disfigured.' Here we see the greying of the image of Bali: the shading of a digital world.

The concerns with the environment have been further explored in a longer series of landscapes on which Mangu Putra worked through the mid-2000s.

These were mainly volcanic scenes, but in the exhibition *Spiritual Landscapes*, the wastelands of volcanoes were filled with Balinese figures processing to points of worship. This theme was carried further in works around that time depicting Denpasar, the capital of Bali, as an alienated urban space for temple processions. The spiritual landscapes of the exhibition's title were spaces in which spirituality was belied by the bleached context in which it struggles to survive. He continued to explore this theme with a series on Tibet, with its own problems of religious survival.

The usual images of Bali reinforce the idyll of colourful ceremonies in harmony with fertile nature. Mangu Putra's work is a reversal of that, where he is interested both in the face of tradition and the way that it has become solarised in the glare of tourist gaze. In this work he continues a line of enquiry begun by other modern and contemporary Balinese artists. One of these was the pioneering Nyoman Tusan, who fittingly wrote a short essay for the catalogue of *Nature, Culture, Tension*. Tusan's work was



Exploitation I,  
2000, acrylic on canvas,  
150x250cm

Exploitation III,  
2000, acrylic on canvas,  
100 x 50 cm x 3 panels



*Hari Pahlawan (Hero's Day)*,  
2008, oil & pastel on linen,  
140x140 cm

concerned with Balinese ontology, particularly the underlying difference between what is manifest in the world, the *sekala*, and what lies beyond the senses, the *niskala*. Ceremonies engage the relationship between these, as does art. The other important precedent for Mangu Putra's work was that of Nyoman Erawan, particularly in a series of works that dealt with the idea of cosmic destruction as the basis of creation, or *Pralaya*, aspects of the God Siwa's presence in the world.

Mangu Putra's work over the next decade shifted from specific Balinese concerns to national ones, but there are important elements of continuity. In recent years, Mangu Putra's main work has been concerned with images of veterans. These old men are the surviving fighters of Indonesia's Revolution, the struggle for independence against Dutch colonialism. In these works Mangu Putra has moved towards hyper-realism, the kind of detail that makes for discomfort. Whereas the participants in Balinese processions of the preceding decade of his work were anonymised, part of the collectivity of Balinese maintained through ritual, in the veteran works, Mangu Putra wants us to feel the individuality of these old men.

These are the men who have been marginalised by history. In annual celebrations of 17th August, commemorating the 1945 proclamation of independence, politicians take the stage and utter slogans about development and prosperity. The emptiness of such rhetoric is revealed in the neglect of the veterans and the persistence of poverty and social injustice in Indonesia. The 'freedom', *merdeka*, that was the cry of the Revolution has yet to be achieved.

One of the most touching of such images is the 2008 *Hari Pahlawan, Heroes' Day*, the national day of commemoration of the Battle of Surabaya, held every 10th November. An old man in over-large military uniform sits eating a meagre bowl of rice, on a ground of patriotic statements written on a blackboard, describing the sentiments of these veterans who gave everything for the nation. He sits at a school desk, in an ironic commentary on what kind of history is taught to young Indonesians, a history that omits its real actors.

This turn to history has most recently brought Mangu Putra back to Balinese concerns. Unlike many of the other successful contemporary Indonesian artists

who live in Yogyakarta, Bandung or Jakarta for their careers, Mangu Putra chooses to stay in Bali. He has pushed further back through Balinese history, looking both at the Revolution, and at the moment when the Dutch took over Bali in 1906-1908, when Balinese rulers chose to fight to the death rather than surrender.

The parallels between these two struggles for independence are clear. Mangu Putra uses the on-line archives of colonial photographs that Dutch institutions have made available. He reimagines these historical photographs of both periods, changing the emphasis and making the Balinese in them the agents of history. In the scenes of the *Puputan*, the battle of ending of 1906, the surviving Balinese are bowed down under the conquering Dutch troops, who preside over a field of corpses. Another image of the colonial period, here given continuity with the other scenes, is of the landing of a German plane with a Nazi insignia on the island.

Two of those agents of history were his father, I Gust Agung Suberata, and uncle, I Gusti Agung Alit Reta. Both had successfully ambushed and killed Dutch troops in 1946, but Alit Reta was captured. Mangu Putra imagines the moment of his uncle's execution as one of defiance. This mirrors another scene that he has chosen to rework, one in which occupying Dutch troops and Balinese watch a cockfight. One rooster yells, 'you are already surrounded, surrender.' The other replies, 'I'm not going to retreat.'

Mangu Putra's work starts with the mundane. From there his shift of attention both towards the degradation of the natural world and the neglect of those who made Indonesia are part of a search for spiritual meaning. He brings a dark perspective to this quest for meaning, one that is critical not just of the wider nature of Indonesian politics, but also of those who contribute to the neglect of the environment and history.

#### ADRIAN VICKERS

*Professor Vickers researches and publishes on the cultural history of Southeast Asia. His research utilises expertise in the Indonesian language as well as drawing on sources in Balinese, Kawi (Old and Middle Javanese) and Dutch. He has held a series of Australian Research Council grants (Discovery and Linkage), the most recent looking at modern and contemporary Indonesian art, Cold War history, and labour and industry in Southeast Asia. As part of a linkage grant on the history of Balinese painting, he is preparing a virtual museum, continuing previous pioneering work in eResearch and teaching. His books include the highly popular Bali: A Paradise Created (2012), The Pearl Frontier: Indonesian Labor and Indigenous Encounters in Australia's Northern Trading Network (2015, with Dr Julia Martínez, funded by an ARC Discovery Project Grant) - winner of the 2016 Northern Territory Chief Minister's History Book Award, A History of Modern Indonesia (2013) and Balinese Art: Paintings and Drawings of Bali, 1800-2010 (2012). Professor Vickers has supervised more than 30 PhD theses to completion, and has taught subjects on Southeast Asian history and culture from first year to Honours and Masters levels. Professor Vickers is frequently asked to comment on Indonesia and Australian-Indonesian relations for national and international media.*