

AN ATTEMPT TO CREATE
CONVERSATION ABOUT ESSENCEALIA SWASTIKA
14 MAY 2024

Can paintings today still fit into the definition of 'picture that is made complicated', as S. Teddy D. conveyed more than two decades ago? In the context of contemporary art today, how can we understand painting beyond its standing as a mainstream medium that often serves merely as an art market indicator? Can paintings being made at the present moment still convey subjective meaning beyond their own implicit position and take part in greater artistic discourse? This essay does not seek to discuss the history or repositioning of painting in contemporary art practice; however, in order to understand Nadya Jiwa's artistic methodology conveyed in this exhibition, it would be necessary to examine how paintings are positioned as an entry point to separate and construct specific discourses. This begs the question of whether pursuing painting may actually constitute a "political" or "subversive" attitude in the face of the global market's rising commodification of art?

Nadya Jiwa comes from a generation of artists who has experienced firsthand the overflowing of visual exposure as an indirect consequence of digital progress and emergent technologies. Raised by a family of artists herself, Jiwa's early exposure to the art world may have led her to begin questioning the purpose and significance of art in contemporary society since she was young. How does one come to terms of begin to comprehend the aesthetics of her generation, which are simultaneously so chaotic but also open to new ways of discovering and translating freedom? I feel that these fundamental questions have grown within Jiwa's own psyche ever since she has been following the footsteps of her family to become

an artist. Although the relationship between these questions may not be consciously apparent, Nadya's methodology of working as well as her journey of art making opens up the possibility of discovering responses to the aforementioned questions.

The work of an artist to express something deep within their psyche, or an interior dialogue of sorts, might seem romantic in today's day and age. If the consciousness of 'self' may be considered to be the central tenet of philosophy, then the field of philosophy itself has become integrated into popular culture (which may have some advantages) and commodified to such an extent that it becomes crucial to consider the practice of delving into the 'self' as a reflection of broader humanistic discourse. The practice of artmaking acts as a bridge that connects philosophical possibilities to reveal a critical awareness and proximity to specific emotions, and in turn push forth empathy and solidarity. Because of this, there in the process of an artist's thought, there exists a certain demand within an artist's thinking process to present this discourse and narrative of solidarity in a more sublime formulation.

Nadya Jiwa's artwork, in my view, presents an opportunity to reconsider the subjectivity of an artist in interpreting a certain phenomenon or situation and by extension open up space for others to connect their own interpretations from the vantage point of their own knowledge and emotions. There exists a space, or void, in which things that are alien and unknown, unnamed, as well as invisible lives which appear haphazardly. Nadya Jiwa confronts us with narratives we might ourselves tend to steer clear away from. How can we imagine our emotions, or internal worlds, as expressed upon a canvas? And how does the examination of such feelings have implications upon a greater social praxis?

The title *sadar* (*awareness*) becomes a spark towards seeing how artistic practices contain complex processes associated with awareness as well as perceptions regarding reality; how Nadya is able to consider those things that appear and do not appear, as well as things that exist within the realm of the intangible. In *sadar*, Nadya expresses a certain sensitivity as well as sensibility that I feel are shaped by her own multiple layers of complex identity: as a woman, as a Sundanese, as a part of her current generation with its corresponding complexity, as well as an artist who sees reality in a different light.

Approaches to understanding painting are no longer based upon theories of understanding symbols such as semiotics. Psycho-analytical models are also not novel in placing and understanding artworks within a broader context. The way in which curators and critics share meaning to paintings becomes very different to how it used to be a decade ago. Semiotics and psycho-analysis have become the main frame by which critics now decipher artworks, which are thereafter stitched together through cultural research. Because of this, an understanding towards the context by which paintings are created, as well as the political positioning and identity of artists becomes a significant variable in understanding a painting. Efforts that initially contain more of a textual format, reading what appears on the surface of a canvas, is extended into an act of connecting several contexts together, until this reading becomes a webbing surrounding a layer of reality that consciously/subconsciously appears within such a painting.

Painters such as Faith Ringgold, Lubaina Himid, Samia Halaby, amongst other names whose paintings oftentimes appear in recent cutting edge contemporary exhibitions, show how paintings to them are a source for discourse and knowledge reference over certain subjects, for instance with regards to the shift of social structure after Black Live Matters, decolonization, gender, power relations in sociopolitical contexts. The spirit of what is contemporary today, in my view, considers the curatorial framing or curatorial interpretation towards painting beyond mere formalism. Classifications of form such as expressionism, naturalism, abstraction, realism, also require further reading and reconsideration within the framework of a more relevant local context.

Nadya Jiwa molds her interrelationship to daily narratives and references from pop culture, such as in story books from her childhood, songs, film and the such. A number of her works derive inspiration from the industry of pop culture, such as television series that have become quite well-known, so that visual cues may be present for the viewer to understand the work. Other works depart from local narratives that exist within layers of mythology and ancestral stories, such as in *Cipamali* and *Dayang Sumbi*. In her search for meaning in local myths and legends such as these, Nadya Jiwa indeed expresses how the traces of spirituality in communities are highly contingent upon their own attitudes towards mythologies. The story of mythologies are oftentimes also misconstrued as mere ghost stories, a

metaphor that oftentimes appears in Jiwa's visual expression. The border between what exists and what does not, is apparent or absent, visible or invisible, all become blurred through a visual strategy that appears initially to appear gloomy, dark, or even provokes feelings of trembling.

Dayang Sumbi is a form of interpretation towards a local myth that has become very popular in West Java pertaining to a woman who almost marries her own offspring. An important site pertaining to this mythology is a site that can be analogous to the Karangkamulyan stone site in Ciamis, the place in which Dewi Naganingurum gave birth to Ciung Wanara. Nadya considers a new interpretation upon this story in positioning the site as a place where life begins. She then incorporates the notion of fire (from the story of a kitchen where Dayang Sumbi tells Sangkuriang to leave) and water (as an aspect of holiness and cleaning) that refers to Pamali river. As a radical proposition, by naming the work *Pawon*, Nadya parses layers of interpretations upon this story by emphasizing female knowledge in intimate and domestic spaces, such as the kitchen.

In her own unique way, Nadya Jiwa's works provoke us to unravel stereotypes in reality that are often read through the interpretation of visual works. My own introduction to the work of Nadya Jiwa occurred three years ago when I first saw her work exhibited in Selasar Sunaryo, Bandung, in which she responded to a mural by Yudi Yudoyoko. It was in that moment where I witnessed a very specific sensibility inherent in Nadya's work, which appears from within situational wisdom pertaining to space, time, and object. The way by which Nadya responded to the work of Yudi Yudoyoko did not pertain to visual relationships, but rather considered the understanding of object (wall, light, imprint), into something that appears to come back to life. *Batang Mati, Cendawan Tumbuh (Trunk Dies, Fungi Grow)*, a title of one of her works in that show, appears as if it contains a new spirit departing from another artist's visual inspiration, as opposed to becoming appropriative in nature.

In a number of works exhibited in *Sadar*, we are able to analyze a number of figures that appear in Nadya Jiwa's paintings, which appear more like lines and silhouettes. In my view, what is most interesting is how these figures are not portrayed as primary subjects to speak about any particular narrative, but rather as visual form positioned as equal to the gestural forms that fill each canvas. The bodily lines appear as if they are clashed

together and abstracted away through gestures that are oftentimes considered to be part of the "background". These forms can be seen in *Isyarat* or *Dentur*. It is as if Nadya Jiwa attempts to blur the boundaries of the living world and its environment, making ambiguous what is inside and outside through her choice of thin lines and monochromatic hues.

Though not communicating specifically about gender issues or women's rights, the work of Nadya Jiwa helps us to take apart female stereotypes in a unique manner. In the history of Indonesian painting itself, practices like Nadya Jiwa's can be traced to the work of artists such as Lucia Hartini (born in 1957) or Sekarjati Ningrum (born in 1969), who in their work also begin with the self as a personal subject which is thereafter connected to their specific viewpoints of the world. Though stylistically very different, which also expresses how far generational shifts have made an impact, these female artists have also been wrestling with their own respective psychological contexts in facing the desire for autonomy over their own selves in their identity as women. A special attention towards the subjectivity of self is perhaps unavoidable within the reality of a patriarchal society, where women carry the burden to build a certain image of themselves in manner that projects the ideal self. A self-awareness towards the thinking and imagining self, a body that shifts in a unique manner, an articulation of a different language, oftentimes renders these artists misread through an overly common manner, separated from their own struggle towards the confinement of masculinity. The three artists I refer to seem to see how such a world does not conflict with their own patterns of thought, which must be fought for as an attitude of a liberated artist. Within the context of Nadya Jiwa's generation, such tension oftentimes goes unnoticed due to the mass flow that has the tendency to drown oneself ever so quickly.

Nadya Jiwa turns her canvases into a way to communicate with a world outside of her own about things that are stored within her own mind. She considers the world through a different perspective, with a sensitivity to see those things that are forgotten from the eye's vision, as well as the bravery to enter a portal into herself into the essence of life itself. In a world that offers ever accelerating changes, where the glitter and wonder of facades are celebrated, an intimate effort to establish a soliloquy and an awareness towards a another universe becomes a new form of subversion in and of itself. Nadya Jiwa provides an alternative route

as well as observational mode towards a different world, to see and observe the diversity of life around us. Entering the world of Nadya Jiwa, to me, is not only a mere matter for pause, but as an expression of courage to break through those things that we have taken as truth for granted.

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Lives and works in Bandung, Indonesia

Nadya Jiwa precipitates impressions as well as images that form in her work. Consuming information, human nature is presented in conjunction with a certain composition of reality through thin movements and strokes that may at once be derived from more cognitive considerations, while departing from intuition. Symbolism is deftly interweaved in Jiwa's paintings and drawings in an attempt to distill a cacophony of interactions, information exchange, as well as development of her external world. It is as if she attempts to share a certain sensibility of personal knowledge and impression that approaches more spiritual considerations, impressions that are at once clear and yet uncanny, and of truths that seem devoid of meaning and yet linger.

Jiwa received her Bachelor in Arts from the Bandung Institute of Technology with a concentration in painting. Selected exhibitions include solo presentation *Khayal | Chimeric* with ROH at Liste Showtime (2021); duo presentation with Rizal N. Ramadhan, Batang Mati, *Cendawan Tumbuh* at Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, Bandung, Indonesia (2022). Her group exhibitions include Art Basel Hong Kong with ROH, Hong Kong (2023); Art Collaboration Kyoto with ROH, Kyoto, Japan (2022); Art Jakarta Virtual with ROH (2020-2021); S.E.A. Focus with ROH at Gillman Barracks, Singapore (2020); *Jauh Tak Antara, Sepilihan Karya 20 Perupa Bandung* at NuArt Sculpture Park, Bandung, Indonesia (2018); *Getok Tular #2: Spacing Out (Lamunanku...)* at Omni Space, Bandung, Indonesia (2018); 15×15×15 at Galeri Soemardja, Bandung, Indonesia (2016); *Smile is the Answer* by Catalyst Art Shop Jakarta & Kopi Keiling at Local Fest 4.0, Grand Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia (2015); *Lunch Time!* at Kanal Art Space, Jakarta, Indonesia (2013); and *Apa Saja dan di Mana Saja* Woodcut Exhibition at Galeri Soemardja, Bandung, Indonesia (2013). Nadya Jiwa is the Silver Winner of the UOB Painting of the Year, Emerging Artist Category in 2019.

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Alia Swastika is a curator and researcher/writer that expands her practices in the last 10 years on the issue and perspectives of decoloniality and feminism, where she involved with different projects of decentralization of art, rewriting art history and encouraging local activism. She works as the Director of Biennale Jogja Foundation in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. She continues her researches on Indonesian female artists during Indonesia's New Order and how the politics of gender from the regime influences the practices of artists from that period. She is now part of curatorial team of Sharjah Biennale 16 in 2025.

THANK YOU

ROH TEAM
ALIA SWASTIKA
MY FAMILY