



Photograph of two ladies
attributed to Kassian Céphas (1845 – 1912), 1900s,
Indonesia

(RE)IMAGINING THE IMAGE

Dated circa 1900s, a sepia studio photograph portrays two Javanese women dressed in traditional clothing, allegedly delousing—ridding lice from each other’s hair—against a mock-tropical backdrop. Wearing her long, thick and wavy hair down, the woman on the left sits on a mat with her body turned sideways towards viewers, giving us a glimpse of her slender profile and vacant, stoic face. Sporting her hair in a neat, low bun, the woman on the right sits on a stool behind, with one hand firmly placed on the other woman’s hair, and another close to her lips. While the photograph is visibly staged, this woman nonetheless looks as if an intruding onlooker had displeased her. She turns her head straight towards the photographer, with a sharp, unnerving gaze that pierces past that frozen moment in time—and onto present-day viewers.

Such a haunting gaze urgently invites a deeper look into the context surrounding this otherwise prosaic scene. At the back of the photograph, one will find a Dutch inscription handwritten in cursive, which translates to, “One man’s death is another man’s bread.” Morbid as it sounds, the phrase is in fact a popular Dutch proverb, parallel to the saying, “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.” These words ambiguously paired with the image then open up more intriguing questions into the invisible dynamics at play behind the photograph: who wrote these words, and for whom? How did the person behind the camera, or the words, truly view and treat the humans in the scene—who may or may not have consented to their bodies, culture and everyday activities to be captured, packaged and exchanged with strangers who spoke a language that was not their own? Given woman’s stare, the Dutch saying and the photograph dating back to the colonial era in Java, one might deduce that the photographer was indeed Dutch. However, the photographer was in fact a man named Kassian Cephas, the first indigenous person from Indonesia to become a

professional photographer. Having served as the official court photographer of the Yogyakarta Sultanate, Cephas was rare in the sense that he later sought and was granted European equivalency—and was thus accepted into Dutch colonial circles.¹ Now knowing the photographer was of the same Javanese blood as the subjects, we can only speculate, given the details on Cephas’ life, what would have provoked such a tense expression in the woman. Nonetheless, despite the photograph’s many enigmas, the distance and dissonance between photographer and the photographed, the words and the image, the image’s inception at a 19th century studio in Java and its current presence in a commercial art gallery in Singapore are enough to open up a vital, albeit arduous, conversation on the fraught narratives behind colonial photographs in Southeast Asia—and what such an image could mean in the context of contemporary art in the region, urgently facing and reclaiming difficult pasts, today.

While art historian Alexander Supartono acknowledges that photography had been an understudied academic discipline in the second half of the 20th century, he believes that recent scholarship on photography has opened up illuminating perspectives on Southeast Asia, unmatched by other disciplines that wrestle to find commonalities among nations in a region that had, in his words, been forcefully forged together like an “arranged marriage”.² Photography, by contrast, reveals a unique network of

visual documentations that surpassed colonial state borders since the mid 19th century—in which Singapore played a vital role as the “photographic meeting point” for European photographers of varying backgrounds and destinations to converge, and learn from one another.³ Some of the prolific photographers at the time were British Walter Bentley Woodbury and James Page, who founded a thriving photography studio in Java; Scotsman John Thomson, who captured more spontaneous scenes of everyday life across Malaysia, Vietnam and Cambodia; and Dutch-Flemish photographer Isidore van Kinsbergen, who shot local royalty and antiquities in Java and was one of the first photographers to visit Siam.⁴ Though they largely served commercial and colonial agendas as they worked across and traversed geographic borders in the region, these photographers offered some of the earliest glimpses into the distinct characteristics of the places they immersed in—ranging from portraits of royalty, political leaders and ordinary people; spiritual sites, palaces and monuments; and lush, picturesque tropical landscapes. The breadth of these historical images, while boasting the rich diversity of Southeast Asia, also provide insight into shared realities and connections across localities, making them worthy of being critically studied to deepen our understanding on the region’s complex, collective history.

Recent research also reveals certain nuances among these early photographers, such as the presence not only of

European but also local photographers, as revealed in the likes of Kassian Cephas. Cephas, who trained under van Kinsbergen, was particularly fascinating for his perspective as a “man of two worlds”, who could move fluidly between both Javanese and Dutch colonial cultures, and whose unique identity may have subtly, subconsciously bled into his work.⁵ With the rise of Dutch intelligentsia that supported independence movements in the Indies during the Second World War, photographers such as Niels Douwes Dekker also provided an alternative, anticolonial perspective on Indonesia, in which rich, ancient traditions harmoniously coexisted alongside modern developments.⁶ Major endeavors over recent years have also highlighted more critical ways of seeing these images, such as the exhibition *Garden of the East* held at the National Gallery of Australia in 2014, which presented a revealing collection of photography from Indonesia between the 1850s and 1940s. One of the show’s catalogue authors, Susie Protschky, drew intriguing parallelisms from that era to the present, such as the way Indonesia persists to be seen by foreigners today—still photographing indigenous people, picturesque landscapes and Hindu-Buddhist monuments—along with ubiquitous juxtapositions of old and modern, rich and poor, local and global that still endure in the country one century later.⁷

(Re)imagining the Image similarly strives to discover parallelisms and juxtapositions across time and place, situating an invaluable collection of historical images from Burma, India and Indonesia spanning the late 19th to early 20th century alongside contemporary art in the region. Yet, in doing so, it is conscious of not falling into ‘problematic binaries’ between photography and art pointed out by writer Zhuang Wubin in his recent survey of photography in Southeast Asia.⁸ Rather than deepening the divide between the two, or valuing one over the other, the exhibit aims to enrich and complicate their relationship—echoing the observation of Wubin that there is no one fixed understanding or agenda of photography, but rather, different practitioners maintain varying perspectives of the medium, layered with their personal desires and creative decisions.⁹ Thus it is important to note that these photographs, as much as they provide immense historical and documentary significance, also hold intimate, aesthetic value that offer profound inspiration to contemporary artists.

Such a connection harkens back the weighted question posed by Supartono in 2014, in his essay *Afterimage: Is There Such a Thing as Southeast Asian Photography?*: “To what extent has the photographic tradition developed in the colonial era influenced traditions and practices in the post-colonial era?”¹⁰ Though Supartono was mainly referring to the practice of contemporary photography in Southeast Asia, the question is just as relevant in the broader field of contemporary art. Featuring a diverse range of art practices that experimented with and tested the limits of the photography medium, the exhibit *Afterimage: Contemporary Photography from Southeast Asia* (2014) at the Singapore Art Museum sparked a crucial conversation on this renewed consciousness among artists in the region engaging with images. The artists wrestled with questions related to what constitutes and makes an image, along with what happens when images are fractured, concealed or marked—and in effect, possess new, expanded interpretations. One of the show’s curators, Sam I-Shan, thus proposed turning the audience’s attention away from what they see,

and onto their present relationship with what they see—to look “beyond the frame” and onto what comes “after the image”.¹¹ I-Shan’s revitalized reading of images similarly echoes what art critic Douglas Crimp put forth in his seminal essay for the New York exhibition *Pictures* in 1977, wherein he challenged audiences to expand their imagination and understand the altered images in the show in a way that was “freed from the tyranny of the represented.”¹²

Featuring eight contemporary artists coming from Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and China, *(Re)imagining the Image* situates itself within this rich lineage of endeavors and exhibitions in recent history to deepen, broaden and challenge the way artists and audiences engage with images, ranging from the historical to the present-day. Freeing pictures from a fixed, one-on-one relationship to the realities in which they were made, the artists draw from a diverse plethora of photographs: from personal pictures taken by the artists themselves—natural landscapes in their hometowns, candid photos taken on vacation—to archival photographs that illumine lost histories in their countries. Testing and contesting the way varying ‘truths’ are visualised over time, the artists then copy, contrast, conceal, distort or subvert these images into vivid, independent art objects in their own right—ranging from screen prints on fabric; watery, ink on paper works; hyperrealist, oil on canvas paintings; or three-dimensional, mixed media pieces. Though narratives and ‘realities’ may

AHMAD ZAKII ANWAR
ASHLEY BICKERTON
FIKA RIA SANTIKA
JUMALDI ALFI
LI JIN
MANGU PUTRA
OCTORA
SUZANN VICTOR

be lost or obscured in the process of transforming these photos, the imagination of both the artists and audiences are powerfully triggered, allowing the images to be liberated from one way of seeing—and assume, in continuity with I-Shan and Crimp, new possibilities of meaning.

Yet, as the curatorial premise of this show is outlined and contextualised, it is imperative to discuss the deeply entrenched ethical issues underlying both the collection of historical photographs displayed, and some of the images employed by the contemporary artists. Writer, photographer and art historian Teju Cole urgently addresses the kinship between photography and violence present not only during colonial rule, but even—albeit more veiled—today.¹³ During the colonial era, photography aided colonisers in their quest to learn, exploit and essentially, own the world.¹⁴ Photography did not serve the interests of those being photographed, but rather, the needs and desires of imperial powers that sought to dominate them. Just as the Javanese woman in the photograph discussed at the start of this essay implicitly suggests, many subjects were coerced into being in these photos—they had no say whether or not they wanted to be seen. Cole notes that though photography today can be integral in triggering the public’s conscience and sparking their understanding on important issues, ultimately, political relationships between dominant and marginalised societies have hardly changed—thus, photography must continually be questioned regarding whom it ultimately serves. When we engage with photographs, whether colonial or contemporary, we must be aware of this crucial, unspoken and deeply uncomfortable reality: that in the living history of photography, many humans’ right to remain private and hidden had been violated. The responsibility thus now lies on how we—whether artists, academics, photographers, or the broader public—resist this fraught tradition.



SUZANN VICTOR

It is precisely this subtle yet sinister power imbalance underpinning the photographs of girls and women in black and white 1900s postcards that compelled Singapore-born Suzann Victor to reframe these subjects in her recent Lens Series. Upon finding these postcards at opportunity shops and antique dealers in Australia, where she currently resides, Victor shares the unsettling experience of intimately gazing at their aloof, almost defiant faces, and noticing its jarring contrast against their carefully adorned, docile appearance, rife with perfectly done hair and staged poses.¹⁵ She notes discovering phrases like “Malay natives playing” inscribed on these postcards, which are then addressed to different places in Europe—and painfully realising what these otherwise banal words and clues truly reveal: the act of othering so steeped in the colonial encounter.¹⁶ Victor then grew deeply conscious of the imperial gazes woven into the histories of these images, emphasising the way these women had been surveyed, judged and labeled. At times, she says, she finds herself angered by the superiority tied to the camera; how it was imposed on subjects who may not have consented.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the images incite in Victor not only the visceral feeling of anger, but also a profound curiosity towards the private worlds of these subjects, whom she identifies as her people—moved, then, by this urgent need to restore in these subjects the subjectivity robbed from them.

For her work in the show, *Unequal Innocence*, Victor subverts the act of forcefully exposing the subjects in these historical images by masking them instead. After painting found portraits of women from across Asia and forming them into an intricate assemblage adorned with foliage, she covers the painting with layers of overlapping circular magnifying lenses to form a disorienting interface between the audience and the actual painting. Whether blurring, magnifying or distorting one’s perspective, the lens interface provokes viewers to move around and observe the work through different viewpoints—serving as a powerful allegory of the fluid, multilayered ways of seeing these subjects, rather than presenting the idea of one fixed and uncontested picture. Creating burnt apertures and gaps in some lenses, Victor allows viewers to see only glimpses and slivers of the actual faces beneath—and through this obscurity, she communicates a haunting reality: that much of women’s stories, particularly in Asia, remain buried in our collective memories, retrieved only through sharp cracks or hazy fragments. Yet, this concealment also alludes to a sense of agency—as if Victor is asserting these women’s ultimate unknowability, allowing their personhood to escape the constricting, colonial gaze; and returning to them an almost sacred sense of respect and privacy. At the same time, Victor reveals that the lenses hold a double meaning that illumines her more personal, present-day experience of growing up in Singapore, rife with a super-surveillance that dominates public life. This constant awareness of being watched—and the paranoia that developed in her psyche as a result—is perhaps an invisible thread that connects her to the experiences of the women in these historical photographs.¹⁸ Thus, the lenses aimed to obstruct uninvited gazes and restore a sense of dignity also extend beyond the subjects in the artwork, and onto the lived realities of women in Singapore today.

Unequal Innocence

2020
acrylic on canvas, acrylic strip and lens with nuts
and bolts
127.5 (diameter) x 15 (width) cm



OCTORA

West Java-born artist Octora similarly draws attention to the moral and ethical weight attached to historical photographs, focusing her oeuvre particularly on ethnographic portrait photography of Balinese women taken circa 1910 to 1930. As she encounters and sources these portraits online through the Leiden University website, she is highly sensitive of not falling into the cycle of violence attached to making and consuming of these photographs—though she admits it is not easy, as ‘looking’ can also be entertaining, even fetishised, despite her best intentions.¹⁹ She thus takes a self-reflexive approach throughout her process, constantly questioning what attracts her to these images—whether or not she is participating in a voyeuristic act; or falling into the trap of a colonialist, exploitative mindset. Octora knows that though the functions of these images have evolved over time, the past acts done onto these subjects—othered, fantasised, exoticised—can never be erased.²⁰ These photographs, to her, ultimately disembodied their subjects; damaged relationships between the people of different socio-cultural backgrounds involved; and removed the subjects from their contexts and realities—thus distorting even the ‘reality of the self’.²¹

In her art, Octora wrestles with the tensions in these photographs by reconstructing them, and obscures the original ‘reality’ in which they were made by casting herself as the subject. It was important for her that the images were restaged in Bali, where the original portraits were shot, and taken by a

Balinese photographer. Octora then similarly participated in the performative act of being in front of the camera, taking control of how reality would be distorted and altered. In *Give Me Pearls Necklace*, she wears a traditional Balinese headdress and gazes straight at the camera—yet her face, dotted with actual fresh water pearls, is not fully revealed to the viewer. In *Mevrouw Paradiso*, Octora erases one subject’s face completely with an opaque orange-bronze embroidery the shape of her face, which sharply stands out amid the monochrome work—thus drawing attention to the erasure, and imbuing that erasure with subtle power. Injecting these vivid, deliberate marks, she radically intervenes the dominant narrative that had long surrounded these images—challenging viewers to question the way they will now view and understand these photographs when certain ‘truths’ are manipulated and stripped away. In doing so, Octora opens up an important conversation on the complicated relationships between image, history and identity.²² She questions how these images had once been, and perhaps persist to be, deemed as a way to define Indonesian identity—when in reality, identity is infinitely more complex than the narrow, often untrue, narratives that had been attached to these images. Thus, in manipulating them and centring herself as the subject and director of the photograph, she makes a powerful statement that removes the making of history and identity from the hands of external powers—taking that power instead onto her own hands, and defining history and identity on her own terms.



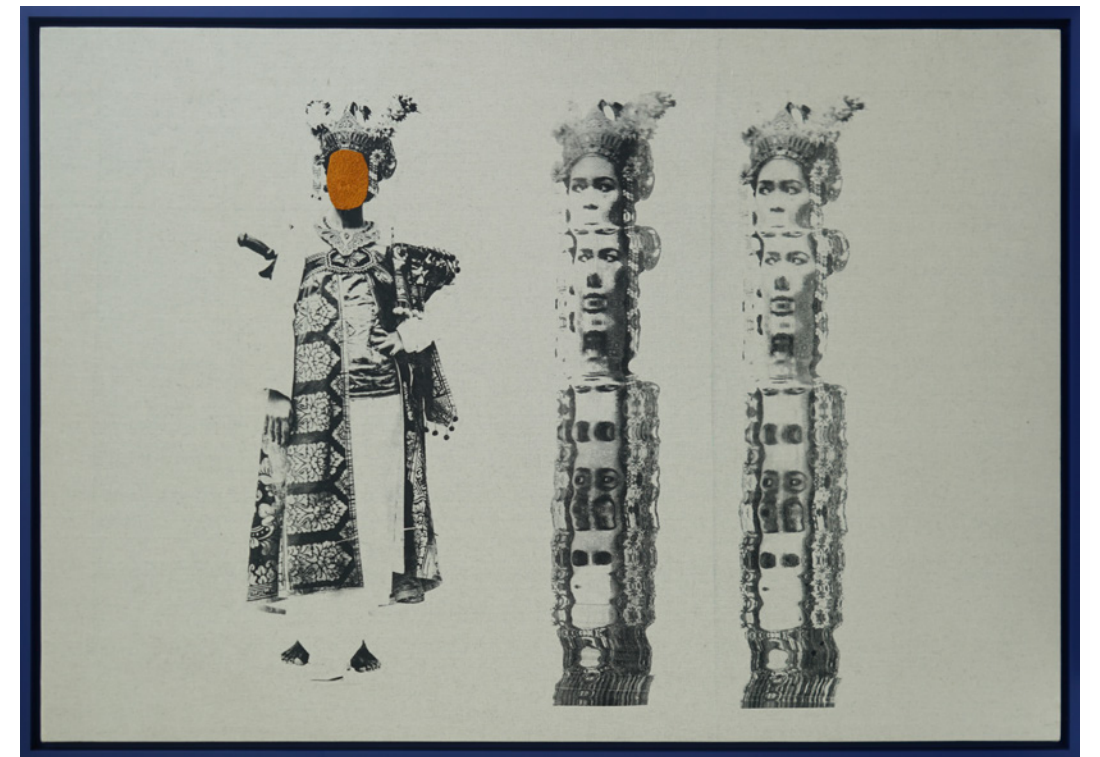


Left:
Give Me Pearl Necklace

2018
screen print on fabric and fresh water pearls
116 x 112 cm

Right:
Mevrouw Paradiso

2018
embroidery and screen print on canvas
145 x 200 cm



ASHLEY BICKERTON

Bali-based artist Ashley Bickerton assumes a different perspective from Victor and Octora, who grapple with looking at images from their own homeland’s difficult pasts. Bickerton’s tension, by contrast, lies in him being a Western man living in the Bali, and communicating on canvas the jarring juxtapositions such a slippery position has allowed him to see. Having moved to Bali in the mid-1990s after establishing a successful artistic career in New York, Bickerton was faced with the burden of being compared to Paul Gauguin, known for his historic move from Paris to Tahiti in the late 19th century, and now infamous in art history for painting portraits of Polynesians fraught with the male, colonial gaze. Bickerton, while rejecting such a comparison, nonetheless plays with and subverts the label—creating works filled with a distinct, self-reflexive irony. In his loud, often dizzying paintings, he similarly depicts stereotypical scenes of contemporary life as a foreigner on the island—ranging from pristine beach views to sordid bar scenes—while fully exposing the exoticism, hedonism and excessively consumptive culture rife around him. The paintings he created in Bali are distinctly hyperrealist, and thus working with photographs has played a central role in their creation. Yet, like Octora, he carefully directs and creates the images informing his works—and oftentimes, makes himself the subject.

In his work *Sanur beach after Le Mayeur & Ni Pollok*, Bickerton starkly references someone who can arguably be

seen as a link to both Gauguin and Bickerton: Begian artist Adrien Jean Le Mayeur. Having once travelled to Tahiti in hopes of following the footsteps of Gauguin, Le Mayeur later settled as an Impressionist artist in Bali, enamored by the island’s unspoiled landscapes, religious rituals and traditional dances. Certain details in Le Mayeur’s life also hauntingly mirror Bickerton’s: apart from settling in Bali, Le Mayeur, like Bickerton, married a Balinese, who similarly became his main model and muse. While working in Bali, both artists also eventually displayed their works in Singapore, earning them exposure and artistic acclaim beyond Indonesia. Drawing from a black and white photograph of Le Mayeur painting his bare breasted wife Ni Pollok on a beach, living the very kind of white man’s tropical fantasy Bickerton sharply critiques, Bickerton preempts these particular reductive comparisons between him and Le Mayeur—asserting, through this self-awareness, his distance from the stereotype. He depicts himself covered in all trite Western artist tropes—French sailor shirt akin to Picasso, painter’s palette in hand—leisurely painting his wife Cherry, who, adorned in tropical flowers, is similarly reduced to these cultural tropes. Yet, as much as Bickerton parodies such connections to both Gauguin and Le Mayeur, his continual assertion of himself as subject of his work subtly communicates a serious, deep-seated vigilance against this exploitative exoticism steeped in western art history. Through his ironic hyperawareness, it is as if Bickerton implicitly says: I, too, am responsible.



Photo of Le Mayeur and Ni Pollok on the beach, Scheeres Collection, Amsterdam, Netherlands



Sanur Beach after Le Mayeur and Ni Pollok

2014
mixed media on jute
162.5 x 270 cm

MANGU PUTRA Bali-based Mangu Putra, on the other hand, chooses not to replace or conceal, but rather, fully reveal the faces of the subjects in his chosen historical pictures—as a form of resistance to the way they had long been kept hidden and forgotten in Indonesia’s official narrative. His work in the show, *Vickers Carden*, belongs to Putra’s decade-long investigation into lost archival images in Balinese history. While the photographs he finds are far from forming the complete picture, he sees every image as part of a puzzle²³—perpetually intriguing him to dig deeper in search for the missing pieces in his country’s history; pieces erased from monuments and textbooks. The subjects in these images are veterans who fought to uphold the country’s independence from Dutch forces in the mid 20th century, known as the Balinese Puputan War. While he employs his distinct hyperrealist approach in his recreations of these images, Putra does not entirely copy them—choosing instead to assert carefully placed artistic details and imbue the paintings with his own reinterpretation of these histories.²⁴ The original photograph of Vickers Carden, for instance, was taken during daytime, showing a bright background of luscious trees. Without any accompanying description, the subjects in photograph remain elusive, containing minimal clues towards their specific place and agency in history. In Putra’s painting of the same image, however, the background is dark, placing vivid focus on the soldiers. Moreover, at the centre of the image, Putra inserts the Indonesian flag—as if to say that it is they who

are responsible for Indonesia’s liberation from colonial forces, for it is they who risked their lives to fight rather than be once again subjugated. Perhaps most crucially, there is a strong sense of empathy and intimacy in Putra’s portrayal of these subjects, for he knows their stories well—having interviewed veterans in the past, and being himself related by blood to some of them.²⁵

Putra’s other work in this show is an intricately detailed, hyperrealist picture of one of Bali’s sacred mountains, Mount Batur. While it depicts an entirely different subject matter from *Vickers Carden* and was drawn from a contemporary rather than historical image, *Mount Batur* holds a profound, unseen connection to Putra’s depictions of the Puputan War in the sense that, like the majestic mountain, these Balinese wars were also seen as holy—rooted in the teachings of Balinese Hinduism to protect their hometown.²⁶ Putra thus similarly captures this sacred longing to defend one’s land in *Mount Batur*—this time, from the contaminations of modern society. The Balinese believe that the mountain and the lake surrounding it are sites to the Goddess of the Lake, Dewi Danu, who is believed to provide vital irrigation water from the natural springs that flow through the lower slopes of Mt. Batur. While rich in color and texture, Putra’s depiction of Mt. Batur subtly reveals the tensions between these two realities: Mt. Batur as a life-giving natural source, and a popular tourist attraction vulnerable to exploitation. The trees are dry and thin, the lake is barely seen, and any sign of life is hauntingly absent. Contrary to the luscious and pure nature scene ubiquitous in colonial postcards and contemporary tourist promotions, Putra paints a landscape truer to reality—thus inciting in viewers a similar empathy, like with the memory of the Puputan War veterans, to save this deeply nourishing and spiritual site from neglect.



Left: **Vickers Carden**
2014
oil and acrylic on canvas
200 x 200 cm

Right: **Mount Batur**
2020
oil on linen
150 x 200 cm



JUMLADI ALFI

Hailing from West Sumatra, Jumaldi Alfi similarly depicts a hyperrealist representation of a volcano in Indonesia, Mount Bromo. The photograph he references, however, was taken from a postcard during the Dutch colonial era—rather than being vivid with colour, it is cold, faded and monochrome. These enigmatic aesthetic qualities are precisely what enamored Alfi: drawn to its quiet atmosphere, he became deeply curious about the events that took place in the specific area surrounding the volcano at the time, moved to imagine the life and colour that the photograph concealed.²⁷ Such an affective experience with the image may allude to what Alfi shares is a common characteristic among Indonesian artists—how for many of them, an intuitive feeling, rather than a cerebral concept, is what usually sparks their art making and fuels them to start working.²⁸ Moreover, his strong attraction to such an image may also provide insight into his identity coming from West Sumatra and the Minangkabau culture, in which nature is deeply ingrained into its way of life. In Indonesia’s art history, there exists a rich lineage of Minangkabau artists that hold a profound affinity towards natural landscapes.²⁹

Nonetheless, Alfi is conscious and critical of how such nature scenes had been portrayed during the Dutch colonial era, highlighting how this piece is also part of his investigation into rereading the Mooi Indie phase in

Indonesia’s art history.³⁰ Mooi Indie (*Beautiful Indies*) artists portrayed tropical landscapes in the Dutch East Indies as romantic and picturesque—a genre that has since been contested for continuing the colonial agenda of exoticising the archipelago and whitewashing darker social realities in the country. Yet, despite having rooted in the colonial era, these idyllic depictions of Indonesia still emerge in contemporary art today. Alfi thus questions how Indonesia’s art history would have evolved had this genre not existed—what dominant forms and subject matters would have surfaced instead?³¹ In his work, he sticks his black and white, hyperrealist rendition of Mount Bromo taken from a colonial photograph against a dark blue backdrop, in which phrases and questions are handwritten in blue and white. The image at the centre, however, covers most of the words, making their meaning obscure and elusive to the viewer. One is thus left with only vestiges of these raw thoughts and musings, which are permanently masked by the colonial image. As he recontextualises the photograph and asserts his artistic hand, Alfi communicates a poignant, difficult reality—that as long as the dominant colonial narrative persists to be centred, there are infinite, invaluable thoughts and voices that will remain hidden and invisible. Nonetheless, in communicating this erasure, Alfi takes a bold step in establishing new ways to express their reality—one that asserts his voice is not lost in history.





Left:
Re-Reading Landscape, Colour Guide #01

2020
acrylic on linen
145 x 200 cm



Right:
Re-Reading Landscape, Colour Guide #02

2020
acrylic on linen
190 x 260 cm

FIKA RIA SANTIKA

Like Alfi, Fika Ria Santika also comes from West Sumatra, and is profoundly connected to the Minangkabau culture guided by a philosophy of nature. Contemplating the Minang adage *Alam Takambang Jadi Guru* (nature acts as our teacher), Santika is on a perpetual quest to discover how such a teaching remains relevant to contemporary life, and to a young artist like her who, while embracing her roots and traditions, simultaneously hopes to incorporate in her art the modernity, technology and diversity of cultures she experiences in her everyday life, now living in Yogyakarta. Her artistic process thus begins from this raw, affective interaction with nature—exploring the sceneries and landscapes of her childhood; noticing the unique qualities of certain times of the day, such as a majestic morning fog; and witnessing the organic cycles and changes that pervade nature. In creating her work, however, her process evolves to incorporate layers of varied contemporary media, seamlessly marrying natural forms with technology. Crucial to her process are taking photographs and videos of these landscapes, either captured herself, by her friend, or sourced through other video documentations, and transforming them into new, manipulated images.³² Santika then prints the photographs on varied materials, such as an acrylic sheet or brass plate, using an etching technique; and continues to layer her work with other mediums, ranging from oil paint to mirrors. Her long, meticulous process

and marrying of varied natural and digital forms often result in sublime abstractions, in which vivid, detailed glimpses of nature emerge out of hazy, dreamlike landscapes.

As she combines, layers and abstracts images of nature scenes, Santika establishes a unique visual language that reveals a deeper relationship to the natural world. Contrary to the colonial images of complete, picturesque landscapes, Santika portrays nature not as a distant, aloof sight to capture and consume, but as something lodged deeply into her memory and psyche. In her *Tumpuk Lapis Tampak Isi* series, she stacks translucent layers of different monochrome images of mountains and forest views, serving as an allegory to the multiple stages of her nature discoveries. Rather than appearing fixed and permanent, the layers of images also create an illusion of a scene perpetually in flux, alluding to the ever-evolving nature of the environment and its relationship to Santika. She paints over some scenes in pale, watery colours of red, yellow and blue, triggering emotional responses to the particular areas of the landscapes. In her most recent work, she includes a more direct reference to historical images by adding circular fragments of sepia-toned photographs. Juxtaposed against a mountain view washed in bright pink, these quiet, dramatic images of grass and trees become charged with poetic, psychological depths that communicate a poignant longing for rootedness, both to a history and an environment.



Tumpuk Lapis Tampak Isi: Duality 3

2018
digital print, acrylic sheet, mirror and oil paint
100 x 100cm x 2 panels



Tumpuk Lapis Tampak Isi - Sibir 3

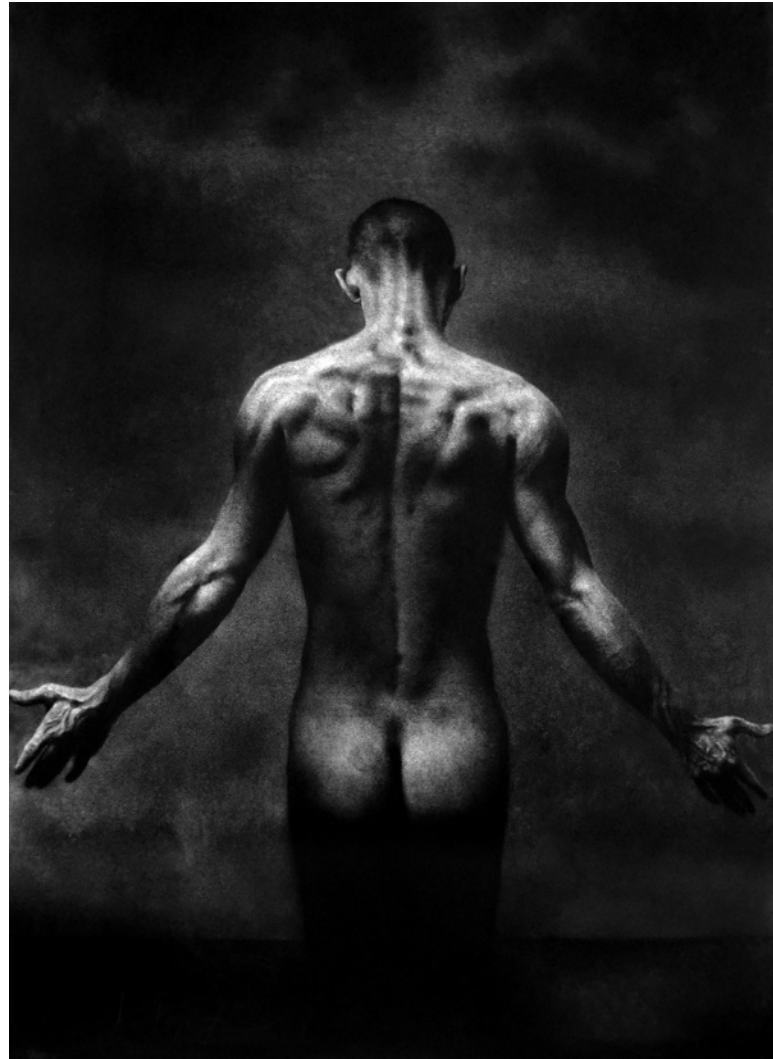
2020
resin, acrylic, pigment and brass
occupies a wall space of 71 x 116 cm

AHMAD ZAKII ANWAR

Malaysia-born artist Ahmad Zakii Anwar similarly attempts to capture a psychological quality as he translates photographs into hyperrealist, figurative paintings; also employing patient, meticulous layers as a way to express his complex state of mind.³³ Though referencing photographs is central to his process, Anwar shares that he is not so much concerned with the context of the original images, or the history and politics behind them.³⁴ Rather, once he chooses an image, he makes it his own: exploring the various ways in which he can engage the image such that it resonates with his ideas and the emotional depths he wishes to express. Refraining from communicating a direct, didactic message, Anwar sees painting more like poetry—hoping to allude through implicit innuendos, rather than preach.³⁵ Anwar says he enjoys the slowness of painting; the control he has over tones and subtleties in colour; and the traces he can leave to express his fluid, fluctuating moods and thoughts. In this sense, he communicates not just the physical image, but also something deeper and more intangible.³⁶ This open ambiguity is ultimately what he hopes to leave with viewers—left with no clean and clear answers, one must then partake in this same meditative process of looking not just at the image, but within.

For his painting *Postcard from the Fringe*, Anwar discovered the reference image of a British soldier on the Internet, and shared that he was drawn to the man's posture, describing

a “relaxed arrogance” radiating from him.³⁷ Beside the soldier sits a bulldog, possessing a still, stern gaze that matches the aloof, austere atmosphere of the painting. Behind the man and dog is a vast, empty and almost barren piece of land, wherein off distance, close to the mountains, patches of fire are seen burning and releasing thick smoke into a grey, cloudy sky. Smoke fully covers the face of the soldier, leaving viewers only with the precise bodily gesture that initially captivated Anwar to give subtle clues into the character's interiority: he stands front-view with an unfazed air despite the gloom around him, as his hands are neatly stacked together, suggesting an icy formality. Such cold confidence, so commonly attached to figures of authority, nonetheless provokes viewers to ponder more deeply into the personal histories of such figures—events that could lead to such an absence of feeling, of humanity. By contrast, Anwar's other work in the show, *Standing Figure*, feels hauntingly raw and tense with emotion, despite also refraining to show the face of the figure. In this charcoal work, viewers are presented with the bare and muscled back of a man, whose head is bowed down and arms are opened up before a dark, empty sky, as if in deep, humble prayer. The distance and stark juxtaposition between the two portraits masterfully achieve that poetic ambiguity distinct to Anwar, offering a powerful space for viewers to contemplate the vast range of the human condition. Pondering the works together, one is moved to recall similar moments both of apathy or desperate surrender—whether in themselves or in others—transcending country, culture and history.



Left:
Standing Figure 16

2010
charcoal on paper
147.3 x 101.6 cm

Right:
Postcards from the Fringe

2020
acrylic on linen
83 x 213 cm



LI JIN

Unlike most of the artists in this exhibit, Tianjin-born artist Li Jin draws inspiration from images not of his hometown, but his travels: contemporary pictures that capture that unique, ephemeral thrill of being a stranger in a new land. Every trip, he says, awes him with its fresh atmosphere³⁸—something that is often lost when one stays in familiar places, which can at times feel dull and routine. He envies the ancient painters that essentially lived semi-nomadic lifestyles, who, throughout their travels, would carry around a bag that contained their brush and rice paper, and could paint directly from the mountains and landscapes they visited.³⁹ On the other hand, Li Jin’s process is distinctly modern and intervened by the camera. He begins painting only after he goes home, taking out the photos he took and attempting to recall the scenes—a process that, he admits, inevitably loses much of the details and emotions of the particular moment.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, he finds a certain freedom in drawing from both the original pictures from his travels and his own imagination—giving him room to inject his own thoughts and make-believe scenes into his paintings. Like Octora and Bickerton, Li Jin boldly inserts himself in the pictures, oftentimes in awkward and comical scenarios as he partakes in activities both banal and foreign. Yet, beneath the explicit humour in his oeuvre, one detects more implicit, universal tensions with desire, connection and belonging.

In his series *Impressions of Bali*, Li Jin recreates a vacation in Bali employing his signature traditional Chinese brush painting technique; skillfully rendered wobbly strokes and watery colours; and candid, voluptuous characters. Depicting vacationers on a beach shore with vapid, perplexed faces, he significantly veers away from the reference images he took, which mostly depict him and his family, smiling leisurely by a beachside lounge. Though he and his family reappear in these paintings, they are, by contrast, charged with unease and a tinge of alienation. Li Jin appears almost as a different character in each painting: in some pictures, he blends in with other vacationers in his swimsuit gear; while in others, he wears clothing one might consider out of place at a tropical beach—a beret, long socks—looking unsure of what to do with himself. In one particular piece, Li Jin appears twice: lying on the beach and talking to a woman; and sitting down next to this scene, wearing a black hat and glasses, inconspicuously watching his other—perhaps more confident—self talk to the woman. Situated within an exhibit that engages with colonial photography and wrestles to undo othering gazes, Li Jin’s paintings of himself in a land not his own act as a provocative reversal of depictions aimed to consume and control. In portraying himself as the strange and self-conscious visitor, he sees difference not as a doorway to objectify and exoticise—but as a signal to embrace messier, more uncomfortable realities; and assume a humble position before the unfamiliar.



巴厘岛印象
Impressions of Bali

2017
ink on paper
19 x 28 cm per panel



To close this essay, it is important to address the historical moment that *(Re)imagining the Image* is situated in. As racial protests swept the US and the rest of the world in 2020, former imperial powers are now being forced to confront their difficult, oppressive histories: over the past few months, statues of colonisers both in the US and Europe have been torn down, museums have been held into account, and marginalised groups are now reclaiming their stories—demanding narratives that centre rather than silence them. While contemporary artists working in Southeast Asia have long been wrestling with their own countries’ uncomfortable truths, the call to reexamine painful pasts—and the way these pasts persist to seep into our present—feels particularly vivid and vital today. Photography, long troubled with the act of othering, thus serves as the fitting starting point into, quite literally, facing these vestiges of dark colonial histories in the region. Nonetheless, the exhibit, as much as it calls attention these realities, also hopes to carve a way forward. The participating artists have restored portraits of women their rightful privacy and subjectivity, critiqued and questioned their place within a burdened art history, revealed the faces of unsung heroes who courageously fought for independence from colonial powers, drew attention to hidden realities and lost voices concealed in colonial landscapes, deepened expressions of the natural world that go beyond sceneries to be captured and

consumed, unveiled the psychological depths and humanity of cold portraits, and honestly and humbly depicted their slippery sense of belonging when facing the foreign. Though we still have a long way to go, the artists have evidently taken crucial steps to create and engage images that no longer serve to suppress—but in fact, do the reverse: spark agency, and liberate.

NICOLE SORIANO

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