

FEATURE

'Songs of Ubud' bring up critical questions

I Wayan Juniarta, The Jakarta Post, Ubud | Thu, 07/01/2010 9:05 AM | Feature

Is Balinese traditional painting on the verge of a heart attack? At least one art critic seems to think so. The courageous man who is not afraid of losing friends by making rather harsh comments about this art scene, is none other than Garret Kam, a Hawaiian-born performing art scholar turned full-fledged Balinese.



The Musicians, by Sudana I Ketut

His piercing yet humorous criticism of Balinese traditional painting was published in a catalogue presenting works from the "Songs of Ubud" exhibition — currently on show at the Agung Rai Museum of Art (ARMA), which is renowned for its marvelous collection and equally stunning location.

The romantically titled "Songs of Ubud" exhibition highlights no less than 60 works of Balinese traditional painting from 30 artists, including the likes of seniors Ketut Madra, Made Budi, Ketut Kasta, Nyoman Lesug and AA Anom Sukawati.

"Songs of Ubud", part of a long-term program launched by Bali Bangkit to give more exposure to traditional Balinese painting, was co-organized by Larasati auctioneers, the international art management firm One East Asia and GHM (General Hotels Management). Bali Bangkit, a group of individuals and art collectors, strives to preserve and promote the island's cultural heritage.

Kam voiced his concern about today's Balinese traditional painting scene by likening it to an artery, which he defines as "either a blood vessel carrying blood away from the heart or a major transportation route into which local roads merge".

"Most Balinese traditional painting today is like an artery: Artistic lifeblood is flowing away from the source that is not being replenished... and minor or individualistic styles are merging into the mainstream [like local roads merging into a major transportation route] because of economic or aesthetic pressures.

"Unfortunately, there can be traffic jams along the way, as witnessed by the current stagnation and lack of vitality in the arts," he wrote.

In other words, he wished to say that Balinese traditional painting was on the verge of a heart attack.

Kam's piece should be standard reading for the non-Balinese who is about to fall in love with Balinese arts, as well as for Balinese intellectuals, who have for decades willingly embraced this postcard, gimmicky image of the island as reality.

Noted art critic Jean Couteau blames the absence of vitality in Balinese traditional painting on the lack of critical dialogue. In spite of art connoisseurs' rising interest in traditional Balinese paintings, critical appreciation and review is sometimes lacking.

"This renewed interest [in Balinese traditional painting] is good. But, what we have seen so far among the proponents of the revival is a self-congratulatory attitude, people praising each other for what they have done for traditional Balinese painting.

Critical appreciation is essential if we want to see traditional Balinese painting not only survive but also reach the next level," he said, adding that supporting traditional Balinese painting was still a better endeavor than promoting the quasi-modern abstract works that litter the island's streets.

Both Garret Kam and Jean Couteau highlight the importance of moving beyond the obvious esthetic norms of the past and the trap of the modern market.

The exhibition, however, still deserves much praise. For One East Asia chairman Daniel Komala, "Songs of Ubud" explores the richness and diversity of traditional paintings by highly dedicated Ubud painters.

"Through this exhibition we, non-Balinese, can learn and experience more about the life, art and culture of the Balinese in the context of the extraordinary political and social changes that have occurred in the region over the past decade."

The exhibition's romantic-sounding title is not merely a ploy to draw more crowds, commented Agung Rai, the museum's founder and owner.

"Traditional Balinese paintings are generally works of beauty, with painters tending to present beautified forms of reality. Most of them don't dwell on the darker side of the reality — misery in modern life, the marginalization of the poor, or political bickering.

"They instead project a laid back, optimistic view of the world, where flowers bloom, the sky is clear blue, and colorful rituals are carried out by joyful people. The works are the lyrical, rhyming song of an idealized Bali," he explained.

The exhibit gives art connoisseurs the chance to bask under the radiant beauty created by Balinese master artists, and at the same reflect on what possible role they can play to assist this art in securing a better place in the future.



Sacrifice of Sita, an acrylic on canvas, by Durus I Wayan



Melasti Procession, by Rasna I Made

Songs of Ubud

Traditional Balinese painting exhibition

June 19-July 11

Agung Rai Museum of Arts

Jalan Raya Pengosekan,

Ubud

www.armamuseum.com