

SATYA CIPTA
A BUDDING TALENT



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The Puri Lukisan, which has just presented the works of Ubud Maestro Ketut Budiana, will be presenting the works of a young Balinese woman named Satya Cipta, who -at this early stage of her career, is one of Bali's most promising artists. Her works will be on display from October 6th to November 6th.

Satya Cipta's family is 'diaspora Balinese'. Her father is the owner of a fisheries company in the area of Lampung, South Sumatra where the Balinese are a small minority. So Cipta was raised in an environment where she had to constantly struggle for social recognition, justifying her Hindu identity amidst Moslem and Christian influences. She then studied for a time at the Jakarta Institute of the Arts (IKJ), providing her with an even wider vision of the world and her place in it. For all these reasons, Satya Cipta's Bali-hood is different from that of Ubud-type Bali-born Balinese.

When Cipta came to settle in Bali with her family, this difference came to the fore in customs and social habits. Add to this the idiosyncrasies of a modern, rather feminist woman who is suddenly faced with the conditions of women in Balinese society, the technical peculiarities of Balinese painting as taught by Ketut Budiana and, last not but not least, her own personal expressive urge, and we have an artist in the making. Although she is still in the early stages of learning her craft, under the right conditions, Cipta could very well become a very important female voice in Balinese art.

Puri Lukisan Ubud is known to support traditional Balinese art. It was founded for that purpose. Yet, with Cipta, this institution may have got more than it bargained for as this young artist invites us to consider how modern gender issues can be translated in the visual language of tradition. Poignantly, her drawing style is derived from the style that was widely practiced in the Pita Maha days (1930s), but with a

narrative content that is totally novel.

Balinese traditional painting never criticizes social and religious order. Unless it depicts evil through demonic iconography, it tends to consider Bali as a finished and harmonious world in which people feature not as individuals but as equal members of the community. Women are shown walking around carrying offerings while men are depicted working in the rice fields or caressing their favorite cock. Social and gender roles are clearly defined and questioning them is inconceivable. Religion further reinforces this stasis. When things go awry it is not thought to originate from personal mistakes or social disruption but as a sign of cosmic disorder.

However, society changes and this is what Cipta's works are about.

While most artists continue depicting Bali as if it were impervious to transformation, this transformation is nonetheless taking place and it needs to find an artistic formulation. Most artists formulate these social transformations by shifting their visual means of expression and adopting the language of modern aesthetics, thus breaking away from their own Balinese memory to embrace what is to them full modernity.

The main exception to such an attitude in Bali is Ketut Budiana, who proposes a highly personalized reading of Balinese classical symbolism that ponders the cosmic forces that are at work both within the universe and within the individual. Using the Chinese wash layering that has been in fashion since the Pita Maha days (1930s), his work delves into the highest level of the fantastic. Ketut Budiana is arguably Bali's greatest living painter.

Satya Cipta is Ketut Budiana's disciple, though she is engaged in a different kind of evolution. Her technique is derived from her master's, but she touches on a taboo: the conditions of women in Balinese society.

It is not harmony she is talking about in the language of tradition, but its opposite: disharmony. Not cosmic disorder, but the social disorder of women in revolt; women who do not accept the distribution of the role attributed to them in Balinese tradition, women in revolt against the sexual violence of men, women avenging the violence done to them.

Cipta's works explore a number of poignant social issues from a personal perspective. 'Dreaming at the Monkey Forest', shows a woman lying prostrate with darkness all around her except for some ghostly figures hanging in the nebulous cloud-like world. Surrounding the female character are what appear to be spirits from the intangible world out there but for the artist these figures are obviously her own very private ghosts that inhabit her psyche. This work speaks of a woman's loneliness.

Other works are of a more violent nature. In 'Harvest', a woman is carrying the chopped heads of two men -probably her tormenters. In 'Disgusted', another woman has just slit a man's throat. Here Cipta is obviously keen to avenge past insults or misdeeds by some men.

Several of her works are particularly promising because they expose a free imaginary world, outside anything pre-patterned by Balinese tradition or modern art history.

In 'Longing', for example, a woman's body is shown as if melting on her lover's face. In 'Spirit', a woman is shown squatting, looking at her vagina while vomiting in her hidden thoughts. In 'Broken Vulva', another woman is shown ripping open her vulva. Her disheveled face and the snake-like rolls slithering around her legs betray a situation, which is not that of consent, to say the least.

It is no surprise if another of her drawings, 'Darmi', features a rape, with the

rapist depicted as an ogre. Yet other approaches to sexuality are also presented such as in 'Undress', in which one feels the virginal expectations of a young woman undressing herself, probably before love making.

In all these works, it is the painful sexualizing of woman's body that the artist questions. Cipta denounces the fact that women are often viewed as mere sexual objects.

Yet, in spite of their critical power, let us be clear that Cipta is a newcomer to art making and her stunning works presented at Puri Lukisan in fact show her learning process over the last year or so.

Sometimes the proportions are not what they should be, a gesture may be awkward or one may feel her overly painstaking endeavor to fully control minute details. Other times, her struggle with bodily forms or more generally with the economy of lines is apparent.

This may seem to be undue criticism however it is in fact more a testament to her development as an artist. In her more recent works, we see her turning the wash technique of her guru Ketut Budiana into an tool for deep psychological expression and her lines suddenly so well synthesized that they appear to be running free – showing the hope for a great career that certainly promises to be an interesting one.

Most criticism of Satya Cipta's works come from the voice that she questions head on: patriarchy. When she makes a direct reference to her own sexual parts, or shows a woman carrying the chopped heads of men, she is accused of being immoral or suspected of being psychologically unbalanced.

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More generally she is said to behave improperly and to betray Indonesian Eastern culture. Which, it should be noted, is most certainly a false assertion as sexuality is indeed present throughout much of Balinese visual artistic culture. It is however male sexuality that is presented. It is rather uncommon to have women artists delve into sexual suffering, as Cipta does. They usually stop at the boundary of exploring gender issues more broadly.

Satya Cipta has much to say. Seeing her cruising freely through the initial phases of creativity, we must say that we are waiting for more. More uncovering of the hidden self, more dreams and nightmares, more complexity, in more complex forms and narratives, but always with the creative thrust that one feels hanging around all her works.

Satya Cipta obviously has much more to express through her fascinating art works in the coming years



Dr. Jean Couteau

