



Portrait of CITRA SASMITA. Photo by Gus Agung/Niskala Studio. All images courtesy the artist.

CITRA SASMITA

Imagined Cosmologies

BY KERSTIN WINKING

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries European colonizers routinely controlled the image of Balinese women for economic and political gain, linking, and thereby reducing, the role of women to fertility. Colonial photographers illustrated their anthropological studies with images of bare-breasted women in order to promote the tourism trade from the 1920s onwards, while traditional Balinese Hindu culture and society had long reduced women to superficial representations: witches with aging bodies or nubile young women primed for procreation and childbirth.

A century on from the more pernicious forms of patriarchal and colonial power, artist Citra Sasmita is determined to subvert these dominant, and often prevailing, narratives and structures, in particular the depiction of Balinese women throughout history. On a recent visit to her studio in the Balinese village of Batubulan in Gianyar Regency, she told me that her work is “rooted in [her] own life experiences.” Though she initially wanted to study art, her father preferred she study physics. Despite already “viewing the world, and in particular social relations, as systems based on codes that can be rewritten,”

Sasmita eventually abandoned physics and pursued her creative desires. In 2012 she embarked on a career as an illustrator for *Bali Post* newspaper in Denpasar where she was mentored by renowned writer and feminist Oka Rusmini. Recalling this period, Sasmita proudly mentions that *Bali Post* grew out of a political movement that opposed the feudal regime in colonial Bali; reported extensively on farmers’ issues and the nascent nationalist and independence movements; and frequently challenged gender inequality.

Around the same time, Sasmita met her husband, Dwi Setyo Wibowo, in Yogyakarta, where they often visited art exhibitions and attended public programs. Here, Sasmita recognized that artists in Yogyakarta were more politically engaged than in Bali where they, in her telling, “still seemed paralyzed by Dutch *Baliseering* politics and were

chiefly concerned with catering to the demands of an art market that was not ready for contemporary socio-political engagement.” The Dutch term *Baliseering* (Balization) refers to a colonial “ethical policy” turn in the 1920s through 1940s, in which the Balinese aristocracy was strengthened, and “authentic” Balinese Hindu culture, religion, and aesthetics were stimulated and instrumentalized against the rising popularity of Islam and nationalism. While working as an illustrator for *Bali Post*, Sasmita began to paint, working out how best to connect her creative practice to feminism and “express truthfully the experience of Balinese women with patriarchy.”



Installation view of CITRA SASMITA's *Timur Merah Project VIII: Pilgrim, How You Journey*, 2022, acrylic painting on Kamasan traditional canvas, eight wooden carved pillars, dimensions variable. Photo by SEA AIR/NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore.

One early example is *Old Mountain and Imaginary Pillars* (2017). In this painting four legs carry a large rock out of which cactuses grow; the naked, white, hairless legs and the rock are delicately entangled with red thread. Sasmita considers the rock a “symbol of archipelago culture” that nurtures the prickly plants, while “the legs symbolize the female pillars that carry this culture which is complicated by the red thread of nationalism.” For this, Sasmita was awarded Singapore’s UOB Painting of the Year Gold Award 2017, enabling her to give up her job at *Bali Post* and concentrate on developing her artistic practice before embarking on a five-month residency at Red Base Foundation in Yogyakarta in 2018.



CITRA SASMITA, *Old Mountain and Imaginary Pillars*, 2017, mixed media on canvas, 160×120 cm. Photo by the artist.

It was during the residency that Sasmita was compared to Balinese artist I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasih, who deployed humor and satire to engage with her experience of sexual abuse. But not all reviews were favorable. Sasmita's approach to women's issues was perceived by some as "tragic, heavy, and not easy to hang," and she remembers being asked by the feminist activist Nunung whether she might conceive of more empowering ways to depict women. As hard as it may have been for her to hear, it pushed her to search for a more radical approach to her work.

Returning to Bali, Sasmita researched Kamasan painting, an artform practiced in the village of Kamasan in Klungkung Regency since at least the 15th century and marked by a limited color palette consisting of red, blue, yellow, ochre, black, and white. "Traditionally women can only color the paintings," Sasmita says. "They cannot create the narrative, which bothered me." In many ways her research into Kamasan painting marks the beginning of her ongoing *Timur Merah Project* (2019–), loosely translated as "The East is Red," about how the lives of Balinese women and art historically coexist. The title emphasizes Sasmita's orientation toward an "Eastern philosophy as a way of life and cultural root, with red referring to blood, desire, and sacrifice." In Kamasan paintings "women are usually depicted in the roles allocated to them in the religious texts on which Balinese Hinduism is grounded. The content of the paintings is determined by Brahmins, male spiritual leaders who, within the Balinese caste system (*wangsa*), are the only ones allowed to access the palm-leaf manuscripts (*lontar*) containing the stories. By determining the subject of Kamasan painting, Brahmins continue to use Kamasan painting to support their traditionally powerful position." Apart from her interviews with local Kamasan painters and her research into the local supply chains of the cloth and the pigments

with which the paintings are made, Sasmita also traveled to the Netherlands in 2022 where she gained access to early Kamasan paintings in colonial archives and the collections of the National Museum of World Cultures in Amsterdam and Leiden.

Out of this research came her most recent exhibition, "Timur Merah Project VIII: Pilgrim, How You Journey," which was presented in 2022 at the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore. It consisted of a painting on Kamasan cloth hanging on eight antique wooden pillars and accompanied by a double-channel video. One screen shows different buildings of the royal palace complex in the Balinese city of Amlapura, while the other focuses on a singer performing the poem *The Coded Language of Symbols (Pralambang Bahasa Wewatekan)* by Dewa Agung Istri Kanya, the Queen of Klungkung, poet and anticolonial leader. Sasmita explains that the poem recounts some of the most memorable moments in the Queen's life and "contains strategies for colonial resistance," such as how she once bought valuable time when the Dutch asked what it would take for the Queen's subjects to submit to Dutch rule. She requested a one-horned rhinoceros to be delivered to her palace. It took them three years. The resistance movement endured for decades until the Dutch destroyed most of the Klungkung palace during their takeover of Klungkung Regency in 1908.

For the Kamasan-style painting exhibited with the video, Sasmita took inspiration from the Queen's poem as she depicted a self-created myth and a new cosmology featuring scenes of women fighting, giving birth, and playing with fire. For the composition of the painting, Sasmita was inspired by Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly*

Delights (c. 1490–1510). She presents the work as a triptyc showing the female pilgrims' journey through three worlds: the upper world (Heaven), the middle world (Earth), and the underworld (Hell).

In September 2023, Sasmita will present *Timur Merah Project IX: Beyond the Realm of Senses* at the 35th Bienal de São Paulo. This installation comprises an eight-meter-long painting on Kamasan cloth and a replica of a statue of a European missionary known as *Patung protugies* from a collection at the Museum Semarajaya, which the Dutch government built on the site of the original palace following its destruction. Sasmita's *Patung protugies* is made out of gilded fiberglass in reference to how much colonial activity was motivated by gold. A thread and pulley block will connect the statue to the painting on Kamasan cloth, which will be positioned as if the statue is dragging the painting like a ship into port. The painting will also feature a new cosmology by Sasmita based on Bosch's composition, and will show female figures engaged in tantric rituals and symbols used in Balinese sorcery. The visual codes and iconographic roots of Sasmita's paintings can be found in books used by Kamasan painters, books about the symbolism of Balinese sorcery, and in the architecture of Bali, where locals apply symbolism to their lives through rituals they consider essential to their relationships with the world and to the gods.

Heeding advice she has received from numerous female artists and working under the influence of powerful figures from the past, Sasmita continues to resist the exploitation and submission that comes from patriarchal power. Sasmita's paintings aim to subvert these reductive narratives and empower women to challenge their toxic relationships. While her work maintains a high level of support for intergenerational and inter-religious sisterhood, above all it confronts the colonial, the superficial, and the traditional, and in the process, "reprograms the code" to envision newly imagined cosmologies of her own.



Detail of CITRA SASMITA's *Timur Merah Project VIII: Pilgrim, How You Journey*, 2022, acrylic painting on Kamasan traditional canvas, eight wooden carved pillars, dimensions variable. Photo by SEA AiR/NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore.