

Susurrus

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Through her solo exhibition *Spectral Fiction* (2016), Syagini Ratna Wulan (Cagi) has affirmed her stance on color. Using a number of artistic and scientific postulates, Cagi seeks to question the 'what' and 'where' of colors. She projects the colors in her works as element that points to the phenomenon of the color, which does not represent anything outside of themselves. However, unlike the principle of formalism which prioritizes merely visual aspects (colors, lines, shapes, textures, etc.) above narrative and subject-matter, Cagi's perspective places color as a kind of 'object,' or more precisely unstable and arbitrary 'sign' or language.

In *Spectral Fiction*, Cagi also worked by showing the links between color and light. Albeit utilizing a number of scientific views, she did not design her artworks as proof, let alone visualization about theories of color and light. On the contrary, and more fundamentally, she wants to emphasize that the ways we understand various visual phenomena are never really strong and steady. She came to the conclusion that classification, human perception, or the meanings of color are ultimately relative, and at an extreme level, turn to be a kind of 'fiction'. Although embodied in colorful paintings and objects, Cagi's ideas are precisely related to skepticism over our understanding of color itself.

It seems that skepticism is not only a way of thinking for Cagi but rather an artistic attitude. As an artist who began her career in the midst of the tumultuous 1998 reformations, and having witnessed first hand the massive and drastic changes that occurred around the worlds of arts, social and politics, Cagi understands well just how fragile isms and movements in arts. During her university years, she grew up along the waves of critical thoughts (especially postmodernism), which arrived

in Indonesia accordingly, with the beginning of the era of freedom of information and the growing popularity of the Internet at the end of the second millennium. It could be because of this, that her explorations are not characterized by one style (visual) or consistent use of a medium. Changes and leaps in style and medium have actually become a common thread in her artistic records.

With varying intensity, the tendency to doubt everything has manifested repeatedly throughout Cagi's oeuvre. Long before *Spectral Fiction*, ever since she began displaying configurations or assemblies of ready-mades and imitations in the *Seven Deadly Sins* (1997) series, or in *Bibliotea* (2011) which mocked the phenomenon of the art boom through a combination of libraries and teahouse; when arranging a dining room with surreal objects that were all white (*Love Affair pt.1*, 2010); when painting objects and human figures covered in cloth, in *Concealing* series (2010); or in *100 Years of Tempest* (2012), in which she utilized interactive game pattern and public interaction, Cagi always tries to insert ambiguity, mystery, uncertainty and speculation, which, in her own words, "... can only be conveyed amusingly through art."

For *Susurrus*, Cagi still displays colors developed from the Newtonian light spectrum. The initial artwork that became the main inspiration for this exhibition project is *Fatamorgana* (2017), a painting depicting a transparent bubble with a white background. Parts of the bubble's body reflect the rainbow color bias indicating where light had befallen them. The irregular shape of the bubble, with some parts almost lost from view, gives rise to the imagination about something that is vague, fragile and temporary – between existence and nonexistence. This painting is seemingly trying to capture a transitional moment, a split second before the brilliant colors disappear because of an impulse or pressure that causes the bubble to burst. The gentle burst of a soft soap bubble is certainly different from a bomb explosion but this painting still demands us to feel a certain tension.

Cagi's objects for *Susurrus* are now fully made with resin and plexiglass materials. *Plexiglass* is used to present rectangular fields on a wall that might remind us of paintings, whilst resin is used to make objects of irregular sizes and shapes. Cagi works on coloring these objects with special techniques so that they appear more like biases or nuances.

The whole surfaces of Cagi's resin objects are plainly white. But the biases and nuances of colors remain visible, albeit vaguely because they are 'embedded' inside or below the surfaces of the object. This

technical execution is interesting when associated with the etymology of color, which is said to be derived from the Latin word *colorem*, and rooted in *celare*, which means to *hide or to conceal*. In the history of civilization, the use of color cannot be separated from human efforts to beautify things. Color is used to produce illusions or cosmetics, as a way to decorate, cover up a defect or deficiency on a surface. But in Cagi's artworks this time, it is not color that covers the body of resin objects, but rather the opposite.

The title *Susurrus* (swish/sizzle/rustle/whisper) departs from the idea of converting and exchanging identifications of visual and audio elements, which are both sensory entities that provoke human perception. Up until now we know how digital media technology has been used to convert noises or sounds into forms (into algorithmic schemes or moving graphs on a computer screen, for example). The conversion referred to in *Susurrus* is however, of course, different from that sort of scientific model. The appearance of the dull colors on all objects in this exhibition can be likened to soft sounds – gentle sounds –, which are diametrically distinguished, from the 'busy', 'loud' or 'noisy'. So in essence, *Susurrus* is an invitation to listen (not just to hear or see in passing), to observe things carefully.

If in *Spectral Fiction* Cagi mainly presented canvases with symmetrical shapes that tended to be measured, in *Susurrus* she deliberately worked on irregular shapes with resin material. These solid objects are hanging on the wall, none are identical, and everything looks non-representational, if not 'abstract'. Even if they are valid to be called abstract, the forms of these objects are not the result of a process of simplification or deformation of anything natural, but only based on playing with the material's form and character.

An important part of this series is the texts and icons or symbols that are inseparable from each resin object. Cagi presented the texts and symbols as white relief-like cutout, in such a way that they blend with the walls of the exhibition room. At a glance, the juxtaposition of resin objects, text and images seem to configure complementary elements; as if they explain each other. The text and icon/symbol may remind us of the title or didactic descriptions attached to objects in a museum exhibition but observing them carefully, we soon find out that the true relationship between them is not as simple as we imagine.

In general, the relationships between resin object, text and icon/ symbol are basically unstable, arbitrary, and at certain levels, contradictory or negating one another. We can take an example from one work that displays objects similar to inverted bowls attached to the wall. The bowls are

displayed side by side with the cutout word that reads "hitam" (black) and ant-like icon. The ant icon and the word "black" can be two things that are related because they can form a phrase. But would we imagine the same thing when the word "black" are inscribed in white cutout? Do the inverted bowls represent black ants lining up on the wall?

Another example is an artwork with two resin objects where their contours mirror imperfect bubbles. Both objects accompany the word "lurus" (straight) and an icon of mountain. In math terminology, a circle is always categorized as a closed curve, which is absolutely impossible as a straight line. While the mountain outline, which is generally wavy, not straight, are presented as an open curve. Her other artwork, features the Gemini symbol (twin creatures) with dozens of resin gem-like objects, are instead displayed side by side with the word "satu" (one).

Here, we can again see Cagi's tendency to put forward ambivalence, and avoid various associations of certainty. Her configuration of resin object, texts and icon is like delaying a finished meaning... but what does that mean? Overall, *Susurrus* is a project that plays with signs. Referring to the classification of relationship models known in semiotics, the term 'schizophrenia' seems suitable to explain what Cagi serves in *Susurrus*. The term schizophrenia is used by Fredric Jameson (who adopts Jacques Lacan's thinking) to identify the loss or destruction of a conventional chain of signification in language. According to him, the so-called 'meaning' is not the result of a one-to-one relationship between the signifier and the signified. Meaning, instead, results from the relationship between signifiers, from the movement of one signifier to another.

So in reading Cagi's work, it's certainly not useless if we try to find, for example, the relationships between the Venus symbol and the word "tembaga" (copper); and then the relationship between "copper" and resin objects arranged like an inverted triangle. But it may be more important to realize how the relationships between those signifiers are always relative, temporary, and at an extreme level: artificial. By quoting the words of John Berger (see the white cutouts on one of the pillars in the gallery room), Cagi understands perfectly that the relationship between what we see and what we know is never certain. Through *Susurrus*, Cagi is like interrupting various conventions in language, again with her distinct skepticism.

Cagi seems to realize that skepticism remains relevant and even become more important in the post-truth era like these days. When the jargons around the movement of our lives become stiffer,

stricter, then hardens into dogma, the awareness that language is basically a play of sign and association becomes very meaningful. Skepticism must be distinguished from nihilism. While the latter concept tends to reject all (metaphysical) contemplation and the search for objectivity, skepticism is based on a critical attitude and the belief that there is still truth to be found by first doubting everything. "*I know that all I know is that I don't know anything*," thus Cagi quoting Socrates.

## Bibliography

1. David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, London: Reaktion Books, 2000.
2. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997.