

ROH

Oototol: Warna Hidup

EXQUISITE CORPSE

Marking Oototol's first solo exhibition in Jakarta, this two-venue presentation at ROH and Komunitas Salihara captures the pluralism that defined the late Balinese artist's approach. Working in Chinese ink with bamboo pens and brushes, Oototol (b.?-2009) developed a consistent practice within a constellation of practitioners in Bali known familiarly as Murni, Mokoh, Mondo, whose formal affinities register across the artist's works. Often framed within these influences, this presentation focuses rather on an engagement with Oototol's singular vision.

The uniformed figures, which are also self-portraits, are a constant narrator appearing throughout most of the paintings, an image said to have been influenced by the artist's interest in Indonesia's first president, Soekarno. In Oototol's paintings, they are seen harvesting rice, sharing meals, communing with one another, giving birth, killing, playing with animals, and absorbing all forms of human activity into the uniform's logic. At times, non-human creatures are also wearing hats and uniforms. The artist seems to express a fanciful interest in modes of transport: airplanes, motorbikes, mythological creatures ferrying these characters across land and water. But Oototol also flips this dynamic in other works, where people carry animals instead. In this visual universe, there appears to be nothing a soldier cannot do. This capacity to move so seamlessly between the very personal, historical, and cosmological constitutes one of the many rich facets of Oototol's practice.

What appears at first to be basic or mundane observations of daily Balinese life belies the compositional and conceptual complexity of these

paintings. They are dense with metaphorical allusion, in a manner that considers the polyphony of reality and the imaginary in non-hierarchical company. The innocence and playfulness of Oototol's approach recalls the spirit of Fischli and Weiss, whose own pursuit of profound truths arrived dressed in an aesthetic language that can be understood by anyone. This being said, Oototol's figures still exist within structures of ceremony and societal taxonomy, faithful to a Balinese cosmology of life and death as twin guiding forces in daily life. Yet, throughout the artist's opus, these figures reappear to dabble in and beyond the edges of frames, suggesting a life lived outside the norm. The uniformed self-portrait, recurring across the paintings, becomes a vehicle for this tension, at once part of the social fabric while distinct in terms of identity and position. The same figure wearing the same uniform is placed repeatedly into different contexts and encounters, until what was meant to signify control reveals an extraordinary plasticity.

Oototol's practice may express a certain attitude of subversion or critique in the artist's seeming debasement of a common symbol of power, or how that same power seems to absorb life into its logic in its own mockery. Such readings risk domesticating what is genuinely strange and unassimilable in the work. In a present where such iconography has become inseparable from competing visions of political futurity, it is worth exploring what Oototol left us that we have not yet been able to process, and what questions they continue to place on us who seek to wrap our minds around them today.

The exhibition's title, *Warna Hidup*, in Indonesian meaning "the colour of life", seems contradictory to Oototol's choice to work exclusively in monochromatic Chinese ink. Despite this constraint, Oototol's work nevertheless expresses many different spectrums of life and culture, both in Pengosekan and Bali, where the artist was born, but also in relation to universal truths that resonate with us all. The absence of color becomes its own kind of abundance, a constraint that forces every complexity into the interplay of mark, surface, and space. Oototol's paintings express a mind and spirit that is transgressive, radical, and contemporary, so much that the works reverberate and continue to be relevant as a reflection of what is happening today.

Essays by Hera Chan, Roger Nelson, and Ibrahim Soetomo accompany the exhibition, each extending the scholarship around Oototol's life and

thinking in different directions. A public program curated by Putu Sridiniari opens further space for sitting and thinking with what is on display. These are early gestures toward a concerted effort to focus our attention on the works of an artist who, in Oototol's travelling imagination, continues to stray (to borrow a term from Nelson's essay) from us.

(b. ? - 2009)

Oototol was born as Dewa Raram in the village of Pengosekan, south of Ubud in Bali and home to many traditional painters from the pre-war Pita Maha school of painting. Amidst this environment, Oototol developed a radical visual language that strayed from convention, combining raw brushwork, unusual formats, and a predominate focus on the figure of the soldier depicted in variously quotidian and transgressive scenarios.

Oototol's early life was embedded in the conditions of Bali under Japanese Occupation, and his original name "Raram" was an onomatopoeic reference to the sounds of war planes in the skies. His enduring fascination with the soldier was said to have arrived later with his interest in the speeches of Sukarno, Indonesia's first president, and stories of national heroes and generals. A coincidental discovery of the works of late Balinese artist I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasih "Murni" absorbed Oototol into a dialogic group of artists including Murni, Dewa Putu Mokoh, and Edmondo "Mondo" Zanolini. Under Murni and Mondo's guidance, Oototol experimented with black Chinese ink on canvas using bamboo pens and brushes. His paintings often bear the physical marks of the conditions in which he worked - creases and folds produced by his habit of working directly on canvas on the ground of Murni's studio.

In reflecting upon Oototol's work, we recognize an organic fusion of diverse cultural and artistic elements that preserves and contemporizes the Balinese identity. Oototol himself may never have deliberately sought to create a particular stylistic approach, but his oeuvre provides a nuanced bridge, blending tradition with an approach that saw no limit to what painting and its subject matter could offer about the most trivial and interior aspects of the human experience.