

In the lounge of the historic Grand Inna Bali Beach hotel on the shore of Sanur, a modern relief stretches twenty-three metres across the wall (Image A). This andesite relief is entitled *Indonesia yang akan Datang*, and was designed by artist Harijadi Sumadidjaja. It depicts Balinese life, ranging from traditional ceremonies and agricultural activities to the daily bustle of labourers and farmers. This relief is actually incomplete. It is said that the carving process was discontinued due to the regime change in Indonesia in 1965–1966. Upon approaching it, we notice the remains

of sketches. The human figures still lack sculptural depths, their skins rough and unvarnished. Amidst this unfinished expanse, a single figure stands out for having been carved more finely than the rest: an adult man wearing a *kopiah* and a formal suit, carrying a child and standing taller than the crowd. Seeing this distinctive attire and charisma, we are immediately reminded of Indonesia's first president, Sukarno.

Sukarno popularised wearing *kopiah* as a symbol of nationalism and solidarity with his people. Paired with a formal suit, he projected an image of a leader who was grounded yet dignified on the international podium. During his presidency, he presented Indonesia as a growing nation through strategic development projects in the mid-1950s, including modern relief works. Through these reliefs, Sukarno, by commissioning artists of the time, sought to carve a vision of Indonesia that was prosperous, independent, and moving forward.

Prosperity and patriotism are vividly depicted in three reliefs in the VIP lounge of the former Kemayoran Airport in Jakarta. This series, dating to 1957, is entitled *Balada Sangkuriang*, *Manusia Indonesia* and *Flora dan Fauna Indonesia*. While painters S. Sudjojono, Harijadi Sumadidjaja and Surono were the designers, members of Seniman Indonesia Muda (SIM, est. 1946) were the sculptors. Upon approaching them, one is struck and satisfied by

the abundance of icons rendered with masterful anatomical precision. Much like gazing at reliefs in Hindu or Buddhist temples, these modern reliefs document the social and cultural life of a community with aesthetic and political intent. *Balada Sangkuriang*, fourteen metres long, chronicles several folklores, including *Sangkuriang* of Sundanese culture itself, as well as mythological creatures such as the Balinese *Leak* and the winged *Sembrani* horse, which served as the mount of the Javanese royalty. (Curiously, this relief omits the portrayal of Garuda, the symbol of the Indonesian nation) Also portrayed are Sundanese *angklung* players, who intriguingly sit next to musicians playing an acoustic guitar and a German-brand Hohner accordion. At the right end of *Balada Sangkuriang* (Image B), revolutionary soldiers are sitting and smoking at their leisure.

*Manusia Indonesia* (Image C) portrays many faces of workers in a twelve-metre panel. The left side shows activities related to agriculture, farming and maritime labour. In contrast, the right side of the panel illustrates an industrial life: factory workers collaborating (or *gotong royong*) to harvest minerals, while others operate steam engines. They are set against a backdrop of factory buildings and modern modes of transportation—a motorcycle, a truck, an aeroplane. This relief blends Indonesia's agricultural roots and industrial ambitions in a unified movement of progress.

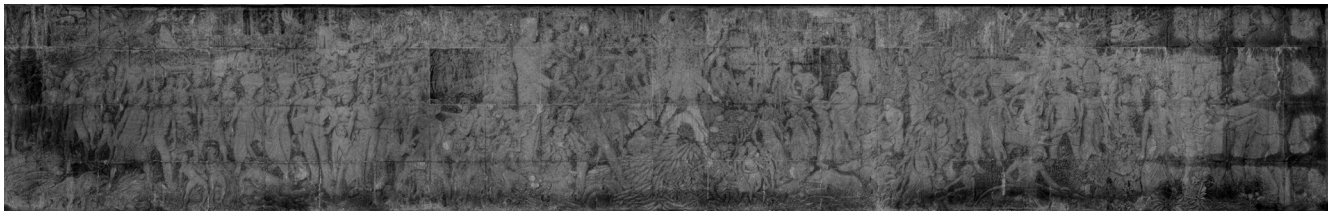


Image A



Image B

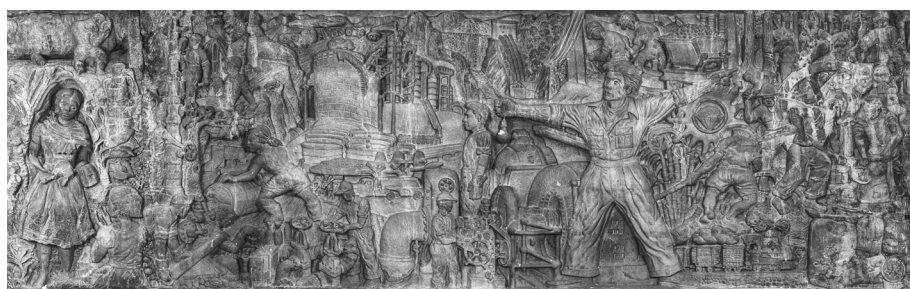


Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image H



Image G

These reliefs are capable of collapsing conflicting or seemingly unrelated events into a single, cohesive scene. A relief panel brings together the traditional and the modern, and mythological creatures with contemporary figures, within a non-sequential space without beginning or ending. In this sense, a relief is a happening. Unexpectedly, the same visual logic is also apparent in the works of Oototol. Surely enough, placing Oototol's Chinese ink brushstrokes alongside the rigid, modern relief works may initially seem a strange juxtaposition. However, they share striking iconographic similarities. Both mediums interpret reality, imagination, and the artist's dreams as a tapestry of identities that cross cultural and temporal boundaries. Both serve as a contemporary pictorial succession of ancient Hindu-Buddhist reliefs, Kamasan wayang paintings<sup>1</sup>, and the works of the Pita Maha group<sup>2</sup> from the 1930s.

The juxtaposition of reality and fantasy is most evident in the recurring figures wearing a *kopiah* and the soldiers that populate Oototol's world, which are said to be inspired by leaders such as

Sukarno. Oototol's portrayal is clearly non-paternalistic and non-masculine. It is rather fluid and liberated even from the weight of nationalism, and further still from the strict regionalist discourse of "Balinese art", even though traces of IGAK Murniasih and I Dewa Putu Mokoh are noticed in Oototol's strokes, and despite the artist coming from Pengosekan, a village known for popularising the art of painting flora and fauna. Unlike the reliefs that portray a single figure tied to a singular identity, Oototol's soldiers perform myriad roles and tasks despite their identical attributes. They appear as mercenaries of unknown rank working in nameless institutions. These soldiers, capable of duplicating themselves like Naruto Uzumaki executing "Kage Bunshin no Jutsu"<sup>3</sup>, inhabit a world without rigid rules and loud patriotism. Who assigned them? Are they carrying out orders or not?

After all, since when does a task have to make sense?

Among Oototol's many facades, *Warna Hidup*—exhibited at Komunitas Salihara in collaboration with ROH—speaks

of *kendara*, or travel. Seventeen of Oototol's works are installed along the elliptical walls of the gallery, set against vibrant colours that accentuate the monochromatic works. This elliptical architecture also complements the recurring motifs in Oototol's practice: forms that are predominantly circular, curved, organic or dynamic. The act of viewing becomes a cyclical experience, one that feels as borderless as the works themselves.

The soldiers do not merely ride various kinds of conventional vehicles. They summon mythological fauna as modes of transport within absurd and naive scenarios. In one instance, a man wearing a black *kopiah*, this time dressed dashingly rather than formally, stands atop the back of a giant dark crocodile (Image D). The creature appears to be standing on a river's surface rather than swimming through it. The figure in *kopiah* holds two crossed flags which, based on their colour division, clearly evoke the Indonesian Merah Putih flag. They are set against a surreal formation of floral clouds, further distancing them from any literal historical reality.

In another creaturely encounter, two figures ride a sea beast resembling a giant fish or dolphin with round eyes and thin, cat-like whiskers (Image E). The leading figure in front resembles a wayang orang character<sup>4</sup>, possibly the hero Arjuna, brandishing an arrow coiled by a snake. Seated behind the wayang is a soldier in a peaked cap, whose appearance now resembles a policeman or ship's captain. Much like the *kopiah* figure with the crossing Merah Putih, they are set against a backdrop of flowery atmospheric formation, and surrounded by a decorative frame with a repeating motif of stars or tiny flowers.

Not only are the human identities within Oototol's world unidentifiable, but the modes of transport are equally peculiar. In one painting, a soldier sits casually on a vehicle resembling a futuristic wheelchair, or a carriage, or a rickshaw (Image F). Meanwhile, a soldier on the right appears to be pulling or steering the vehicle's handle, which resembles a distinctly phallic form pointing towards the soldier's own face. The ambiguity of the scene leaves us guessing: is this a laid-back chase scene, or an erotic encounter?

Images of vehicles—buses, cars, motorcycles, penny-farthings—dominate the space of some of the paintings. Echoing the monumental scale of a stone relief, one particular work installed in Komunitas Salihara's

gallery stretches panoramically across eleven meters of cloth (Image G). This work features a rhythm of repetitive figures, juxtaposing uniformed soldiers with bare-chested soldiers sporting long, flowing black hair. They appear as if seated within an excessively elongated *Kopaja*. A surreal, high-occupancy transit.

In an exquisite depiction of a contemporary performing arts show, a troupe of Oototol's soldiers—dressed in formal attire and peaked caps rather than traditional Balinese dress—perform on gamelan instruments with a gong anchoring on the right side of the painting (Image H). Behind the performers rises an architecture resembling a Candi Bentar, or *pura*, decorated once again with flowery and dynamic strokes, as well as lush trees at the top. At the base of the composition, three dogs in different positions—sleeping, standing, and crouching—add to the impression of cosy everyday life amidst the orderly, yet surreal, musical ritual.

Oototol's world represents a new, plastic, and ever-evolving opening. If Oototol does indeed explore questions of identity, nationalism or patriotism, the artist does so in a fluid, relaxed and suggestive manner. Here, a role, be it a job or a task, is no longer a rigid depiction carved in andesite. Instead, it is an entity that moves, duplicates itself, and drives towards endless possibilities

<sup>1</sup> Originating in the village of Kamasan in Bali, these sacred narrative paintings draw on Hindu and Buddhist texts, and are formally characterised by pure flat figuration, repetitive decorative patterning, and dense graphic combinations.

<sup>2</sup> Founded in Ubud in 1936, Pita Maha was an artist collective formed by Tjokorda Agung Sukawati, Prince of Ubud; senior local artist and first modern master of Bali, Gusti Nyoman Lempad; and the expatriate Europeans Walter Spies and Rudolf Bonnet. Its aim was to cultivate and preserve what it termed Balinese modern traditional art, and to bring this new genre to audiences beyond Bali.

<sup>3</sup> A clone technique in the Japanese manga and anime series Naruto. It allows the user to create one or more copies of themselves. The user's chakra, or life force energy, is evenly divided between themselves and their clones.

<sup>4</sup> A wayang theatre term for a "human puppet", or an actor who performs multiple characters identified by rules of type, costume, and behaviour.