

## A Provisional Painting History of Oototol

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Oototol arrives to us entirely through aftermath: a body of paintings, fragments of recollection, and an unstable archive of snapshots. Very little has been written, and what exists tends to reflect the writers' projection of the Balinese artist as instinctive, untrained, and outside of history. The characterization of his practice surfaces through second-hand sources whose memories of the artist are intensely personal and perpetually anachronistic. Whereas an artist's text is usually secured through exhibition histories, reviews, and archives, here, there is only the artwork itself: several hundred paintings with no stable distinction between studies and finished works. There are a few marked dates, yet no titles, contextual markers, or annotations. Artist Li Yong Xiang described any critical work on Oototol as a kind of retroactive reconstruction or a *Rashomon* situation, after Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film, where multiple accounts coexist without resolution and truth is dispersed across perspectives. Records and recordings emerge through fragments—videos of him in the studio, stories of what he wore, candid photographs—while little material exists that documents his life outside of the studio.

Thus, the following account is based on the paintings made available to me, extended conversations with Edmondo (Mondo) Zanolini, and exchanges with friends.<sup>1</sup> It is unadulterated conjecture

intended to open ways of thinking that take Oototol's works as acts of departure. The suggested titles of the works have been applied for clarity and description of what is shown. My voice occupies a disproportionate space in this particular chronicle, and this excess is offered as part of a larger restorative process for his practice and its place in the world.

We begin with the knowable facts of Oototol: He was born circa 1930 with the name Dewa Raram in Pengosekan Village, located directly south of Ubud in Bali. Nobody in his family knows the exact year. Born during the Japanese occupation of Indonesia, his name "Raram" is associated with the sound of war planes in the sky. When he was young, he worked as a wood carver for hire. In all the found photographs, he is wearing a *peci* hat. Otherwise, he often shifted his vision through donning different colored sunglasses to the studio that he shared with I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasih (Murni) and Mondo. Prior to joining their studio, he made a new kite every day, using materials found in dumpsters and garbage piles, and flew them in the fields. When he first joined the studio, he played a bamboo xylophone for several months, ceaselessly repeating the same motif. Then he began to paint. Using primarily black ink, rarely color, he made compositions on stretched and unstretched canvases laid out on the floor or leaning against furniture. He seemed to work only sitting on the floor. His period of activity spans roughly from the 1990s to the day he died. He passed away in 2009 in Pengosekan Village.

My approach consists of constructing constellations within Oototol's immense body of work. Looking to his sources of inspiration in the studio materials provided to him—mostly detailed, cropped reproductions—not to trace influence for its own sake, but to determine how meaning shifts as images are translated into new formal terms. What he retained, simplified, enlarged, or omitted in the works tell a story. There is a discernible chain of selection: Mondo chose images; Oototol chose from those images; and now I choose which images to foreground in analysis. With each stage, the material is further processed and proceeded.



Untitled (After holding a bottle in mouth)

Oototol was prolific, producing numerous mural-scale works alongside more irregularly sized paintings. At times, the monochrome palette and thick outlining invite comparison to the Batuan School, yet the dense minuteness associated with that tradition is absent. It is replaced by rounder forms and broader passages of empty space, as seen in *Untitled (After holding a bottle in mouth)*<sup>2</sup> and related studies. As self-contained fields, the mural-scale compositions read as narrative, though the stories embedded within them do not extend across multiple works. Instead, each painting consolidates its own internal logic and sequence. As imagery passes through successive acts of selection and enlargement, figures drawn from different sources begin to resemble one another. What began as disparate material ultimately resolves into uniformed units.

In *Untitled (Baleganjur by the sea)*, a long ceremonial procession unfolds horizontally, composed almost entirely of uniformed figures playing the *baleganjur*, a Balinese gamelan used in processions. Cacophonous, the *baleganjur* refers to a 'marching army'

<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Ariane Sutthavong, Grace Samboh, Jun Tirtadji, Kate Whiteway, and Li Yong Xiang for your clarity and conversation.

<sup>2</sup> All works are untitled and titles in brackets are my suggestions based on what is visible.



Untitled (*Baleganjur by the sea*)

that is performed to appease dark and disruptive entities in the Hindu-Balinese cosmology. At the center-left, several participants carry an elevated palanquin on their shoulders, upon which two elaborately dressed individuals sit beneath ceremonial parasols, their relaxed posture and ornamentation distinguishing them from the laboring figures below. Flora fills the foreground in stylized clusters, creating a decorative base that contrasts with the ordered repetition of bodies above. At the center, a uniformed figure holds a blank white flag.

This bordered composition makes an enclosed world that operates like a ceremonial stage, echoing the historical functions of mural painting in Bali, where large narrative images have traditionally served cosmological and social roles. They teach how the universe works, justify how society is structured, and transform physical space into sacred experience. Since the mid-20th century, Bali has frequently served as a cultural stage for national representation, where ceremonial processions combine traditional visual elements with the disciplined organization associated with state and military bodies. The elevated seated figures may be dignitaries or symbolic authorities carried by the collective body of the institution. Reflecting how state authority is often performed through choreography, repetition, and spectacle, *Untitled (Baleganjur by the sea)* elucidates conditions that imply the intertwined worlds of ceremony, tourism, and political performance on the island. It's as if the island itself had realized it was both the stage and the performer in a nonstop political pageant.

An androgynous character in a nondescript military uniform moves throughout almost all of Oototol's works, not as an individual subject but as a repeated condition. In *Untitled (Holding newspapers)*, they repeat, populating the frame as one unit, holding blank newspapers. Their lines of sight do not meet, forever inspecting and vigilant

to their surroundings. Uniforms serve to standardize the appearance of soldiers, erasing personal identity and foregrounding institutional power. The soldier is turned into a surface through which the state becomes perceptible. These bodies carry the same face, replicated again and again while engaged in different activities—ritual gestures, encounters with animals and mythical creatures, riding vehicles, and assembling in various formations that suggest collectivism without necessarily implying cohesion. They are not faceless, yet their sameness produces the effect of anonymity, like a mass of interchangeable actors occupying the visible surface of society. The bodies move from androgynous to gender fluid in certain works. In other moments, they read as the outward armature of the Indonesian state, implicitly armed even when weapons are absent. Only a small number of works depict guns directly, but the possibility of force is embedded in posture and dress. What emerges feels duplicitous: the condition of being one among many, rarely shown in contact with civilian life, countless figures circulating primarily within their own closed system.

From the 1990s to 2009, dispatches from the world moved as images through satellite television, internet, and printed matter. The news was punctuated with the violence of the post-Cold War era with American military interventions, insurgencies, and the sensation of perpetual security crises. The artist himself did not seek direct access to these flows. The images that reached Oototol arrived stripped of origin and passed along as fragments of printed newspaper clippings, propaganda, photocopies, scans of artworks both ancient and recent, forming a repository of source material that included everything but the histories that produced them. Among them was Yue Minjun's *Execution* (1995), emblematic of the Cynical Realism movement and itself haunted by the Tiananmen Square Massacre of 1989. Yue's painting foregrounds a young man curving his arms to hold an invisible rifle, with his head cocked to look through the crosshairs. The targets are laughing, standing only in their underwear while the men in the front wear white t-shirts and black pants. In Oototol's rendering, all figures wear batik shirts and the military cap found in his other works, with an arrow positioned on a traditional bow pulled taut in the foreground.



Untitled (*Holding newspapers*)



Untitled (After Yue Minjun's Execution, 1995)



Untitled (After North Korean traffic controllers)



Untitled (After Chinese peacekeeping police officers in Beijing, 2002)



Untitled (After female students of Amin Police University in Iran, 2006)



Untitled (After a US soldier in Iraq and two girls, 2007)



Untitled (The artist and a painted cow)



Untitled (The artist with a handheld camera)



Untitled (The artist with a Disney dwarf)

Militarized imagery constituted the ambient atmosphere of Oototol's period of practice, particularly women with guns. Works such as *Untitled (After North Korean traffic controllers)*<sup>3</sup>, *Untitled (After Chinese peacekeeping police officers in Beijing, 2002)*<sup>4</sup>, *Untitled (After female students of Amin Police University in Iran, 2006)*<sup>5</sup>, and *Untitled (After a US soldier in Iraq and two girls, 2007)*—the last published by Agence France-Presse with the caption "A girl becomes embarrassed after giving flowers to a female US soldier on duty in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul"—demonstrate the informal economy of images circulating to him, which became foundational for his work. These figures were cropped, outlined, enlarged, and reprocessed, destabilizing gender specificity and contributing to the androgynous, ambivalent character of his paintings. Oototol's process reads as absorption: a slow metabolizing of the visual agents of regimes circulating during that period, and once more again now.<sup>6</sup> In the act of redrawing, propaganda and journalism are distanced from claims to immediacy; the authority of the image dissolves into line and gesture, exposing the constructedness of what they claim to show.

Some of Oototol's other works turn the eye—or the brush—back on the act of image-making itself, playing with the slippery boundary between picture and reality. In both *Untitled (The artist and a painted cow)* and *Untitled (The artist with a handheld camera)*, he casts himself as the star: peci hat perched, sunglasses on, a kind of calm, observing presence in a world of his own construction. In *Untitled (The artist and a painted cow)*, he interacts with a cow—but not just any cow: one

confined to a frame resting on an easel, a bovine that exists both as creature and painted idea. In *Untitled (The artist with a handheld camera)*, he aims a handheld camera at a woman with long black hair, caught mid-observation, a wink at the endless loop of looking and being looked at. The image within an image becomes a playful signal, highlighting the layers of framing, attention, and intention. And those frames themselves—thick, at times ornate, sometimes almost swaggering—announce their presence with sly confidence, as if the paintings are saying, "Yes, I know I'm a painting." It's a gentle, humorous meditation on making, seeing, and the delightful artifice that ties them together.

Across Oototol's opus, a fascination with mediation—between image and reality, subject and observer, frame and world—emerges as a guiding principle. A handful of self-portraits extend this mediation, from passport-like likenesses to scenes among peers, always marking him as part of the internationalist generation of Sukarno-era Indonesia, shaped to look outward while carrying the weight of global currents. Those same blacked-out eyes obscure intent and orientation, teasing the viewer as to whether he looks inward, outward, or slyly beyond the pictorial frame. The more he paints, the more figures are processed into standardized uniformed types, their individuality absorbed into the rhythm of repetition and frame. In the end or this new beginning, this selection of Oototol's works are antecedents and provisions for a mechanics of seeing, a media analysis, a story in which all the protagonists are one—and they all must wear the same hat.

<sup>3</sup> Appears drawn from a pictorial issued by the North Korean government on their female air traffic controllers.

<sup>4</sup> Drawn from a photograph by Liu Yu published with the Xinhua News Agency on October 22, 2002, when 40 UN peacekeeping police officers, about to be deployed to East Timor, were received in Beijing by leaders of the Chinese Ministry of Public Security.

<sup>5</sup> Drawn from a photograph by Satyar Emami published with Fars News Agency on March 11, 2006 depicting the graduation ceremony of female students of Amin Police University in Tehran, of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

<sup>6</sup> On February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel launched military strikes in Iran. Last December, nationwide anti-regime protests spread over the nation, which were met with massacres of protesters.