

Introduction by ISA Art Gallery

I GAK Murniasih and Sinta Tantra – A Regeneration of Balinese Women Artists

I GAK Murniasih (1966–2006), an influential figure in Indonesian contemporary art, known for her distinctive approach to themes of sexuality, trauma, and female identity. Born in Tabanan, Bali, Murniasih's work is marked by an unfiltered exploration of personal and societal taboos. Her compositions feature surreal, distorted figures that capture the layered nuances of her experiences, merging vibrant colors and exaggerated forms to challenge conventional representations of the female body, dreams and desire. Murniasih's imagery serves not only as an artistic expression but also as a diary of her complex realities, where figures are often both grotesque and intimate, bearing marks of her internal struggles and resilience.

Murniasih's work offers critique of cultural norms through an unfiltered engagement with eroticism and the human body, a radical stance within the context of Balinese and broader Indonesian art. Her depictions subvert conventional representations of the female body, rejecting passive or ornamental roles and instead constructing figures that embody agency, defiance, and autonomy. Murniasih achieves this through a vocabulary of fragmented and exaggerated bodily forms, which—while at times infused with humor—are emphasized by a surreal intensity. This aesthetic invites viewers to confront themes of sexuality, pleasure, and autonomy while challenging the entrenched societal taboos surrounding these subjects. Her work is deeply autobiographical and visceral, like a raw—almost painful process of unearthing one's deepest layers. It feels as if the consciousness is clawing at the skin of herself, attempting to release the raw truths that lie beneath.

The fluidity of surrealism, femininity and ferocity in Murniasih's work introduces a nuanced examination of the female body as a site of both personal and collective trauma. By incorporating grotesque forms such as *vagina dentata* and *Medusa-like* figures, Murniasih evokes archetypes of the "*monstrous feminine*," which serve as both a critique of patriarchal anxieties and a reassertion of female power and complexity. Her compositions transcend mere provocation; they offer a symbolic resistance to gendered expectations of docility and objectification, embodying what Julia Kristeva has termed "*abjection*"—the process through which socially taboo subjects invoke both fascination and repulsion. Murniasih's exploration of the abject not only destabilizes traditional gender dynamics but also resists easy classification, suggesting that her work operates within and beyond the confines of feminist and subversive art.

Largely self-taught, Murniasih developed a visual style that draws from Balinese artistic practice—*pengosekan* style while pushing the conventional constraints. Her mentor, I Dewa Putu Mokoh, introduced her to techniques that she later expanded upon, crafting a language distinctly her own. Her compositions, which contrast traditional earthy palettes with more saturated hues, capture a deeply personal narrative that resists aesthetic categorization and invites viewers to confront complex questions about femininity and autonomy. IGAK Murniasih's career was tragically cut short by ovarian cancer in 2006— but her work endures, offering a potent, poignant visual legacy that challenges viewers to re-examine their journey—ultimately the subconsciousness of the body.

After almost a generation later from Murniasih, Sinta Tantra (b. 1979) is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice seamlessly bridges the domains of painting, sculpture, and installation. Her work is characterized by vibrant color palettes, a compelling interplay of geometric and organic forms, and a distinct sensitivity to the passage of time and the dynamics of space. Tantra's compositions, whether realized as

monumental public installations or meticulously crafted canvases, employ a universal visual language that prioritizes the experiential—emphasizing emotional resonance and physical engagement. Her works evolve in response to environmental conditions, transforming subtly throughout the day to offer shifting moods and perspectives.

Born in New York to Balinese parents and raised in London, Tantra's artistic identity is informed by her cultural heritage and global upbringing. She trained at the Slade School of Fine Art (2003) and the Royal Academy Schools (2006), where she began developing her distinctive practice that melds formalist abstraction with personal and cultural narratives. Her compositions often employ repetitive, meditative forms that evoke processes of introspection and balance, while her choice of materials—including the use of gold leaf—engages with histories of ritual and ornamentation, reflecting both individual and collective cultural legacies.

In recent years, Tantra has explored darker palettes, employing shades of blue and gold leaf to evoke depth, reflection, and luminosity. Her work increasingly transcends traditional painting, incorporating soundscapes, archival materials, and elements of ritual. For instance, her 2021 solo exhibition *Birds of Paradise* at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in Berlin combined painting, sculpture, and sound to explore notions of transformation and otherness through postcolonial and ecological lenses. Similarly, her large-scale installations, such as her work at Art Jakarta, integrate Balinese references through materials like incense, flowers, and volcanic rock, while incorporating modernist design elements such as steel and glass.

Tantra's work has been exhibited internationally in prestigious venues, including the Karachi Biennale (2019), Folkestone Triennial (2017), and Liverpool Biennial (2012), alongside institutional showcases at the Saatchi Gallery, Museum MACAN, and other major collections. Her practice continues to expand beyond medium-specific definitions, engaging with issues of identity, spatial interaction, and cultural hybridity.

For SEA Focus 2025, ISA Art Gallery brings together the works of I GAK Murniasih and Sinta Tantra, two seminal figures within Balinese contemporary art. While distinct in their formal approaches, both artists interrogate questions of identity, form, and culture, positioning their works within broader discourses of global modernity and tradition. Tantra's practice is rooted in abstraction, geometry, and architectural references, emphasizing spatial interaction and audience engagement. Murniasih, on the other hand, employs surrealist imagery and biomorphic forms to address themes of gender, sexuality, and the human body. Her deeply personal narratives, often laced with irony, critique societal norms and invite an interrogation of Indonesian patriarchy and taboos. Despite these differences, both artists share a commitment to challenging conventional representations of Balinese culture, offering instead a nuanced, contemporary reimaging of tradition.

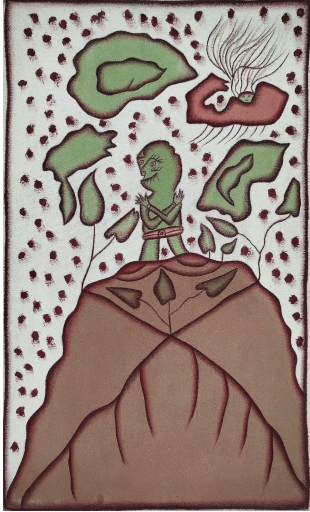
Central to Tantra's recent practice is her shaped canvas series for SEA Focus 2025, which draws inspiration from the writings of Raden Adjeng Kartini (1879–1904), a pioneering Javanese woman intellectual. Kartini is revered as a national heroine in Indonesia, renowned for her advocacy of women's education and empowerment during the Dutch colonial era. Her letters, published posthumously as *Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang* (Out of The Darkness, Here Comes The Light), articulate her vision for social reform, particularly in dismantling the cultural and systemic barriers that constrained women's access to education and autonomy.

Tantra's shaped canvases are informed by Kartini's ideals, with their fluid forms and unconventional structures reflecting a defiance of imposed boundaries—whether cultural, social, or artistic. The titles of

the series reference phrases from Kartini's writings, creating a conceptual dialogue between the artist's contemporary practice and Kartini's enduring legacy. Much like Kartini's letters, which blend personal reflection with progressive social critique, Tantra's works oscillate between introspection and outward engagement, using abstraction as a medium for reimagining cultural and historical narratives. Through this series, Tantra weaves together historical and contemporary voices, situating her practice within a broader exploration of cultural identity and transformation.

I GAK Murniasih and Sinta Tantra represent two distinct yet interrelated trajectories within Balinese contemporary art, each addressing questions of identity, culture, and representation through unique formal and conceptual approaches. Tantra's shaped canvases and public installations emphasize spatial interaction and cultural hybridity, while Murniasih's surrealist explorations foreground issues of gender, power, and the body. Together, their works articulate a vision of Balinese art that is deeply rooted in tradition yet expansively global, challenging conventional narratives and inviting critical reflection on the intersections of history, culture, and modernity. Through their innovative practices, both artists exemplify the evolving and multifaceted nature of Balinese artistic expression in the 21st century.

IGAK MURNIASIH



Geledek Menggelegar

1998

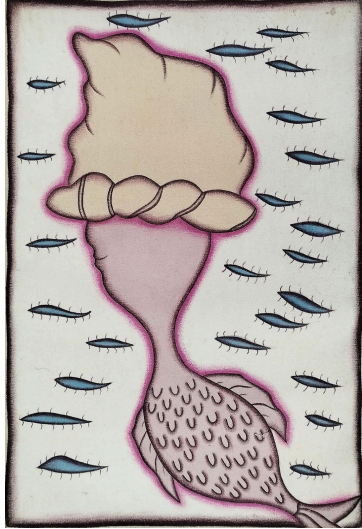
Acrylic on Canvas

55 x 33 cm

Geledek Menggelegar (Thunderous Lightning) exemplifies IGAK Murniasih's playful yet incisive exploration of deeply personal and often disruptive life events. The lightning motif suggests both physical and emotional turbulence—a phenomenon that strikes with sudden, uncontrollable force. This aligns with Murniasih's broader practice of using surrealism to articulate the complexities of memory, trauma, and transformation.

Informed by her lived experiences as a Balinese woman navigating patriarchal structures, her art transforms chaos into visual poetry. The vibrant color palette reflects Murniasih's unique way of imbuing seemingly catastrophic events with a sense of wonder, echoing surrealist traditions pioneered by artists like Frida Kahlo, whose works similarly negotiated the boundaries of trauma and vitality. Kahlo's use of symbolic imagery to depict her own pain resonates with Murniasih's ability to merge deeply personal narratives with universal emotional landscapes.

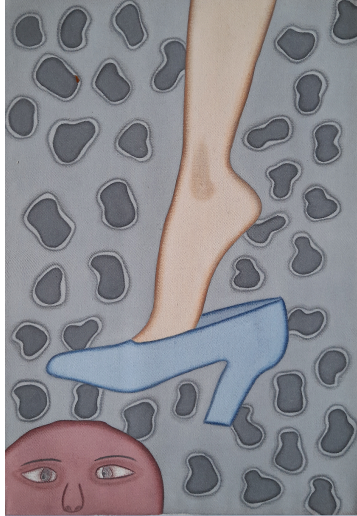
Furthermore, the anthropomorphic forms and bold composition in *Geledek Menggelegar* subvert traditional notions of femininity by embracing emotional intensity and imperfection. The work exemplifies Murniasih's resistance to rigid gender expectations and her capacity to convey the beauty of unpredictability.



Topiku 5
1997
Acrylic on Canvas
60 x 40 cm

In *Topiku 5 (My Hat)*, Murniasih uses the motif of hats to question notions of identity, disguise, and self-presentation. Hats, historically and culturally, have been seen as extensions of identity, used to signify status, profession, or individuality. Murniasih's whimsical treatment of this object—depicting it in exaggerated forms and bold colors—transforms it into a metaphor for the ways individuals navigate societal expectations and personal expression.

This work also reflects Murniasih's larger artistic project: to reclaim and reinterpret her lived experiences through the lens of self-exploration. The vibrancy of the palette contrasts with the subtle layers of meaning embedded in the image, reflecting the duality of joy and introspection that characterizes much of her oeuvre. As a self-taught artist emerging in the 1990s, Murniasih stands as a critical figure in challenging and redefining women's roles within Indonesian art—a space traditionally dominated by male narratives.



My Sepatu 9
1995
Acrylic on Canvas
55 x 33 cm

Shoes appear frequently throughout I GAK Murniasih's body of work, functioning as potent symbols that intertwine notions of power, pleasure, and autonomy. In *My Sepatu 9* (My Shoe 9), the act of slipping a foot into a shoe—a seemingly mundane gesture—is transformed into a charged and multifaceted scene. The leg, poised in a diagonal composition, directs attention toward the head of a man, suggesting an act of dismissal or detachment, as though the wearer is metaphorically pushing him aside or asserting independence.

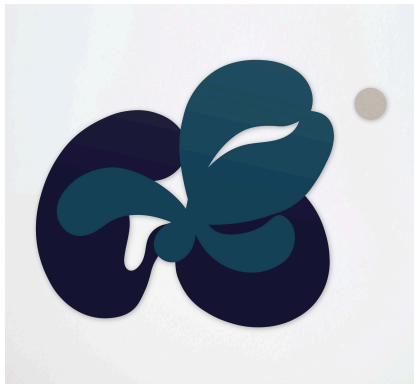
Shoes have long been associated with mobility, progress, and identity, often serving as metaphors for life's journeys and transitions. For Murniasih, the shoe transcends its practical function to become an icon of both personal pleasure and societal resistance. The incomplete action—captured as the foot hovers above the shoe—evokes a sense of anticipation or unresolved tension.

SINTA TANTRA



Nourished by Flowers, Perfume and Incense
2024
Tempera and 24ct gold leaf on linen
90 x 120 cm

This work by Sinta Tantra explores the intersection of sensory experience and spatial perception, using the shaped canvas as a medium to transcend traditional pictorial constraints. The organic, flowing composition evokes the intangible qualities of fragrance and ritual—scent becomes memory, and gesture becomes form. The inclusion of 24ct gold leaf, a material associated with sacredness and permanence, juxtaposes the fleeting nature of the work's conceptual inspirations: flowers, perfume, and incense. By shifting the canvas off the wall, Tantra reimagines painting as an object that exists in dialogue with its environment, dissolving the boundary between two-dimensional image-making and three-dimensional space.



Hidden in the Heart
2024
Tempera on linen
90 x 120 cm

In *Hidden in the Heart*, Tantra navigates the psychological and emotional dimensions of abstraction, employing intertwining forms and deep hues to suggest the layered and concealed nature of human emotions. The shaped canvas itself becomes a metaphor for the hidden and asymmetrical structure of the heart—both as an organ and as a symbolic repository for emotion. By moving beyond the rectangular

format, Tantra challenges traditional modes of viewing, inviting the audience to navigate the work spatially rather than statically. The tactile quality of the tempera on linen further underscores the intimacy and vulnerability of the theme, while the sculptural presence of the canvas encourages an embodied engagement with the piece.



Let us always have great dreams
2024
Tempera and 24ct gold leaf on linen
100 x 98 cm

This piece stands as a testament to Tantra's ability to merge optimism with formal innovation, offering a vibrant meditation on aspiration and possibility. The bold form and color reflects a sense of boundless imagination, while the incorporation of gold leaf serves as a conceptual anchor, invoking the transformative power of dreams and their material manifestations. The shaped canvas extends the work into the realm of sculpture, positioning it as a liminal object that oscillates between presence and potentiality. In moving the artwork off the wall, Tantra redefines the act of viewing as an active and participatory experience, urging viewers to engage with the work in a manner that echoes the openness and expansiveness of the dreams it seeks to celebrate.