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Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia: Defining Experiences by Wulan Dirgantoro (review)

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[REVIEW]

Wulan Dirgantoro, *Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia: Defining Experiences*

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Yvonne Low

Wulan Dirgantoro's *Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia: Defining Experiences* marks a significant milestone in the advancement of scholarly writing on feminism and contemporary art in Southeast Asian art history. In this empirically grounded and theoretically engaging book, Dirgantoro argues compellingly for the urgency to develop "critical thinking towards feminism/s in Indonesia". It aims to outline a framework to analyse works by Indonesian women artists that draw upon international feminist discourses in relation to feminist-inspired and/or gender critique whilst adopting the dual strategies of correction and interrogation.

The author stakes her own feminist positioning from the outset, asserting that her interest in women artists "stems from [her] feminism", where a significant challenge of hers as a researcher was to understand how feminism/s as a contested discourse may produce an alternative reading of the works of Indonesian women artists in current Indonesian art historiography.¹ This defence for her own political position seems understandable given how fraught the terms "feminist" and "feminism" are in Indonesian society. Resistance against the use of such terms in curatorial and art historical contexts—as Dirgantoro incisively demonstrates—has in large part to do with the view that feminism is an imported concept, and therefore might run counter to *budaya ketimuran* ("eastern values"). As such, feminist discourse within Indonesia takes on the

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guise of “gender issues” or “women’s issues”; the term “gender” in Indonesia, Dirgantoro explains, has become a euphemism for feminism.

The main thrust of the book thus serves to open up a discourse on feminist art in Indonesia by examining the lives and works of over 20 female artists from the 1940s to present day, beginning with Emiria Sunassa and Mia Bustam, and concluding with Kelompok PEREK and Arahmaiani. The author’s objective here is to explore the socio-cultural and political contexts circumscribing the production and reception of works by Indonesian women artists, specifically, how they “have used feminine strategies” or “have been inspired by feminism in their works to raise issues that are both personal and political, even though their works do not necessarily employ the visual languages familiar to Western feminist art”. Whilst Dirgantoro neither contests nor expands on the view that feminism/s has formally entered the Indonesian art discourse in the 1990s with the rise of critical theory (namely “western/post-structuralist”) from within, the distinction of such concepts as exogenous to the socio-political landscape of Indonesia is nonetheless maintained: Dirgantoro employs a range of “western”-derived feminist theories as interpretative tools to situate a discourse of Indonesian feminist art (regardless of whether the artists themselves necessarily intended the work to be “feminist” as such).

To achieve this objective, the book, as explained by the author in the introductory chapter, is divided into two parts with the first, comprising chapters 2 and 3, delving into the formation of the “canon of Indonesian art history” and the marginal positions women artists held in such histories. Employing Griselda Pollock’s concept of differencing the canon, Dirgantoro eloquently exposes the myth-making enterprise behind the construction of the male “genius” artist and masculine ideals, often at the expense of subjugating the female figure, as evident in the author’s incisive psychoanalytic readings of the prominent works by S. Sudjojono and Jim Supangkat. The following chapters then reinserts women artists to the canon of art history through the analysis of the lives and works of modern painters Emiria Sunassa (1894–1964) and Mia Bustam (1920–2011) as counter-narratives to “mainstream history”. Here, Dirgantoro builds on the formative work of preceding scholars in re-evaluating Emiria’s contributory role to Indonesia’s nationalist and cultural history in spite of her marginalisation.² The subsequent discussion on Mia Bustam, who is most commonly remembered as the former wife of S. Sudjojono, crucially marks the formal entry of Mia in Indonesian art history, in spite of her nebulous position as a professional artist and small body of work. Dirgantoro convincingly argues for the agentive role that Mia played as “eyewitness” to Indonesian’s modern art history, paying critical and inaugural attention to the memoirs that she left behind.

As cautioned by the author, the second part of the book (chapters 4 to 6) shifts its focus to examine what the author terms “strategies of interrogation”. Having first explained that the book’s approach is more thematic than chronological, the exploration of selected themes in the latter half, namely the monstrous-feminine in Chapter 4, political motherhood/maternal subjectivity in Chapter 5 and the impact of feminism/s in performance art in Chapter 6, might require more qualification. Why, for instance, were the themes of the monstrous-feminine (applicable perhaps to a very narrow sector of women’s art) or the maternal subjectivity selected over others? This issue aside, many readers will appreciate the richness of the discussion in each chapter, especially the author’s perceptive interpretation and original analysis of the artists’ works using a range of feminist theoretical models.

In particular, the discussion of late Balinese artist I Gusti Ayu Kadek (IGAK) Murniasih (1960–2006) is the most comprehensive reassessment to date of her oeuvre. Dirgantoro considers the wider reception of Murniasih’s “bizarre yet compelling” paintings, which she argues served to expose the “unbalanced relationship between the representation of the feminine, feminine desires and their masculine reading in Indonesian visual arts”. Dirgantoro demonstrates here the difficulty in comprehending the feminine even as Murniasih might have achieved some limited success in transcending the stranglehold of hegemonic masculinity in Indonesia; though thematically distinct, the succeeding chapter on maternal subjectivity in fact resonates well given its examination of contested readings of the feminine. In this regard, the selection of artists, Laksmi Shitaesmi (b. 1974) and Titarubi (b. 1968), are well-chosen given their powerful portrayals of motherhood and womanhood. Critically, the rereading of maternal subjectivity serves as a tacit reminder to viewers of contemporary art the challenges evident in comprehending and interpreting women’s art at large.

For both these chapters, the author elaborated on the effect feminist thinking might have on the artists’ practice which manifested from their personal and subjective experiences rather than from direct or explicit engagement with feminist ideology *per se*. On the other hand, there was arguably a strong relationship between the rise of performance art and the engagement with feminist ideology in Indonesia as shown in the last chapter. Here, she discusses the feminist practices of internationally renowned artist Arahmaiani (b. 1961) and the lesser known art collective Kelompok PEREK (founded 1998), with the aim of also exploring the extent of influence western models might have on their practice. This is a salient and significant subject that could lead to productive comparative studies with existing scholarship that traces the rise of so-called “feminist art” within the region and beyond (namely in Taiwan, Japan and South Korea).³ More critical elaboration, however, on how and when such a

transfer of purportedly “official” feminist ideology or western models as such might have taken place in the case of the respective artists discussed in this last chapter, would have offered some closure to this issue of influence.

Overall, *Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia* is a scholarly achievement that makes for requisite reading for all undergraduate and advanced studies in Indonesian art and gender studies. The book, in its entirety, foregrounds new and significant research into the lives and works of significant Indonesian women artists. More crucially, it offers a feminist framework in which to discuss and interpret such histories within the context of patriarchal systems that is surely invaluable to the advancement of feminist art history both within and without.

BIOGRAPHY

Yvonne Low specialises in the modern and contemporary arts of Singapore and Indonesia. Her research interests include colonial histories, cultural politics of art development, women artists and feminist art history, and digital art history. Low has published in books, peer-reviewed journals and exhibition catalogues. She holds a PhD from the University of Sydney, and is currently Lecturer in Asian Art at the University’s Power Institute where she co-convened the inaugural Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories Symposium in 2017 and coordinated the units Contemporary Asian Art (2016–17), Gender and Sexuality in Asian Art (2018) and Curating Asian Art (2018).

NOTES

- ¹ Whilst there have been limited published studies on the subject of the marginalisation of women artists and their art in Indonesian art historiography (see reference list below), few extant studies have analyzed women's art using feminist visual theories as formalized in the discipline of New Art History. One might see Wulan Dirgantoro's book as the inaugural attempt to legitimize this field within such a discipline.
- ² For example, Heidi Arbuckle, "Performing Emiria Sunassa: Reframing the Female Subject in Post/colonial Indonesia", unpublished PhD dissertation (Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 2011).
- ³ The cultural phenomenon leading to the rise of contemporary "feminist art" as part of direct/indirect engagement with Euro-American feminist movements and discourses from the late 1980s have been variously discussed in country-focused studies particularly in Taiwan, Japan and South Korea; see, for example, Victoria Lu, "The Rise of Feminist Awareness and the Feminist Art Movement in Taiwan", *n.paradoxa* 15/16 (2001), online, and articles in *Text and Subtext: Contemporary Art and Asian Women* (Singapore: Earl Lu Gallery, 2001).

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