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Brigitta Isabella, Oei Sian Yok

Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia,
Volume 4, Number 2, October 2020, pp. 285-309 (Article)

Published by NUS Press Pte Ltd

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sen.2020.0013>

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[TRANSLATIONS]

Situated Formalism in the Art of Encounters:

A Brief Introduction to the Translation of Selected Writings by Oei Sian Yok

BRIGITTA ISABELLA

The location of culture, as laid out by James Clifford's now classic argument, can be "an itinerary rather than a bounded site—a series of encounters and translations".¹ The following selection of articles written by Chinese-Indonesian art critic, Oei Sian Yok (1926, Magelang–2002, Jakarta), is premised on encounters between artists, art objects and artistic discourse to measure what it means for art historical perspective and art criticism to traverse cultural distance. Perhaps it could mean a series of translations, retranslations and, inevitably too, mistranslations across our contemporary sites of art historical knowledge production; but whatever it may or could be, as Clifford says, "There is only more translation."² This brief introduction to the following translations of selected writings by Oei Sian Yok can be read as an attempt towards extending the collaborative labour³ of "more translation" to historicise the worldly travel of modernisms.

Among hundreds of articles that Oei Sian Yok wrote for the popular magazine *Star Weekly* from 1956 to 1961,⁴

Oei Sian Yok in her 20s, ca. late 1940s. Courtesy of Nieke Adhidharma.

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the following four articles highlight her itinerary of reviewing artistic encounters and cultural translations between Indonesia and the world; at stake is the renegotiation of the stereotyped claims of identity reinforced by the violence of colonialism and the polarisation of the Cold War. By inquiring into several exhibitions of works by foreign artists held in Jakarta during the 1950s and 1960s, Oei Sian Yok allows us to acknowledge the value of transcultural experiences and problematise the cheap binaries between the East and the West, the traditional and the modern, the foreign and the familiar. At the same time, her articles also critically hint at the disproportionate currency of differing forms of artistic knowledge, by pointing out the decadent cultural tastes of Indonesian elites, the distancing effects of overly narrow conceptions of cultural identity, and the Western-centric paradigm of art education that overlooks “the art from our own neighbours”. Oei’s thoughts are written in straightforward language, equipped with art historical references, and are often squeezed within the confines of a single-page art review segment—appearing alongside recipes, an advice column on family life, sports news, comic strips and so on, in the *Star Weekly* magazine. Oei’s writings are mostly published under the pen name *Pembantu Seni Lukis Kita* (Our Art Servant), and only on a few occasions does her real name appear in the magazine.

Oei Sian Yok’s attention to moments of transculturalism—especially to occasions when artists moved, and to what they moved between—is arguably quite distinct within the context of the Indonesian-centric nationalist art discourse of her time. This dominant discourse was formed in alignment with the road taken by the postcolonial sovereign state power to construct its exclusive national borders and territory. In Oei’s reviews of an American artist couple’s exhibition, a group show of Indian artists and a solo show by an Argentinian female artist (all of which have been selected and translated here), one may recognize her interest in the way art and artists travel, circulate and traverse national borders. These reviews in turn allow us to pursue a transnationalist path of exhibition history and investigate the political economy of international art encounters. Meanwhile, Oei’s essay “SOS to Our Artists” issues a crucial caveat to the reductionist process of Othering in the course of art appreciation, which in her own words, is “often influenced by negative assumptions that hinder understanding”.

Considered in relation to the politics of Indonesian citizenship at the time, Oei’s position as an Indonesian of Chinese descent—that is, the internal Other of the Indonesian nation—may be interpreted as one reason for her sensible and careful attitude towards the dangerous zone of narrow nationalism. In the period when the following articles were published, the

nationality status of Chinese-Indonesians had not yet been resolved, although the Indonesian and Chinese governments had signed the Sino-Indonesian Dual Nationality Treaty in 1955. The Chinese minority also faced the threat of discriminatory policies resulting from the ambiguous diplomatic relationship between Indonesia and China, which led to the forced repatriation/migration of thousands of Chinese Indonesians.⁵ This is not to mention the racial stigmatisation of Chinese-Indonesians that remains present until today. The visual anthropologist Karen Strassler has argued that the marginalisation of Chinese-Indonesians in the formative years of Indonesian national-modern identity had compelled the minority ethnic community to pursue an outward-looking, cosmopolitan vision that was more open to transnational relationships.⁶ The exclusionary binary logic that was subtly reinforced in the frozen differentiation between the authentic-insider and the alien-outsider in national identity artistic discourse, seems to be discomforting for Oei, especially if we situate her as a figure in the specific political location of being a Chinese-Indonesian subject. Written from the margins of Indonesian nationalised identity, Oei's art criticism evokes an imagined proximity to and ongoing dialogues with cross-cultural dynamics, in which she performs the key role of art critic as a cultural translator.

Oei Sian Yok studied fine art at Balai Pendidikan Universiter Guru Gambar (Higher Education for Art Teacher, now the Faculty of Art and Design under Bandung Institute of Technology) from 1949–53, before she went to the Netherlands to take art history courses as a sit-in student until 1956. A premature reading of her formalist approach to art criticism and her educational trajectory might relegate her to the teleological railway of Euro-American formalist modernism. However, while she is evidently attentive to the formal properties of the paintings she discusses, Oei hardly separates her analysis from the social and cultural contexts of the artists. In her encounters with foreign artists' paintings, she grants space to the outsider gaze that might sometimes lead to the rediscovery of one's home culture, while also being aware of the asymmetrical colonial encounters and the existence of an exploitative exoticising gaze.

The Euro-American version of formalist modernism and its undeclared White value of universality facilitates bias in the interpretation of meanings, by being uninterested in an artist's persona. Oei Sian Yok's formalist procedure, which I would call a "situated formalism", deviates from the universalising and flattening paradigm of Euro-American-centric formalist modernism, as she does not appear to suppress the particular terms and conditions of artists' gazes and their respective artistic encounters. Oei rehearsed her "situated formalist" art criticism with a conviviality towards artists and their

works, at a time when increased ideological polarisation and competition that came into effect due to the heightening Cold War climate gave little space to evaluate the individual agency and interpersonal relationships within postcolonial artistic scenes. A closer reading of Oei's writings might allow us to redefine the philosophical and political values of abstraction that were produced through the multidirectional crossing of artistic styles and subjective encounters in the exhibition history of global modernisms. Her approach can also be read as recalibrating the self-claimed superiority of Western art historical discourse that believes in the unilinear development of modern art from their majestic colonial centres. Such approaches may be resourceful for the historicising project of contemporary art encounters, across myriad globalised artistic communities.

BIOGRAPHY

Brigitta Isabella (Yogyakarta, Indonesia) navigates her encounters with people, objects and discourses through different knowledge production platforms that operate at the intersection of art history, critical theory, and cultural activism. She is affiliated with the Yogyakarta-based interdisciplinary research group KUNCI Study Forum & Collective; the women-led arts network PERETAS (Perempuan Lintas Batas, "Women Crossing Boundaries"); and a member of the editorial collective for the journal *Southeast of Now: New Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia*. In 2014, she initiated "From Bandung To Berlin", a curatorial endeavour that revolves around the speculative interplay between the 1955 Bandung Conference and the 1989 Fall of the Berlin Wall.

NOTES

- ¹ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 11.
- ² Ibid., p. 13.
- ³ I would like to acknowledge Roger Nelson for providing such encouraging feedback and a detailed copy-editing work to this introduction and translation.
- ⁴ The collection of Oei Sian Yok's art reviews has been published as *Dari Pembantu Seni Lukis Kita: Bunga Rampai Tulisan Oei Sian Yok 1956–1961* [From Our Art Servant: Oei Sian Yok's Collected Writings 1956–1961] (Jakarta: Dewan Kesenian Jakarta, 2019). In the book's introduction, I provide an in-depth account of Oei Sian Yok's figure and the place of her thoughts within Indonesian art historiography. I thank Yvonne Low for the friendly and generous conversations that have brought Oei Sian Yok to my attention. Oei Sian Yok was also mentioned in Low's dissertation "Women Artists: Becoming Professional in Singapore, Malaya and Indonesia" (University of Sydney, 2015).
- ⁵ For the most recent and extensive work on the subject, see *Migration in The Time of Revolution: China, Indonesia, and the Cold War* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2019).
- ⁶ Karen Strassler, "Cosmopolitan Visions: Ethnic Chinese and the Photographic Imagining of Indonesia in the Late Colonial and Early Postcolonial Periods", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67, 2 (May 2008): 398–9, 406.

Star Weekly, 10 May 1958

Richard and Jean Wolford's Exhibition: Indonesia As Seen by Two American Painters (1958)

Oei Sian Yok

translated by Brigitta Isabella

When we listen to foreigners talking about our own country, sometimes we don't recognize what they say as something of our own anymore. They often hear or see something that we couldn't perceive, because we have taken things around us for granted, as being ordinary; foreigners might rediscover things for us because they see with the "other eyes".

In general, foreigners' views of a certain country can be categorized into coming from three main groups. There is the group that always complains and mocks a situation that is different from their own; there is the group that unrealistically overpraises everything from a foreign country; and the third group: those who keep their eyes and heart open, accept and pay attention to the situation in a foreign country.

In our view, Richard and Jean Wolford belong to the third group; Jean herself has said she really admires Indonesia, with its paddy fields, gamelan, et cetera, and her paintings are an attempt to show her admiration.

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Richard Wolford ***Jean Wolford***

FIGURES 1 & 2: Profile pictures of Richard and Jean Wolford.

Richard Wolford was born in 1917 in Canton, Ohio and received his education from Cleveland Institute of Art and Western Reserve University. Later he continued his studies under Frank Lloyd Wright, the famous architect. His paintings have been exhibited in Cleveland, New York, Los Angeles and Rome, to name a few. He is part of the ICA¹ team (and has been here for two years), and he works with the Ministry of Information.

Jean Wolford, his wife, was born in 1919 in Cleveland, Ohio, and she also studied at Cleveland Institute of Art and under Frank Lloyd Wright. Her paintings have been exhibited in Ohio, California and Italy.

The works of these two painters were exhibited at the Hotel des Indes from 6 to 8 May, and they consisted of watercolour and oil paintings using the "encaustic method". This method originated in ancient Egypt, and now it is being researched and improved in America. What makes this method special is the combination of paint and a kind of wax that, once heated, will turn into a substance similar to a thin enamel layer. The result is distinct from oil paint and poster colour paint.

Richard Wolford showed bold watercolour paintings; with firm and exact strokes and some cheerful smudges he was able to depict various landscapes of Indonesia, such as scenes of people planting and cutting rice, and fishermen busily drying or spreading their nets. These are ordinary scenes that have often captivated the hearts of painters, but Wolford's suggestive way to show them, with original colour, is always interesting.

FIGURE 3: Richard Wolford, *Seven Bird Cages, Bandung*, watercolour.

More successful are his encaustic oil paintings, which show beautiful colours and harmonic compositions. These paintings demonstrate a little bit of influence from cubism, although naturalist forms are still present. In choosing his colours, Richard Wolford manifests a soft and calm feeling. Whilst his watercolour paintings are impressions with exuberant colours, his oil paintings are deep ruminations from the thoughts and feelings of an artist. One case in point is the painting number 31, *Perahu Nelayan (Fishermen's Boat)*, which awakens a tranquil atmosphere, and has a rhythm, coloured with light brown, mild blue and grey.

Mrs Wolford paints in a very different style. She does not arrange compositions by dividing picture planes, but rather paints the colours side by side without borders, and then within those colour planes, she draws some lines, which look like children's paintings and remind us of Paul Klee, or she draws lines inside the layers of paint, so the painted background disappears. In her choice of colours, Jean seems to favour bold and brave or dark colours.

In an exhibition of two painters it is common to compare them, and in this case they are a married couple. We can conclude that Richard's paintings

accentuate forms and compositions architecturally, while his wife likes to ‘play’ with lines against colourful backgrounds. Richard chooses objects from daily life, or scenes that attract him as a foreigner because of their ‘peculiarity’, and the shape and colour attracts him as a painter.

Jean gives more attention to mysterious and sacred objects, such as in *Stone Idol*, *Rice Goddesses*, and *Batak Spear*, and also crowded scenes such as markets, umbrellas and *becak* (pedicabs). For the latter, she has painted the chaotic scene of a *becak* bursting with red, yellow and green colours, where she also depicts the bravery of the *becak* driver.

The two painters are planning to visit Yogyakarta since it is the cultural centre, and they hope to go there before returning to America (in the next few months). In America they will probably also exhibit the result of their 1.5 years of experience in Indonesia, and we think their results are going to be admirable.

Star Weekly, 4 April 1959

SOS to Our Painters (1959)

Oei Sian Yok

translated by Brigitta Isabella

- Although still at a young age, Indonesian painting has experienced a significant development.
- Yet, sincere appreciation for our very talented painters is coming more from foreigners.
- Our elites who can afford to buy paintings prefer to fill their walls with paintings that are eye-catching yet superficial.
- We can regenerate our society's appreciation of Indonesian modern painting by educating children at school, when they are not yet influenced by negative assumptions that hinder understanding.

At night in the romantic Italian city, Venice, people can hear the voice of gondoliers singing opera arias. Even though they have never entered a conservatorium, they have such a natural talent for singing.

In Spain, people have a talent for dancing, especially gypsies, who often have to live in destitution under a bridge. It is common for their kids, with their dirty faces and shabby clothes, to dance with admirable and lively movements.

Each nation has its own talent. The Indonesian nation has a natural talent for painting. Children show their talent in their gentle and distinctive feelings toward shapes and colours. Painting teachers who have experience in giving art lessons in many countries always admire the paintings by Indonesian children, provided that the children have not received any bad influences to freeze their talents, freshness and spontaneity.

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If the influence from the leading teacher is inappropriate, then a child's talent can be withered before it can grow. It is regrettable that many kids lose their talent for painting. However, some of our painters were able to avoid this danger, and could manage to retain and develop their talent.

Foreigners Give More Appreciation

Indonesian painting as we know it now is still at a young age. However, in such a brief period, it has developed brilliantly.

Oftentimes foreigners express their admiration for our painters, particularly for the young painters who are able to create deep paintings. By 'foreigners', we don't mean the tourists who only want to see beautiful things that they consider to be different and exotic in their eyes. It is not that kind of appreciation that we are talking about; what we mean instead is the educated foreigners who sincerely appreciate paintings. They diligently visit painting exhibitions, even though the location of the exhibitions is often far from their homes.

Why should appreciation for our talented and honest painters come only from foreigners? A foreign proverb says, prophets are never respected by their own nation. Is this also the case for artists?

In Jakarta, almost no painters can make a living from their paintings; most of them have to find another job to survive.

Three Types of Painters

In our opinion, there are three types of painters.

The first type of painters are loved by the public: they are the commercial or trendy ones, who paint only to serve the taste of the public, and given this, their works can no longer be recognised as art. Working with oil paint and canvas does not automatically make one an artist. However, this first type of painters receive huge appreciation from the public, because they paint popular subjects with already well-established styles. However, their paintings are devoid of meaning.

The second type are talented painters who stopped striving to explore after they have received appreciation from the public. They already earn a sufficient—or more than sufficient—income, and their paintings are easy to sell because the canvases are signed by a famous name. When success is gained too easily, painters fall into a dangerous mannerism. An original and distinctive style becomes an established style, and it is then used only to produce paintings that are made without any sincerity.

The third type are the real painters, who are still idealistic and honest: honest to themselves as well as to the public. They really explore their soul, and strive to find the best form to express it. Their spirit is the real artist's spirit.

Yet the third type of painters have not yet received serious appreciation from the public, therefore these painters cannot make a living from their paintings.

Most of the time, only foreigners are willing to buy their paintings. Why does our elite class, or better, our 'leisure class' (who could afford to buy paintings) still prefer to fill their walls with 'Mooi Indië' paintings, which are so eye-catching yet superficial? Maybe this kind of salon painting style is the only one that matches their worldview.

The government has yet to give sufficient attention and appreciation to painters. Its attempts to build an art museum are nowhere near success, yet many new buildings have been constructed for other purposes.

Trying to Understand a Painting

Salim, an Indonesian painter who has been acknowledged by the French and Dutch art worlds, once held a solo exhibition in the Netherlands. Coincidentally at that time, many Indonesian government officials were there to attend the Roundtable Conference,² so Salim invited them to come to his exhibition opening. Not a single official went, although they found the time to visit factories and recreational places. Only on the last day of the exhibition did a government official come in a rush and after looking at several paintings in passing, he commented that Salim's painting style is 'Western'.

Deprecating someone's work as 'Western', as has often been expressed toward Indonesian modern art, is an easy comment, yet more often than not, it is articulated without understanding. Modern art, even if it really comes from Western countries, is an enunciation of a soul (*geestesgesteldheid*). Now that the world is internationally connected through radio, press, etc., is it not possible that some painters face similar problems, and have similar conditions of the soul?

Not to mention that each nation, despite using an international style, could still contribute particular elements for their own nation. Thus, we see in our Indonesian modern painting an order of colours that cannot be found in other places, or shapes that are influenced by ancient Indonesian ornaments.

More important than the East-West matter is the sincerity of the painter toward themselves as well as toward the public.

This should be a consideration when we want to evaluate their works. Appreciating painting will enrich our soul, but to achieve that point we must pay attention, in order to understand it. Many people are unable or unwilling

to understand painting, because a certain opportunism makes them easily satisfied by paintings that are good-looking but actually sterile and shallow.

Perhaps public appreciation for Indonesian modern painting can be re-generated by starting at the level of school children: those who have not yet become influenced by negative assumptions that hinder their ability to understand art. Hopefully our teachers will recognise this important matter, so in the future our painters don't have to wait for appreciation from outside, or be understood only after they are dead.

Star Weekly, 23 January 1960

Exhibition of Old (*Kuno*) and New (*Baru*) Indian Paintings: Indian Modern Painters Respond Fittingly to the Force of the Modern Age, by Sustaining the Special Characteristics of India (1960)

Oei Sian Yok

translated by Brigitta Isabella

Most of us know more about the art from faraway Western countries than the art from our own neighbours. This is mainly because our education puts more emphasis on Western culture; but we are also guilty for not paying attention to our neighbours. And this is regrettable, because the art from our neighbours is really worth recognizing and appreciating.

Now the Indian Embassy has organized an exhibition titled *Indian Art Old and New* in Balai Budaja. This is the first time that an exhibition about Indian art has ever been held in Indonesia.

The exhibition consisted of 35 paintings, 55 antique objects (*barang kuno*) i.e. miniature paintings from 1500 to 1858 AD, while other paintings and sculptures were the results of modern Indian art. The objects in this exhibition were summoned for the Indian Government by the Lalit Kala Academy and Office for National Modern Art, New Delhi, with the assistance of the Department of Science and Culture.

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The exhibition showed a brief overview of the development of Indian paintings.

India in ancient times exerted a huge influence on Indonesia, evident in our Hindu Buddhist arts, in our language, etc. There is a strong bond in the cultural histories of the two nations.

In modern times, Indian and Indonesian artists face similar problems, that is, the confrontation with Western culture and the formation of national art. On the one hand, there is inheritance from old art forms, and on the other hand, there are Western styles and techniques; adding to these are the consciousness and forces of our modern age. The responses from the modern Indian painters can be seen in some of their works, from artists whose names have been famous all over the world, such as Amrita Sher-Gil, Abanindranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore, Jamini Roy, etc.

Looking at the beginning of Indian painting, we were drawn into rock paintings from the pre-historic age, which had also been discovered in Spain, with similar subjects in the paintings, such as animals and hunting scenes.

From the historic age, there were paintings inside the Jogimâra cave in Sirjuga. Although there is not so much literature from this age, we could speculate that in the ages BC there were already paintings, particularly in royal palaces.

The energy to create paintings, however, expanded when Buddhism flourished in the first seven centuries AD. Unfortunately, a lot of artworks from this age have disappeared due to the passing of time and weather conditions. Only some cave paintings, for example in Ajanta, still exist.

The paintings in the Ajanta caves depict religious subjects, which were shaped in a style called the Gupta age style. With smooth lines that consist of a certain rhythm and beautiful, bright colours, these paintings are still admirable and indeed still exert an influence on some modern Indian painters, as can be seen in painting number 16 in this exhibition.

From the Medieval Age, only some books (*kitab*) have survived and include illustrations, which prove the existence of painting in that age.

The marvellous development of painting came under the time of the Mughal Dynasty (North India), due to the support of royal patronage. Paintings made during this time are miniature, an art that can be traced back to Persia. Mughal paintings are delicate, full of details in their depiction of humans and animals, as we can see in work number 37, *Majnu with animals around*.

The themes are fragments from royal life, parties, hunting scenes and other events in the lives of kings and queens, so it can be said that the paintings are an aristocratic art. That is why here in this exhibition we can see paintings such as *Prince and Princess enjoying music* (number 40).

Mughal paintings developed because of the king's patronage, but these also drove the development of authentic (*asli*) paintings, which were dying at that time. This kind of painting was named Rājput. It was like folk art (*seni kerakjatan*) in character, depicting religious subjects and made for ordinary people (*rakjat*) too. Rājput paintings include not only miniature art, and can be categorized into two main groups:

1. Paintings from Rājputana or Rajasthani miniatures.
2. Paintings from Himalayan countries or Pahâri miniatures.

Each of these categories can be broken down into smaller groups.

Most Rājput paintings depicted the life of Krishna, as can be seen in paintings number 81, 82 and 84 in this exhibition; or Siva and other fragments from Hindu mythology. The style used in these paintings shows influences from the cave paintings mentioned above, with smooth and elegant lines and bright colours—they have the character of linear paintings.

During the 19th century, the Rājput school froze and its values diminished. Contemporary (*sewaktu*) to these authentic Indian paintings were also other schools of paintings that were influenced by Mughal paintings or continued the styles of the Deccani school, etc., such as paintings number 42, 43 in this exhibition.

By the end of 19th century, all schools of paintings were facing decadence, although the technical skills of the painters remained strong.

In such a disheartening situation, a painter named Abanindranath Tagore (cousin of the famous poet Rabindranath Tagore) rose up as a pioneer. He gathered a group of young painters who resisted following only examples from the West, and instead studied old Indian art, as well as the ancient arts of Persia, China and Japan. It was a renaissance for the wonder of Indian paintings, and in many cases Western materials were deployed for the old techniques.³

Abanindranath Tagore painted with smooth, lively lines and delicate colours, showing influences from the Ajanta style as can be seen in his *Peacock* painting (number 31).

One of the most prominent painters was a female painter, Amrita Sher-Gil, who passed away in 1941. During her life she didn't receive enough appreciation, like many other major artists. We admire her glorious yet humble style, as seen in her painting titled *A young man in white clothing* (number 11).

Shri R.D. Raval exhibited a successful mixture of a neo-primitive style and a modern, fresh take on his human figures. The forms are authentic, showing a strong personality (see *Study in blue*, number 14).

FIGURE 4: Shri R.D. Raval, *Study in Blue*.

N.S. Bendre, who has visited European countries, the USA and China and now is a professor and head of the Department of Painting at Baroda University, was represented by an oil painting (number 23, *Adiwasi sisters*).

Shri Satish Gujral shows a stylistic influence from Mexico in his painting number 15, *Darkness at noon*, which looks bleak and tense.

Pure and cheerful characteristics could be found in paintings that sought inspirations from Bengala and Andhra folk art, such as those of Jamini Roy (number 30, *Santal dance*), who is the pioneer of neo-primitivism, and Dipen Bose (number 26, *Dancer*) and A. Paidi Raju (number 22, *Broken Strings*), which was full of liveliness with bright and cheerful colours.

The last painter that we're going to mention here is the famous poet Rabin-dranath Tagore, who brought two expressive watercolour paintings that were very wonderful (number 34, 35).

Sculptures exhibited here showed influences from European sculptures, such as from Zadkine in *Lady with cactus* (number 94) and Henry Moore in *Lord Buddha and Ananda* (number 93).

FIGURE 5: Dipen Bose, *Dancer*.

In brief: most modern Indian painters have given fitting responses to the force of modern times, by sustaining the special characteristics of India.

This exhibition should be very interesting for art lovers. There is still a chance to see it until 31 January.

Star Weekly, 4 June 1960

Exhibition of Argentinian Painter Magda Liguori (1960)

Oei Sian Yok

translated by Brigitta Isabella

To develop painting, contact with painters from other nations is significant. Familiarity with painter's creations, which contain the specific characteristics of art from other nations, as well as the painter's individual character, would widen and enrich our views. Thus, we are happy to welcome the exhibition of a woman painter from Argentina, Magda Liguori, which is now held in the Argentinian Embassy, at Diponegoro Street No. 1.

As stated by the Minister of Education and Culture in his opening speech, this is the first time that an Argentinian painter has held an exhibition in our country. Indeed, we rarely have the chance to see exhibitions from foreign painters. It is understandable because there are a lot of difficulties for painters to bring their paintings, such as that faced by Magda Liguori herself.

The young painter Magda Liguori, who arrived in Indonesia around two months ago after her trip around Eastern Asia, was born in 1934 in Buenos Aires. She used to be a student of philosophy in her country. She has been passionate about painting since she was

FIGURE 6: Profile picture of Magda Liguori.

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a child; at the age of three years old, she started to paint without any teaching or guidance, she wanted freedom in painting, as she felt that it is necessary for life. It is only recently that she has joined classes at the art academy in Buenos Aires, although she doesn't want to be constrained by the academy. Besides painting, she also makes sculptures and ceramics, and she even writes too.

In our conversation with Magda Liguori, it turned out that she has a sharp intellect and a soft manner. She thinks that all human beings are created to fulfil a task, specially reserved for each of them. Each human being has to contribute something to the society where they live, according to their own role, be it as a carpenter or as an artist. It is important for everyone to know their role and fulfil it as best as they could, and so it is equally important to seek and know one's inner self. But this is not an easy task and requires a strong personality.

Regarding painting, she said that there are many people who are doing painting in this world, but there are only a small number of real painters, that is, those who know why they paint and what kind of consciousness they are trying to reveal.

Magda Liguori paints in a style called abstract or non-figurative. This style was at first mocked in Europe as well as in North America, but according to her, this is not the case in Argentina, because as a young country (young as in newly independent from its colonizer), Argentina doesn't have traditional arts. It differs from Italy, for example, where for centuries people had admired and reminisced the great age of the Renaissance, which was viewed as the highest peak in the development of painting. In Argentina, people don't have these kinds of assumptions, so they are open to receive new things.

Magda Liguori believes the abstract style to be the genuine form of painting, because the colours are indefinite, there is no restriction of forms, and instead there is an autonomy in painting. Paintings that use form, for her, are merely "coloured drawings" and not real "paintings". Her extreme opinion attests to the fact that until today there are still two opposing views on the value of linear and painterly characteristics, between the main role of lines and colours. Through her paintings, she wants to contribute something that has not previously existed, as there is no use in repeating what already exists.

India, with its intense and flaming colours, really spoke to her; it opened her eyes, so she could paint like she never did before. Indonesia also has forms that amazed her.

Half of the exhibited paintings are the result of her time here: for example, *Djago bertarung* (Cockfight), with its cheerful colours and distinct atmosphere of the event, was the result of her visit to Bali.

It's not easy to discuss abstract paintings. People have to directly encounter them in order to dive into their beauty, such as *Wajang kulit* (*Leather Shadow Puppet*) (7), which is impressive in its composition of deep blue and soft green colours. A black-and-white photo reproduction cannot capture the aliveness of the painting's colours.

Masa lampau jang berketerusan (*A Continuous Past*) (12) is a red composition full of dynamism and tension.

Meanwhile, *Mimpi anak-anak* (*Child's Dream*) (16 b) is poetic and lyrical.

In her paintings of people, she deepened the visual reality, as attested by her self-portrait *Manusia biasa* (*Ordinary Human*) and *Husein*.

Before coming to Indonesia, Magda Liguori visited Japan and India, where she also held exhibitions. Here she has visited Bali for a month, Jogja, Bandung and Jakarta. Through Central Asia and Europe, she will return to her homeland.

Magda Liguori's exhibition remains open until June.

FIGURE 7: Magda Liguori, *Mimpi anak-anak* (*Child's Dream*).

FIGURE 8: Magda Liguori, *Husein*.

BIOGRAPHY

Oei Sian Yok (Magelang 1926–Jakarta 2002) was born to an affluent family that accumulated their wealth through tobacco selling business in Magelang. However, during the political and economic turmoil in Indonesia after the countries' independence, the family business was disrupted and they had to move to Jakarta in 1948. Oei Sian Yok then studied at Balai Pendidikan Universiter Guru Gambar (Teacher Training School, now Faculty of Fine Art and Design under Bandung Institute of Technology) from 1949–53 and continued her study on art history by taking sit-in courses in the Netherlands. After returning from her study, she worked as an art contributor for *Star Weekly* magazine from 1956 until 1961 when the magazine was banned by Soekarno's regime. Oei's writings were mostly published under the pen name Pembantu Seni Lukis Kita (Our Art Servant), and only on a few occasions did her real name appear in the magazine. In the New Order era, when Chinese-Indonesians are forced to change their Chinese names, Oei Sian Yok changed her name to Eugenie Darmawinata. After her art writing career in *Star Weekly* ended, according to her family Oei Sian Yok once opened a small advertising bureau at her house for a short period of time; some of her relatives also vaguely remembered she used to sell some handicrafts to make a living.

NOTES

- ¹ Translator's note: the International Cooperation Administration (ICA) was established in 1955 by the US Department of Foreign Relations to coordinate foreign aid and non-military defense programmes.
- ² Roundtable Conference (*Konferensi Meja Bundar*) was held in Den Haag, 23 August–2 November 1949.
- ³ Translator note: The original word used here was “procédé”, from French (noun, singular).