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INTRODUCTION

Mia Bustam and Her Memoirs: Speaking for Herself

YVONNE LOW

Few Indonesian women painters have left behind as detailed records of their lives as Mia Bustam, who is best remembered as the ex-wife of maestro S. Sudjojono, rather than as a “painter”. She is the author of two memoirs, *Sudjojono dan Aku* [Sudjojono and I] (2006) and *Dari Kamp ke Kamp: Cerita Seorang Perempuan* [From Camp to Camp: The Story of a Woman] (2008), which chronicle in rich textual depth and description the highs and lows of her life—as wife, mother, artist, activist and political prisoner. Born in a minor aristocratic Javanese family, Sasmiya Sasmojo is better known as “Mia”, a nickname that she later gave herself following her divorce from Sudjojono. From her first memoir, we learn of how she came to fall in love with Sudjojono, whom she subsequently married in 1943 in spite of objections by her parents given their class differences. Together, they had eight children before Sudjojono left her for Rosalina Poppeck (later Rose Pandanwangi) in 1959.

Set against the politically tumultuous period of Indonesian Independence under Sukarno’s rule, *Sudjojono dan Aku* presents detailed recollections of all the events that took place during the revolution period, and stands as a testimonial to Mia’s active interest in the work of Sudjojono and the general political events that took place. Yet, this aspect of her character was frequently

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overlooked as she performed the role of the reserved, dutiful and supportive wife in accordance to *adat* (custom) and to the social propriety expected of her gender.¹ This is gleaned throughout the narrative of the memoir as she expressed with honesty and criticality her inner struggles against Javanese ideals to achieve some degree of self-determination in her personal and political life.

To feminist scholar Wulan Dirgantoro, this first memoir “represents a complex kind of truth in self-life writing as it depicts a kind of ‘truth’ that relies on cultural convention concerning what a life should be like, how its story can be told in speech and somewhat differently in writing”.² As part of a larger study to recover women’s history in Indonesian art history, Dirgantoro sought to locate Mia’s agency in her textual contributions, and not merely her visual contributions, because so few of Mia’s paintings remained from her short-lived painting “career” as a result of the communist suppression.

Significantly both memoirs provide irrefutable evidence of how she had articulated creative and intellectual authority in the public arena after her divorce, as marked first by her formal membership in the prominent *sanggar* SIM (Seniman Indonesia Muda), where she was Head from 1962–63 before leading the LEKRA (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat) [Institute for the People’s Culture] branch of Yogyakarta.³ This all came to an abrupt end when she was arrested and imprisoned without trial for 13 years, following the rise of the New Order that purged all “communists”.⁴ Her second memoir *Dari Kamp ke Kamp* largely focuses on the harrowing period of her life as a political prisoner, as she was moved from one prison to another from 1966 through to 1978 before she was eventually released.

Her marked absence in the canonical art history of Indonesia stood in sharp contrast to the much celebrated professional life of her former husband, who is remembered as the “father of Indonesian modern art”. Yet her memoirs have argued against seeking comparability, where her objective was never to demonstrate how she could measure up to men in terms of “greatness” but instead to point to the different terms in which women have had to act under particular socio-political circumstances; here, at the height of nationalism, it was to uphold the traditional and familial values of society. No doubt as well, Mia’s political position as an advocate for socialism may have further complicated and delayed any formal recognition of her participation in Indonesia’s anti-colonial history. The delay in publishing the memoir for close to a decade under the New Order rule because of the sensitivity of the material is an example.⁵ Regardless of the reasons for her exclusion, the publishing of both memoirs have irrevocably concretised her position to speak for herself.

BIOGRAPHY

Yvonne Low is an art historian and lecturer in Asian Art at the University of Sydney. She researches on modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art, with interest in diaspora visual cultures, women's history, feminisms and digital art history. Yvonne has published over 40 books, peer-reviewed journals, and exhibition catalogues. She is co-convenor of two international conferences, Gender in Southeast Asian art histories in 2017 and 2019, and is co-founder of the Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories Research Network.

NOTES

- ¹ *Adat* was particularly binding for the upper classes. A good source on this subject is Cora Vreede-de Stuers, *The Indonesian woman: struggles and achievements* (Gravenhage: Mouton & Co., 1960).
- ² Wulan Dirgantoro, *Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia: Defining Experiences* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University, 2017), p. 99.
- ³ LEKRA is a left-wing organization closely linked with the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI, Indonesian Communist Party). Several Yogyakarta *sanggar* including SIM, co-founded by S. Sudjojono, were associated with LEKRA, which in turn demonstrated strong support for these artists.
- ⁴ Following the “failed” political “coup” on 30 September 1965, which marked the fall of Sukarno and his Old Order, Suharto assumed control of Jakarta and began a campaign “to inflame smouldering class and religious tensions”. Over six months, the Indonesian Left was purged. The left-wing cultural institute LEKRA was outlawed and the painters it supported were killed, imprisoned, or left without prospects for exhibiting their work. See Saskia Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia* (Palgrave: Institute of Social Studies, 2002) and Claire Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967).
- ⁵ Hersri Setiawan, “Introduction”, in *Sudjojono dan Aku* [Sudjojono and I] (Jakarta: Pustaka Utan Kayu, 2006), p. xi.