ti Yang Berbunga-bunga (Blossoming Heart), 1994.

I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasih
A Biography

Nicole Soriano

One year after she finalised her divorce in 1993, I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasih, then a 28-year old budding Balinese artist, painted *Menanti Kedatangan Bapak* (Waiting for Daddy to Come). Washed in soft, pastel colours, the work depicts the body of a slender woman languidly lying down, holding a flower in her left hand. Save for a gold necklace, a pink cloth partially covering her stomach, and a thin watch wrapped around her right arm, the woman is naked. The title and the woman's position reveal a sense of anticipation—capturing a longing so honest and pure, it almost feels childlike.

But perhaps the most intriguing feature in the piece is what is not there. The woman's head is cut off from the frame, rendering her anonymous. There are almost no distinctive marks on the woman's bare body to suggest a specific identity. The woman could be the artist, or not. It could be any Balinese woman, any Indonesian woman, or any woman.

In 1995, *Menanti Kedatangan Bapak* was featured in the artist's first solo exhibition at the Seniwati Gallery in Bali.[1] Its wistful, delicate quality stood in contrast to the more explicit sexual subject matter and unsettling allusions to trauma and abuse that bled into the other works on display. The exhibition shocked the audience which, according to Seniwati Gallery director Mary Northmore, included prominent feminists visiting from the United States, such as two Guerrilla Girls.[2]

"Of the sixty paintings included in that first exhibition, not one was sold," recalls Northmore."I was absolutely convinced that one day her work would be appreciated."[3]

Fig. 1. *Menanti Kedatangan Bapak* (Waiting for Daddy to Come), 1994.

A CHILDHOOD OF POVERTY AND PAIN

Born in Tabanan, Bali, on 4 July 1966, I GAK Murniasih, known as 'Murni', was the tenth child in a poor family. Her father was a farmer, and she grew up with little to no access to schooling. Yet, as a child, Murni already showed an innate desire to draw: lacking pens and paper, she would search for leaves to scratch on after her daily routine of cleaning the cows.[4]

In hopes of improving their livelihood, Murni's family moved to South Sulawesi when she was still a young girl. They took part in the controversial Indonesian transmigration program, in which millions of Balinese and Javanese farming families relocated to work in the archipelago's undeveloped rural islands, as part of the government's efforts to ease overpopulation. The move caused her family to sell their rice paddy, house and land, revealing the desperation of their situation, especially as Balinese, who put great spiritual and religious weight on having access to their birthplace.[5]

Against the backdrop of her family's economic struggle, Murni endured her own private pain as a young girl. When she was seven years old, her father raped her. She stayed silent about the abuse for thirty years.[6]

"I still remember how my father forced himself on me, with no thought to try to protect me. I saw in his eyes, it was like I wasn't his child," Murni shared in an interview with *Hello Bali* in 2003. She recalls how, after being molested one night, she stayed in her friend's house for two days and refused to go home. The abuse harbored in her the desire to run away from her family.[7]

ADOLESCENT LIFE AS A DOMESTIC WORKER

In 1976, ten year-old Murni moved to Ujung Pandang and worked as a domestic helper for a family who was generous enough to send her to elementary school. Juggling school and work, however, was extremely taxing for her young body. Her daily routine involved waking up at three or four in the morning, walking five kilometers to get to school, doing her domestic chores when she got home, and sleeping at almost midnight.[8] She learned how to work intensely, mastering everything from babysitting to cooking to cleaning. "But she was doing that with love, because she knew she needed to do that to continue to school," says her close friend, Ni Wayan Suarniti.[9]

Murni, however, had to quit her studies when the family that she worked for relocated to Jakarta, and brought her along with them. There, she worked as a seamstress in a clothing factory owned by her employers, where she struggled to thread needles because of her poor eyesight.[10] As she entered her early 20s in 1987, Murni decided it was time to go back to Bali to seek independence. Yet, having nurtured a good relationship with her employers, she continued to keep in touch with the family through phone calls and letters even after she left.[11]

Fig. 2. The artist I GAK Murniasih at her home in Nyuh Kuning, Bali, circa 1990-1999.

SEEKING INDEPENDENCE AND MARRYING IN BALI

In Bali, Murni found a job as a jeweler in a silver factory in Celuk, Gianyar, joining the waves of Balinese women who worked for meager salaries in companies serving the tourist and export industries.[12] The job required her to select from a set of readymade Balinese silverwork designs, and produce as many pieces as possible without breaking away from these established patterns. But Murni grew dissatisfied with this process—she wanted to make jewelry designs that were her own.[13] She then began creating new, unique and artistic jewelry pieces, reawakening the creative instincts she had as a child.

Making jewelry ultimately proved detrimental to her poor eyesight, and after two years of working in the silver factory she left. She married a man she met at the factory, and followed him to his village in Payangan, where she soon discovered that being a housewife would not sustain the family—she had to keep working.[14] She returned to domestic work, babysitting the daughter of a Javanese mother and German father.[15]

Tension brewed between Murni and her husband when, several years into their marriage, Murni still could not bear children. Her barrenness was caused by an earlier surgery she underwent to remove a cyst in her womb.[16] Her husband expressed his desire to take a second wife so that he could have children, but Murni rejected his wishes. She refused to partake in a polygamous marriage. "Is there still love if just for the sake of progeny a man turns to another woman? I will never accept that. Never, never, never," said Murni.[17] She asked for a divorce, and chose to live on her own.

DIVORCE AS A WOMAN IN BALI

Murni was allegedly the first Balinese woman to file for divorce.[18] Divorce was unwelcome in Bali due to material and biological property rights, and even more rare for women to initiate, as the local traditional law, or *adat*, was not in the woman's favour.[19] Her divorce was therefore only finalised years later, in 1993, when her husband filed for divorce after his lover became pregnant.[20] "She said to me that after she got divorced, that was when she felt her life started," recalls Suarniti. "She did not have freedom until she divorced from her husband."[21]

Fig. 3. Murni in the patio of her home with Zanolini in Nyuh Kuning, Bali, circa 1995-1999.

BECOMING AN ARTIST

After her divorce, Murni moved to Ubud. Living alone in an environment peppered with art galleries and studios nourished her artistic wonder. She worked in the home of Italian painter Mondo Zanolini, who was introduced to her through her former German employer, and later became his partner. One afternoon, after finishing all her domestic work, Murni asked Zanolini if she could join him in his patio, where he was painting with Balinese artist I Dewa Putu Mokoh.[22] The two artists encouraged her. She sat beside them and began to paint, marking the beginning of her life as an artist.

Mokoh became Murni's artistic mentor. He was a veteran artist of the Pengosekan school of Gianyar, Bali, which employed a brush made of splintered bamboo, and depicted subjects ranging from religious and spiritual symbols, to images of local flora and fauna. Though he used distinct Pengosekan stylistic features—pale and earthy colours, flat perspectives, thick black outlines—Mokoh broke away from the usual Pengosekan subjects in his depictions of sexual relationships, and everyday, intimate domestic scenes, exposing Murni to a broader range of imagery in Balinese art.[23]

This page: Fig. 4. Murni at work, Bali, 1998.

Opposite page: Fig. 5. Murni and her partner, Edmondo Zanolini in Bangkok, 2005.

Having had no formal art education,
Murni initially doubted her skills as an artist.

"She would say, 'Oh my god.
I cannot draw well'," recalls Zanolini.

But he saw her talent, and rather than putting utmost importance on mastering technique, encouraged her to keep painting such that her true self emerged in her work. Eventually, Murni realised that thousands of artists were painting in the Pengosekan style, and that staying strictly within that technique would limit her self-expression.[24] So she carved out her own way.

PAINTING THE SUBCONSCIOUS

Murni began employing brighter, louder colours rather than pale earthy tones, and simplified her paintings to focus on one subject against a plain background, contrary to the Pengosekan's crowded backgrounds. But she continued the Pengosekan style's strong use of symbolism as she painted a deeply personal, interior subject matter: her traumatic past and wild, vivid dreams.

She would often wake up in the middle of the night and immediately sketch her dreams, at times surprising herself at the accuracy of her memory reflected in her drawings.[25] Mondo recalls how he would sometimes wake up early in the morning, and find Murni not in bed, but asleep in front of her painting.[26] When she began painting, she worked frantically and would not stop.

"I lose all track of time. I pass the night chainsmoking and drinking endless cups of coffee, and I paint and paint," said Murni.[27]

Surrendering to the stream of images that emerged from her subconscious, she painted bold depictions of sex and absurd scenes from her dreams: sharp objects piercing through erotic body parts, animals and vegetation morphing into alien-like creatures, for instance. She expressed her pains, pleasures and fantasies with humour and honesty, juxtaposing her mature subject matter with a naïve, childlike style. Unrestricted by conventional social and aesthetic Balinese values, she let her imagination run free, unwittingly breaking social mores and taboos in Bali.

SHOCKING BALINESE SOCIETY

Murni's works that reclaimed her sexuality and body, scarred with the traumas of rape and years of demanding labour, stood in sharp contrast to a culture that favoured women's purity and passivity. People in Bali were accustomed to seeing the woman's nude body as a commodity, a glossy object to obsess over: found in calendars that came from abroad, or erotica art by foreign men.[28] Frank, grotesque expressions of sex and desires, especially by Balinese women, were taboo to local audiences.

Dominated then by myth and legend, the Balinese art world initially snubbed Murni's works. Apart from shunning her lack of formal education, galleries in Ubud dreaded disappointing wealthy conservative customers.[29]

FINDING A HOME AT THE SENIWATI GALLERY

Fortunately, when Murni began painting after her divorce in 1993, an art gallery in Ubud had just emerged two years earlier, dedicated to promoting the works of women artists living in Bali. The Seniwati Gallery aimed to indiscriminately support all women artists, aware that they struggled within an impenetrable male-dominated art world.[30] Thus, when Zanolini approached Northmore presenting Murni's works in 1995 (Murni had been nervous to approach the gallery herself), Northmore instantly invited Murni to participate in a group exhibition, 'Unveiling the Goddess'.[31] In the same year, Murni staged her first solo show at the Seniwati Gallery.

Murni has credited the Seniwati Gallery for refraining from controlling her artistic freedom and creative process. Yet, even within an open, supportive environment, her works persistently disconcerted audiences, particularly women. Recalling her early days with the gallery, she shared how her peers had confessed to feeling shame and embarrassment when they first saw her work. But Murni was unfazed, refusing to suppress her creativity.

Fig. 6. Murni (second from right, waving to the camera) celebrating the birthday of an artist at the all-women Seniwati Gallery in Ubud, Bali, 1998.

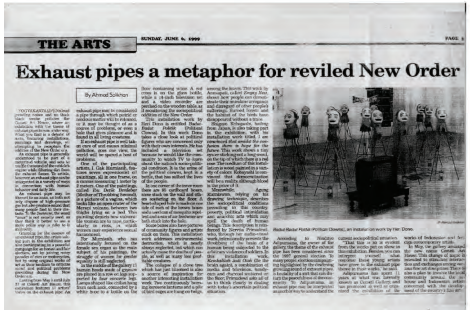
"I just laughed at them," said Murni. "In my opinion, if my paintings happen to touch on so-called taboo subjects, why should I be ashamed?"[32]

Northmore, however, recognised Murni's talent, noting that her original subject matter and experimentations outside the Balinese painting tradition had set her apart from her peers.[33] The Seniwati Gallery actively promoted her work not only in Bali, but internationally: In 1998, the Seniwati Gallery organised a solo exhibition for Murni at the prestigious Fringe Club in Hong Kong. That same year, Murni held a string of solo exhibits both within and outside Indonesia—from Melbourne, Australia, to Bologna, Italy. By 1997, art historian Astri Wright, writing for the Jakarta Post, hailed the 31 year-old Murni as an emerging artist "on the threshold of becoming known, nationally and internationally, as one of the most original younger artists in Indonesia."[34]

Fig. 7. Murni with her close friend Ni Wayan Suarniti at her solo exhibition in Melbourne (From left: Gusti Agung Galuh, Ni Wayan Suarniti, Murni), 1998.

ACCEPTANCE IN THE INDONESIAN ART WORLD

After gaining significant exposure abroad, and after Wright introduced her to the Cemeti Art House in Yogyakarta, Murni began commanding the attention of the Indonesian art world. In 1999, she joined her first major show in Java at the Cemeti Art House, exhibiting alongside prominent contemporary Indonesian artists, such as Heri Dono and Agung Kurniawan. Three months later, she staged a duet exhibition with Nyoman Masriadi, also at Cemeti. The artists in the former show, *Knalpot* (exhaust box), articulated the collective trauma and socio-political issues that prevailed in post-New Order Indonesia.[35] Covering the show for Koran, writer Ahmad Solikhan interpreted Murni's painting of a vagina, open like a volcano crater, as a reflection of women's vulnerability to rape and sexual harassment, particularly during riots.[36] In contrast to the responses at the beginning of her career, which saw her art as graphic and immoral, observers began to see how her works exposed the larger struggle for gender equality in Indonesia.



THE ARTS

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Exhaust pipes a metaphor for reviled New Order

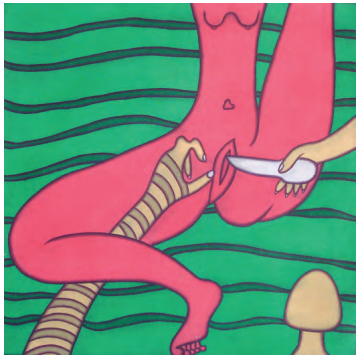
By Ahmad Solikhan

This page: Fig. 8. An exhibition review published in *Koran* on the group show "Knalpot", held at the Cemeti Art House. The article was published on 6 June 1999.

Opposite page: Fig. 9. *Suatu upacara tradisional* (A traditional ritual), 2002.

Zanolini recalls how a magazine called *Latitudes* had asked Murni to contribute works for an issue that tackled female genital mutilation in Indonesia. In the early 2000s, Murni submitted works that featured a knife or scissors cutting through a vagina, belonging to a pair of anonymous legs or torso. The works bore striking resemblance to Murni's earlier paintings that depicted sharp objects piercing through the vagina, supposedly for pleasure. Zanolini shares how these works, to him, were powerful for how they captured the message of the theme: though they were far from realistic depictions of the issue, they expressed something deeper—the unconscious level of others.[37]

Murni's participation in *Knalpot* and her contribution to *Latitudes* reveal her plausible interest in depicting social realities in Indonesia that went beyond her life—a discussion that was overshadowed at the time because of the sensation that surrounded her jarring, explicit work and how Murni herself would claim in interviews that she only painted her life. But in 2000, Murni wrote in an email to Wright about how her concerns were expanding: "Murni is now painting about thin/emaciated people—emaciated because of the Indonesian crisis, where lots of people do not have enough food."[38]



CRITICAL RECEPTIONS OF MURNI

One visitor at the *Knalpot* exhibit encountered Murni for the first time there, and, allured by her works, claimed that they inspired him to start his own gallery. In 2000, Biantoro founded the Nadi Gallery in Jakarta, dedicating its second show that same year to her: *Fantasi Tubuh* (Body Fantasy).[39]

Indonesian commentators at the time, all male, hesitated to read her work through the lens of gender critique. Reviewing the show for Panji Media Nusantara, writer Mas'ad understood Murni's works as reflective of her life and longings: how her work, in its naiveté, attempted to reclaim a lost childhood, and how they likewise revealed a lost fantasy of having a child of her own.[40] He noted Murni's anger towards the unfair treatment of Balinese women compared to men, yet stressed how she evaded speaking on women's struggles, lacking the confidence to comment on a larger feminist discourse.

Another writer, Raudal Tanjung Banua, that same year also described Murni's works as flirty and humorous, rather than heroic revolts against patriarchy.[41] He credited Murni's two male mentors, Mokoh and Zanolini, for bringing her into the art world, and influencing her to break free from convention.

RESTLESS EXPERIMENTATIONS

Living with Zanolini, however, Murni always worked independently. The two painted in separate parts of the home: Murni in her studio to the west, and Zanolini in the patio to the south, rarely meddling in each other's business.[42] Zanolini remembers how Murni was always restlessly learning and experimenting, even as her career was skyrocketing. She was most creative when she was alone, and had the luxury of time to study a new skill. When Zanolini would leave for long periods to travel for work, he would return to find Murni having mastered something new, such as woodcarving and mask-making. She was naturally unconventional—Suarniti recalls that when Murni longed to dance, she learned the *baris*: a pre-Hindu ritual dance that was typically performed not by girls, but boys.[43]

Fig. 10. Murni wearing the traditional *baris* costume, Bali, circa 2003- 2004.

EXPLORING SCULPTURE

In 2003, Murni assisted Zanolini in creating soft sculptures, using the sewing skills she learned as a seamstress. After they worked, Murni would play with the leftover materials, intrigued to explore the three-dimensional form.[44] Murni then began creating her own soft sculptures made of cotton, which were entirely different from Zanolini's. She made life-size works depicting the female form, distorted and imbued with enigmatic clues that provoke a story. Thumb, for instance, shows the shape of a woman possessing thick black stitches that mark across her figure, alluding to a fragmented body being sewn back whole. Describing another soft sculpture, Murni shared how it had represented her body: she placed holes in the woman's vagina, head and heart, inserting an elephant's penis in each hole.[45] The disproportionally large penises captured the feeling of a visceral memory for Murni—her powerlessness as a child before her father.[46]

Fig. 11. *Thumb*, Undated.

REVEALING HER RAPE

In her late 30s, Murni began to speak about her rape. The first person she told, thirty years after the fact, was Zanolini. She then opened up to her older sister in Negara, whom she felt closest to among her siblings, and eventually discovered that she was the only child who was raped by their father.[47] After sharing privately to her loved ones, she shared publicly and candidly in interviews, alluding to how painting was her form of therapy.[48]

In 2004, phalluses became a dominant motif in her work. She exhibited these paintings in a group show at the 10 Fine Art Gallery in Bali, which drew controversy for showcasing work that depicted the male nude body.

But after disclosing her rape in an interview with *Bali Rebound,* Murni defended her work: "I paint like this to get it out of my mind—and ease my heartache. If I don't do it, I feel like I'm being choked."[49]

Untitled, created in 2004, serves as a revealing foil to *Menanti Kedatangan Bapak* (Waiting for Daddy to Come) (Fig. 1), painted 10 years earlier in 1994. Both works feature a nude torso, whose head is cut from the frame, rendering the subjects anonymous. In the earlier work, the woman's figure is conventionally depicted, such that her curves and breasts are clearly defined. Baring her body, she is shown passively waiting for something to be done to her. In the later work, the figure's body is more ambiguous, revealing no curves or distinct male or female body parts. Contrary to the earlier work, the subject's gesture here is active—firmly holding an elongated purple penis in the hand. Understood against the context of her life at the time, the work subtly mirrored the artist regaining a sense of control: of her body, her story.

Fig. 12. *Untitled*, 2004.

FACING CANCER

Sometime in 2004, two years shy of turning 40, Murni was diagnosed with stage four ovarian cancer. According to Suarniti, who accompanied her closely during that time, the news naturally devastated Murni.[50] To calm her, Suarniti brought her to a Balinese healer in a temple, where Murni got on her knees, prayed and wept—a rare sight of Murni, who was not spiritual or religious, and who, in Suarniti's eyes, never cried that way.[51] Zanolini then took her to Bangkok for treatment, where she eventually stopped taking morphine to keep her clarity of mind.[52] She continued to paint even as she was confined to her bed, and often sang songs with words she made up.[53] As she was undergoing chemotherapy, Suarniti recalls how Murni was still lively and kind. She did her best to enjoy her life.

Fig. 13. Murni painting in bed during her treatment in Bangkok in 2005. During this time, she was too sick to sit or stand.

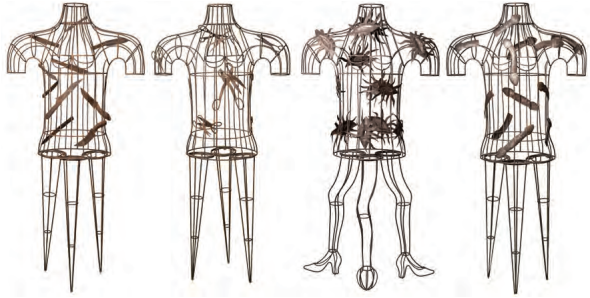
MURNI'S FINAL MASTERPIECE

During a visit to Bali from the yearlong treatment in Bangkok, Murni got in touch with a blacksmith, wanting to create iron sculptures.[54] She gave him drawings and paintings showing her plans for the pieces, and by the time she returned permanently to Bali months later, the blacksmith had already built the structures of the sculptures. The subject was, once again, the body.

Resembling a cross between skeletons and birdcages, the headless bodies contain various objects spread out inside them—penises, vulvas, scissors and knives. Murni had instructed the blacksmith sspecifically where to weld these objects when she came home, even as she was weak and frail.[55]

Out of place in these bodies, the objects evoked a sense of intrusion: this time, not only of sexual organs, but of the rapidly spreading disease and the inevitable medical procedures performed on her over the past year.[56] Creating them was perhaps her final act of rebellion against yet another powerful force that took control of her body.

About one month after she finished the iron sculptures, Murni passed away.[57]



Opposite page: Fig. 14. *Untitled,* 2005-2006.

HER LEGACY

According to Zanolini, Murni made these sculptures at a time when she knew she would soon die. She chose iron because of its durability—she wanted to leave with something that would last. They are consistent with a profound desire Murni expressed towards the end of her life: she wanted to build a foundation that would manage and conserve her estate, ensuring the access to her works for the public.[58] She knew the impact and power of her work, and until her last breath, fought hard to imbue them with a sense of permanence.

Alas, due to various infrastructural and bureaucratic roadblocks in Indonesia, the foundation she envisioned never materialized.[59] The iron sculptures, however, remain. Their hard, strong quality alludes to the resilience of both her spirit and body—a resilience that harkens all the way back to her younger days as a domestic worker, filled with grueling physical and mental labour. While Murni was alive, this defining part of her life had largely been left unexplored in writings on her work, much of which had focused on her overtly sexual themes and personal trauma. But in 2016, ten years after her death, Murni's works were part of a major group show staged in Para Site Hong Kong called *Afterwork*. The show explored the representation of migrant workers in Hong Kong and its surrounding region, and produced a publication that compiled migrant and domestic worker literature from Indonesia, China and the Philippines.[60]

Tellingly, Murni's paintings were selected as the main visuals to accompany these haunting pieces of literature, from short stories to poetry, both classic and contemporary. The publication recognised how her work broke away from the stereotypes surrounding these migrant workers, deeming them as invisible, "anonymous lower echelons of our everyday society".[61] In the context of this book, her work, while deeply rooted in her life, revealed its capacity to go beyond, connecting to the struggles and strengths of those who transcend her place and time.

"I paint to feel that I exist," Murni said towards the end of her life.

From surviving poverty and abuse, defying tradition and leaving her marriage, to making art that dared to tell the truths about her life and desires, Murni did not only exist, but lived a full life of unbelievable bravery. In her art, she took control. It is where she experimented without restraints and refused to surrender her agency until the end. Her legacy endures in the courage and spirit echoing in her art. Encountering her work today, one can almost hear her laughter washing away shame, gently creating space for others to breathe free.

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