

## **'LUKISAN-LUKISAN'**

We should not attempt to define the title of this exhibition literally. We invite the audience to first look closely at what are placed on the walls of the exhibition space. Let's put aside, for a moment, images of flat canvases, of the strokes and strikes of colors associated with the term 'painting', because this current project of Made Wiguna Valasara (born in Sukawati, Bali, 1983) will test our resolve to stay committed to such a definition.

So we see rectangular and circular objects attached to, or hanging on, the wall. Yes, this is how we usually display paintings, as two-dimensional objects. From up close, we will soon realize that the objects have been 'made' using canvas. Indeed, this is the type of canvas commonly used by painters to make their paintings. But wait, why are the canvases all white? Where are the colorful paints that we usually see 'clinging' to the canvases? Isn't white a base, or background, color? And, by the way, can we even call white, a color?

We will certainly see human figures, animals, and objects depicted in this exhibition. So, isn't this a common experience when viewing paintings? But the images do not appear through etched lines, brushed spaces, the play of light and dark of colors creating the illusion of objects on canvas, as usually found in paintings. White panels placed on the exhibition walls present images through a dynamic play of depth and thickness across the surface of each canvas. Our next question is: if the canvases are stuffed or hollowed in many places, can Valasara's works still be considered paintings? Shouldn't a painting be a presentation of image(s) on a flat canvas surface?

### **The Life of a Painter**

Valasara has long been obsessed with painting. By using the term "obsessed", I am not just trying to describe a condition of being continuously 'tempted' or 'possessed', but also a condition of being determined about something. I would also like to explain how Valasara's obsession has gone through the phases of 'blind fanaticism' or 'mere love' of painting.

Valasara's painting obsession did stem from the work of painting itself. I draw a connection between this and the influence of his uncle, a senior painter from Bali, Nyoman Erawan. A young Valasara lived for several years with Erawan. He was often overcome with awe watching his uncle 'draw' on large canvases with expressive

brushes of paint. In the 1990s, Erawan was widely known as a painter who developed abstraction of the objects and symbols found within Balinese tradition. Young Valasara once asked: how can such wild brush strokes of paint on canvas be called 'painting'? Valasara could no longer recall his uncle's answer. But it was clear that the experience of watching his uncle paint had resonated deeply in him, further guiding him onto the path of becoming a painter.

When he was a student at SMSR Denpasar, Bali (an Arts Secondary School in Denpasar, Bali, 1998-2001), Valasara chose to major in "modern painting"—the same major as his uncle, who also went to SMSR. He had a simple reason for his choice: Valasara prefers 'new' paintings, which are different from the ones seen on the walls or ceilings of Balinese temples. In his second year at SMSR, Valasara was already able to complete an oil painting of a Balinese dancer, created in a photorealistic way. 'Balinese dancer' is a common theme or object to be painted by 'modern painting' students at SMSR even today. Looking at the archives and documentation of Valasara's paintings from those days, we can easily conclude that he's a technically-gifted student.

[picture] Made Wiguna Valasara  
*untitled*, 80 x 60 cm, oil on canvas, 1999

In 2001, Valasara enrolled into ISI (Indonesian Art Institute), in Yogyakarta, where his uncle was an alumni. Valasara was accepted as a Sculpture student, but his passion for painting was too great that he wanted to change majors. To do so, he had to re-sit the entrance exam in the following year. His dream came true, and he was (re)accepted at ISI as a Painting major in 2002.

In college, Valasara found himself intensely involved in the art scene in Yogyakarta. He joined Sanggar Dewata Indonesia (SDI), whose members were students and artists from Bali. Unlike other artist's collectives with their informal and fluid structures, SDI is more structured and solid as an organization, with regular programs such as discussions and group exhibitions. Founded in 1980 by senior Balinese artists (I Nyoman Gunarsa, I Wayan Sika, I Made Wianta, Pande Gede Supanda, and I Nyoman Arsana), SDI began as an informal association, or *paguyuban*, to help students newly arrived from Bali to adapt to Yogyakarta's environment. In time, SDI's activities and

programs were slowly streamlined into a specific and collective artistic manifestation. 'Bali' usually informs the themes of their regular exhibitions.

Living and working in Yogyakarta began to put some distance between Valasara and the Balinese attributes that had defined him. Although he was still involved in several of SDI's exhibitions since 2003, Valasara felt that 'deeply Balinese' themes and artistic motifs were not his final aim. His move to Yogyakarta had been driven by the need to expand his horizons and to freely explore new things. In his fourth year of college, Valasara began to shift his thematic focus. He began to consciously avoid depicting icons that were synonymous to 'the Balinese identity'. And if they somehow had to be on the canvas, he would conceal them, or express them in an ironic or critical way.

A substantial growth occurred throughout 2006-2007, when Valasara's works gradually showed formalist elements, especially in terms of lines and colors. In 2006, together with AT Sitompul, Askanandi, Yon Indra, and Antoni Eka Putra, Valasara formed 'Sentak', an artist collective that vowed to explore 'lines' as both visual element and artistic subject matter. The formation of 'Sentak' was based on a creative desire to highlight simple, even elementary, aspects found in the art of painting. This sort of consciousness reflects the artists' skepticism of a tendency to the representational, which dominated ISI's painting curriculum at the time.

For Valasara, there was an even more crucial reason—representation tended to draw him back to a symbolic way of thinking, which he tried to avoid. Born and raised in the middle of an environment steeped in Balinese traditions, Valasara was too accustomed to thinking symbolically. It is true that, fundamentally, our world—the human world—is a world of symbols and narration. However, the Balinese people have their own unique ways to uphold and maintain their rich symbolic tradition in their daily lives. Various elements found in human life, such as objects (fauna, flora, the mountains, texts, colors, numbers, etc), space (loca, cardinal points, house/home, etc), and time (calendar system, day-night, days, weeks, etc) must be read and interpreted according to their symbolic rules. For non-Balinese people, the Balinese system of symbols may come across as too complicated to be fully understood.

Valasara fully understands the fact that as a Balinese, he was born into, and will continue to live in, a 'universe of symbols' with its arbitrary (socially-negotiated) meanings. Consciously or otherwise, the symbolic system has governed his actions and

the way he sees the world, including the world of images, the visual and the visible. In an interview, Valasara once revealed, *“There were times when, during painting, I actually tried to avoid symbols and visualizations, especially those connected to my identity as a Balinese. In Bali, I’ve had my fill of symbols and stories, in the shape of artifacts, rituals, and myths... The problem is, I don’t have the space to ask, once again, the question of why I have to believe the meanings of those symbols.”*

### **Canvas as a ‘Symbolic Material’**

The paintings that Valasara created throughout 2006-2009 mostly emphasized upon dynamic colors and lines. He also worked with repetitive lines and spaces to create an optical illusion of space, volume, and depth. An exploration of lines also took him to use collages, and mixed materials such as plastic hoses, threads, bamboo, *lidi* (coconut leaf spine), etc. In some of the paintings, the composition of his materials combine and mix together with lines and colors created using paint. To put his materials together into a painting, Valasara often had to tear, stuff, and re-stitch his canvas. He used collage as a technique to present the ‘concrete-ness’ of lines, so that his paintings no longer present two-dimensional illusions, but the dimensions of objects in a real way.

[picture] Made Wiguna Valasara

*Menyudut*, diameter 145 cm, acrylic and bamboo on canvas, 2005

In 2010, Valasara’s works began showing a development into much more complex technical aspects. His solo exhibition, *Animal Behave* [sic!] in 2010 marked an achievement in his experimentations, using canvas as material. If in the preceding works, volume and space were presented as illusion or optical plays—through brushstrokes and overlays of lines and colors—then this particular exhibition presented depth in a more ‘actual’ way, that is, through the undulating surface of a canvas. It’s as though Valasara was creating ‘reliefs’ on his canvases, or perhaps soft sculptures—in such a way that the surfaces acquired solidity, contours, and dimensions. The paintings required great dexterity and precise calculations to make. In order to create those contours he filled and stuffed his canvas with soft synthetic materials/fibers such as dacron. He then stitched his canvas according to particular patterns. Truly a series of painstaking work that required great skills and meticulousness.

Another new element introduced in the paintings created in this period was representational forms, especially flora and fauna (pigs, horses, zebras, elephants, etc). These forms were usually presented repetitively within a dynamic composition. In some of the paintings, Valasara would often present the body of an animal only partially, in a corner of the canvas. Other times, presenting it fully, to fill the painting's central space. Some paintings in the exhibition *Animal Behave* [sic!] still demonstrate compositions created using lines and colors. However, in the next exploratory phase, he began to limit the use of colors, even minimizing them.

[picture] Made Wiguna Valasara

*Animal Kingdom - The Last Chronicle*, acrylic on canvas stuffed with synthetic fiber, 180 x 180 cm, 2010

Valasara admitted that the representational forms were only 'triggers', or motifs, for him to create his canvases: he required the shapes of fauna or flora to coax out the objects that he wished to compose as the visual elements to create the contours on his canvas. In fact, Valasara had no intention to convey any sort of message; instead he wanted to give his audience the freedom to assign meaning to the presence of these representational forms.

In 2011, Valasara participated in the residency program *Transit* at Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, Bandung, for three months. It wasn't any ordinary residency program. Every artist involved in *Transit* must follow a series of maturation process through discussions with a number of facilitators. In one of the discussions, Valasara found himself momentarily thrown, in the face of the question: why must his 'contoured paintings' be made on canvas? Senior sculptor Sunaryo, as one of the facilitators of the program, considered Valasara's paintings of 2006-2009 as more akin to reliefs, a conventional sculpting technique.

Sunaryo's question was, indeed, not just a technical examination, but also a way to coax out stronger conceptual reasons behind the use of particular materials. Before participating in *Transit*, Valasara very rarely had to contend with creative blockages. Valasara had been painting with oil colors and canvas since he was fifteen years old. But this one question about the use of canvas truly confused and stumped him. Never before had he ever doubted the inevitability of canvas as an artistic medium.

While in *Transit*, Valasara's creative process stopped for about two months. Yet, the facilitators allowed him to be. Rather than telling him to work, they guided Valasara's explorations through continuous and intense dialog, until Valasara became aware that an artist's belief in the 'inevitability of canvas' proves that an artistic medium could also be ideological. Through its long history, strengthened by the hegemony of modernism, and lately, by the contemporary art market, painting has been transformed into a singular institution. In an extreme sense, painting is no longer one choice out of many forms of artistic practice; it has become its own category with its own legitimacy, as though anything placed on canvas will inevitably turn into 'art'.

At the end of his *Transit* residency, Valasara finally completed three paintings. At *Unload/Reload* (2011 and 2012), an exhibition presenting the fruits of the residency program, he showed works that, at first glance, looked like appropriations of figurative paintings by Western artists such as Jenny Saville and Lucian Freud. The choice of Freud and Saville was merely because their works depict the human body in a painterly way. According to Valasara, Saville's and Freud's figures transcend the achievements of photorealistic painters such as Chuck Close. The 'language' employed by these two artists is a language that is not only unique in painting itself, but something that rises out of a historical accumulation of existing figurative paintings. This time, without color (all white), Valasara's 'paintings' showed off canvases with contours that follow the folds and slopes of the bodies of Saville's and Freud's figures.

[picture] Made Wiguna Valasara

*White #1, After Freud*, 200 x 260 cm, canvas stuffed with synthetic fiber, 2011

Valasara's works in today's *Lukisan-lukisan* exhibition are still connected to everything he had discovered during the time spent with *Transit* residency program. Not to present paintings in a conventional sense, the current exhibition must be seen as a project that questions painting as an 'ideological' practice. It is true that the works at this exhibition have been created using canvas, but not canvas as a neutral medium. Here, canvas is positioned as a 'symbolic' material, because it carries with it the weight of history and the many implications due to painting's domination over centuries of artistic practice.

For this exhibition, Valasara has chosen to work his canvases with images 'borrowed' from Renaissance paintings. Why Renaissance? Valasara wishes to show the

breadth of (Western) art history, which he still accepts. This project is not to emphasize these historical canons; rather, the project uses them as way to guide us toward a conversation about how our understanding of art is still very much influenced by dominant (Western) historical constructs. The Renaissance period had indeed given birth to the many revolutions in art and culture, including painting. One of the 'discoveries' of Renaissance painting was the renewal of processes and use of oil color, so that the colors (as used in the works of that period) could create truer illusive effects. In addition, the discovery of perspective in painting has influenced how painted objects can be captured by our eyes more accurately, or can be closer to reality.

Works in this exhibition will remind us of the images belonging to the Renaissance art canons, including *Pieta*, *Creation of Adam* (Michaelangelo), *Mona Lisa* (Leonardo da Vinci), and *Entombment of Christ* (Caravaggio). Valasara has deliberately played with the main narrative construct found within these canons by 'dividing' the sum into parts or fragments. Some of his works are created by substituting certain parts from one painter's work with parts or fragments from another canon. Valasara is not trying to create a new narrative or meaning. Instead, he is playing with, and using, the historical canons as texts that are open to change. Valasara is interested in the various characters embodied in the figures within these Renaissance works, because he believes that they can strengthen the way he creates contours and slopes on his canvases.

At this exhibition, we can still find a connection to optical illusions—a long-standing motif and subject matter in Valasara's works. Looking at the canvases from a distance, we will become aware of how the human eyes are very susceptible to manipulations or tricks of light. Because he doesn't use colors to emphasize light and dark, Valasara's raised objects may appear sunken, and vice versa; the sunken parts can also appear raised in photographs.

In *Interpreting Caravaggio #3*, which unites convex and concave segments on one canvas space, it is clear that Valasara has gone some distance away from common patterns of sculptural reliefs. Meanwhile, in *Carousel*, Valasara seems to be dismantling the idea that painting is synonymous to a canvas with clear boundaries or limits. He has taken common Renaissance iconographies (fauna, human forms, angels/cherubs, the Virgin Mary, Jesus, cupids, etc), and reproduced them arbitrarily across the walls of the exhibition space.

Original or complete Renaissance historical narratives are not present here. But these canvases, as material, and their familiar iconographies easily remind me of Western art canons, and more specifically: paintings. Here, the icons of art history have been uprooted from their sources, and are transformed into something different. The situation offered by this exhibition reminds me of a migration, or a mutation, of cultural symbols within the context of today's Internet-connected society—one that is massive, rhizomatic, without any clear patterns or reference points. These days, we often see, for instance, religious symbols being borrowed, appropriated, reproduced, modified in such a way as to diminish their aura within the simulacra. Perhaps, this is a conceptual layer hidden behind Valasara's *Lukisan-lukisan* project: this exhibition intimates that painting has made profane its purity and sacredness.

Finally, I wish to return to the very thing I mentioned in the beginning of my essay. I am in the opinion that a painter should have a deep obsession and belief in painting. However, this belief should not be diminished by mere love, or worse, blind fanaticism toward convention and institutional definitions. With these positive attitudes, we can avoid hurrying painting into failure or even death.

**Agung Hujatnikajennong**

Curator