

I NYOMAN ERAWAN  
PRALAYA MATRA



BEAUTY  
WITHIN  
DESTRUCTION

KOMANEKA FINE ART GALLERY

I Nyoman Erawan 1978.

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KOMANEKA FINE ART GALLERY  
UBUD, BALI

Front cover: *Pralaya Matra CXVII*. 1998, acrylic on paper, 35 x 29.4 cm

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# THE DIMENSIONS OF DISINTEGRATION

by Putu Wirata Dwikora

*Creation and destruction  
Are processes of life  
Which are ancient and consuming  
Of everything,  
Fragmenting and tearing apart all  
That appears to be orderly and chaotic...  
So it is for us  
Who live with the knowledge that it all ends  
In death  
For organic and inanimate forms.  
And it is this impermanence of life  
That is our end  
At last...  
Oh Almighty God... protect us!*

(I Nyoman Erawan, "Creation and Destruction", 1989)

I NYOMAN ERAWAN was born in 1958 into a community of artists and performers in Dlodtangluk, a part of the town of Sukawati in Gianyar, Bali. From an early age, Erawan absorbed art, culture, and ritual into his daily life. His father, a former village headman, is familiar with Balinese and Old Javanese literature, while his mother produces gold-leafed cloths for religious ceremonies. After finishing junior high school in Sukawati, he continued his education at the High School of Fine Art in Denpasar, then went on to the Indonesian Fine Art Academy (now the Indonesian Arts Institute) in Yogyakarta, Java, where he majored in painting. While he was a student, he never was far from the art world. He was active in experimental theatre and the Sanggar Dewata Indonesia artists' group in Yogyakarta.

Erawan now lives in his family compound in Dlodtangluk, where he continues to have social contact with those he grew up with. Villagers often ask him to help make animal-shaped sarcophagi for cremations, which he does as a member of his community. In addition to his artistic activities, Erawan has participated in many group and solo exhibitions in Indonesia, Australia, Switzerland, and Holland, where his works have stirred controversy in the world of art.

## Beauty within Destruction

WHENEVER SOMETHING is created, there comes a time when it is faced with destruction. Both creation and destruction coexist, revolving around a wheel that no one knows when or where it will stop. Human consciousness and memory ends with the time of death. This is the focal point for the creativity of Erawan. For

him, death is a natural word for maintaining order and balance, of birth followed by death. The human mind has the power to create civilization, especially things associated with the “culture of death”.

Hindu philosophy teaches that life moves in the circle of universal time, from birth to life to death. What is created subsequently grows and develops, then “surrenders” to the processes of decay and decline that eventually ends in death. Death is not just a separation of the soul from the body; it is a mystery regarding the identity of the soul and the afterlife. In Bali, the “culture of death” includes not only loud processional music accompanying the carrying of the sarcophagus and tower in colorful procession, but also with quiet moments when the singing of poetry and melancholy music can be heard.

Erawan creates from these things. His obsession with creation and destruction challenges us in his works with deeper meanings of disintegration, time, and the past. Erawan expresses these views in *Antiquity* (1987, 70 x 63 cm, mixed media) with a mountain painted upon a traditional Balinese calendar painting. The work is shaped and marked with burns, cracks, and holes. Erawan shows that things no longer are the same due to “time” and “fractures”, but there is no need to regret that traditions are undergoing natural decay. Death and destruction cannot be prevented by anyone.

More explicit expression is apparent in the work *Dark Destruction* (1990, 1000 x 70 cm, mixed media), made from a board with natural cracks. Upon a background color of yellow with some blue, Erawan has arranged rows of circles in white, red, brown, and black. From the lower section, a black cloth hangs down. The work evokes the mood of a Balinese cremation, the flaming fire having consumed the body of the deceased person and leaving behind remnants. In *Pure Dissolution* (1990, 1000 x 70 cm, mixed media), the mood of a cremation still can be felt in another way. The white cloth hanging from the bottom of the board used for the painting evokes a rite of purity, a ritual ascent to heaven to become one with the deities. Meanwhile, *Temple Dancer in Blue* (1991, 200 x 200 cm, mixed media) is made from part of a hollow tree, the rough surface painted with yellow and white with colorful patterns in certain areas. A blue cloth is suspended from strips of wood. The work illustrates the confrontation between old and new, destruction and beauty.

From 1984 to 1999, Erawan remained obsessed with images of death and the dimensions of destruction, something that clearly was problematic for humanity towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the economic crisis that struck most of Asia, compounded by political problems in Indonesia, Erawan became preoccupied by the destruction of society as it was torn apart by traumatic events.

## Avant-garde Balinese Tradition

If the Western concept of modernity is viewed as the opposite of tradition, then the works of Erawan are not directly in contrast to tradition. Rather, he continues the process with naturally occurring changes that have evolutionary qualities. Erawan uses traditional art as decorative elements. He adapts and assembles symbols from puppet paintings, checkered cloths, perforated Chinese coins, spears, plant fibers, broken canoes, fishing nets, and other objects to illustrate his contemporary language and make it easy to understand. In his works these objects are completely removed from Balinese symbolism and culture, so that they become Erawan's personal expression.

The Indonesian art critic Jim Supangkat has called the works of Erawan – including both three-dimensional pieces and performance art – as the “avant-garde tradition” of Balinese modern art. Meanwhile, art critic

Jean Couteau views Erawan as an artist who creates new symbols by making use of traditional ones: "He takes traditional elements and combines them, then completely breaks them apart for a new symbolic unity. In this way he creates a modern Balinese language that is individual and collective at the same time."

Erawan presents problems of destruction in an original way by making holes in his paintings, scraping and scratching the surface, or letting paint drip down. By rejecting and criticizing violence, he pays attention to injustice, and in symbolic ways reminds people to practice self-restraint. Such reflections are obvious in *Dimensions of Death* (1995, 500 x 500 cm, mixed media), in which he invites viewers to ponder the fate of humans who suffer from exploitation and oppression as a result of institutionalized violence by those in power.

The thought provoking installation *The Pierced One* (1993, 300 x 1500 cm, mixed media) shows a chunk of wood, lying like a frail body upon a blood-red mattress. Twelve spears are stuck into the wood, while six long tubes hang down from its "belly", and cock-fighting spurs of different sizes are inserted in the "head" like curls of hair. The impression is of a vulnerable and oppressed person, powerless against violence, an ever-present sociological phenomenon.

## Performance as Art

While he was a student in Yogyakarta, Erawan participated in performances as another outlet for his creativity. This passion for art and performance later became manifested in his performance art pieces like *Kecak Artistic Healing*, which was done in front of the Latta Mahosadi Museum for the Performing Arts at the Indonesian Arts College in Denpasar. The inspiration for this contemporary *kecak* composition with chanting dancers came from the *Ramayana* epic, when Lakshmana was wounded by the arrow of Ravana and was healed by medicinal plants. In the climactic scene the monkey Hanuman, unable to find the healing herbs, carries back the whole mountain peak on which they grow. This event was dramatically acted out when pots of paint hanging from a scaffolding were cut free to swing down and smash against a wooden wall measuring 10 x 5 meters, splattering their contents and forming a gigantic painting.

In 1998, Erawan continued with these unconventional ideas in *Ritual Artistic Purification*. Beneath a tree, he constructed a stage in the middle of a canal flowing through the Art Centre in Denpasar. One level of the stage was empty, another filled with mud, while one section was like a raft made of ten boards. An additional platform contained offerings for the purification. The performance began with a scene of shadow puppetry by the artist on the highest platform. Wearing a mask, Erawan then cut his way through the puppet screen and descended to the empty part of the stage where he danced with a sprinkler on his head that sprayed water. He circled the sides of the platform and struck large pieces of metal hanging from the tree. In the longest scene, he created ten figures of mud on banana leaves upon the floating raft, one on each board. During the final scene, Erawan was ritually purified on the platform of offerings, and a Hindu priest shaved his head.

Not everyone can comprehend the deeper intellectual and critical content of Erawan's art. His works, however, neither question development projects that desecrate holy sites, nor do they criticize the commercialism and exploitation of culture. An artist is not the primary agent of social or political change, for criticism alone cannot be the driving force behind creativity. His works can be placed in the context of time, whether past, present, or future.

# BREAKING DOWN ARTISTIC BARRIERS

by Jim Supangkat

CONTEMPORARY ART no longer only means "art of the time". It is artistic expression full of aesthetic ideas, standards, conventions, and spiritual tendencies. Contemporary art, also called post-modern art, generally is considered to have appeared during the early 1970s. It rejects the modernism that developed after World War II and which became dominant in Europe and America up to the end of the 1960s. There are many points of departure between modern and post-modern art that are not entirely relevant in regards to Indonesia. Yet standards of contemporary art demand closer examination, beginning with universal conflict as the fundamental assumption of modernism. This is the most influential expression in the final development of modern art.

Modernism often is interpreted as an ideal collectivism of the modern world, but this is not entirely correct. In the development of art during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, modernism was a very influential and emotional force that was adapted by non-Western peoples. As a means of expression, modernism is very complicated and subject to debate even today. Yet it is unclear as to how modernism emerged as a criteria among critics, art historians, and curators in Europe and America. During the 1960s nearly every major gallery and museum in the West followed this practice, which led to institutionalized modernism. This was applied even to non-Western art, based on the belief that modern art throughout the world represented a unity by following one system of values.

Institutionalized modernism was not only influential but also dominating, for international exhibitions focused on the contradictions between tradition and modernity, the absolute power of progress, the background of the artists, chronological history, and the search for purity in art that was reflected as a visual language. These forums were considered to be the starting point for modern art, beginning with the artists coming only from Europe or America; those from Asia, Africa, Australia, or Latin America were ignored. This led American art critic Lucy Lippard to denounce modern art towards the end of the 1960s. She expressed her views about the "decay" of modernism by examining the discrimination practiced by major museums in America. In her book *Mixed Blessing: New Art in Multi-cultural America* that was written in 1990, she pointed out that no female or non-white artists were represented in major American museums. As a result of this discrimination, Lippard saw modernism as a white male phenomenon.

This issue quickly spread and gave rise to the consciousness that modernism alienated world art, an accusation that was not just theoretical. Modern Indonesian art experienced this revelation when major museums in the West refused to consider it as modern. It was regarded as lacking in development, having stopped at realism and expressionism. Growing resistance to the domination of modernism resulted in regional exhibitions across the globe. Contemporary Third World artists who did not apply the discrimination of modernism emerged, and variety was acknowledged. Representational trends that were once considered as outdated modernism were revived. Public issues that were regarded as polluting the purity of modern art became popular themes in contemporary works. Traditions that were "forbidden" to be expressed in contemporary art came to be of prime importance in understanding these works from the Third World.

In contemporary art exhibitions throughout Asia and the Pacific, the connections between tradition and modernity are the main issue. These attempts still give rise to controversy, because such exhibitions group together the contemporary art of Asian countries with those of the Third World that do not yet have it. The question remains as to what kind of art is contemporary from these countries. As a result, debate continues over the contacts of modern art with the traditional world, and over the role of tradition in the development of contemporary art.

## Symbols of Social Reality

Exhibitions of regional contemporary art should investigate these trends before they become included in the traditional framework of art. In this context the works of I Nyoman Erawan are very important in pointing out contacts between modern and traditional art and showing the position of tradition in contemporary art. In particular, during 1997 and 1998 he presented two performance art pieces, *Kechak Art of Healing and Ritual Artistic Purification*. These works no longer can be seen in the context of tradition, for Erawan used forms that usually were expressed in contemporary art. He created gigantic installations and fully showed performance art as collaborative public pieces. They also invited public participation in their social-political impact. Both of these works thus can be viewed as community art because they fuse together contemporary and traditional phenomena. This artistic trend is but one matter of discussion, for fusion signals the way for future developments in contemporary art.

The works of Erawan in all their various forms take their inspiration from tradition, but they do not stop there. His installations appear to be mystical, while his performances emphasize more human qualities. He selects ethical themes and applies them to contemporary life. What emerges is a kind of social reality in his works, so that traditional themes appear to be stronger. Traditional symbols that usually are signs of balance become dynamic in his works and indicate anxiety in the face of social reality. The energy in Erawan's creations also gives rise to emotions in the use of collective tradition, personal symbols, mythological themes, and their primeval quality. Given the tension between the individual consciousness of the artist and the subconscious collective world, Erawan creates new symbols due to the transformation of energy.

## PERFORMANCE ART

1998 *Ritual Artistic Purification*, Taman Budaya (Denpasar)  
1997 *Kechak Artistic Healing*, Latta Mahosadi Museum for the Performing Arts, Indonesian Arts College (Denpasar)

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1996 Sanur Beach Festival, Darga Fine Art Gallery (Sanur, Bali)  
*Dimensions of Death* installation, Hyatt Hotel (Sanur)  
1995 *Creation and Destruction*, Natayu Contemporary Art Gallery (Sanur)

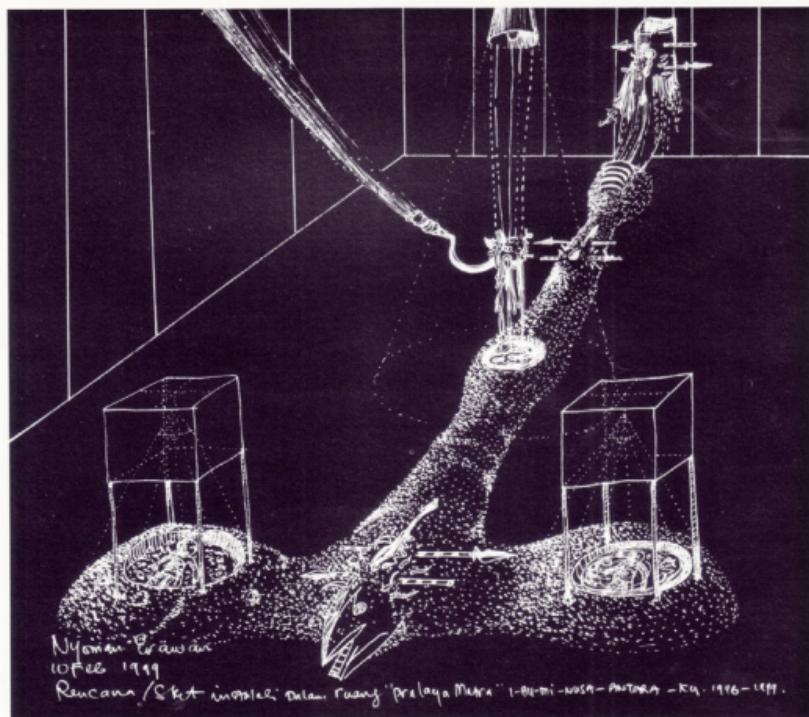
## GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1999 Indonesian Paintings, Garuda Hotel (Yogyakarta, Java)  
*Avant-garde in Tradition*, Edwin Gallery (Kuta, Bali)  
1998 *Images of Power: Expression of Culture and Social Awareness in Southeast Asia*, Jakarta International School  
*Uncovering Layered Meanings in Decorative Art*, Puri Lukisan Museum (Ubud, Bali) (also in Yogyakarta, Bandung, and Jakarta)  
*Six Indonesian Painters in Paris*, Darga and Lansberg Gallery (Paris, France)  
*Winners of the Phillip Morris Art Awards, 1994-1997*, ASEAN Secretariat Building (Jakarta)  
11<sup>th</sup> Jakarta Fine Art Biennial, Taman Ismail Marzuki (Jakarta)  
Sketches and Drawings by Matahati group, Taman Budaya (Denpasar, Bali)  
Sanggar Dewata Indonesia group exhibition, Benteng Museum (Yogyakarta)  
1997 *Art of Nyoman Eruwan and Eddi Hava*, Santi Gallery (Jakarta)  
Sanggar Dewata Indonesia and Sabi (Dutch) group exhibition, Sika Contemporary Art Gallery (Ubud) and Dutch Embassy (Jakarta)  
*Master Artists of Indonesia*, Darga Fine Art Gallery (Sanur, Bali)  
1996 *Three Cities*, National Monument (Jakarta)  
10<sup>th</sup> Jakarta Fine Art Biennial, Taman Ismail Marzuki (Jakarta)  
1995 *Art from the Non-Block Movement*, Department of Education and Culture Exhibition Hall (Jakarta)  
*Farewell to Paradise? New Views from Bali*, Museum of Ethnology (Basel, Switzerland)  
1994 Sanggar Dewata Indonesia group exhibition, Nyoman Gunarsa Museum (Klungkung, Bali)  
Jakarta International Fine Art Exhibition, Shangri-La Hotel (Jakarta)  
International Fine Art Exhibition (Singapore)  
1993 Indonesian Cultural Exhibition (Amsterdam, Holland)  
1<sup>st</sup> Triennial Asia-Pacific Contemporary Exhibition, Brisbane Gallery (Queensland, Australia)  
9<sup>th</sup> Jakarta Fine Art Biennial, Taman Ismail Marzuki (Jakarta)  
1992 Experimental Art, Taman Budaya (Denpasar)  
Contemporary Art, Jakarta Design Centre  
*Five Installations*, Hidayat Gallery (Bandung, Java)  
1991 Sanggar Dewata Indonesia group exhibition, Taman Budaya (Denpasar)  
*7 Artists of Sanggar Dewata Indonesia*, Rudana Gallery (Ubud)  
*Selected Young Artists*, Department of Education and Culture Plaza (Jakarta)  
1990 *Modern Indonesian Art: Three Generations of Tradition and Change*, Festival of Indonesia in America (various locations)

7 Artists of Sanggar Dewata Indonesia, Neka Museum (Ubud)  
1989 Non-traditional Balinese Paintings, Taman Budaya (Denpasar)  
*Black and White Exhibition*, Taman Budaya (Denpasar)  
8<sup>th</sup> Indonesian Painting Competition and 7<sup>th</sup> Jakarta Fine Art Biennial, Taman Ismail Marzuki (Jakarta)

#### AWARDS

1995 voted 3<sup>rd</sup> best artist and 15<sup>th</sup> best painter in Indonesia by 11 art critics for *Gatra* magazine  
1993 one of ten best paintings, The Phillip Morris Group of Companies Indonesian Art Awards Competition, Yayasan Seni Rupa Indonesia (Jakarta)  
1987 best painting, Indonesian Art Institute (Yogyakarta)  
1985 best painting, Indonesian Fine Art Academy (Yogyakarta)  
1982 Lempad Prize, Sanggar Dewata Indonesia (Yogyakarta)  
1979 best painting and sketch, Indonesian Fine Art Academy (Yogyakarta)



## Colour Plates

*Pralaya Matra CV.* 1998

Acrylic on canvas

130 x 130 cm



*Pralaya Matra CVI*. 1998

Acrylic on canvas

130 x 130 cm



*Pralaya Matra CVII.* 1998

Acrylic on canvas

95 x 45 cm



*Pralaya Matra CVIII.* 1998

Acrylic on canvas

95 x 65 cm



*Pralaya Matra LXXXIV*. 1998  
Acrylic on canvas  
130 x 160 cm



*Pralaya Matra CIX.* 1998  
Acrylic on canvas  
60 x 60 cm



*Pralaya Matra LXXXIII.* 1998

Acrylic on canvas

130 x 160 cm



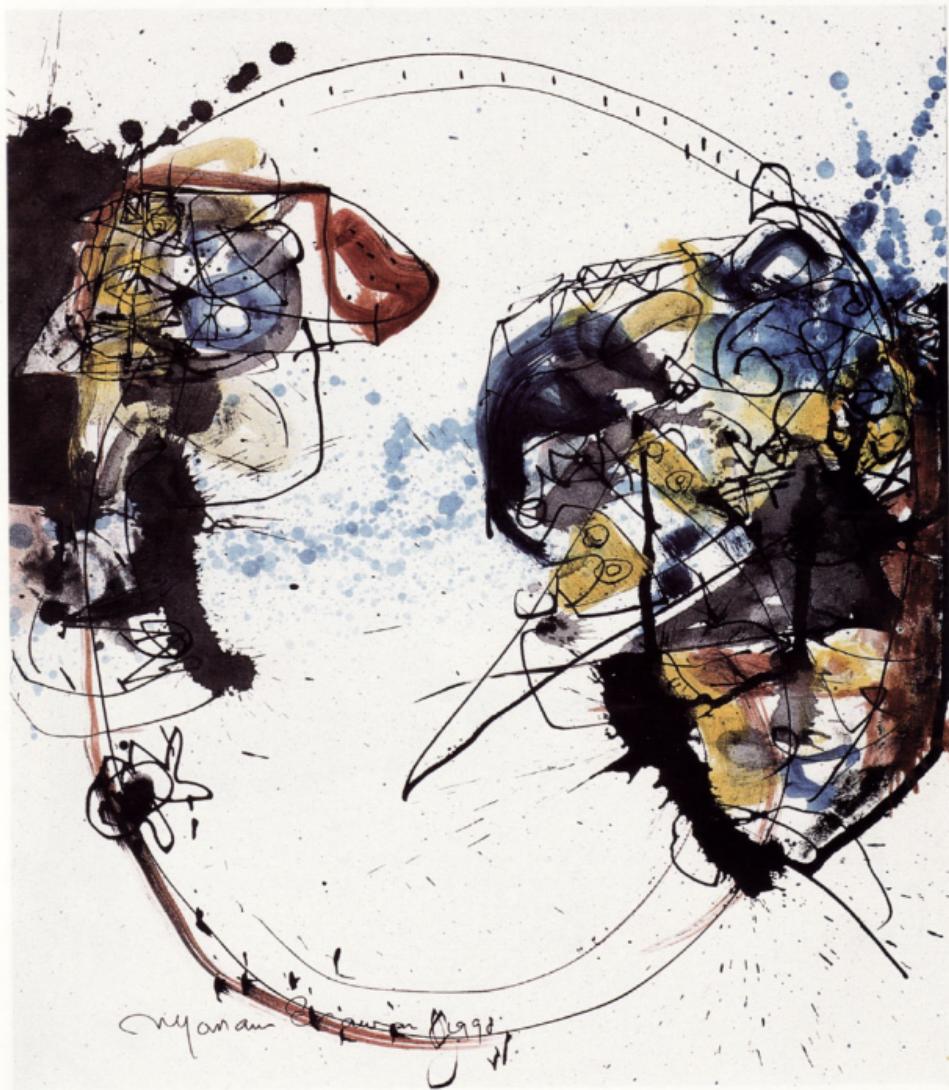
*Prataya Matra CX* 1998  
Acrylic on canvas  
130 x 130 cm



*Pralaya Matra CXIX.* 1998

Acrylic on paper

35 x 30 cm



*Pralaya Matra CXX.* 1998

Acrylic on paper

27.5 x 21.5 cm



Ernesto Gravina  
1978