

About the Cover

Punctuated Equilibria and Indonesian Art

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What defines the evolution of craft to an art form? Is it the length of time that a person puts into producing it? Probably not, for the cardboard cathedrals crafted by John Merrick (the Elephant Man) surely equate in time and effort to a typical sculpture; however, one is whimsy and the other is art. Is it an issue of quality, where a refined craft eventually becomes art? The Dürer woodcut, the carved burl, and the samurai sword are of undisputed quality—but art, not necessarily. Is it the level of abstraction or impressionism in figurative expression? If so, we might compare a tourist caricature painter to one of the Dutch masters. Perhaps the closest definition is this: craft is the basic repetition of a learned skill, whereas art suggests creative innovation even if applied to old technology.

In this issue's cover art, we witness a natural experiment in the evolution of art from craft. In this case, the art is "Luxuriant Grass," by Indonesian artist Mardiyono. The craft is batik, a fabric that has been decorated using a wax resist dyeing method. First, the batik maker applies a pattern of hot wax to a cloth. When the wax dries, the fabric is either brushed with or dipped into a series of dyes. The wax, which is later removed, preserves intricate patterns of unstained cloth.

Throughout Southeast Asia, batik carries great cultural significance. Batik can be defined according to pattern, color, or fabric. In Indonesia, traditional Javanese court batik consisted of specific symbolic and ceremonial motifs, typically dyed in earthen tones. However, due to colonial rule, wartime occupation, maritime trade and other geopolitical factors, Indonesian batik patterns have also been known to include European bouquets, Indian peacocks,

Chinese phoenixes, and Arabic calligraphy (UNESCO 2009).

At its origins, batik was an art intended for royal appreciation (Elliot and Brake 2004). Over time, as innovative artistic designs became recognizable symbolic patterns, batik shifted into the realm of cultural craft. In the expanding regional markets of the mid-1800s, batik makers turned to copper stamps to apply the wax to large swaths of fabric. This allowed for faster production of precisely patterned batik textiles, turning cultural craft into an industry. In the 1960s, new technology encouraged the production of yardage of batik for clothing in Western-style cuts (Elliot and Brake 2004). In Malaysia today, many government departments honor "batik Thursday," a far more elegant contrast to our Western "casual Friday."

How can we map the transformation of modern batik? For batik, the evolution of art from craft did not occur along a smooth trajectory of increasing abstraction or finery of detail. It occurred in the shift away from a repetitive, learned skill. In "Luxuriant Grass," Mardiyono's change is stark but simple. Rather than repeat figurative motifs on a stained background, Mardiyono keeps large swaths of the silk canvass pure crystal white. Moreover, he paints free-hand renditions of Indonesian scenes with stunning detail and explosive color. This artistic leap punctuates the equilibrium to push the evolution of art in a single generation.

This is an exciting time for aficionados of 'Eco-Art' (see www.ecoartsonline.org). To witness the birth of a new art form is equivalent to witnessing Halley's comet. What do new artists choose as they look for subject matter to

distinguish their form from that of others? In “Luxuriant Grass” Mardiyono gives us a reflection of what he sees in the hills of Indonesia—biodiversity in its resplendent magnificence. Here, thin stalks bend, heavy with flower blossoms. Thick leaves, peppered with rainforest algal blooms and fungal blight, serve as perches for iridescent dragonflies. He also stretches us a little, giving a first glimpse into what the future of Indonesian art might bear. His true artistic innovation is in the white space and the flash of black that crisscrosses the background. The negative space enclosing this definitive scene is a radical jump for batik and the sign of a great artist.

Will this art continue its evolution to mimic life, becoming an abstract realist’s plea to deal with landscape change? This would be a worthy goal, given the rampant deforestation in Indonesia, Malaysia and the rest of southeast Asia. Or, will this art continue its evolutionary drift to abstraction, with each vivid streak of black, or each panel of crystal white, becoming more important than the subject matter itself?

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Mardiyono (1955-) was born in Indonesia. He first began making batik with traditional continuous patterns used for textiles and clothing. However, he began to experiment with stand-alone pieces of brilliantly colored fruits, birds, and fish. His batik is stunningly intricate. Just the throat of a bird or the vein of a leaf can contain infinitesimal circles, dots, and lines. In some pieces, the dyes seem to glisten like the panes of a stained glass window. Mardiyono’s work has been exhibited in Indonesia, Germany, Canada, and the U.S. His art can currently be found at Fine Batik Sdn Bhd, a Malaysian gallery and studio.

An environmental perspective is present not only in the botanical patterns of batik, but also in the creation of the art and craft. Like any industry, modern batik production leaves an impact on public and environmental health. The batik industry produces the highest annual CO₂ emission of small- and medium-enterprises in the region, mostly due to a dependence on kerosene and electricity consumption (Clean Batik Initiative 2010). In some batik factories, the use of chemical dyes and bleaching agents also pose a risk for public health. Some organizations—such as Clean Batik Initiative, a 4-year program implemented by the German-Indonesian Chamber of Industry and Commerce (EKONID) and the German-Malaysian Chamber of Industry and Commerce (MGCC)—seek to promote sustainable production and consumption within the large-scale batik industry. Many artists, like Mardiyono, also choose this alternative by using dyes from rambutan, mangosteen, and a diversity of other Malaysian fruits.

ON THE COVER

“Luxurious Grass” by Mardiyono, 2011. Batik on cotton cloth, 75 cm × 45 cm.

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