

Contemporary Photography in Bali

Step inside any reputable bookstore in Bali and your eyes are quickly seduced by glossy, colourful images adorning the covers of magazines and books praising the virtues of the island. Be that of the culture, landscape and the gracious people, or the architecture and gardens, all the while emphasizing the aesthetic beauty of Bali.

The island of the Gods is unquestionably a unique visual feast for both the novice and the seasoned observer alike; dynamic colour and movement saturates the eye. Photography has been the most effective medium to share the distinctive qualities of Bali to the worldwide audience.

Mysterious images of an exotic island far off in the East Indies began to circulate in Europe early in the 1900's, and then the first ever collection of black and white photographs of Bali, were published in two volumes in 1920. They immediately struck a cord with the disillusioned Europeans, reeling from the horrors of WW1 and in fear of communist revolution, and who were hungry for new experiences and a tropical haven. German photographer Gregor Krauser's images caused a sensation and soon after anthropologists, writers and artists visited the island and began documenting an idyllic and seductive world.

Fast-forward into the future and with the revolution in smart phone technology photography is now the fastest growing and the most popular hobby in Indonesia, if not the world. Cameras within hand phones are a new hi tech gadget that is inseparable from contemporary youth culture, not to mention other age brackets as well. While what may remain as a toy for many in the narcissists' world, for fortunate others this activity may open a window into new creative realms, and even a career in photography.

Unlike painting and sculpture, photography in Indonesia has yet to be fully embraced as a fine art. However over recent years a few photography exhibitions have been held, one in particular geared to educating fine art collectors in Jakarta, "Beyond Photography" in 2011, curated by Jim Supangkat, Indonesia's most respected international curator, featured works by Indonesia's leading commercial and photojournalist, along with a handful of senior contemporary artists.

"The Age of Photography – Intentions and Transparency in Photographs", an exhibition at the Tony Raka Art Gallery in Ubud, December 2013 - January 2014, also curated by Supangkat, featured 29 leading Indonesian and expatriate professional and amateur photographers. The exhibition was a landmark event in contemporary photography in Bali due to the quality and diverse nature of works on display.

Renown as an island of extraordinary creative activity there is a wealth of photographers that reside in Bali. Lets take a look at how a few, known and unknown, both local and foreign who use the medium to explore their ideas and record inspirations.

Agung Mangu Putra is Bali's most talented painter and photography is an inseparable part of his creative process. He regularly travels around the island documenting the environment in both its grandeur and degradation, however it is the marginalized people of Bali that are most often his subjects. In his studio in Denpasar later these snapshots, along with the breadth of his social conscience inspire his extraordinary realism paintings.

Ida Bagus Alit's passion for photography has drawn him along two distinctive paths. He is dedicated to documenting Balinese religious ceremonies around the island, capturing rare events, and the unique traditional costumes that characterize separate villages. And he is always experimenting with colourful and eccentric painting techniques upon the backgrounds of his printed portrait images on canvas, striving to achieve new aesthetic results with his art photography.

D.P Arsa Putra is one local photographer who is bored of seeing the ubiquitous, tourist images of Bali and uses photography as a medium to communicate ideas that are dear to his heart. His recent exhibition in Bali "Keep Calm & Shop Til Drop" combined images in 2 dimensions and 3 D installation works investigating the modern cultural phenomenon of consumerism that is rapidly impacting the island. Logos and trademarks play an ever-present role in peoples lives in a world that is increasingly becoming image and brand orientated and Arsa's works argued that the results are the loss of personal and cultural identity.

Swiss born engineer and soft ware developer Jiri Kudrna has been experimenting with technology and photographic equipment for many years while living in Bali and builds devices that are on the cutting edge of experimental technology. In Kudrna's words, "The picture take process is a complex choreography between the photographer, model and machine with often almost unpredictable results." His light plane photography method records 4 dimensional images with unique and dynamic optical effects.

Australian expat photojournalist Jill Gocher divides her time between Amed, on the north east coast and Ubud while scouring the countryside for fresh and unusual shots. "The smart phones, especially the Iphone 5 and later models can make really good photos and the technology is extraordinary and when you used with aps like Snapseed," she says. "You can make spectacular images that would take hours with a regular camera and Photoshop and the quality is good enough for full-page reproductions in a large format magazine."

Dewa Gede Aristawan Gotama is a young fine arts student at Ganesha UNDIKSHA University in Singaraja, North Bali, recently exhibited beautiful seascape images captured at dawn on Nusa Penida, the island to south east of Bali. Revealing an eye for composition and technique that belies his twenty something age, his skill confirms some of the depth of photographic talent in Bali.

A key element of the photographers process is now is often related to the time invested in front of the computer screen working with Photoshop. The program allows the fine-tuning of images, as well as an array of special effects to enhance the shots. Nowadays there is much competition to produce quality shots and the ability to technically alter images is a must. However as Gocher says, "The new smart phone technology has been condensed so that it's user-friendly, though experience still counts a lot in producing quality photos, this technology now takes contemporary photography to a whole new level!"



Dewa Gede Aristawan Gotama - Color of Dawn - digital print on canvas



Bodytime Jiri Kudrna 2014 Light Plane Photography



Jill Gocher - Amed Afternoon - digital image



Jiri Kudrner