

# Wayan Karja

Within every Balinese village there is a tale or two to be told.

The association between the master and pupil has played a vital role in the development of Balinese traditional art. The bonds amid teacher and student, father and son, or amongst relatives have enabled the sharing of ideas, support and tuition. Such relationships helped categorize Balinese art by village styles or 'schools'.

In the late 1920's – 30's, Balinese art was being revolutionized and adapted for foreign tastes. The two-dimensional Hindu narratives, Kamasan or Wayang paintings met head on with western aesthetics and the results were dramatic. The development of tourism created large markets for these new paintings, and localized schools of art, such as the Ubud, Sanur and Batuan schools, came to the fore.

Fast forward to 1959 when Arie Smit, an accomplished Dutch artist living in Penestanan began sharing art materials with, and teaching young boys in the village. This was the beginning of the "Young Artists" style, and at its height there was about 300 village practitioners. Colorful and fresh, it was very popular in the 1970 as tourism was enjoying a revival. And so Penestanan has a distinctive artistic history of its own.

This tale however, is about a painter, art educator and administrator from the village who has succeeded in creating a unique artistic voice within the framework of Balinese modern art.

Wayan Karja's earliest memories are of sitting in his father's lap with a paintbrush in hand.

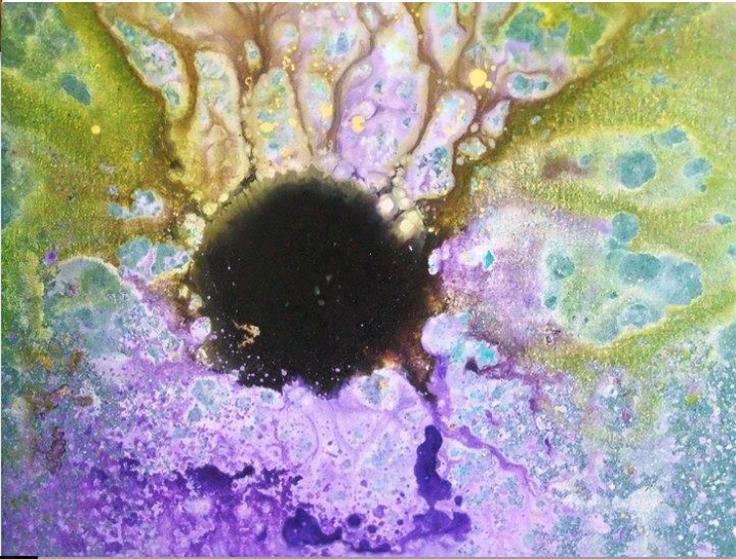
"My father often guided my hand through sketches or marked areas within a composition that I would fill in with color," Karja says. "I was very lucky to grow up in a thriving art environment, every member of my family within the compound was painting, even the women too. This intense activity was an inspiration for me."

Born in Penestanan in 1965 Karja's natural ability and birthright automatically sealed his fate. Determined to learn more about art he received a wealth of local and international art education. Karja studied in Switzerland in 2008-11 painting abstract landscapes, while in 1997-99 he undertook an art scholarship at the University of South Florida, USA. At the School of Fine Arts, Denpasar, 1981-85 he broadened his knowledge of art theory and international art, and then at the Udayana University in Denpasar, 1985-1990 delved into impressionism and abstraction and was inspired by Monet, Van Gogh and Matisse. From 1978-81 Karja studied the Ubud style learning about light, shade and the anatomy. As a child he was introduced to the master pupil association and trained for many years under the watchful eye of his father, Ketut Santra, who gave him his indoctrination into the "Young Artist" style. "There were no galleries at that time so the buyers came direct to the artists home. At the age of 10 I sold my first painting," Karja recalls.

In 1994 upon visiting a museum in Switzerland Karja had his most profound art experience, and one that began his love affair with modern art. He observed a pure red composition by the American abstract painter Mark Rothko. "Is this what they call art?" Was Karja's cynical response. Yet by the time Karja had completed his tour of the museum the significance of the work was understood. Rothko's work leapt out from the walls and "spoke" to him unlike any other artist had previously done. Rarely had an Indonesian artist adopted color as their sole message, least of all the Balinese.

"Balinese art is about tight configurations of patterns, details and narratives yet I was always driven to search into its philosophies." Karja's journey eventually led him to a deep exploration of cross-cultural thinking and he began combining the philosophy of the Balinese Hindu Mandala colors with modern western techniques. Karja's initial response to the colors and movement of his environment (landscape and culture) had been based on emotion, yet the impact of Rothko and other western painters demanded from him a new sense of self-expression.

"Balinese abstraction developed in the 1970's yet it was different to the western model. Most of our creations are deeply rooted in traditions including icons, symbolic and non-symbolic elements, as well as philosophical and spiritual aspects of the Balinese way of life." Karja's direction evolved through intellectual endeavor, "Allowing my work to become simpler and more spiritual," Karja says.



Karja's technique involves building layers of color, often in drips and with the use of watered down medium often creating swirling and dynamic organic forms. The works may be subtle and shimmering, or powerfully vibrant. They are always inviting, meditative and mysterious, creating aesthetic contrasts between the landscape and the cosmos. "There is no separation between art and life," Karja says. "Life is color and my physical and spiritual journey is to become an accomplished colorist painter."

His contribution, via teaching, to the development of Balinese art has been substantial. Karja began in 1990 at the School of Fine Arts in Ubud and then at the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI) in Denpasar where he continues teaching to this day. Over the years he has taught locally and abroad holding various positions, from 2002-04 as head of the Fine Arts Dept., Indonesian College of the Arts (STSI), Denpasar and from 2004-08 as the Dean of the Visual Arts Department at ISI. "I enjoyed and benefited from this experience," he says. "However being an administrator took me away from my artistic dreams." Karja has exhibited in many international countries and frequently travels locally and abroad giving lectures, speeches and engaging in collaborative projects. At his family's guesthouse, Santra Putra in Penestanan is his gallery and studio, along with a space open to the public for workshops and events, where he teaches tourists and often hosts exhibitions by young local artists.

"Journey to the Unknown" Karja's March 2015 exhibition in Jakarta showcased 42 paintings created between 2010-15 was an outstanding success. "The audience's response was excellent, nonetheless I experienced an unexpected sense of liberation. I realized to complete a procession from childhood through to adulthood, my transition from a world of freedom to one dominated by mental activity, in order to sustain my creative journey I have to return to a childlike state."

"I have now opened a new door with the motto – play, flow and free. I am invigorated and my works reflect a new joy," Karja says. "Now I am learning how to play again."

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Wayan Karja - Image by Richard Horstman