

## GUSTI LANANG MEN

First impressions are very powerful.



Gusti Lanang Men.

Responding to an impulse I called into the Lanang Men Gallery in Lungsiakan, one recent grey Ubud afternoon. As I approached the front entry I noticed the gallery was very well presented. Opening the door I was instantly seduced by the fragrance of fine sandalwood incense and the ringing tones of the sitar.

“Mmm, very nice,” I thought to myself as I ventured in.

My eyes quickly scanned the paintings on the walls and then came to a rest at a pile of books on a table. Among them was Eckhart Tolle’s iconic, ‘The Power of Now’ and another written by popular Balinese spiritual teacher Gede Prama. I continued into the studio at the back of the gallery where I discovered art materials and canvases in varying stages of the creative process.



'common Pollution 2' acrylic on canvas, 120x100cm, 2011

I began to study the works and recognized a painter with strong technical skills and a sound sense of balance within his compositions. There were beautiful scenes of Balinese traditional life as well as scenes depicting modernity. These are by no means new creative themes, however, there was an undeniable and intriguing quality about this work.

My first encounter with the world of Balinese painter Lanang Men concluded without a sign of the man I had come to meet. Yet my curiosity was ignited.



'Common Pollution 1', acrylic on canvas, 120x100cm.2011

Who is Gusti Lanang Men?

On my next visit to the gallery I slipped quietly through the door and discovered a man with large bright eyes and a soft round face sitting in quiet contemplation. I introduced myself and we immediately engaged in lively conversation.

“In 1990 I moved from Jembrana in West Bali to Ubud to pursue my dream to become a professional artist,” Gusti revealed. “After finishing high school I began painting and developed skills from visual observation of the natural environment and working along side talented local artists who lived nearby my family home.”



61x40cm, acrylic on canvas, 2011

Gusti was born in 1971 in a small village in a traditional agrarian society. The landscape was bordered in the south by the Indian Ocean and mountain ranges to the north. “The freedom I sensed as a child was very much related to the vast open spaces which surrounded me. I now realize this has had a powerful impact upon my life.”

In 1993 a meeting with Dutch artist and art tutor, Jean Pecasse was to have a profound influence on the career of the young artist. Recognizing Lanang’s talent, Pecasse invited him to Holland to study western painting techniques and to introduce him to the wealth of culture in Europe.

“For three months I stayed in the Netherlands receiving private tuition from Jean, as well as studying Modern Art in the museums. I met and talked with professional painters and became even more inspired. During this stay I had my first solo-exhibition in Piet Hoetsloot.”



'Dangerous Fun 2' 80x60cm, acrylic on canvas, 2011

Looking at an overview of Gusti’s works, it is apparent they are marked by periodical colors – being blue earlier in his career, then pale grey/pink, vibrant reds and currently with beige and grey backgrounds. The painterly tones of the compositions are soft as well as warming to the eye. His figures flow with a graceful rhythm and he portrays a solid understanding of utilizing darkness and light to emphasize his subjects.



'Sacred Dance' acrylic on canvas,  
140x60cm, 2008

In his most recent works Gusti has adopted a minimalist style. These compositions are observations of the meeting of traditional Balinese and western culture. Gusti's explores the spatial relationship between the painting's subject and the background emphasizing the subject without having to depict this onto a large canvas or making the subject larger within the composition.

He makes the subjects visible by isolating them and confronting them with empty space. In this way he enlarges the meaning of the subject without having to enlarge the size of his canvas. The colorful subjects may appear to be floating in a field of neutral color, in aesthetic contrast and creating visual tension. In this separation Gusti provides a confrontation between what is seen and understood and also that which is unknown.

"I concentrate on the meaning of the subject surrounding it with emptiness which, as a natural response, generates greater focus upon that subject. My works are not criticisms; they are observations of a contemporary phenomenon that I like to analyze and then endeavor to find new ways to translate my responses onto canvas. It is very important for me to highlight what is going on."

Gusti loves to paint about his culture and people. He focuses on the relationship between tradition and modernity and believes it is essential to record his observations. These are depictions of accesses and comments about ecological concerns showing how consumerism and pollution have crept into our lives. His narratives reflect a high degree of integrity as well as a strong element of fact and are poignant reminders of what confronts the collective planetary specie.

"Unlike traditional culture that has a foundation honored by time, modern culture evolves extremely quickly and it is my wish to capture this fascinating, yet at times concerning transition.

It is my wish to paint the truth lies behind the subjects."

I asked Gusti to share his thoughts on contemporary art in Bali and the many young artists coming onto the scene and this was his response.

"Artists must be honest, first and foremost to themselves and then they will be able to professionally survive. They need to invest time exploring and analyzing their inner self and then continue to strive for new personal creative territory."

The most enduring art is created from a sacred, wisdom filled place within the artist. A strong piece of art both touches and inspires, then aids the observer to connect with something that is greater than the self.

"Artists work must contain a sense of richness and this can not be forced. If they are committed and their heart and soul is in it, everything else will be in place. And once they have found this truth everyone else will be able to see it too."