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ABSTRACT PAINTING AS A TRANSFORMATION OF THE COSMOLOGY CONCEPT

Wayan Karja

‘Of all the arts, abstract painting is the most difficult. It demands that you know how to draw well, that you have a heightened sensitivity for composition and for colours, and that you be a true poet. This last is essential’.

Wassily Kandinsky

Abstract

Painting in Bali in the last three decades has veered towards abstraction. This abstraction is based on narrative and icons, including symbolic and non-symbolic elements, with the use of colour as a major component. This development is rooted in Balinese Hindu art and traditional culture. Philosophical aspects of the Balinese way of life provide a major source for the Balinese artist’s creativity: therefore, even if the painting is very abstract, it is likely to be strongly based in Balinese Hindu culture. Structures of life in Bali are rooted in a hierarchical order. Based on the idea of balance between the macro cosmos and the micro cosmos, Balinese people aim to live life in harmony. The various dimensions of life according to Balinese philosophy often inspire the visual artist.

Keywords: Bali, Painting, abstract, transformation, cosmology.

I. Introduction

1 This title is a continuation of a previous research paper, Seni Lukis Abstrak Sebuah Transformasi Konsep Kosmologi for which research was sponsored by DUE-like Batch IV STSI Denpasar, 2003. The research took place in two regencies Denpasar and Gianyar, Bali by using 25 samples of abstract paintings created by beginning artists, mid-career, and well-established artists.

2 My thanks are due to the Director and staff of DUE-like Batch IV STSI Denpasar for supporting this research, to my colleague Drs. I Dewa Putu Merta for his feedback and for assisting with detailed discussion and comments on earlier drafts; to my students I Nyoman Bing Sunawar and I Made Agusman who helped me to collect the raw materials for this paper. Satima Flavell Neist made helpful comments and edited the finished work.
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Introduction

Abstract painting forms a major part of mainstream modern art. An abstract painting is without a recognizable subject, doesn’t relate to anything external or try to look like something. It is concerned with inner expression and unseen (niskala) subject matter. According to the Encyclopedia Americana, the word ‘abstract’ is derived from the Latin word ‘abstractus’, and refers to that which is apart from concrete existence; that is to say, an abstract idea; not applied or practical: theoretical; hard to understand: abstruse; thought of or stated without reference to a specific instance (abstract words like ‘honesty’ and ‘beauty’); designating a genre of painting or sculpture whose intellectual and
affective content depends solely on intrinsic form: non objective. Abstract can also mean ‘a statement summarizing the important points of a given text; the concentrated essence of a larger whole’.

Even in the art world, the term ‘abstract’ is still a major focus of debate in the search for an answer to the question ‘What is abstract painting?’ In some circles, ‘abstract’ is used as a joke for the things we do not understand. When discussing abstract art, often we hear ‘we do not know,’ or ‘we do not understand,’ or ‘something strange,’ or ‘nothing’; ‘it has no form,’ or sometimes the artist is blamed: ‘the artist does not know how to draw,’ or ‘the artwork is never finished.’ It is even suggested that the artist tries to hide his/her ignorance because he/she does not know how to draw realistic figures. Many people do not recognise the value of abstract painting. They call abstract art ‘the sin of culture’ (dosa kebudayaan). Abstract painting has always ‘coloured’ the development of modern art, from the end of Impressionism through Minimalism. However, even though it is part of the mainstream in Western art history, in Indonesia it has never been fully accepted among the people. They assume that abstract art is a derivative of Western art, because in the early development of Indonesian abstract art it was taught by Western art teachers and the art education system was influenced by the Western system.

The aim of this article is to examine the ‘hidden influence’ of local content in abstract painting in Bali in the last three decades. What is the structure of abstract painting in Bali? How much does the idea of cosmology inspire the artist’s work? In seeking the answer to these questions the next question arose: how much has the ‘local genius’ coloured the development of abstract painting in Bali?

**Spirituality in Abstract Painting**

There are many terms in the world of art that refer to abstract painting, such as suprematism, neoplastism, purism, abstract expressionism, action painting, tachism, lyrical abstraction, art informal, art autre, and a handful of other terms. Characterized by an intensely personal and subjective response by artists to their own feelings, the medium, and the working process, it is an art in which painters and sculptors might be seen as being engaged in a search for their own identity. ‘In a universe described by
existentialists as absurd, the artist carried the romantic quest for the self, and for sincerity and emotional authenticity, into a world of total uncertainty.\textsuperscript{13}

Abstraction is the best means available to artists for depicting an unseen realm. \textit{Concerning the Spiritual in Art} was written by Wassily Kandinsky, a spiritual as well as an aesthetic pioneer, in 1910. Kandinsky considered that painting was too important to be used as a tool. On the other hand, Robert Motherwell wrote in 1944: ‘The socialist is to free the working class from the domination of property, so that the spiritual can be possessed by all. The function of the artist is to make actual the spiritual, so that it is there to be possessed’\textsuperscript{4} During the 1950’s abstract painting in Indonesia had no audience, because it held no benefit for propaganda in political action, mainly of the socialist movements.

Consider Yves Klein’s ‘Cosmogony’, a canvas covered with blue, red and black circles that seem to be in movement, as if engaged in a cosmic dance. Such abstract painting is aimed at expression, transforming the real or natural object so that organization of the elements--line, form, colour, space, shape, texture--becomes the major concern. The process of creation in abstract painting often needs deep contemplation; therefore, ideas about the level of reality might arise in many different versions, depending on personal experience. We can see considerable similarity between what the Balinese think about the seen world (sekala) and the unseen world (niskala). We can read many mythologies or create many stories about the things we cannot see. In abstract painting these phenomena assume considerable importance because we tend to assume that abstract painting is rooted in the Western art tradition. Balinese painting, however, has a natural bent towards abstraction because of its basis in the religious life of the people, in which symbolism plays an essential role.

In Balinese (Hindu) philosophy we find that there are two ways to worship God: 1) \textit{saguna upasana}, which is the concrete form of meditation that uses human symbols to worship God in a form of imagination (abstraction), and 2) \textit{nirguma upasana} completely abstract meditation to worship God in the heart without any symbols (padma hredaya). In abstract painting, we are also able to find two major directions: 1) abstract painting that uses many icons and symbols, both cultural and personal and 2) abstract painting without symbols, composed purely of elements of art such as line, colour and composition.
Colour that has not been concretised by association with an object has no relation with the outer world. An abstract painting using both symbolic and non-symbolic elements reflects the fact that art is about life and for life; that art itself must be alive.

‘Art is the daughter of the divine,’ said Rudolf Steiner. Abstract painting is food for the soul; art clarifies mind and spirit and is a purely aesthetic activity. Abstract painting in this case is not related to the concrete world; inner feeling is more important than outer forms. In Hindu terms, it can be seen as Atman and Jiva in a human body. Abstract art wants to achieve the most profound and simple things in life. In considering the inner world between Atman and Jiva, Depak Chopra pointed out: ‘You need Jiva to remember who you are personally. You need Atman to remember yourself as pure spirit. You need Jiva to have a reason to act, think, wish, and dream. You need Atman for the peace beyond all action. You need Jiva to journey through time and space. You need Jiva to preserve personality and identity. You need Atman to become universal, beyond identity.’ Considered in this light, abstract painting might be approached as a doorway to the symbolism of modern culture’s spiritual underground.

Balinese tradition regards balance as the most important aspect both in art and life. The physical, mental and emotional levels, Atman and Jiva - all need balance for spiritual awareness. Balinese Hinduism is characterized by a search for balance between the visible and the invisible worlds. To maintain and restore cosmic equilibrium is to the Balinese a major concern. By recreating a balanced universe in the art of the offering, the continuity of life on earth is hoped for. Offerings and ritual decorations not only consist of the fruits of the earth: their structure and decorative motifs also symbolize the world or the universe. Traditional Balinese cosmology is a fundamental aspect of Balinese painting. ‘Cosmology’ in this paper is not fully about the Universe, but refers to a more symbolic meaning in the Balinese way of life: to balance self with the One Supreme Divine Being. It provides a belief system to inspire the abstract painting of creation rather than relating to the scientific realm.

**Balinese Cosmology**

To balance the self between micro cosmos (human body) and the macro cosmos (the Universe) is a major goal in the Balinese philosophy of life. This philosophical aspect is a
base for the Balinese to live by and also for their art and culture. Wherever the Balinese people are, and whatever they do, the balance of life forces is always an integral aim of their way of life. Life is seen as having many sets of dimensions, which continually need to be brought into balance:

1) One dimension: physical/spiritual, peace and happiness.
2) Two dimensions: two opposite forces (e.g. day/night, male/female, seen/unseen, etc).
3) Three dimensions: Divine Trinities (creator, preserver and dissolver); Triad of aptitudes (intelligence, energy/force, inertia/mass); Three Planes of Universe (earth plane, spiritual, and infernal).
4) Four dimensions: Four Aspects of Desire (fulfilment of desire, lawful desire, the desire itself, fusion with the unmoved mover); Four Stages of Life (stage of study, stage of family, asceticism and total release).
5) Five dimensions: Five Physical Elements (earth, air, water, fire, space); Five Spiritual Elements (God, soul, karma, reincarnation, and union with God).
6) Six dimensions: Six vices (lust, greed, anger, drunkenness, confusion and jealousy); Six Basic Taste Sensations (hot/spicy, sweet, salty, bitter, sour and burnt).
7) Seven dimensions: Seven Days of the Week.
8) Eight dimensions: Eight Cosmic Powers (soft, super light, omnipresent, whole, omnidirectional, omnifarious, omnipotent, ultimate supremacy).
9) Nine dimensions: Nine Divinities of the Pantheon (Isvara, Brahma, Mahadeva, Vishnu, Mahesora, Rudra, Sangkara, Sambhu and Shiva).
10) Ten dimensions: Ten Letters of the Sacred Alphabet (sa, ba, ta, a, i, na, ma, ci, wa, ya).

The concept of Pengider Bhvana, which is the idea of balancing nature, human beings and God, strongly influences Balinese abstract painting. Pengider bhvana is symbolized by a mandala with eight directions plus the centre; each associated with a colour, sound, god, goddess, attribute, number, place in the body, etc. Mandala is a Sankrit word that means disk or circle and is also part of the balance concept. Mandala is a diagrammatic representation of the cosmos or some aspect of it, used in Eastern religion as a focus for the contemplation, and occurring frequently in Balinese abstract painting. According to Jungian psychology, mandala is a symbol representing the effort to reunify
the self. Besides the *mandala* also we can find the *Yantra* (another Sankrit word), a geometric diagram used by Hindu mystics to focus concentration while meditating. In Bali the word ‘*jantra*’ also means ‘wheel’ and relates to balance.

**Cosmology as Symbol**

Cosmology is the study of the structure of the universe as a whole. The word is derived from the Greek word cosmos, for the order that is revealed in the beauty of the sky. Cosmology is distinct from cosmogony, which is concerned with the origin and evolution of individual objects in the universe, such as stars and galaxies. The cosmology circle is a major symbol in many traditions. Dr. Marie Louise von Franz has explained the circle (or sphere) as a symbol of the Self. It expresses the totality of the psyche in all of its aspects, including the relationship between man and the whole of nature. Whether the symbol of the circle appears in primitive sun worship or modern religion, in myths or dreams, in the mandalas drawn by Tibetan monks, in the ground plans of cities, or in the spherical concepts of early astronomers, it always points to the single most vital aspect of life---its ultimate wholeness.

The idea of mandala is reflected in the form of ‘*Catur Muka,*’ the four faces of Brahma (the Creator), turning his eyes to the four points of the compass. This fourfold survey from the circle of the lotus was a kind of preliminary orientation, an indispensable taking of bearings, before he began his work of creation. A similar story is told of Buddha. At the moment of his birth, a lotus flower rose from the earth and he stepped into it to gaze into the ten directions of space. (The lotus in this case was eight-rayed; and Buddha also gazed upward and downward, making ten directions). These ten directions are also a symbol of wholeness. The spatial orientation performed by Brahma and Buddha may be regarded as symbolic of the human need for psychic orientation. The four functions of consciousness--thought, feeling, intuition, and sensation--equip man to deal with the impressions of the world he receives from within and without.

In the art of painting the forms from one dimension to the ten dimensions of a mandala or circle are found. The circle is often eight-rayed. This expresses a reciprocal overlapping of the four functions of consciousness, so that four further intermediate functions come about. For instance, thought can be coloured by feeling or intuition, or
feeling can tend toward sensation. In Balinese culture the eight-rayed and four-rayed circle are both very common as a pattern of the religious images that serve as instruments of meditation.

The mandala represents the cosmos in its relation to divine powers. This interest in emptiness, in nothingness, is found in many disciplines; in particular it is an important sector of modern philosophy. What we know, for example, that philosophers such as Heidegger or Sartre have, at a given moment, made nothingness the centre of their thought, and that Heidegger even went so far as to say ‘existence is the extreme nothingness which is simultaneously copiousness.’ This is similar to the Mahayana Buddhist concept that ‘Emptiness is form; form is emptiness’ which is especially espoused by the Zen tradition.

The Road to the Abstract
Since the Pita Maha art movement began in the 1930’s, Balinese art structures have been moving rapidly toward modernization. Nevertheless, a preference for structured, realistic forms dominated Balinese art right up to late 1960’s. Since the 1970’s, abstraction in Balinese painting has gained ground in the academic art world. Modernization encourages painters to be effective and efficient in their work, including the way they approach and deal with their subject matter. According to Charlotte Douglas, ‘the shift to abstract art in the early 20th century was prompted by a need for new dimensions of consciousness, forms suited ‘to serve as a passport to and report from the so-called higher realms.’ This process of simplification, reduction and modernization is a worldwide trend. Modern art developed in Bali in response to a ‘quest’ for modern art in the West and the beginnings of postmodernism. It is interesting to examine why this happened and what distinguishing features characterised the transformation.

The modernization of Balinese painting is a product of ‘transferred knowledge’. Besides the techniques employed, painting engages not only nature or natural objects but also the elements of painting itself (line, form, colour, texture). The influence of formal art education, (typified by artists such as the alumni of the Bandung Institute of Technology’s Dept Visual Art, The Indonesian Institute of Art in Yogyakarta and the Indonesian Institute of Art in Denpasar) has played a major role in the development of
modern abstract painting in Bali. Nyoman Tusun, Anak Agung Rai Kalam and Gung Wayan Tjidera, to name a few, were educated in Bandung. They were partly responsible for the introduction of abstract expression in Balinese painting. Nyoman Gunarsa, Made Wianta, Wayan Sika, Pande Gde Supada, Nyoman Erawan, Made Budhiana, Wayan Darmika and Made Sumadiyasa introduced abstract expression from Yogyakarta as a result of their training there.\textsuperscript{12} Wayan Sujana, Wayan Setem and Gusti Ngurah Buda come from the Indonesian Institute of Arts Denpasar, and Wayan Karja was educated in the United States of America. It can be seen, therefore, that Balinese abstract painting is not only enriched by local influences but also by those of national and international importance.

Artists often concern themselves less with the outer world and more with inner development. In general, there are two realities in abstract art: the first is the physical reality, which we perceive through our five senses; the second is the artist’s inner reality. In the modern painting, the artist’s reality or personal consciousness is the more important. This consciousness constantly seeks new ways to develop art and to expand awareness. It finds less need for the use of realistic forms, seeking, rather, a more organic, lyrical idiom. Various styles developed early in the process of modernization, such as surrealism, which concerned itself with elements of dream and fantasy, and expressionism, which sought to listen to the inner voice in order to express feelings through the aesthetics of painting. The geometric influence brought the use of the square, triangle, circle and other geometric forms to create a new modern form in abstract painting. Emotion, sound and time also became important elements. Fantasy, dream and imagination turned realities into abstract images. Geometric expression continues, but it now relies more on colour and texture than form, often attained by, for example, dropping, dripping or drizzling materials such as sand and sawdust on the canvas. While all these elements exist in Balinese abstract painting, trying to limit and classify their use is not at all easy. Compared to Western art, Balinese abstract art is fluid in the extreme, occupying a continuum between continuity and change: between the old tradition and the new.

The abstraction process in Balinese painting continued into the 1990’s, which understandable because painting in Bali has never sought the purely realistic. The artist
tends to reduce the formal elements of composition into emotional and spiritual experience. In this way, patterns are reduced to their simplest form, bringing forth their most basic essence. Work of the alumni of the Indonesian Institute of Art, in particular, reveals this tendency towards minimalism.

The Concept of Cosmology in Balinese Abstract Painting

Before Western art influenced Balinese painting, the artist in Bali used many symbols as a form of worship. Their work was related to the tools of meditation designed to uncover the Self (Atman). The paintings they created were based on their religious beliefs and were used as a tool to balance Atman and jiva: thus the belief in the macro cosmos and micro cosmos is reflected in Balinese abstract painting. Balance, achieved through transformation, is fundamental to Balinese beliefs and way of life. Essential to this process is the transformation of symbols and icons into completely abstract forms. Pengider Bhvana, the colour circle of the Balinese tradition, is one of the symbols of cosmology in Balinese Hindu culture that inspires abstract painting.

The Balinese see themselves as part of a socio-cosmic reality, so individual life autonomy does not fully exist in the Balinese artist’s life. Abstract painters are part of the community, part of the social life, reflecting the fact that, like everything else in Bali, art is intertwined with the philosophy and cosmology of Hinduism. Abstract painting in the Balinese ‘modern art’ tradition is inspired by the cosmological concept of centring the self to invite the ‘taksu.’ Taksu is inner creativity, inner power, similar to the muses in Western culture. It is attracted through practice in order to receive further inspiration.

It should be noted that another aspect plays a major role in the development of Balinese abstract painting - tourism, which is a major source of income. Abstract painting which uses traditional colours and cosmic references is distinctively Balinese, but nevertheless has universal appeal, so many tourists are eager to purchase such works: local roots – international fruits. Balinese painters live close to their environment and their community. They see themselves not so much as individuals, but rather as part of a collective. Whether work is individual or collective, it will show some relationship to the Balinese way of life and its inherent beliefs and cosmology. Furthermore, any distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art is not very clear in the Balinese abstract painting world. The
idea that ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’ is especially important at this level. How can we make a distinction between ‘art’ and ‘not art’; between high art and low; between bad painting and good painting, when its very essence is rooted in the collective?

**Cosmic Symbols and their Dimensions**

We have seen that the cosmology used in Balinese abstract painting is part of a mystical belief system. Everything about a painting--the composition, the themes, the title--refers to the balance of macro and micro space in multi dimensions. The one-dimensional circle, frequently used to represent perfection or oneness relates to the philosophy of *mokshartam jagaddithaya ca iti dharmah*. Moksa is the balancing of the inner and outer dimensions of life. The use of a circle to denote the sun or moon, which seems universal, is often found in Balinese painting. In like vein, a little dot can represent a star. A circle can be interpreted in many ways, which is why we see it so often in Balinese abstract painting, sometimes singly, sometimes in multiplicity.

The two dimensions might be symbolised by black and white cloth ‘*poleng*’ with vertical and horizontal lines. Balance is found in dualistic images: seen/unseen, yin/yang, good/bad, day/night. These themes are the most common in Balinese abstract painting. An ideal abstract painting is steeped in spiritual concerns in order to bring into balance element of cosmic beliefs. A single line in an abstract painting can create meaning: for example, a horizontal line will give an impression of a horizon, dividing the upper and lower worlds. A horizon or suggestion of a landscape can imbue an abstract painting with a sense of divinity.

Two horizontal lines suggest the lower world, the middle world and the upper world - ‘*bhur loka, bwah loka, and swah loka*.’ This concept--*tri hita karana*-- forms part of daily life and provides a philosophical basis for subject matter. The triangle is frequently seen as a symbol of trinity, an important concept in Hinduism as in Christianity.

The circle or little dot in the Balinese philosophy develops into two points: vertical and horizontal. From two points into three: low, middle and high; and then four points: north, east, south, and west, and the five points: north, east, south, west, and the middle; the six points are north, east, south, west, up and down; the seven: north, east,
south, west, up, down and centre; the eight: north, northeast, east, southeast, south, southwest, west, and northwest; the nine: north, northeast, east, southeast, south, southwest, west, northwest, and centre; the ten: north, northeast, east, southeast, south, southwest, west, northwest, up and down. And the eleven points include the human body as the micro cosmos.

Other concepts include ‘Ulu teben,’ push and pull to build up the surface of the painting, ‘pradaksina’ the clockwise turning of the cosmic wheel and ‘prasaviya’, its reverse, the anti-clockwise motion. Hindu forms of the cross (+) tapak dara, swastika, and charka are often seen and can suggest the form of a circle. Other Hindu symbols often found in Balinese abstract painting include the Tree of Life, Awidya, Purusa predana, Tri Hita Karana, the colours of chakra, Butha Yadnya, Meditation, kundalini, Kala Rau, etc. These are common titles for Balinese abstract paintings.

The ten dimensions ‘Sarad’ are often seen, especially in Balinese religious offerings, which include cakes representing cosmic symbols. These traditional symbols form the basis of Balinese abstract painting: however, foreign influences continually flow in through tourism and education, thus enriching the tradition.

**Emptiness**

Pure abstract painting is imageless, and uses only colour, radical abstraction, darkness and obscurity to symbolize God, the wholly other Absolute who is unknowable by means of the intellect but approachable through love.\(^{14}\) Nothingness or emptiness can be represented by painting in one colour. At this level, the viewer needs a lot of preparation and experience in ‘padma hredaya’ to appreciate the painting. Because, in a mystical context, nothing can also be something, a sense of ambiguity or double meaning is created. The term ‘nirguna upasana’ refers to abstract painting containing nothing but colours or lines: thus the formal elements of art become the ‘subject’ of the work without any reference to cosmic symbols. Like a blue sky, a monochrome painting can evoke images of macro cosmic space.
Cosmology in Fields other than the Abstract

It is not only in abstract painting in Balinese contemporary art that the concept of cosmology is well respected. The work of Nyoman Erawan ‘Ruwatan Bumi’ (1998) shows the artist is concerned about the balance of cosmology and daily life. The series of works ‘Moksa’ by Nyoman Gunarsa is also traditionally imaginative about the upper world. Art and Peace by Made Wianta is another example: the peace he announces is world peace, an ideal that can be related to the cosmic aspect of life. The influence of cosmology on visual art in Bali can be found in small art works and in huge pieces, in applied art and fine art. Abstract painting is, perhaps, its most obvious manifestation, because the entire concept of ‘abstract’ fits so well with the Balinese concept of the unseen - ‘niskala’.

Conclusion

The Balinese abstract artist presents cosmology through symbols: mostly religious symbols, but the door is also open for the use of individual symbols, which the artist creates as a personal interpretation of the cosmic realm. There is a clear link with the past: the present structure of Balinese abstract painting grew out of earlier concepts and structures. We can see how painting developed in Bali not as a ‘movement’ à la ‘avant garde’ as in the West, but rather through an ever-changing continuity, which has always been underpinned by the concepts of traditional Hindu philosophy regarding the essential balance between the macro cosmos and the micro cosmos. It seeks to deepen understanding of life through reference to the unseen world of niskala. The development of abstract painting in Bali, therefore, has used and continues to use major components of the ‘local genius’ as well as the influence of modern Western art movements, which it adapts to its own ends. There can be little doubt that Hindu cosmology forms the very core of Balinese abstract painting, and will continue to do so for a long time to come.

Notes

1. This title is a continuation of a previous research paper, Seni Lukis Abstrak Sebuah Tranformasi Konsep Kosmologi for which research was sponsored by DUE-like Batch IV STSI Denpasar, 2003. The research took place in two regencies Denpasar and Gianyar, Bali by using 25 samples of abstract paintings created by beginning artists, mid-career, and well-established artists.
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7. see Bandem, 1986: 11; also Karja, 1999:5-6.


12. There are many names in this group under the Sanggar Dewata members, but not many of them specialise in the abstract style.


References


