

In other words, it could be said that Mahendra Yasa is presenting a type of self-portrait that negates the tradition of self-portraiture in general; and in a contradictory way, actually revitalizes it. And that is why Mahendra Yasa's current paintings have the internal power to keep moving, in search of various possibilities of change and difference that can be *conceptually* achieved by the contemporary art of painting, after the practice of painting has been accepted for so long and has continued to keep going until today.

- Enin Supriyanto


But what is even more interesting and unique about Mahendra is that the illusions, he eventually reduplicates to the point of layering them, both at the conceptual level and at the level of their visual configuration. He does not stop at the game of simulacra, but rather reduplicates them to the point that they become hyper-simulacra: quotations of quotations; imitations of imitations of imitations; illusions of illusions of illusions, etc. So it should come as no surprise, at the conceptual level, if the title of a painting by Mahendra is "*painting as mask as painting*", for example—as if to echo the words of Kosuth, "*art as idea as idea*", which also appropriated Reinhardt's idea of "*art is art-as-art*"—which in itself already constitutes a simulacrum on its own.

- Prof. Bambang Sugiharto

The face here serves as a kind of invitation to look at the issues of painting, especially the potential of realist painting. However, in Mahendra's abstract-realist paintings, what is foremost is the realist method. In his realist paintings featuring brush strokes and blobs of paint, what surfaces is an ambiguity (= realist painting or abstract painting?). In the works of the *face series*, what surfaces is the ambiguity between the artist and his work; the artist and his ideas. This involves questions about the existence of the artist and/or painter in the era of contemporary art. With the appearance of the face, then, the clarity of Mahendra's paintings as realist paintings becomes irrefutable. As if to confirm that the "reality" of the artist really cannot escape the question of the "selfhood" of painting, as opposed to relating to matters beyond painting—as is generally true of representational painting.

- Asmudjo Jono Irianto

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Enin Supriyanto

Paintings, Self-Portraits and “Invisible Soul”

Sometime in 1995, Ugo Untoro had a solo exhibition at Bentara Budaya Yogyakarta. In the exhibition catalogue he wrote a kind of aesthetic “credo”. Thus, he wrote: *“I don’t have to strive for shapes and forms. Because there have been David, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Cezanne and Basoeki Abdullah. I don’t have to trouble myself about colors, since there have been Delacroix, Manet, Monet and Seurat. I don’t have to fuss around lines, because there have been Durer, Matisse, Miro and Oesman Effendi. I don’t have to bother about content, since there have been Van Gogh, Gauguin, Dali, Rusli and Amang Rahman.”*¹

So, what way out did Ugo take to keep on painting, which eventually led to what he called his collection of doodles (*corat-core*)? In the same text, we find the following extension of Ugo’s thoughts: *“After that, I started to know how good it feels to paint ... Without paying any attention to shapes, lines, colors, composition, techniques and –isms in the history of art. I paint anything in any way, and about whatever I find in me when facing the canvas. I’m sure that, whenever I’m hungry, everything I paint would show hunger. When I’m all by myself, lonely, in the dark, besieged by anxieties, can’t breathe, and cry out, my painting will honestly carry all those elements.”*²

Apparently, for Ugo, painting along the traditional lines of modern painting provided no space for the contemporary painter to engage in invention or renewal. And, at the end of the long road of tradition, Ugo decided to go back “within himself”. And, with that, although separated in time by decades, it was as if he were echoing S. Sudjojono’s conviction about the artist’s “honesty” in channeling “himself” into each of his works, presenting his “soul” in every painting.

With particular regard to the issue that the arena of the practice of painting and paintings has been exhaustively explored by all the painters of past periods, Ugo is clearly not alone. All the painters in the US and Western Europe, who thoroughly developed the art of painting in the post-World War II period, eventually came to the same journey’s end in the 1960s. In his latest book, *Painting Today*, Tony Godfrey touches on this issue. He quotes Joseph Kosuth, who apparently got frustrated and broke with the tradition of modern

Details of
**WHITE ACRYLIC PAINT ON
FACE #1**
2009
150 cm x 120 cm
Oil on canvas

2 painting and paintings: “*Painting has become a naïve art form because it can no longer include self-consciousness (theoretically as well as that of historical location) in its program.*” Then, moving on from Kosuth’s statement, Godfrey describes the general problem faced by painters at the end of the golden age of Abstract Expressionism: “*In other words, painting could no longer criticize the nature of art, because it had accepted its limitations as a type or genre of art, nor, by inference, could it criticize the world at large. Painting, Kosuth conceded, would continue because the market demanded it, but it had no significant role in the world of ideas.*”³ It is precisely there, in the last part of the sentence—that painting no longer had a significant role in the world of ideas—that we shall encounter Mahendra Yasa and his paintings.

Mahendra Yasa is a painter. This we know for sure, as he has indeed been working for years as an artist who continues to pursue this very thing: the making of paintings. However, it should also at the same time be proposed that Mahendra Yasa is an artist who seems keen on treating his own paintings, or his own artistic practice in general, as a work of philosophy—the critical thinking endeavor of an artist, to continually test or examine his own art practice, within the limits of the history and philosophy of aesthetics that encompass it.

I hope that this brief introductory essay can explain the matter adequately enough. Because, so far, I have not discovered any other way to understand or explain how much the paintings of Mahendra Yasa deserve proper attention from the art public in Indonesia. And even more important, how the art practice of Mahendra Yasa can provide food for thought for the artists of Indonesia—especially those who still continue to pursue the work of creating paintings—that more than mere technical skill or an interesting theme are required to give birth to a painting that can reaffirm its own existence as a relevant practice in the contemporary fine art context.

The paintings of Mahendra Yasa in the current exhibition can quickly

3 attract anyone’s attention because, visually, all of their elements are so easily recognizable: faces, or self-portraits of the artist, smeared with colorful paint, or integrated with masks and stacked images of the self-portrait itself. Further, all of the paintings are made—or created—by hand, by the artist or some of his assistants, working as a whole to bring forth every detail on every existing millimeter of the canvas, working hard to rival the detail and precision of the mechanical reproduction of photographic imagery, which is the main reference for each painting. All the paintings are made using techniques of *painstaking photographic realism*—a contradictory term, which indicates the surrender of the practice of painting to the greatness of photography, and at the same time, an effort to *reclaim* the greatness and technical capacity of painting to *rival* the capacity of photography.

They are like visual appearances; this is all that we find in each canvas in the current exhibition. No more, no less. The titles of each painting—instead of helping us to enter the domain of narrative, symbolic, or poetic interpretation, as commonly happens when we come face to face with a work of art—just stop at the affirmation of whatever exists and is tangibly present on each canvas plane. The title simply stops there, as an index of the initial reality—the main object—now presented in the painting. Mahendra Yasa is presenting a set of paintings that he has designed and has executed in such a way as to emphasize the main idea of his painting up to now: that the painting is present and lives of and for (the painting) itself. In other words, it can be said that each canvas in this exhibition refuses any reading effort whatsoever by those of us observing it. The paintings—in this context meaning Mahendra Yasa as well—only say: *What you see is what you get. Or: It is what it is; they are what they are.*

This definitely sounds like an echo on the rebound from a statement of Susan Sontag’s, several decades ago, when she said: “*The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art—and by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show how it is, what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.*”⁴

4 It is as if Mahendra Yasa, through his current paintings, were providing some concrete examples of how this might be done. Not through the epistemological disciplining of methods of interpretation, but by positioning the object of interpretation itself—the painting—so that it can stand on its own and refuse to be revived by means of hermeneutic interpretation. And, simultaneously, it is spared from becoming the mere bearer of a sensuous visual experience.

What is present before us is only the visual appearance of the painting—utterly physical and chemical: dye, oil paint, spread and stuck onto the surface of the canvas. What we see is the surface. None of these paintings show us any signs of a trail or process for channeling the thinking or emotions of the artist, as it would be appropriate for us get as a function of the general process involved in paintings created in the tradition of *gestural painting* (compare this to Ugo’s statement at the beginning of this article). Rather, what appear to us are procedures: the paintings are made based on certain considerations, along with following certain stages of work to bring forth paintings entirely constructed using certain techniques, while the painter himself maintains emotional and conceptual distance so that the paintings are clean of any traces of the artist’s selfhood. The procedures are carefully calculated, so that technically and physically, we can eventually be brought face to face with a set of paintings that are preoccupied with looking at and questioning themselves. The paintings rely entirely on their physical materiality, while at the same time leaning strongly on the tradition, history, and philosophy of modern painting itself. I shall gradually expand on this in the following paragraphs.

Just look, for example, at the no less than eight paintings that display Mahendra Yasa’s paint-covered face: black, white, gold, silver, and multi-colored. These paintings were actually born of the following working procedures: First, Mahendra Yasa daubs acrylic paint on his face. This objective reality, the paint-covered face, is then recorded by a photographic camera, to later be printed on photographic paper. Based on these two procedures, we have already got two visual facts, manifested in two different physical realities. The first:

5 there really are layers of gold or silver paint pigment, for example, which really adhere to the surface of the skin of the face. Second: on the photograph, what we see is an index of the former fact, which now features entirely as a photographic duplicate, printed, by the mixing of paint pigments modulated by a printer, on a sheet of paper. Visually, we still accept the “fact” of the spreading of paint on the surface of the skin of the face, but physically, what we are facing is a totally different paint pigment. The gold or silver colors in the photograph are completely illusory; a set of informational data and visual signs of gold or silver, received by our visual perceptions.

At the next stage, all of the visual aspects of the photo are imitated and copied as closely as possible by Mahendra Yasa onto his canvases using oil paints. It is the outcome of this final stage of the work that we see in the paintings. Now, we are face to face with yet another visual fact: a painting that presents a paint-covered face, created with techniques of *painstaking photographic realism*. Does this not, in the end, lead us to the question: What was this painting made for, if it is entirely a copy of a photographic image that is precisely the same? Is the photo itself not enough to present the image of the paint-covered face? Why is it that the photograph to which it refers, featuring precisely the same image, does not become “art”, while the painting that imitates the photo is entitled to carry the title, “art”?

It is the answers to these questions that can lead us into the issues of painting, in the context of the philosophical ideas and history of art in general—the concerns that have underpinned Mahendra Yasa’s work in creating paintings over the past few years.

Believing that art (painting) today has already reached the endpoint of its journey—on the assumption that modern painting, which up to now has operated and thrived in a groove of its own, had the flow of a progression—is something that makes Mahendra, Yasa as a painter truly nervous and upset. The reason is simple. Because, in the course of that progression, the art of painting and paintings have actually reached an impasse—or stage of completion—as described by Ugo, or Kosuth above: the art of painting has come to the end of

6 its story. As a painter, Mahendra Yasa endeavors not to stop, even once he fully agrees with and knows about the end of the journey of the art of painting today. Exactly there, at the end of the road, Mahendra Yasa is faced with a clear opportunity: the art of painting and paintings can now be done and be present only by grappling with various aspects of tradition, history, philosophy, even all the aspects of their materiality itself.

The easiest aspect for us to examine, of course, is the last. Let us take Mahendra Yasa's work from the series he made before this exhibition, and showcased in two of his previous solo exhibitions: *White Series: Allegory of Painting* (Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2008) and *The Painter's Palette* (The Aryaseni Art Gallery, Singapore, 2008)—his "white" paintings in particular.⁵

Of course, as many of us know, the matter of color in the tradition of modern painting has actually seized the attention and creativity of many artists. Yves Klein went to the point of making a special blue color, conclusively following his conviction that color is an adequate and sufficient element as an aesthetic reality in itself. *International Kline Blue*—whose main ingredient was a fixative resin called Rhodopas M60A, which he later patented—resulted from his experiments with Édouard Adam, a chemist and seller of painting supplies in Paris in 1955.⁶ Then there was also Barnett Newman, who, as if to extend Klein's idea, filled his canvases only with color fields. In the next period, Robert Ryman too occupied himself with "colorless" situations—or, one might say, the absence of color—in his all-white paintings, simply relying on different kinds of white pigment for his canvases.

Mahendra Yasa began his practice of the art of painting precisely at the point where the paintings of Ryman left off.

If, with Ryman's all-white paintings, we are physically confronted by canvases whose surfaces have been smeared with white paint, Mahendra questions whether what we receive visually—or more precisely, optically—can be separated from the physical reality of completely white paint pigment. This, he put to the test in

7 a straightforward manner: by taking Ryman's white paintings, or palettes smeared with white paint only, as the objects of his paintings. He captured and recorded all the visual-optic facts of these all-white objects, to later be turned into paintings using conventional and realist painting techniques, by applying layers of oil paint onto canvas. And, indeed—as we will soon see in Mahendra Yasa's paintings—to replicate even the whitest of objects in a painting takes more than just white paint, does it not? Yet, in the end, we still accept it as a painting that is "all white".

The same procedure recurs in the current paintings of Mahendra Yasa, featuring his paint-smeared face. It takes more than just the same paint to re-present that paint—in our visual-optic perception—in the painting. If photography could fully record the reality of Mahendra Yasa's paint-covered face as an image that is an analogue of the reality recorded, then Mahendra's painting would indeed not wish to be a mere analogue of that reality. Mahendra Yasa's paintings actually only render the materiality of painting—oil paint as the chemical vehicle that conveys the color of the optical reality of color as pigment—which he then presents as the main aesthetic issue in his paintings. Thus, Mahendra Yasa's problem is not merely a matter of how to present his paint-smeared self-image. A task and goal of this sort could very easily be accomplished by photography. Painting—with all of its traditions and aesthetic issues—indeed provides him with an opportunity to conduct a re-investigation of the aesthetic issues—which may still remain—in the contemporary practice of the art of painting.⁷

Expressed in another way, it could be asserted that what Mahendra Yasa is doing this time really falls within the trajectory of issues of the philosophy of art, as once described in a set of essays by Arthur C. Danto on the end of art. For Danto—when he was reviewing Duchamp's *Urinal* as well as Andy Warhol's *Brillo*—contemporary works of art have reached the endpoint of the aesthetic journey when the artwork: "... raises the question of the philosophical nature of art from within art, implying that art already is philosophy in a vivid form, and has now discharged its spiritual mission by revealing the philosophical essence at its heart."⁸ And, for this reason, he added, the time has

8 come to surrender the practice of art to philosophy. To the point that in the end: "... [what] art finally will have achieved as its fulfillment and fruition is the philosophy of art."⁹ This certainly does not mean that Danto thought that all contemporary art practice has shifted to become, or is unvaryingly the same as, the practice of philosophy. What he meant, I think, is that art can no longer rely solely on itself alone to redefine itself as art.¹⁰ Mahendra Yasa's practice of painting—ironically—is an affirmation of exactly the contrary. Almost the opposite of Joseph Kosuth, who considered painting no longer capable of being "self-conscious, of its own history and theory", Mahendra Yasa plunges himself into the practice of an art of painting of exactly this sort.

This sequence of aesthetic procedures he tries out with a number of different visual-optic effects, the results of which we can also see in the current exhibition. There are a number of "self portraits" that he has made based on the visual reality of the self portrait resulting from the stacking of two visual realities: his *real* self in addition to his self portrait illuminated by the lens of a projector. In another, the self-portrait overlaps with and hides behind a mask that features his own face. Still more complex, he also tries to present color as waves of (projected) light later turned back again into paint pigment on canvas (*Projection: Paint, 2009*).

The paintings occupy themselves with aspects of the materiality of painting, attempting to transfer and mimic various visual-optic aspects of form and color in the reality of painting, relying completely on the mixing of paint pigments to arrive—or stop—at a visual-optic reality that is the same as, and congruent with, the main object of reference at the level of our visual perception. This is what I mean by paintings, which, at the end of their aesthetic journey, take themselves as their own subject matter, look at themselves in all aspects of their own materiality as paintings. This is most clearly and vividly evident in the works, *Watercolor on Paper* (2009) and *Pointillism* (2009).

9 Finally, one question may remain to tempt us: What is the use of presenting all of that in the form of self-portrait paintings? Is it not true that in these paintings there is a clear subject matter: the self-portrait?

As in the case of paintings/the art of painting, the self-portrait—in the course of modern and contemporary painting—is a line of tradition, or genre, which has been thoroughly and exhaustively worked through by a great many artists. From Albrecht Durer to Rembrandt, all the way to Affandi, S. Sudjojono, and Agus Suwage; from Chuck Close to Ronald Manullang, to Ariadhitya J. Pramuhendra; there is a long list of names of artists, from the Renaissance period in Italy up to today in Indonesia, who have dealt with the self-portrait genre in painting in myriad ways.¹¹

I think that—as with the general issues I have described regarding paintings and the modern art of painting—the self-portrait, as a genre, as a tradition, has also reached the endpoint of its aesthetic journey.¹² Of course we can accept the self-portrait works of Chuck Close or Agus Suwage, for example, as the results of creative endeavors to revitalize this genre of painting. However, they are not endeavoring to test and then negate this tradition and genre. Whereas Mahendra Yasa actually enters this very territory: of the self-portrait as a continuation, or completion, of his efforts to place painting, or his own particular practice of the art, into an internal struggle over issues related to the main traditions, ideas, practices and materials of the art of painting.

In general, it seems that the painting of portraits, self-portraits in particular, in the final stages of its development in the present period, like it or not, must face itself as well, along with all the traditions and aesthetic principles that have supported and made it thrive up to now. In that way, as in the case of what has happened to the traditions of the art of painting in general, this practice still reserves its own internal dynamic. I think this is something that Chuck Close clearly realized, for example, when he declared that his painted portraits—and self-portraits—were no longer about issues of the self, or of the body. He said: "I reject humanist issues in

10 my work.” And with that, Close—I again quote Godfrey—actually wanted to affirm that in confronting his portrait paintings, what was there was only: *You see what you see.*¹³ So, we could say that rather than being concerned with problems of the “self”, Chuck Close is mainly questioning the “portrait” and painting, in the context of a contemporary society inundated by technology and media that wreak an explosion of visual imagery and turn everything into spectacle.

This issue was clearly described by David Campany, when reviewing a work of portrait painting by Chuck Close, *Phil* (1969), and focusing attention on areas ranging from the procedure of making the painting to a comparison of the differences between painting and photography in Close’s practice of painting. Thus, what he wrote about the issue was: “Close’s photorealism is both an expansion and a collapse of painting. The artist’s hand is subordinated to a laborious system for translating visual data, which echoes the mechanism of the photographic source. Close initially grids his canvas and works from an inverted image. He can then relate to it with indifference. In some respects this corresponds to the mechanical indifference of the optical camera lens which inverts the image it casts.”¹⁴

Following this line of thought, we can understand how the painting of portraits, or self portraits, may be treated as an object for raising technical and aesthetic questions around paintings/the art of painting, and have nothing to do with questions of a personal, humanistic, or poetic nature.

Thus, we can see the self-portrait paintings of Mahendra Yasa as the antithesis of the self portrait, for example, in the work of Affandi, who strongly and clearly intended to display the “emotions” or “inner experience” of the artist at different times and in different situations. Further, there are no real traces of the *gestural* from the artist on the surfaces of his canvases. What we see are illusions or simulacra, almost mechanical, clinical, precise, of what is visually-optically perceived.¹⁵

If we have ever concurred with the thinking of S. Sudjojono, who

11 once proposed the importance of the “visible soul” in painting as a measure of its achievement of “artistic quality”,¹⁶ then Mahendra Yasa considers these issues as an entirely technical and optical matter. And that, for that reason, a contemporary painter can imitate the “visible soul” in every which way, then re-present it as painting, in a most simple and terminal objective reality: a painting, layers of paint on canvas. We can see, for example, his self-portrait painting, titled *Face Paint #2* (2010)—the largest painting in the current exhibition. Although it displays “facial expression”, we know precisely that the expression in the painting is only a form of the strokes of colored paint that at one point washed the face of the artist, who then reproduced a record of that fact—from a photograph—to later be re-presented as a painting; the result of the manipulation of various colors of paint in attempt to reproduce the original pigment colors.

In other words, it could be said that Mahendra Yasa is presenting a type of self-portrait that negates the tradition of self-portraiture in general; and in a contradictory way, actually revitalizes it.

And that is why Mahendra Yasa’s current paintings have the internal power to keep moving, in search of various possibilities of change and difference that can be *conceptually* achieved by the contemporary art of painting, after the practice of painting has been accepted for so long and has continued to keep going until today.

This last issue is the most interesting challenge of all, for anyone who still believes in his or her profession as a painter, and still has faith in the “power” of painting.

Endnotes

¹ Ugo Untoro (1995). *Prakata pameran "Corat-Coret '91-'95"*, Bentara Budaya: Yogyakarta, as quoted in Omi Intan Naomi (2008). *The Sound of Silence and Colors of The Wind Between the Tip of a Cigarette and Fire of the Lighter*, Museum dan Tanah Liat: Yogyakarta, English version, p. 26.

² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³ Tony Godfrey (2009). *Painting Today*. Phaidon: London, p. 12.

⁴ Susan Sontag (1990). *Against Interpretation*. Anchor Books, Doubleday: NY, p. 14.

⁵ An interesting interview with Mahendra Yasa by Wang Zineng was featured in the catalogue for the exhibition, "*The Painters Palette*" at the The Arya Seni Gallery, Singapore (2008), pp. 4-8. Based on Mahendra Yasa's explanation in the interview, and also, on rechecking a number of his paintings from that period, I believe that there are no allegorical qualities at all in Mahendra Yasa's paintings, as suggested in the title of his exhibition in Kuala Lumpur. The only elements that might lead people toward an allegorical understanding are the "poetic" messages that Mahendra Yasa still leaves in some of the titles of his paintings. On a visit to Mahendra Yasa at his studio in Denpasar, Bali, in early March 2010, we discussed this issue. It was not until a month later that Mahendra Yasa sent complete data on his works with the titles changed, into ones like those in the current exhibition.

⁶ Philip Baal (2001). *Bright Earth and The Invention of Color*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, p. 248.

⁷ To emphasize the intersection and differences between Mahendra Yasa's self-portraits and the paintings he creates based on the photographs, we can imagine the following situation: A self-portrait in a photograph obviously has the value and function of documentation. The photo asserts that: at a certain time and place,

it truly happened that Mahendra (his face) was stained with colored paints. When this picture was replicated and transferred as closely as possible onto the canvas, it became a painting; it embarked on the path of fate and a history of its own, a history and concept of painting/the art of painting. The painting, however similar it may be to the photo it refers to, is never, or would be difficult to accept as, factual documentation, as in a journalistic report, for example.

⁸ Arthur C. Danto (2005). *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*. Columbia University Press: NY, p. 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Jonathan Gilmore, in his introduction to the book by Arthur C. Danto, *ibid.*, p. xiv.

¹¹ Shearer West (2004). *Oxford History of Art Series: Portraiture*. Oxford University Press: NY; Chapter 7: Self Portraiture, pp. 163-185, in particular.

¹² Recalling the late 1960s period in the US, Chuck Close—who continues various portrait paintings today—once explained the fate and curse of the self-portrait (not to mention paintings in the photo-realist style) in that period: "*If you think about the late 1960s, painting was dead, sculpture ruled. Painting seemed like a senseless activity. If you were dumb enough to make a painting, it had better be abstract. It was even dumber to make a representational image. Then the dumbest, most moribund, out-of-date, and shopworn of all possible things you could do was make a portrait. I remember Clement Greenberg said to [Willem] de Kooning that the only thing you can't do in art anymore is make a portrait.*" See the complete interview at: <http://visualarts.walkerart.org/detail.wac?id=2036&title=Articles>

¹³ Tony Godfrey (2009), p. 96.

¹⁴ David Campany (2003). *Art and Photography*. Phaidon: London, p. 150.

¹⁵ What he would do is to fully imitate—in as full detail and as precisely as possible—all the visual-optical data he could perceive in the Affandi painting—either using aids in the form of photographic records, or by viewing it directly with the naked eye. The result: a painting which is similar (but not the same), complete with all the scratches, slashes and twists of Affandi’s signature blobs of thick paint. However, this time, all we would see in Mahendra’s painting would be the result of the application of paint layers that are completely flat and smooth on the surface of the canvas. By this stage, Mahendra’s painting would not be a “fake” Affandi, but a painting that presents itself as the result of a work involving the alteration—or, conceptual manipulation—of a “loophole” in techniques and practices of painting made feasible and sanctioned by the traditions and history of the art of painting itself.

¹⁶ In 1946, S. Sudjojono—taking the example of “a painter who wants to paint a bird”—wrote his view of this: “... And it is here that the design and style of the picture takes place. So the picture is the fruit of the workings of a process of our soul, and not just a picture of a photographic optical work for our eyes alone.” S. Sudjojono, *Menuju Corak Seni Lukis Persatuan Indonesia Baru*, quoted in Aminudin TH Siregar & Enin Supriyanto, eds. (2006). *Seni Rupa Modern Indonesia, Esai-Esai Pilihan* (Indonesian Modern Art, Selected Essays) Nalar: Jakarta, p. 8.

Isn’t the painting work process that Mahendra Yasa engages really aimed at a full reliance on, and presentation of, that “optical work”?

The Artworks

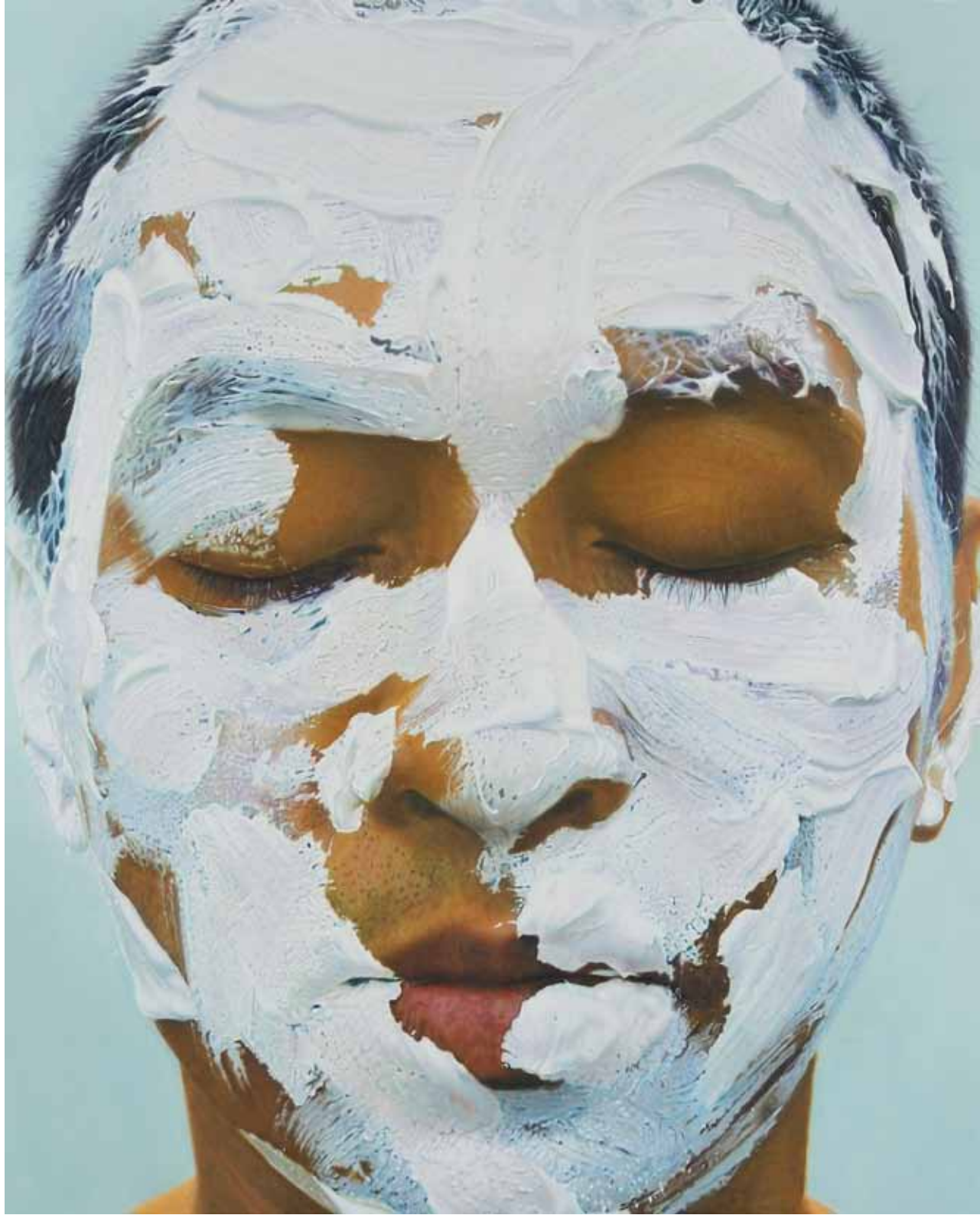


BLACK ACRYLIC PAINT ON FACE #1

2009

150 cm x 120 cm

Oil on canvas

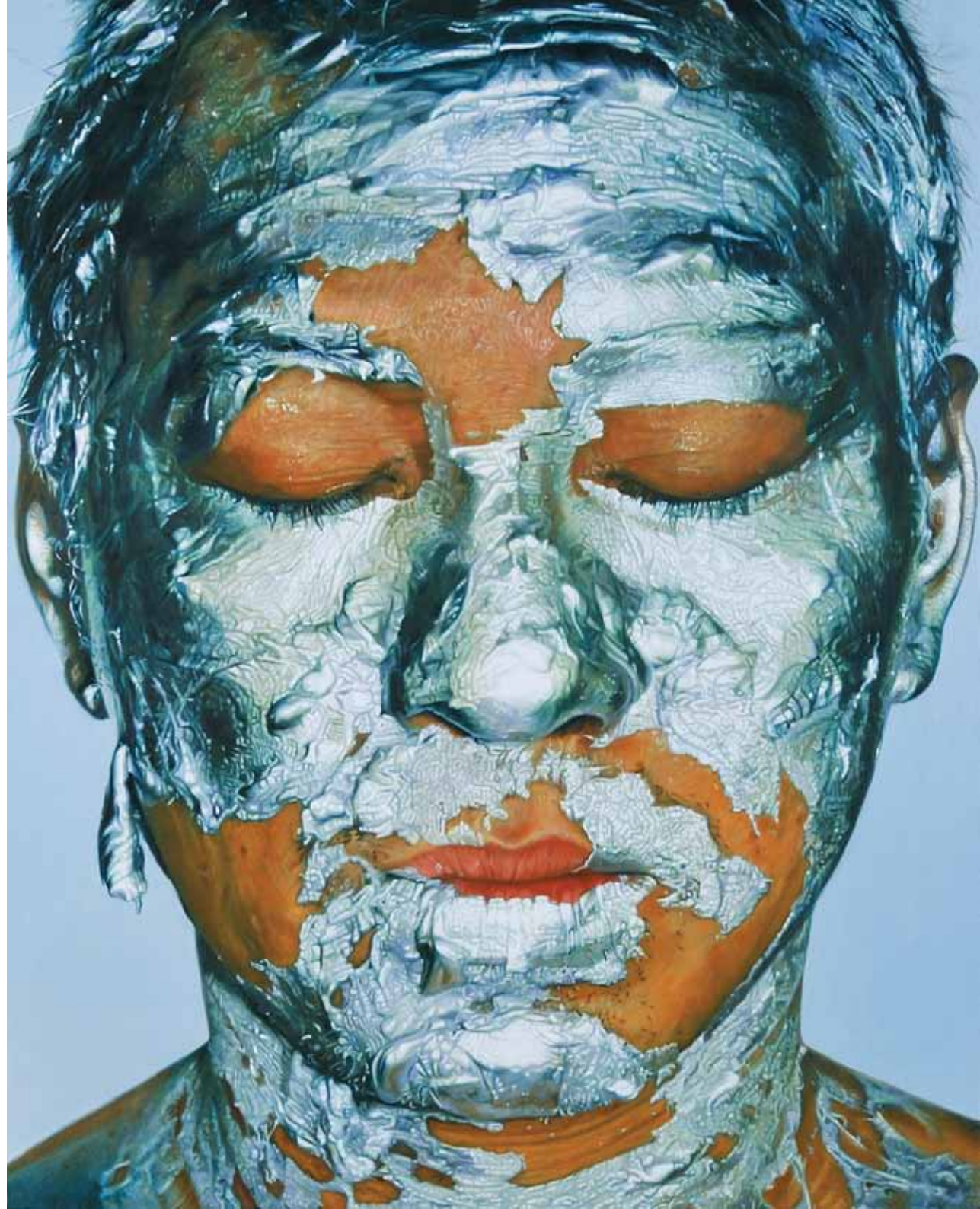


WHITE ACRYLIC PAINT ON FACE #1

2009

150 cm x 120 cm

Oil on canvas



SILVER ACRYLIC PAINT ON FACE #1

2010

150 cm x 120 cm

Oil on canvas



GOLD ACRYLIC PAINT

ON FACE #2

2009

250 cm x 200 cm

Oil on canvas



ACRYLIC COLOR ON FACE #1

2009

250 cm x 200 cm

Oil on canvas



ACRYLIC COLOR ON FACE #3

2009

150 cm x 120 cm

Oil on canvas



PROJECTION: PAINT

2009

250 cm x 200 cm

Oil on canvas



COLORFUL MASK

2009

250 cm x 200 cm

Oil on canvas



PROJECTION: EYES

2009

150 cm x 200 cm

Oil on canvas

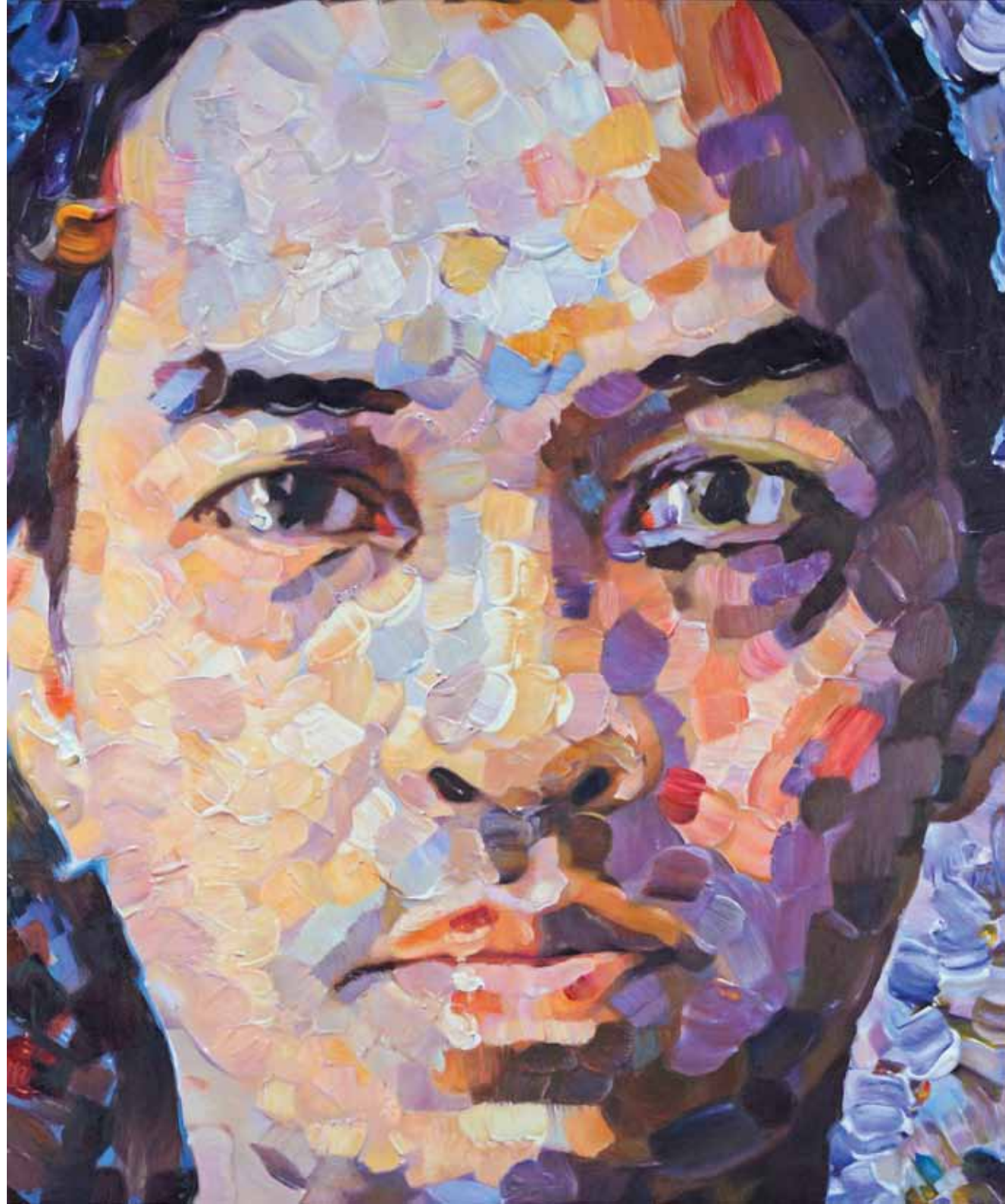
WATER COLOR ON PAPER

2009

180 cm x 150 cm

Oil on canvas





POINTILISM

2009

180 cm x 150 cm

Oil on canvas

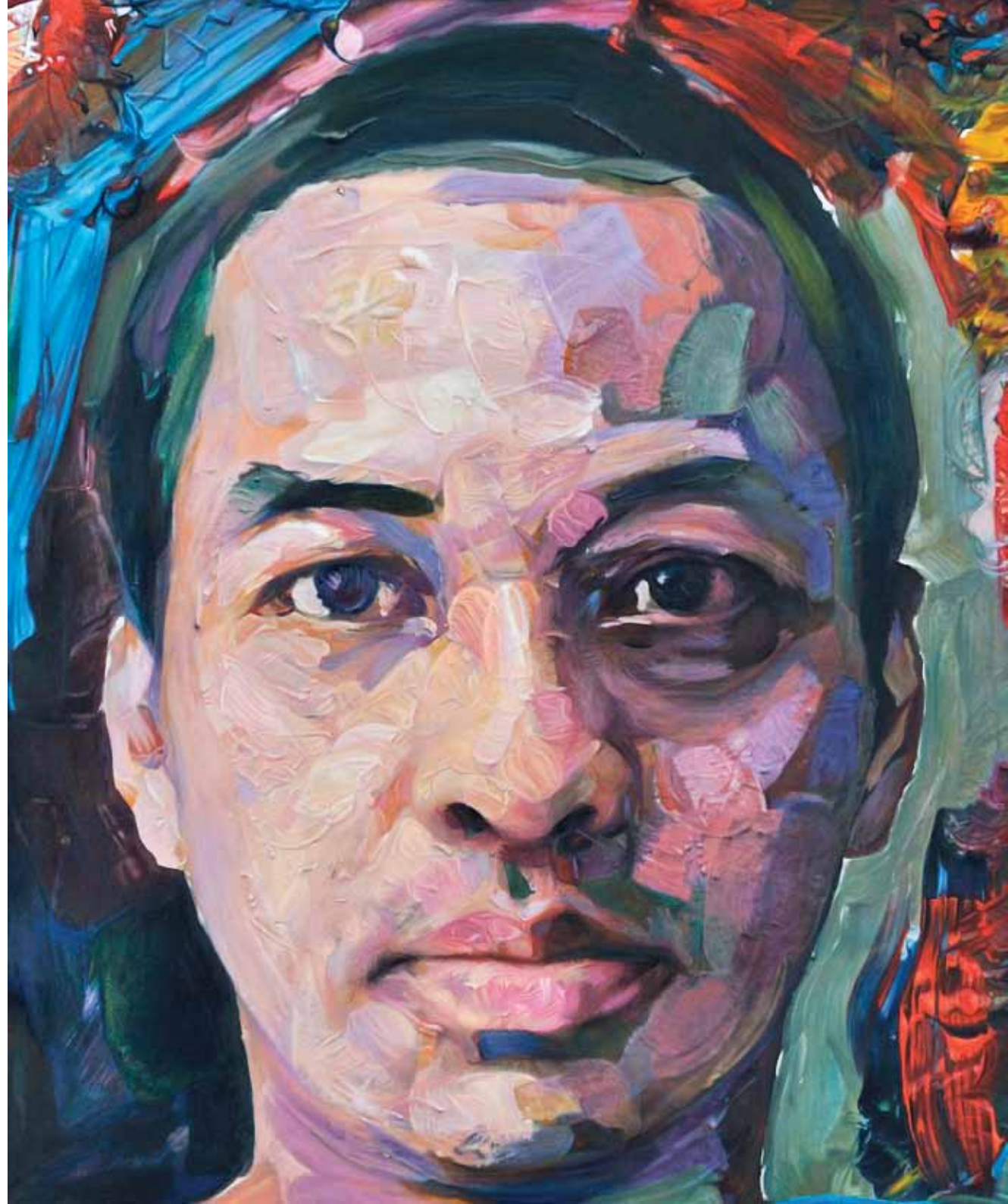


EXPRESSIONISM

2010

180 cm x 150 cm

Oil on canvas



BRUSH STROKES

2010

180 cm x 150 cm

Oil on canvas

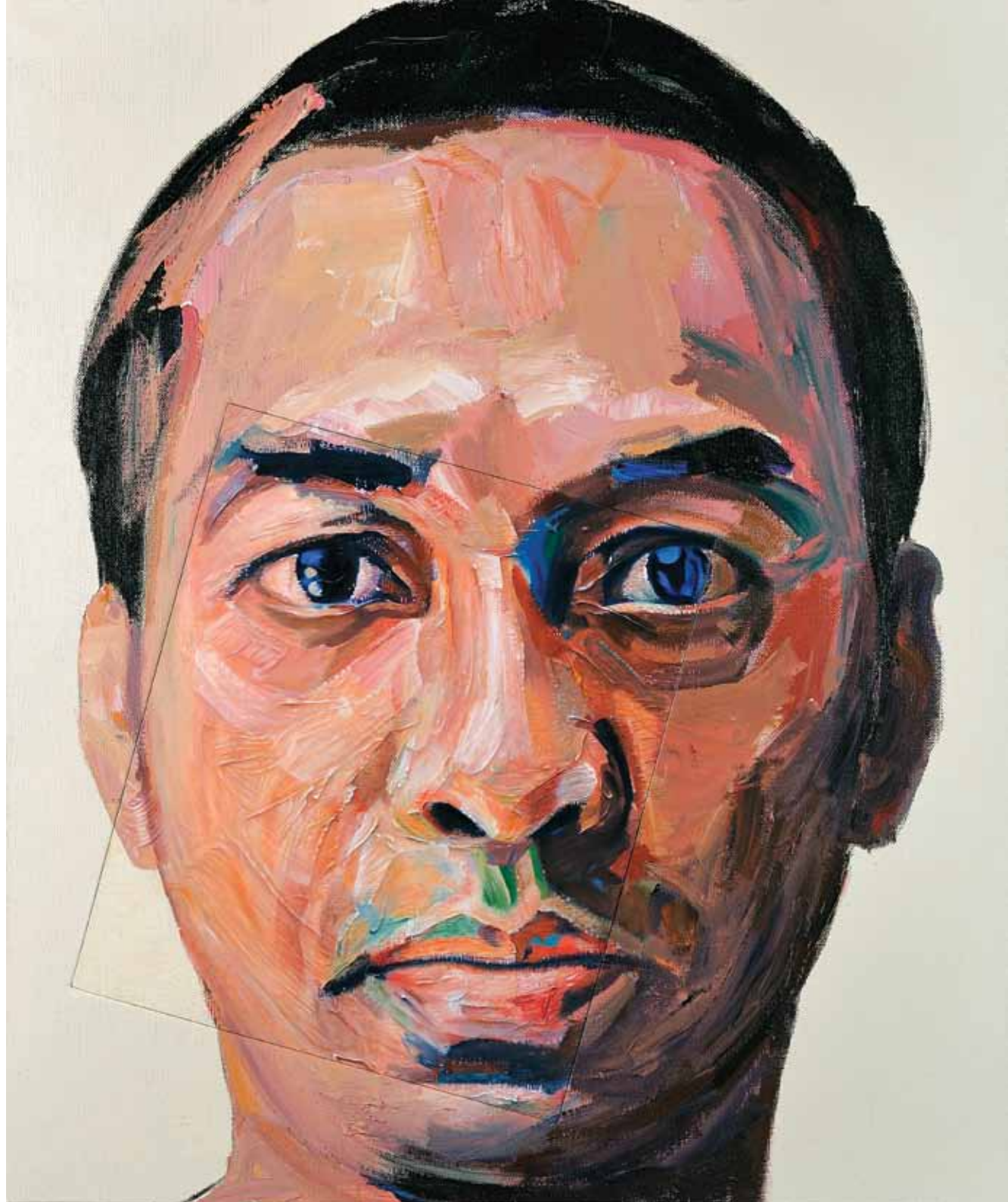


REAL BRUSH WORKS

2010

180 cm x 150 cm

Oil on canvas

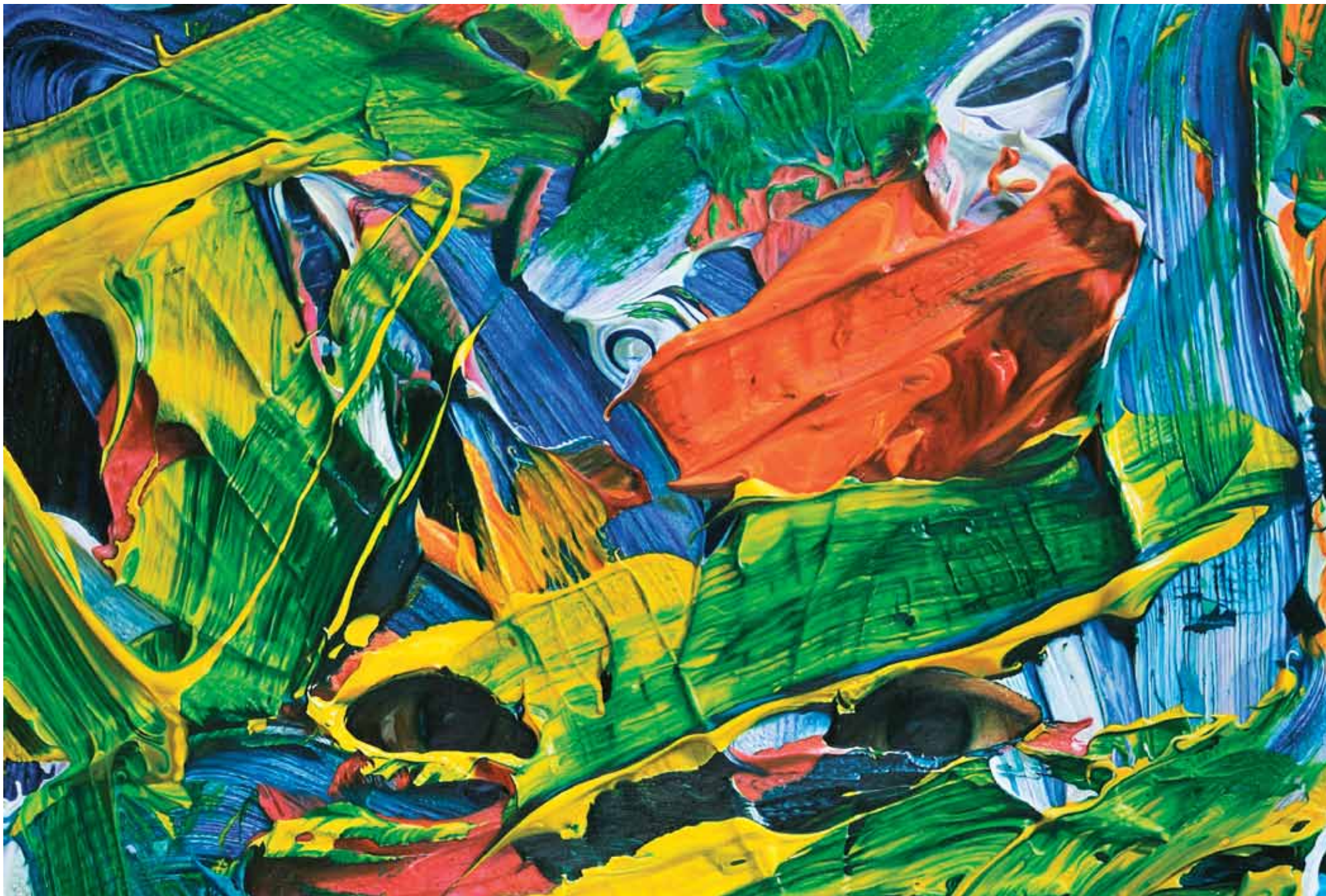


REAL VS FAKE BRUSH STROKES

2010

180 cm x 150 cm

Oil on canvas



PAINTING AS MASK AS PAINTING

2009

200 cm x 300 cm

Oil on canvas



Lukisan, Potret-Diri dan “Jiwa Tak Tampak”

Enin Supriyanto

Suatu waktu di tahun 1995, Ugo Untoro berpameran tunggal di Bentara Budaya Yogyakarta. Dalam katalog pamerannya ia menulis semacam “kredo” estetik-nya. Demikian ia menulis: “Tidak perlu lagi saya mengejar **bentuk**, sebab sudah ada David, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Cezanne ataupun Basoeki Abdullah. Tak perlu lagi saya mengejar **warna**, sebab sudah ada Delacroix, Manet, Monet, atau Seurat. Tak perlu lagi saya mengejar **garis**, sebab sudah ada Durer, Matisse, Miro ataupun Oesman Effendi. Tak perlu lagi saya mengejar **isi**, sebab sudah ada Van Gogh, Gauguin, Dali ataupun Rusli dan Amang Rahman.”¹

Lantas, apa jalan keluar yang ditempuh Ugo untuk tetap melukis, yang hasilnya kemudian ia sebut sebagai sekumpulan ‘corat-coret’nya itu? Dari naskah yang sama, kita temui lanjutan pemikiran Ugo berikut ini: “Saya bisa mulai merasakan betapa nikmatnya melukis... Tidak peduli kepada bentuk, garis, warna, komposisi dan segala macam teknik dan isme dalam sejarah dunia seni lukis. Saya melukis apa saja, dan tentang apa saja yang ada pada batin saya ketika menghadapi sebidang kanvas. Saya yakin, ketika sedang dilanda lapar. Apa pun yang saya lukis tentulah bernada lapar. Ketika sendiri, sepi, lirih, gelap, gelisah, pengap, dan berteriak, apapun yang saya lukis tentulah akan mengatakannya dengan jujur dan menampungnya tanpa ragu.”²

Tampaknya, bagi Ugo, melukis dalam alur tradisi seni lukis modern, sudah tidak menyediakan tempat bagi pelukis kontemporer untuk melakukan invensi atau pembaharuan apapun. Dan, di akhir jalan panjang tradisi itu, Ugo memutuskan untuk kembali ke “dalam dirinya sendiri”. Dan, dengan itu, meskipun terpisah waktu sekian dekade, ia seperti menggaungkan keyakinan S. Sudjojono tentang “kejujuran” seorang seniman untuk menyalurkan “dirinya” ke dalam setiap karyanya, menghadirkan “jiwa”nya dalam tiap lukisan.

Details of
ACRYLIC COLOR ON FACE #1
2009
250 cm x 200 cm
Oil on canvas

Khusus berkenaan dengan soal arena praktik seni lukis dan lukisan yang sudah habis dijelajahi semua pelukis masa sebelumnya itu, Ugo jelas tidak sendirian. Para pelukis di AS dan Eropa Barat, yang habis-habisan mengembangkan seni lukis setelah masa Perang Dunia II, akhirnya menemui ujung perjalanan yang sama di akhir tahun

50 1960-an. Dalam buku terbarunya “Painting Today”, Tony Godfrey menyinggung soal ini. Ia mengutip Joseph Kosuth yang tampaknya sudah frustrasi dan patah arang dengan tradisi seni lukis modern dan lukisan: “*Painting has become a naïve art form because it can no longer include self-consciousness (theoretically as well as that of historical location) in its program.*”

Selanjutnya, bertolak dari pernyataan Kosuth itu, Godfrey menggambarkan persoalan umum yang dihadapi oleh para pelukis di akhir jaman keemasan *Abstract Expressionism* itu: *In other words, painting could no longer criticize the nature of art, because it had accepted its limitations as a type or genre of art, nor, by inference, could it criticize the world at large. Painting, Kosuth conceded, would continue because the market demanded it, but it had no significant role in the world of ideas.*³

Persis di penggalan akhir kalimat itu—lukisan tidak lagi punya peran signifikan dalam dunia gagasan—kita akan bertemu dengan Mahendra Yasa dan lukisan-lukisannya.

Mahendra Yasa adalah seorang pelukis. Ini kita tahu pasti, karena ia memang selama bertahun-tahun bekerja sebagai seniman yang terus menekuni hal ini: membuat lukisan. Namun demikian, segera juga perlu diajukan bahwa Mahendra Yasa adalah seorang seniman yang tampaknya tekun memperlakukan lukisannya sendiri atau praktik keseniannya secara umum sebagai kerja filsafat, upaya pemikiran kritis seorang seniman untuk menguji terus-menerus praktik keseniannya sendiri, dalam batas sejarah dan filsafat estetika yang melingkupinya.

Saya berharap bahwa esai pengantar ringkas ini bisa menjelaskan perkara ini dengan cukup memadai. Karena, sejauh ini, saya tidak menemukan cara lain untuk bisa memahami dan menjelaskan bagaimana lukisan-lukisan Mahendra Yasa pantas mendapat perhatian layak dari publik seni rupa di Indonesia. Dan lebih penting lagi, bagaimana praktik kesenian Mahendra Yasa bisa menjadi bahan pemikiran bagi para seniman Indonesia—khususnya yang masih terus menekuni kerja mencipta lukisan—bahwa dibutuhkan lebih

dari sekedar keterampilan teknis, atau tema yang menarik untuk melahirkan lukisan yang bisa kembali meneguhkan eksistensinya sendiri sebagai praktik yang relevan dalam konteks seni rupa kontemporer.

Lukisan-lukisan Mahendra Yasa dalam pameran kali ini dengan cepat dapat menarik perhatian siapa saja karena secara visual seluruh elemennya bisa dengan mudah dikenali: wajah, atau potret-diri si seniman, yang dibaluri cat warna-warni; atau dipadu dengan topeng dan ditumpuk dengan citra potret dirinya sendiri. Lantas, semua lukisan ini dibuat dengan—atau tercipta dari—tangan si pelukis dan sejumlah asistennya yang suntuik menghadirkan setiap rinci pada tiap milimeter kanvas yang ada, bekerja keras menyaingi kerincian dan ketepatan reproduksi citra mekanis fotografi yang jadi rujukan utama tiap-tiap lukisan ini. Semua lukisan ini dibuat dengan teknik *painstaking photographic realism*, suatu istilah yang kontradiktif: menunjukkan takluknya praktik seni lukis di bawah kehebatan fotografi, sekaligus upaya *reclaim* atas kehebatan dan kemampuan teknik melukis untuk *menyaingi* kemampuan fotografi.

Sebagai penampakan visual, itu saja yang kita temui pada tiap kanvas yang ada dalam pameran kali ini. Tidak kurang-tidak lebih. Judul-judul yang ada pada tiap lukisan—alih-alih membantu kita untuk masuk ke suatu wilayah tafsir naratif, simbolis atau puitis, seperti umumnya terjadi saat kita berhadapan dengan karya seni—justru berhenti pada penegasan apa-apa yang sudah ada dan nyata hadir dalam tiap bidang kanvas. Judul-judul itu berhenti begitu saja sebagai indeks dari kenyataan awal—obyek utama—yang kini dihadirkan dalam lukisan. Mahendra Yasa sedang menghadirkan sejumlah lukisan yang ia rancang dan ia eksekusi sedemikian rupa untuk menegaskan gagasan pokok seni lukisnya selama ini: lukisan yang hadir dan hidup dari dan untuk dirinya (lukisan) itu sendiri. Dengan cara lain, bisa dikatakan bahwa tiap kanvas dalam pameran ini sedang menolak upaya pembacaan apapun dari kita yang sedang mengamatinya. Lukisan-lukisan ini—dalam hal ini juga berarti Mahendra Yasa—cuma menyatakan: *What you see is what you get.*

Atau: *It is what it is; they are what they are.*

Ini jelas terdengar seperti gaung yang memantul dari pernyataan Susan Sontag sekian dekade yang lalu ketika ia menyatakan: *The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art—and by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.*⁴

Mahendra Yasa, melalui lukisan-lukisannya kali ini, seperti memberikan sejumlah contoh nyata bagaimana hal itu mungkin dilakukan. Bukan melalui pendisiplinan epistemologis terhadap metode penafsiran; tetapi dengan memampatkan obyek penafsiran itu sendiri—si lukisan—agar ia sanggup berdiri sendiri dan menolak untuk dihidupkan oleh upaya tafsir hermenetik. Dan, juga sekaligus bisa terhindar dari sekedar menjadi pembawa pengalaman visual yang *sensuous*.

Yang hadir dihadapan kita hanyalah tampilan visual lukisan—sepenuhnya fisik dan kimiawi: bahan pewarna, cat minyak, yang dioleskan dan kemudian merekat ke permukaan kanvas. Yang kita saksikan adalah permukaan. Semua lukisan ini tidak menunjukkan pada kita tanda-tanda jejak atau proses penyaluran pemikiran atau emosi seorang seniman, seperti yang layaknya yang kita terima sebagai proses umum penciptaan lukisan dalam tradisi *gestural painting* (bandingkan juga dengan pernyataan Ugo di awal tulisan ini, misalnya). Yang hadir dihadapan kita adalah prosedur: lukisan yang dibuat dengan pemikiran tertentu, disertai dengan tahapan kerja tertentu, untuk menghadirkan lukisan yang sepenuhnya dibuat dengan teknik tertentu, sambil si pelukis sendiri menjaga jarak emosi dan pemikiran agar lukisan-lukisan itu bersih dari jejak kedirian si seniman. Prosedur ini diperhitungkan dengan serba cermat, sehingga secara teknis dan fisik kita akhirnya bisa berhadapan dengan sejumlah lukisan yang sibuk memandangi dan mempersoalkan dirinya sendiri. Lukisan-lukisan ini sepenuhnya mengandalkan materialitas fisiknya sambil bersandar kuat pada tradisi, sejarah, filsafat seni lukis modern itu sendiri. Saya akan mengurai soal ini perlahan-lahan di paragraf-paragraf berikutnya.

Saksikan saja, misalnya, tidak kurang dari 8 lukisan yang menunjukkan wajah Mahendra Yasa yang berlumuran cat: hitam, putih, emas, perak, warna-warni. Lukisan-lukisan ini sesungguhnya lahir dari prosedur kerja sebagai berikut: Mahendra Yasa melumurkan cat akrilik ke wajahnya. Kenyataan obyektif ini, wajah yang berlumuran cat, lantas direkam oleh kamera foto untuk kemudian dicetak ke atas kertas foto. Dari dua prosedur ini, kita sudah mendapatkan dua kenyataan visual yang hadir dalam dua kenyataan fisik yang berbeda. Yang pertama: sungguh-sungguh ada lapisan pigmen cat emas atau perak, misalnya, yang benar-benar melekat di permukaan kulit wajah. Kedua: pada lembar foto, yang kita lihat adalah indeks dari kenyataan pertama tadi, yang kini sepenuhnya tampil sebagai salinan fotografis, tertera oleh percampuran pigmen cat yang diatur oleh *printer* di atas selembar kertas.

Secara visual kita masih menerima “kenyataan” bahwa ada lumuran cat di atas permukaan kulit wajah; tetapi secara fisik yang kita hadapi hanyalah pigmen cat yang sepenuhnya berbeda. Warna emas atau perak pada lembar foto, adalah sepenuhnya ilusif; sejumlah data informasi dan tanda-tanda visual tentang warna emas atau perak yang dicerap persepsi visual kita.

Pada tahap berikutnya, seluruh aspek visual foto ini ditiru dan disalin semirip mungkin oleh Mahendra Yasa ke atas kanvas-kanvasnya dengan bahan cat minyak. Hasil dari kerja tahap akhir inilah yang kita lihat dalam lukisan-lukisannya. Sekarang, kita berhadapan dengan kenyataan visual yang lain lagi: lukisan yang menghadirkan wajah yang berlumuran cat; dibuat dengan teknik *painstaking photographic realism*. Bukankah ini pada akhirnya membawa kita pada pertanyaan: untuk apa lukisan ini dibuat jika ia sepenuhnya adalah salinan dari citra fotografi yang persis serupa? Bukankah foto itu saja sudah cukup untuk menghadirkan citra wajah yang berlumuran cat? Mengapa lembar foto yang ia rujuk, yang menampilkan citra yang persis sama tidak menjadi “seni”, sementara lukisannya yang meniru foto itu justru berhak menyandang predikat “seni”?

Jawaban atas pertanyaan-pertanyaan itulah yang bisa membawa kita masuk pada persoalan lukisan dalam konteks pemikiran filsafat dan sejarah seni secara umum—soal-soal yang menjadi dasar kerja penciptaan lukisan Mahendra Yasa selama beberapa tahun belakangan ini.

Seraya percaya bahwa seni (lukis) di masa kini sudah sampai pada titik akhir perjalanannya—dengan asumsi bahwa seni lukis modern selama ini berjalan dan berkembang dalam alurnya sendiri, punya alur *progression*—Mahendra Yasa sebagai pelukis sesungguhnya gelisah dan gundah dengan soal itu. Soalnya sederhana saja. Karena, di alur progresi itulah seni lukis dan lukisan justru sampai pada kebuntuan—atau tahap paripurna—yang digambarkan Ugo, atau Kosuth tadi: seni lukis yang sudah tamat riwayatnya. Sebagai seorang pelukis, Mahendra Yasa berusaha untuk tidak berhenti, bahkan setelah ia sepenuhnya setuju dan tahu tentang akhir perjalanan seni lukis di masa kini. Di ujung jalan itu, Mahendra Yasa justru berhadapan dengan peluang yang jelas: seni lukis dan lukisan kini bisa dilakukan dan hadir melulu dengan pergulatan dengan berbagai aspek tradisi, sejarah, filsafat dan bahkan seluruh aspek materialitasnya sendiri.

Yang paling mudah kita telusuri tentu saja adalah aspek yang terakhir tadi. Saya akan pakai karya Mahendra Yasa dari rangkaian karya yang ia buat sebelum pameran ini, yang pernah ia tampilkan dalam dua pameran tunggalnya: “*White Series: Allegory of Painting*” (Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2008) dan “*The Painter’s Palette*” (The Aryaseni Art Gallery, Singapore, 2008); khususnya pada sejumlah lukisan “putih”-nya.⁵

Tentu saja banyak yang sudah tahu bahwa urusan warna dalam tradisi seni lukis modern memang pernah menyita perhatian dan kreatifitas banyak seniman. Yves Klein sampai membuat warna biru yang khusus untuk menuntaskan keyakinannya bahwa warna adalah elemen yang memadai dan cukup sebagai realitas estetik dalam dirinya sendiri. *International Kline Blue* yang terbuat dari bahan utama *fixative resin Rhodopas M60A*—yang kemudian ia patenkan itu—adalah hasil eksperimentasinya dengan Édouard Adam, seorang

ahli kimia dan penjual alat-alat lukis di Paris, di tahun 1955.⁶ Lantas, ada pula Barnett Newman, seperti meneruskan gagasan Klein, hanya mengisi kanvas-kanvasnya dengan bidang warna, *color field*. Di masa berikutnya, Robert Ryman juga menyibukkan diri dengan situasi “tanpa warna”—katakanlah semacam *the absence of color*—bagi lukisan-lukisannya yang serba putih, dengan hanya mengandalkan berbagai jenis pigmen cat putih untuk kanvas-kanvasnya.

Mahendra Yasa memulai praktik seni lukisnya persis di titik akhir yang ditinggalkan oleh lukisan-lukisan Ryman tadi.

Jika pada lukisan Ryman yang serba putih kita secara fisik berhadapan dengan kanvas yang permukaannya dilumuri bahan cat putih, Mahendra justru mempersoalkan bahwa apa yang kita terima secara visual—tepatnya, secara optis—bisa terpisah dari kenyataan fisik pigmen cat yang sepenuhnya putih. Ini ia buktikan dengan cara yang gamblang: menjadikan lukisan putih Ryman, atau membuat palet yang dilumuri hanya dengan cat putih, sebagai obyek lukisannya. Ia menangkap dan merekam semua kenyataan optis-visual yang ada pada obyek serba putih ini untuk kemudian dialihkan menjadi lukisan, dengan teknik melukis realis dan konvensional, mengoleskan lapisan-lapisan cat minyak ke atas kanvas. Dan, sesungguhnya—seperti yang kemudian kita lihat dalam lukisan-lukisan Mahendra Yasa—untuk menyalin obyek yang paling putih sekalipun, ke dalam suatu lukisan, dibutuhkan lebih dari sekedar cat putih, bukan? Tetapi, toh, pada akhirnya kita tetap menerimanya sebagai lukisan yang “serba putih”.

Prosedur serupa terjadi dalam lukisan-lukisan Mahendra Yasa yang menampilkan wajahnya yang berlumuran cat kali ini. Dibutuhkan lebih dari sekedar cat yang sama untuk menghadirkan kembali cat itu—dalam persepsi optis-visual—di dalam lukisan. Jika fotografi sepenuhnya bisa merekam kenyataan wajah Mahendra Yasa yang berlumuran cat itu sebagai suatu citra yang analog dengan kenyataan yang direkamnya; maka lukisan Mahendra justru tidak ingin menjadi sekedar analogon dari kenyataan itu. Lukisan-lukisan Mahendra Yasa justru hanya menjadikan aspek materialitas lukisan—cat minyak sebagai bahan kimia pembawa warna dari kenyataan optis ke warna

sebagai pigmen—yang kemudian ia hadirkan sebagai persoalan estetika utama dalam lukisan-lukisannya. Maka, persoalan Mahendra Yasa bukanlah melulu soal bagaimana menghadirkan citra-dirinya yang berlumuran cat. Tugas dan tujuan semacam ini bisa dengan sangat mudah dilakukan oleh fotografi. Lukisan—dengan segala tradisi dan persoalan estetikanya—justru memberi ia peluang untuk melakukan investigasi ulang terhadap soal-soal estetika—yang mungkin masih tersisa—dalam praktik seni lukis masa kini.⁷

Dengan cara lain bisa dinyatakan bahwa apa yang dilakukan Mahendra Yasa kali ini sesungguhnya ada dalam alur persoalan filsafat seni, seperti yang pernah diuraikan oleh Arthur C. Danto dalam sejumlah risalahnya tentang *akhir seni, the end of art*. Bagi Danto—saat ia mengulas karya *urinal* Duchamp, atau juga *Brillo*-nya Andy Warhol—karya seni rupa masa kini sudah sampai pada titik akhir perjalanan estetikanya, saat karya seni sesungguhnya: “...raises the question of the philosophical nature of art from within art, implying that art already is philosophy in a vivid form, and has now discharged its spiritual mission by revealing the philosophical essence at its heart.”⁸ Dan, karena itu, telah tiba saatnya untuk menyerahkan praktik seni kepada filsafat, lanjutnya. Hingga pada akhirnya: “... what art finally will have achieved as its fulfillment and fruition is the philosophy of art.”⁹

Ini tentu saja tidak berarti bahwa Danto menganggap bahwa seluruh praktik kesenian masa kini telah beralih jadi, atau sama sebangun dengan praktik filsafat. Yang ia maksud, saya kira, adalah bahwa kesenian tidak bisa lagi hanya bertumpu pada dirinya sendiri untuk meredefinisikan diri sebagai seni.¹⁰ Praktik seni lukis Mahendra Yasa—ironisnya—adalah penegasan tentang hal yang sebaliknya. Nyaris berseberangan dengan Joseph Kosuth yang menganggap bahwa lukisan tidak mampu lagi “sadar-diri, *self-conscious*, atas teori dan sejarahnya sendiri”, Mahendra Yasa justru menjerumuskan diri dalam praktik seni lukis semacam itu.

Alur prosedur estetika ini ia uji-coba dengan sejumlah gejala optis-visual yang berbeda-beda, dan hasilnya bisa kita lihat juga

dalam pameran kali ini. Ada sejumlah “potret-diri”nya yang ia buat berdasarkan kenyataan visual potret diri sebagai hasil dari penumpukan dua kenyataan visual: dirinya sendiri yang *real* ditambah dengan potret-dirinya yang disorotkan oleh lensa proyektor. Yang lain lagi, potret-diri yang bertumpuk dan bersembunyi di balik topeng yang menampilkan wajahnya sendiri. Yang lebih kompleks lagi, ia juga mencoba menghadirkan warna sebagai gelombang cahaya (hasil proyeksi) untuk kemudian dikembalikan lagi menjadi pigmen cat di atas kanvas (*Projection: Paint, 2009*).

Lukisan-lukisan ini menyibukkan diri dengan aspek materialitas lukisan, mencoba mengalihkan dan meniru berbagai aspek optis-visual bentuk dan warna dalam realitas lukisan yang sepenuhnya mengandalkan pencampuran pigmen cat untuk sampai—atau berhenti—pada realitas optis-visual yang sama dan sebangun dengan obyek utama rujukannya dalam aras persepsi visual kita. Inilah yang saya maksud sebagai lukisan, yang pada ujung perjalanan estetikanya, menjadikan dirinya sendiri sebagai *subject-matter*, memandang dirinya sendiri dalam segala aspek materialitasnya sebagai lukisan. Soal ini tampak paling jelas dan gamblang dalam karya *Watercolor on Paper* (2009) dan *Pointillism* (2009).

Akhirnya, mungkin tersisa satu pertanyaan yang menggoda kita: Untuk apa menghadirkan semua itu dalam wujud lukisan *potret-diri*? Bukankah dalam lukisan-lukisan ini ada *subject-matter* yang jelas: potret diri?

Seperti juga pada soal lukisan/seni lukis, maka potret-diri—dalam perjalanan seni lukis modern dan kontemporer—adalah satu alur tradisi, atau *genre* yang sudah suntuks dan habis-habisan diolah oleh sedemikian banyak seniman. Dari Albrecht Durer sampai Rembrandt, sampai Affandi, S. Sudjojono, hingga Agus Suwage; dari Chuck Close sampai Ronald Manullang, hingga Ariadhitya J. Pramuhendra; sederetan panjang nama-nama seniman dari masa Renaisans di Italia hingga hari ini di Indonesia, telah mengolah *genre* lukisan potret-diri dengan berbagai cara.¹¹

Saya kira—seperti juga persoalan umum yang telah saya ulas berkenaan dengan lukisan dan seni lukis modern—potret-diri sebagai *genre*, tradisi, juga telah pernah sampai pada titik akhir perjalanan estetik-nya.¹² Tentu saja, di masa kini, kita bisa menerima karya potret-diri Chuck Close atau Agus Suwage, misalnya, sebagai hasil upaya-upaya kreatif untuk merevitalisasi *genre* lukisan jenis ini. Tapi, mereka tidak berupaya menguji dan kemudian menegasi tradisi dan *genre* lukisan ini. Mahendra Yasa justru masuk ke wilayah ini: potret-diri sebagai kelanjutan, atau penuntasan upayanya menempatkan lukisan, atau praktik seni lukisnya sendiri secara khusus, dalam suatu pergulatan internal berkenaan dengan persoalan tradisi, pemikiran, praktik dan bahan utama dalam seni lukis.

Secara umum lukisan potret, dan potret-diri khususnya, di tahap akhir masa perkembangannya di masa kini tampaknya mau tak mau perlu berhadapan dengan dirinya sendiri juga, dengan seluruh tradisi dan prinsip estetik yang selama ini menyokong dan membangunnya. Dengan cara itu, seperti juga hal yang terjadi dengan tradisi seni lukis secara umum, praktik ini kemudian masih menyimpan dinamika internal-nya sendiri. Saya kira hal ini jelas disadari oleh Chuck Close, misalnya, saat dia menyatakan bahwa lukisan-lukisan potret—dan potret-diri-nya—tidak lagi berkenaan dengan persoalan diri, atau tubuh. Ia bilang: “*I reject humanist issues in my work.*” Dan dengan itu Close—saya kembali mengutip Godfrey—sesungguhnya ingin menegaskan bahwa saat berhadapan dengan lukisan potret-nya yang ada hanyalah: “*You see what you see.*”¹³ Jadi, bisa kita nyatakan bahwa ketimbang mempersoalkan masalah “diri”, Chuck Close lebih mempersoalkan “potret” dan lukisan, dalam konteks masyarakat masa kini yang dibanjiri oleh teknologi dan media yang meluapkan eksplosif citra-visual dan menempatkan segala sesuatu sebagai tontonan, *spectacle*.

Soal ini digambarkan dengan jelas oleh David Company saat ia mengulas salah satu lukisan potret karya Chuck Close, *Phil (1969)* dengan memusatkan perhatian pada persoalan prosedur pembuatan lukisan itu dan sampai pada perbandingan tentang perbedaan, *difference*, yang ada antara lukisan dan fotografi dalam praktek seni

lukis Close. Demikian ia menuliskan soal ini: “*Close’s photorealism is both an expansion and a collapse of painting. The artist’s hand is subordinated to a laborious system for translating visual data, which echoes the mechanism of the photographic source. Close initially grids his canvas and works from an inverted image. He can then relate to it with indifference. In some respects this corresponds to the mechanical indifference of the optical camera lens which inverts the image it casts.*”¹⁴

Mengikuti alur pemikiran itu, kita bisa memahami bahwa lukisan potret, atau potret-diri, diperlakukan sebagai bahan untuk mengajukan soal-soal teknis dan estetis di seputar lukisan/seni lukis; dan tidak ada sangkut-pautnya dengan soal-soal yang bersifat personal, humanis, atau *poetic*.

Dengan demikian, kita bisa melihat lukisan-lukisan potret-diri Mahendra Yasa sebagai anti-tesis dari potret diri karya Affandi, misalnya, yang secara kuat dan jelas ingin menampilkan “emosi”, atau “pengalaman bathin” si seniman dalam berbagai waktu dan situasi. Lebih jauh lagi, tidak ada jejak *gestural* yang nyata dari si seniman di atas permukaan-permukaan kanvasnya. Yang kita lihat adalah ilusi atau tiruan yang nyaris bersifat mekanis, klinis, presisi, atas apa yang dicerap secara optis-visual.¹⁵

Jika kita pernah mengamini pemikiran S. Sudjojono yang dulu mengajukan soal pentingnya “jiwa tampak” dalam lukisan untuk mengukur pencapaian “mutu kesenian”nya,¹⁶ maka Mahendra Yasa beranggapan bahwa soal-soal itu sepenuhnya hanya soal teknis dan optis belaka. Dan karenanya seorang pelukis masa kini bisa meniru “jiwa tampak” itu habis-habisan untuk kemudian menghadirkannya kembali sebagai lukisan dalam kenyataan obyektif paling sederhana yang bersifat terminal: lukisan, lapis-lapis cat di atas kanvas. Kita, misalnya, bisa melihat lukisan potret-dirinya yang berjudul *Face Paint #2 (2010)*—lukisan berukuran paling besar dalam pameran kali ini. Meski menampilkan “ekspresi wajah”, kita tahu persis bahwa ekspresi dalam lukisan itu hanya berupa sapuan warna-warna cat yang suatu saat pernah melaburi wajah si pelukis. Kini ia meniru rekaman atas kenyataan itu—dari selebar foto—untuk kemudian menampilkan kembali sebagai lukisan; sebagai hasil manipulasi

60 berbagai warna cat yang berusaha meniru pigmen warna aslinya.

Dengan cara lain, bisa dinyatakan bahwa Mahendra Yasa menghadirkan sejenis potret-diri yang melakukan *negasi* terhadap tradisi lukisan potret diri secara umum; dan secara kontradiktif, sebenarnya merevitalisasinya. Dan karena itulah, lukisan-lukisan Mahendra Yasa kali ini punya kekuatan internal untuk terus bergerak mencari berbagai kemungkinan perubahan dan perbedaan yang bisa dicapai oleh seni lukis kontemporer *secara konseptual*, setelah sekian lama praktik seni lukis diterima dan berjalan terus hingga hari ini.

Soal terakhir tadi adalah tantangan dan peluang paling menarik bagi siapapun yang masih percaya pada profesinya sebagai pelukis dan yakin pada “kekuatan” lukisan.

Catatan Akhir

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¹ Ugo Untoro, Prakata pameran “*Corat-Coret '91-'95*”, Bentara Budaya, Yogyakarta, 1995, dikutip dalam Omi Intan Naomi, *The Sound of Silence and Colors of The Wind Between the Tip of a Cigarette and Fire of the Lighter*, Museum dan Tanah Liat, Yogyakarta, 2008, hal. 255 (versi Inggris, p. 26)

² Omi Intan Naomi, *ibid.*, hal. 256 (versi Inggris, p. 27)

³ Tony Godfrey, *Painting Today*, Phaidon, London, 2009, hal. 12.

⁴ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, Anchor Books, Doubleday, NY, 1990, hal. 14.

⁵ Ada wawancara yang menarik antara Wang Zineng dan Mahendra Yasa yang dimuat dalam katalog pameran “*The Painters Palette*”, The Arya Seni Gallery, Singapore, 2008, pp. 4-8. Dari penjelasan Mahendra Yasa dalam wawancara itu, dan juga memeriksa kembali sejumlah lukisannya dari periode itu, saya beranggapan bahwa tidak ada samasekali kualitas alegoris dalam lukisan-lukisan Mahendra Yasa, seperti yang pernah diajukan dalam tajuk pamerannya di Kuala Lumpur. Satu-satunya elemen yang mungkin membawa orang ke arah pemahaman alegoris itu boleh jadi karena Mahendra Yasa masih menyisakan pesan yang bersifat ‘*poetic*’ dalam sejumlah judul karyanya. Saat mengunjungi Mahendra Yasa di studio-nya di Denpasar, Bali, awal Maret 2010, kami mendiskusikan masalah ini. Tak sampai sebulan kemudian, Mahendra Yasa mengirimkan data lengkap karyanya dengan judul yang sudah diubah, seperti yang kini ada dalam pameran ini.

⁶ Philip Baal, *Bright Earth and The Invention of Color*, The University of Chicago Press, 2001, hal. 248.

⁷ Untuk menegaskan persinggungan dan perbedaan potret-diri Mahendra Yasa dengan lukisan yang dibuat berdasarkan foto itu, kita dapat membayangkan situasi berikut ini: Potret-diri dalam selebar foto jelas punya nilai dan fungsi dokumentasi. Foto itu

62 menegaskan bahwa: di suatu waktu dan tempat, pernah benar-benar terjadi dan ada (wajah) Mahendra Yasa yang berlumuran cat warna-warni. Saat foto ini ditiru dan dialihkan semirip mungkin ke atas kanvas, ia menjadi lukisan, masuk dalam alur nasib dan sejarahnya sendiri, sejarah dan konsep tentang lukisan/seni lukis. Lukisan ini, bagaimanapun mirip dengan foto rujukannya, tidak pernah, atau sulit diterima sebagai dokumentasi faktual, dalam suatu laporan jurnalistik, misalnya.

⁸ Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, Columbia University Press, NY, 2005, hal. 16.

⁹ Arthur C. Danto, 2005, *ibid*.

¹⁰ Jonathan Gilmore, dalam pengantarnya untuk buku Arthur C. Danto, *ibid*, hal. xiv.

¹¹ Shearer West, *Oxford History of Art Series: Portraiture*, Oxford University Press, NY, 2004; khususnya Bab 7: *Self Portraiture*, hal. 163-185.

¹² Mengingat masa di akhir tahun 1960-an di AS, Chuck Close—yang kini masih terus membuat berbagai lukisan potret—pernah menjelaskan nasib dan kutukan bagi lukisan potret-diri (apalagi bergaya photo-realism) di masa itu: “*If you think about the late 1960s, painting was dead, sculpture ruled. Painting seemed like a senseless activity. If you were dumb enough to make a painting, it had better be abstract. It was even dumber to make a representational image. Then the dumbest, most moribund, out-of-date, and shopworn of all possible things you could do was make a portrait. I remember Clement Greenberg said to [Willem] de Kooning that the only thing you can’t do in art anymore is make a portrait.*” Wawancara selengkapnya di: <http://visualarts.walkerart.org/detail.wac?id=2036&title=Articles>

¹³ Tony Godfrey, 2009, p. 96.

¹⁴ David Company, *Art and Photography*, Phaidon, London, 2003, p. 150.

¹⁵ Dengan pengandaian sederhana kita bisa bayangkan bahwa, misalnya saja, suatu saat Mahendra Yasa melukis ulang, atau katakanlah, meniru karya potret-diri Affandi. Yang ia lakukan adalah meniru sepenuhnya—serinci dan setepat mungkin—seluruh data optis-visual yang bisa ia cerap tentang lukisan Affandi itu—dengan alat bantu berupa hasil rekaman fotografis, atau melihatnya langsung dengan mata telanjang. Hasilnya: sebuah lukisan yang merupakan tiruan, atau ilusi rupa lukisan Affandi, yang serupa (tapi tak sama), lengkap dengan segala goresan, sabetan dan liak-liuk *plototan* cat tebal khas Affandi. Namun, kali ini, semua yang kita lihat dalam lukisan Mahendra adalah hasil dari aplikasi lapisan cat yang serba datar dan halus di atas permukaan kanvas. Sampai tahap ini, lukisan Mahendra Yasa tidak akan jadi lukisan Affandi yang “palsu”, tapi lukisan yang menghadirkan dirinya sebagai hasil dari kerja alterasi—atau, manipulasi konseptual—atas suatu “*loophole*” dalam teknik dan praktik melukis yang dimungkinkan dan disahkan oleh tradisi dan sejarah seni lukis itu sendiri.

¹⁶ Di tahun 1946, S. Sudjojono—dengan mengambil contoh “seorang pelukis hendak melukis seekor burung”—menuliskan pandangannya tentang hal ini: (...) Dan di sinilah terjadi corak dan gaya gambar tadi. Jadi gambar ini suatu buah pekerjaan proses jiwa kita dan bukan gambar klise *optische opname* (kerja optis) mata kita saja.” S. Sudjojono, *Menuju Corak Seni Lukis Persatuan Indonesia Baru*, termuat dalam, Aminudin TH Siregar & Enin Supriyanto (ed.), *Seni Rupa Modern Indonesia, Esai-Esai Pilihan*, Nalar, Jakarta, 2006, p. 8.

Bukankah proses kerja melukis yang dilakukan Mahendra Yasa sesungguhnya ingin sepenuh-penuhnya mengandalkan dan menghadirkan “kerja optis” itu?

Gede Mahendra Yasa: Profile

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GEDE MAHENDRA YASA

Born

1967 Singaraja, Bali

Education

1998–2002 Indonesian Art Institute, Denpasar, Bali

Solo Exhibition

- 2009 “Hendra’s Woman: Reframing De Kooning”, Langgeng Gallery, Magelang
- 2008 “The Painter’s Palette”, The Aryaseni Art Gallery, Singapore
“White Series Allegory of Painting”, Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2007 “Hendra Membaca Pollock”, Emitan Fine Art Gallery, Surabaya, East Java

Group Exhibition

- 2010 “Pleasure of Chaos, Inside New Indonesian Art”, Primo Marella Gallery Milan, Italy
- 2009 “Post-Tsunami Art: South East Blooming”, Primo Marella Gallery, Milan, Italy
“Hybridization”, North Art Space, Jakarta
Prague Biennale 4, Prague, Czech Republic
“Friendship Code”, Syang Art Space, Magelang
- 2008 “Taxu 2008: Painting Rejuvenation” SIGlarts, Jakarta
“Space”, Semarang Gallery, Semarang
“Manifesto”, Galeri Nasional, Jakarta

- 2007 “Kuota”, Galeri Nasional, Jakarta
“On Appropriation”, Semarang Gallery, Semarang, Central Java
- 2006 “Surface”, Emitan Gallery, Surabaya, East Java
Langgeng Contemporary Art Festival, Langgeng Gallery, Central Java
Taxu Art Clinic 2006, CP Art Space, Jakarta
- 2005 “Urban Culture”, CP Biennale II 2005, Museum Bank Indonesia, Jakarta
“Trans-it”, Biasa Art Space, Bali
“...reading REALISM”, Nava Gallery, Denpasar, Bali
- 2004 “Tamarind... in Pursuit of Identity”, Nava Gallery, Denpasar, Bali
“Cooking & History”, Cemeti Art House, Jogjakarta
- 2003 CP Open Biennale, National Gallery, Jakarta
“Caution!!! There is A Taxu Ceremony”, Klinik Seni (Art Clinic) Taxu, Denpasar
- 2001 “Against Bali Art Festival”, in front of Latta Mahosadi Museum, Indonesian Art College, Denpasar
“To Breaking Down Hegemony”, KAMASRA (The Association of Visual Art Students) of Indonesian Art College, Denpasar
- 2000 “Democracy in Visual Expression”, the 8th Anniversary of Denpasar, Bali

Award

- 2009 Most Innovative Young Artist Awards, Mapping Asia CIGE 2009

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