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Painting the Social Body of Balinese Youth Amid Simulacra: Ritual Space and the Digital Image

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ABSTRACT

The circulation of Balinese ritual imagery through digital platforms has reached a scale at which the image increasingly precedes and conditions the practice it depicts. This study asks how that condition registers on the social body of Balinese youth, and whether painting can make it visible. Adopting a practice-led research design structured in four phases and closed by a documented expert-appraisal stage, the study produced and analysed a trilogy of mixed-media paintings: *Dialektika Pikiran*, *Fun Run With Ida*, and *Arus Maya*. The analytical framework combines Baudrillard's second and third orders of simulacra with sociological accounts of the social body and the Balinese cosmological pairing of *bhuana alit* and *bhuana agung*. The chosen visual idiom, Wedha's Pop Art Portrait, is treated not as decoration but as an argument: its constitutive procedure of replacing observed colour with colour judged better than the original reproduces, at the level of technique, the very logic of simulation the paintings interrogate. Analysis proceeds from described formal features to perceptual effects to theoretical claims. The findings show the trilogy staging three distinct conditions: contested consciousness, an undecidable ritual-or-screen space, and a body reconstituted as circulating data. The study concludes that the medium's own procedures can function as a critical instrument rather than an illustration of theory, and offers this technique-as-argument approach as a transferable method for practice-led research on cultural mediation.

KEYWORDS

Balinese youth
painting
practice-led research
simulacra
social body

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INTRODUCTION

Bali is among the most photographed places on earth, and the density of that photography has consequences for the people who live inside it. The island reaches a global audience as a compact repertoire of signs — terraced rice fields, a Barong mask, an offering of *canang sari* (small daily offering of flowers and leaves) set on a doorstep at dawn, a procession of white-clad figures moving toward the sea. These signs are not false. They correspond to practices that continue, that carry obligation, and that structure the Balinese year. What has changed is the relation between the sign and the practice. Increasingly, the image does not follow the ritual; it precedes it, circulates faster than it, and returns to condition how the ritual is performed, framed, and understood — by visitors first, and then, unavoidably, by participants.

This study takes that inversion as its problem, and asks two things of it. First, where does the inversion register? Not on abstractions such as culture or heritage, but on bodies: on the young Balinese who stand in a ritual procession with a phone in hand, who owe attendance to a *banjar* (customary neighbourhood association) obligation and simultaneously owe a post to an audience, and whose bearing in sacred space is now shaped by the awareness of being framed. Second, can painting make that condition visible in a way that description cannot? The study answers the second question by making three paintings and then reading them, and it argues that the answer depends on the technique chosen — that a painting technique can be an argument rather than an illustration of one.

The Social Body: Definition and Scope

Because the term *social body* carries the argument of this study, it requires definition before it can do any work. The phrase has a dense and contested lineage, and different lineages would yield different analyses.

Douglas (1996) established the foundational proposition that the physical body is never simply physical: it is a medium through which a society expresses its categories, its boundaries, and its anxieties about pollution and order. What a body may wear, where it may stand, how it must be composed and at what times — these are social facts inscribed on physical persons. Turner (2008) developed this into a sustained sociology of embodiment, arguing that the body is not a topic within social theory but its proper axis, and introducing the notion of a somatic society in which principal political and personal problems are both posed in the body and expressed through it. Foucault (1995) supplies the third element: bodies are produced as subjects through regimes of visibility and discipline, and a body that knows itself observed governs itself differently from one that does not.

To these the present study adds a specifically Balinese term. Balinese Hindu cosmology organises existence through the paired concepts of *bhuana alit* (the small world of the individual person) and *bhuana agung* (the great world of the universe), holding that the condition of one is inseparable from the condition of the other. Ritual practice, and Melasti in particular, addresses both at once: the ceremony purifies persons and cosmos in a single act. This pairing matters here because it means that a Balinese account of the body is already a social and cosmological account. There is no prior individual body onto which social meaning is subsequently added.

This study therefore uses the social *body* in the following restricted sense: the individual body understood as constituted by, and legible as a record of, the social and cosmological relations it stands within. When the paintings discussed below fragment a figure, the claim is not that a collective has fragmented in the abstract, but that the relations constituting a particular body have been placed in competition with one another, and that this competition can be seen. This sense is compatible with all three of the sources above and with the *bhuana alit* framing, and it is narrow enough to be tested against a picture.

Previous Research

Scholarship on the mediation of Balinese culture is substantial and falls into three broad strands.

The first is historical and anthropological. Vickers (2012) traces how a durable Western image of Bali as paradise was assembled across the colonial and early tourist periods, demonstrating that the island has been an object of representation for a century. Picard (1996) offers the decisive analysis of what followed: the Indonesian state's doctrine of *pariwisata budaya* (cultural tourism) produced a reflexive condition in which the Balinese came to regard their own practices as culture, that is, as a resource requiring cultivation and display. Picard's insight is that this was not a simple loss. Balinese cultural production intensified under touristic attention even as its terms were reset.

The second strand is the sociology of the tourist encounter. Urry and Larsen (2011) show that the tourist gaze is systemic rather than personal: it is organised in advance by images, and destinations are progressively arranged to satisfy expectations those images have already formed. Applied to Bali, this predicts precisely the inversion described above.

The third strand, and the most recent, examines mediation in Indonesian and specifically Balinese contexts. Prasiasa et al. (2023) analyse authenticity and commodification in Bali's creative industries, showing that market taste drives cultural products toward heterogeneous mass production and that this bears directly on the sacred–profane distinction. Prasiasa et al. (2024) extend this to tourism villages, identifying cultural strengthening as the central challenge of sustainable development. Swandi et al. (2023) analyse the visual ideology of representative media in constructing the image of Balinese culture, demonstrating that the construction operates through identifiable visual mechanisms rather than diffuse influence. Surahman (2024) situates these dynamics within media and cultural studies more broadly, arguing that digital media drives a cultural evolution that gradually reduces traditional norms and practices.

Alongside these, a body of work examines Balinese painting and its adaptations. Supir (2019) analyses Batuan social realism as hybrid art in which global and local codes combine to produce a new identity capable of destabilising established cultural boundaries. Rediasa et al. (2024) examine realist-style *wayang* (shadow-puppet figure, and by extension the figural idiom derived from it) painting in Penglipuran village, showing that even where figures become volumetric and anatomical, gesture and perspective retain classical conventions — evidence that adaptation need not entail rupture. Rediasa et al. (2021) analyse how Balinese artists responded visually to the COVID-19 pandemic, establishing that Balinese painting has an active tradition of responding to contemporary social conditions. Karja (2021) provides an account of colour meaning in the Balinese context that bears on the chromatic strategies described below.

Research Gap and Novelty

Read together, these strands establish that Balinese culture is heavily mediated, that mediation reorganises practice, and that Balinese painting can respond to contemporary conditions. Two gaps remain.

First, the existing literature analyses mediation almost entirely from outside the practices it studies — through ethnography, tourism studies, semiotic analysis of media artefacts, or cultural policy. Studies conducted from inside artistic practice, in which the researcher's own studio process is the instrument of enquiry and the resulting artefacts constitute the findings, remain scarce in Balinese studies. Where such studies exist, they typically apply theory to finished work rather than treating the making itself as the site of knowledge production.

Second, and more specifically, no study known to the authors has examined whether the *procedure* of a painting technique — as distinct from its subject matter — can carry a theoretical claim about mediation. Discussions of Pop Art in Indonesia, including the substantial literature on Wedha's Pop Art Portrait (Dawami et al., 2021; Rasyid, 2011), treat the style as a formal and communal phenomenon. Studies of simulacra in Indonesian contexts (Azwar, 2014) treat the theory as an interpretive lens applied to an object. The possibility that a technique might itself instantiate the condition it depicts has not been pursued.

This article is the first to treat a painting technique as a theoretical instrument in the study of Balinese cultural mediation. It uses practice-led research to examine, from within the making, how the mediation of Balinese ritual imagery registers on the social body of Balinese youth; and it argues that the constitutive procedure of Wedha's Pop Art Portrait (WPAP) — the replacement of observed colour with colour judged better than the original — is not merely a suitable style for this subject but a structural analogue of simulation itself, and can therefore be deployed as an argument.

Aims and Research Questions

The study aims to produce and analyse a trilogy of paintings that make visible the tension between the social body of Balinese youth and the conditions of digital mediation, and to establish the analytical value of technique-as-argument in practice-led research. Three questions guide the enquiry:

- How does the mediation of Balinese ritual imagery register on the social body of Balinese youth, and what visual form can that registration take?
- In what respects does the procedure of WPAP correspond structurally to Baudrillard's second and third orders of simulacra, and what analytical work does that correspondence perform?
- What does a practice-led enquiry, closed by documented expert appraisal, contribute to the study of cultural mediation that discursive analysis alone does not?

METHOD

Research Design and Its Justification

This study adopts a practice-led research design. The choice requires brief justification, because an earlier formulation of this project used Design and Development (D&D) research after Richey and Klein (2007), and that framework was abandoned during the study for reasons that bear on the findings.

D&D was formulated to establish an empirical basis for the production and validation of instructional products; its evaluation stage presumes measurable outcomes against a defined instructional problem. Paintings are not instructional products, and the questions above are not questions about the effectiveness of an artefact. Retaining D&D would have required either misdescribing the works or leaving the evaluation stage nominal — a common weakness in creation-based writing, in which stages are announced and never reported.

Practice-led research supplies a framework that fits. Barrett and Bolt (2007) establish studio enquiry as a mode capable of revealing knowledge that other modes do not reach, on the grounds that material practice generates understanding not available in advance of the making. Haseman (2006) argues for performative research in which the symbolic outcome — here, the paintings — constitutes the research finding rather than merely illustrating it. Sullivan (2010) provides the account of art practice as systematic enquiry, with the studio as a site of theorising. Gray and Malins (2004) supply procedural structure for visualising and documenting such research. Nelson (2013) insists on the protocols that make practice-led

claims examinable by others, and it is Nelson's requirement that motivated the appraisal stage described below.

Phases of the Enquiry

The enquiry proceeded through four phases, each generating documentation retained for analysis.

Phase 1: Exploration

Observation was conducted over the preparatory period at three types of site: ritual settings in which digital devices are routinely present, including Melasti processions and temple ceremonies; everyday settings in which Balinese youth negotiate traditional obligation and global lifestyle; and online settings in which Balinese ritual imagery circulates. Field notes, photographic documentation, and informal conversations were recorded. No interviews were conducted, and no claims about individual attitudes are made on the basis of this material; its function was to establish the visual and situational repertoire from which the works were composed.

Concurrently, a visual survey established precedent. Three sources were consulted. The WPAP technique was studied through Rasyid's (2011) own account and through the analysis of the style's formal characteristics and community transmission offered by Dawami et al. (2021). Contemporary Balinese practice that stages encounters between tradition and modernity was surveyed, with particular attention to works placing traditional figures alongside communication technology. The construction sandbox game *Minecraft* was examined as a limit case of an entirely self-referential simulated world.

Phase 2: Formation

Alternative sketches were produced on paper for each intended work, and a subset was developed digitally in order to test geometric facet configurations and colour clashes at low cost before committing to canvas. This digital-to-manual workflow follows the logic Budiarta and Sila (2022) describe for visual communication design practice, in which mastery of both manual and digital procedures is treated as a single competence rather than two.

Selection between alternatives was governed by three criteria fixed in advance: whether the composition placed the local and global elements in genuine tension rather than simple juxtaposition; whether the figure remained recognisable after geometric decomposition; and whether the work admitted more than one reading, since a composition that resolved into a single unambiguous message would have contradicted the study's argument about undecidability.

Phase 3: Realisation

Selected designs were transferred to primed canvas. A textural ground was then built by combining acrylic emulsion as binder with a filler of talc and calcium carbonate, producing a dense, dimensional surface. This step is not incidental. A flat surface would have permitted the geometric facets of WPAP to read as a purely graphic, screen-like plane; the coarse ground insists on the painting's material presence and its resistance to the screen, which is itself part of the argument. Proportions were adjusted across the three works, with a coarser aggregate used where surface disruption was intended to be legible at viewing distance.

After the ground had healed, a brown underpainting locked tonal structure. Base-colour blocking then established the chromatic scheme and the pattern of colour collisions before final detailing. Colour selection was informed by Karja's (2021) account of colour as light and energy, perceptible through reflection by particles and objects, and by the observation that the palette of contemporary digital display is itself a marker of period taste.

Phase 4: Reflective Evaluation

Following Nelson's (2013) requirement that practice-led claims be made examinable, the completed works were subjected to a documented appraisal before analysis was finalised. Four appraisers participated: two academic staff in fine art with expertise in Balinese visual culture, one practising Balinese painter working outside the Pop Art idiom, and one Balinese dancer aged under thirty with active social media practice, included specifically because the third work concerns dancers and because the study's claims concern youth.

Appraisers viewed the works without a supplied interpretation and responded to four prompts, derived from the study's research questions and fixed before viewing. Responses were recorded in writing. Table 1 states the criteria and summarises the outcome, including the two points on which appraisal contradicted the artist's intention.

Table 1. Appraisal criteria, prompts, and summarised findings

No.	Criterion	Prompt to appraisers	Summarised outcome
1	Legibility after decomposition	Which figures or elements can you identify, and how quickly?	All four identified the ritual procession and the dancer without prompting. Two required extended viewing to identify the Kratos figure in *Dialektika Pikiran*; one did not identify it at all and read the figure as a generic aggressive Western form. Recorded as a partial failure of the intended reference and discussed below.
2	Undecidability of ritual and screen	In *Fun Run With Ida*, what are you looking at?	Three of four independently reported hesitation between a ritual scene and a screen surface. One reported no hesitation, reading the work as unambiguously a ritual scene with graphic overlay. Strongest confirmed effect across the trilogy.
3	Character of the fragmentation	Does the fragmentation read as damage, as energy, or as something else?	Divided. Two read *Arus Maya* as loss or dissolution; the dancer-appraiser read it as energy and self-presentation, explicitly rejecting a reading of loss. Substantially revised the analysis of that work.
4	Surface and material presence	Does the physical surface affect how you read the image?	All four reported the texture as consequential; three connected it to resistance against a screen-like flatness without prompting.

Note. Appraisal was conducted on completed works prior to finalisation of analysis. Appraisers were not shown the study's theoretical framework. n = 4.

Analytical Framework

Analysis of the completed works proceeds on three levels, applied in a fixed order to each painting: description of formal features actually present in the picture; the perceptual effect those features produce, corroborated where possible against appraisal responses; and only then the theoretical claim. This ordering is deliberate. Practice-led writing habitually inverts it, beginning from intention and treating the picture as confirmation, which renders the claims unfalsifiable.

The theoretical apparatus is Baudrillard's (1994) account of the orders of simulacra. Baudrillard distinguishes an order of counterfeit, in which the copy still refers to an original; an order of production, in which objects are mass-reproduced without individual uniqueness; and an order of simulation, in which the copy has no original and reality is generated from models. The present study engages the second and third orders, and Table 2 states the

mapping in advance so that the analyses can be checked against it. Bhabha's (1994) notion of a third space — the site of enunciation opened where cultural codes meet, which is neither of the parent codes — is used to name what the trilogy produces, and Bourriaud's (2002) account of postproduction, in which artists work with existing cultural signs as raw material rather than inventing forms, describes the compositional operation the works perform.

Table 2. Mapping of Baudrillard's orders of simulacra to the trilogy

Order	Defining relation	Where it operates in the trilogy	Visual carrier
Second order (production)	Mass reproduction without individual uniqueness; copy refers to a model, not an original	*Fun Run With Ida*: ritual imagery reproduced at scale for circulation; the procession as reproducible content	Repeated figure groups; the flattening of individuated faces into a serial rhythm; overlaid platform iconography
Third order (simulation)	Copy without original; the real generated from models	*Arus Maya*: the dancer's body reconstituted as circuit and data; *Dialektika Pikiran*: a fictional character with no referent contending on equal terms with a deity	Circuit iconography replacing anatomy; the Kratos figure; the neon palette of display technology
Boundary case	Self-contained simulated world with no referent, inhabited as real	Compositional principle borrowed from voxel construction (*Minecraft*)	Modular facet construction; the world assembled from discrete units

Note. Mapping fixed prior to analysis. Baudrillard's first order (counterfeit) is not engaged by this study.

Research Ethics and Positionality

No institutional review board governs research of this kind at the authors' institution; consent was therefore secured directly. The four appraisers were informed in writing of the purpose of the appraisal, consented to the written recording of their responses, and are identified in this article by role and not by name. Observation in ritual settings was conducted as a participant within the authors' own community of practice; no photographs of identifiable persons taken in ritual settings are reproduced here, and the field photography served as compositional reference only. The paintings reproduced as Figures 1 to 3 are the first author's own work, reproduced with his consent as maker and rights holder. The first author is a Balinese practitioner of the tradition discussed and the maker of the works analysed; the second and third authors supervised the enquiry. This position is the condition of the study's access and also its principal constraint, and it is addressed in the limitations stated below.

Limitations

Three limitations should be stated. First, the appraisal panel is small (n = 4) and purposively selected; its function is to make the claims examinable and to introduce disconfirmation, not to establish generalisable reception. Second, the artist is also the analyst, and while the ordering of analysis and the appraisal stage are intended to constrain self-confirmation, they cannot eliminate it. Third, the observational material informing Phase 1 was not collected under an interview protocol and supports no claims about the beliefs or attitudes of individual Balinese youth; the study's claims concern what the paintings make visible, not what any person reports feeling.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The enquiry produced three mixed-media paintings on canvas, presented as Figures 1 to 3 below. Before turning to the individual works, two matters require treatment: the correspondence between the procedure of WPAP and the theory, which is the study's principal conceptual claim; and the precedent from which the visual strategy derives.

Technique as Argument: WPAP and the Logic of Simulation

WPAP was developed by the Indonesian illustrator Wedha Abdul Rasyid, who arrived at the style through the practical difficulty of continuing to produce realist portraits as his eyesight declined, and who consolidated it as a named idiom from 2010 onward (Rasyid, 2011). Dawami et al. (2021) document its formal characteristics — facial construction from geometric facets, distinctive line drawing, and a palette selected without reference to observed local colour — and its transmission through regional chapter communities. They also note that economic motive shifted the style's orientation toward commodity, so that its art form tends to follow market trends: WPAP is itself a case of a form circulating faster than the conditions that produced it.

The procedure at the centre of the style is the substitution of colour. In WPAP, skin is not rendered in the colour of skin. The palette is chosen for chromatic effect, and the operative criterion is that the result should be better than the original — more saturated, more legible, more arresting. This is worth stating precisely, because it is the study's hinge. WPAP does not distort an original; it produces a version that does not claim to refer to the original at all, and that is nonetheless accepted as a portrait of that person. The likeness survives the abolition of the referent.

This is, structurally, Baudrillard's (1994) description of the movement from the second to the third order. The second order produces copies that refer to a model rather than to a unique original; the third produces images generated from models, without original, which are received as real. WPAP performs both operations on a face. The facet grid mass-produces the head from a finite set of geometric units — the second order at the level of construction — while the colour substitution severs the referential tie entirely, and the portrait continues to function.

The consequence for this study is methodological rather than merely descriptive. Where a painter using a naturalistic idiom to depict digital mediation must place the argument in the subject matter — a figure holding a phone, a screen inserted in a landscape — a painter using WPAP has the argument in the procedure. Every facet laid down enacts the substitution the work is about. This is what is meant here by technique as argument, and it is offered as the study's principal contribution to practice-led method: the selection of a technique can be a theoretical commitment, and can be defended as such.

The claim has a limit that should be marked. That a procedure is structurally analogous to a theoretical operation does not establish that viewers perceive the analogy. Appraisal (Table 1, criterion 4) found that all four appraisers registered the material surface as consequential, and three connected it unprompted to resistance against screen-like flatness, but none articulated the colour-substitution analogy without prompting. The correspondence is therefore claimed as a compositional and analytical resource, not as a perceptual effect.

Visual Precedent

Three lines of precedent inform the works. The first is WPAP itself, in the codified form documented above (Rasyid, 2011; Dawami et al., 2021), from which the facet construction and non-naturalistic palette derive.

The second is the tradition of Balinese painting that adapts external means without abandoning local idioms. Rediasa et al. (2024) demonstrate this in Penglipuran, where figures

rendered with modern media and greater anatomical volume nevertheless retain classical *wayang* gesture and perspective — a precedent for the present study's insistence that decomposition should not destroy recognisability. Supir (2019) supplies the theoretical form of the same point in his analysis of Batuan social realism, in which the combination of global and local codes produces hybrid work with a new identity that destabilises settled cultural boundaries. Rediasa et al. (2021) establish that responding to immediate social conditions is an established rather than exceptional mode for Balinese painters.

The third is the compositional principle of modular construction, examined through *Minecraft*. The game is a limit case of the third order: an entirely artificial world with no referent, assembled from discrete units, in which players nevertheless act, build, destroy, and feel. The present works borrow the principle of a world assembled from units — the facet functioning as the voxel does — and redirect it toward critique rather than construction. The borrowing is compositional and is claimed no more strongly than that.

Contested Consciousness: Dialektika Pikiran

Figure 1 divides into two unequal zones. The lower third is occupied by the upper part of a head, cropped just below the eyes so that the mouth is absent and the gaze is unavoidable; the head wears an *udeng* (Balinese headcloth worn by men), rendered in the same facet construction as the face. The upper two thirds is a field split vertically between a blue-violet mass on the left and a red mass on the right. Two figures occupy this field, seated at a small table in the posture of arm wrestling: on the left a figure with topknot, ash-toned skin, and patterned cloth, identifiable as Siwa; on the right a heavily muscled pale figure with painted markings and greaves.

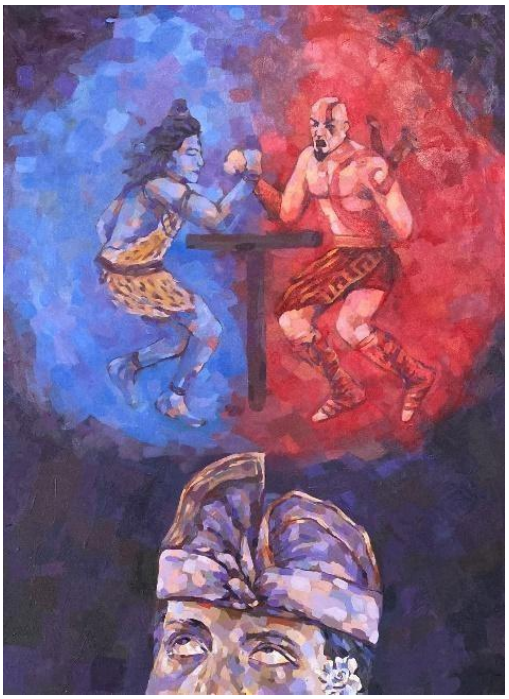


Figure 1. *Dialektika Pikiran*, mixed media on canvas, 80 × 110 cm, [year]
Painting and photograph by the first author. Reproduced with the consent of the artist as rights holder.

The perceptual effect follows from the cropping. Because the head is cut off at the eyes and placed beneath the contest, the upper field does not read as background but as content — as what is inside the head rather than behind it. The two colour masses do not blend at their meeting; they abut, and the abutment falls approximately at the vertical axis of the head below. The composition thus produces a division that runs through the figure rather than around it. The contest is not depicted as observed by the youth; it is depicted as constituting him.

Appraisal qualified this reading in one respect. Two of four appraisers required extended viewing to identify the right-hand figure as Kratos, and one did not identify it at all, reading it instead as a generic aggressive Western form (Table 1, criterion 1). This is a partial failure of the intended reference, and it is instructive rather than merely negative. The specific irony intended — that Kratos is a figure whose narrative premise is the killing of gods, here arm-wrestling a god to a draw — is available only to viewers who bring that knowledge. What survives without it is the structural opposition: a recognisable local sacred figure held to a standstill by an unrecognised global one. Arguably the failure of recognition demonstrates the point more sharply than success would, since a global sign that acts on a viewer without being identified is a more complete description of the condition than one that announces itself.

Theoretically, the work stages the third order at the level of individual consciousness. Siwa possesses a referent: a deity within a living devotional practice, addressed in ritual, present in the *bhuana alit* and *bhuana agung* framework by which the *udeng*-wearing head below would understand itself. Kratos possesses none. He is generated wholly from models, a character produced by an entertainment industry with no original outside its own circulation. The painting places these two on a table of equal height, in a posture whose entire meaning is the equivalence of opposed forces. The claim is not that the sacred has been defeated. It is that a sign without a referent has been admitted to a contest on equal terms with one that has a referent, and that this admission is what the contemporary space of consciousness looks like.

The colour treatment reinforces this. Following Karja's (2021) account of colour as energy perceived through reflection, the blue-violet and red fields are not attributes of the two figures but atmospheres they generate and are held within. Neither field encroaches on the other; the standoff is chromatic before it is anatomical. The facet construction is applied identically to both figures and to the head below, which matters: the technique makes no distinction between the deity, the game character, and the youth. All three are equally products of substitution. That equality is the argument the technique carries independently of the subject matter.

Undecidable Space: Fun Run With Ida

The title requires explanation for readers outside the Indonesian context, since it turns on a bilingual collision that is itself the subject of the work. *Ida* is an honorific in Balinese usage, applied to deities and to persons of high priestly standing; it carries the register of the sacred. Fun run is an unmodified English import denoting a casual mass participation event, sponsored, photographed, and organised for enjoyment. The two registers are placed in a single phrase with no mediation, producing a construction that is grammatical, immediately comprehensible, and slightly indecent. The title performs in language what the painting performs in paint.

Figure 2 depicts a procession, viewed from a slightly elevated and oblique angle. The setting is a Melasti ceremony — the Balinese Hindu purification ritual held in the days before Nyepi, in which villages process to the sea or another water source to purify sacred objects and, in the cosmological terms set out above, to cleanse both *bhuana alit* and *bhuana agung*. Figures in white ceremonial dress and *udeng* carry ritual structures; in the foreground, several figures wear green hooded rain capes, their faces turned in different directions. Across the lower left and centre, translucent rounded rectangles bearing platform iconography are laid over the picture surface.



Figure 2. *Fun Run With Ida*, mixed media on canvas, 100 × 120 cm, [year]
Painting and photograph by the first author. Reproduced with the consent of the artist as rights holder.

The perceptual effect is the trilogy's strongest and most consistently confirmed. Three of four appraisers independently reported hesitation as to what they were looking at, without any prompt naming screens (Table 1, criterion 2). The hesitation is produced by three specific devices. First, the overlaid icon-shapes are rendered at the same tonal weight as the painted figures rather than sitting above them, so they neither read as a separate layer nor integrate as objects in the scene. Second, the palette is dominated by a blue-violet that belongs equally to overcast coastal light and to backlit display. Third, the oblique elevated viewpoint corresponds to no natural standing position within a procession but exactly to the angle at which a phone is held while filming.

The result is a picture that will not resolve. It is not a ritual scene with graphic decoration, and it is not a screen image of a ritual. It occupies the undecidable position between them, and the viewer's inability to settle the question is the work's content rather than a defect of its execution. One appraiser reported no hesitation, reading the work as unambiguously a ritual scene with overlay; the effect is therefore reported as strong but not universal.

Theoretically, this work carries the second order. Where *Dialektika Pikiran* concerns a sign without an original, *Fun Run With Ida* concerns reproduction: the ritual event rendered as reproducible content, its individual participants absorbed into a serial rhythm of white cloth and turned faces, the whole legible as a unit of circulation. This is precisely the movement Prasiasa et al. (2023) identify in Bali's creative industries, where market taste drives cultural products from homogeneous toward heterogeneous mass production and directly engages the sacred–profane relation; and it is the condition Picard (1996) anticipated when he showed that touristic attention causes the Balinese to relate to their own practice as display. The account of the gaze as systemically organised in advance given by Urry and Larsen (2011) explains the viewpoint: the painting is composed from the position the image economy has already established as standard.

Two features prevent the work from collapsing into simple lament. The rain capes are the first. They are cheap, contemporary, mass-produced, and vividly green against the ceremonial white, and they are also entirely practical — it rains, and the procession continues. Their presence records that the ritual is being performed rather than staged, by people making ordinary accommodations. The second is that the faces beneath the hoods are individuated and attentive. They are not depicted as absorbed by screens; they are depicted as present, in a space that has become ambiguous around them. This distinction matters for the study's

account of the social body: what the painting shows is not the replacement of practice by image but their simultaneity in a single body, which is a harder condition to represent and a more accurate one.

This is where the third space described by Bhabha (1994) becomes analytically useful. The picture does not depict a sacred space invaded by a profane one, nor a profane space nostalgic for the sacred. It constructs a site of enunciation that belongs to neither parent code and cannot be resolved back into either. The hybrid identity that Supir (2019) describes, capable of destabilising established cultural boundaries, describes the outcome; the postproduction of Bourriaud (2002) describes the operation by which it was reached, since the painting composes from existing circulating signs rather than inventing forms.

The Body in Circulation: Arus Maya

Figure 3 presents a single frontal figure: a Balinese dancer in the elaborate *gelungan* (ceremonial dance headdress) headdress, occupying nearly the full picture field against a magenta and cyan ground. The facet construction is denser here than in the other two works, and the palette is drawn explicitly from the register of contemporary display — saturated magenta, cyan, emerald, and orange in neon relation. Through the headdress and across the shoulders, the facets resolve intermittently into linear branching patterns that read as printed circuitry.



Figure 3. *Arus Maya*, mixed media on canvas, 80 × 110 cm, [year]
Painting and photograph by the first author. Reproduced with the consent of the artist as rights holder.

The perceptual effect depends on a specific compositional decision: the face is the least fragmented region of the picture. Facet density decreases toward the centre of the face and increases outward through the headdress and shoulders. Consequently, the eyes hold while everything around them disperses, and the figure reads as maintaining composure inside a process of dissolution rather than as having been destroyed by it. This is the same principle Rediasa et al. (2024) identify in Penglipuran painting, where modern technique and greater anatomical volume coexist with retained classical gesture: recognisability is preserved through the point of greatest cultural investment.

Appraisal substantially revised the reading of this work, and the revision is reported here because it changed the study's conclusion. The prompt asked whether the fragmentation read

as damage, as energy, or as something else (Table 1, criterion 3). Two appraisers read it as loss and dissolution, consistent with the artist's initial intention. The dancer-appraiser explicitly rejected that reading, describing the fragmentation as energy and as self-presentation, and noting that circulating one's dancing online is not experienced as being reduced to data but as extending a practice to an audience that would not otherwise reach it.

This disconfirmation is taken seriously rather than absorbed. The initial analysis held that the work depicted the reduction of cultural identity to fragmented digital data under the pressure of social media expectation. That reading is not sustainable as the work's single meaning, because it requires attributing to dancers an experience of loss that at least one dancer directly denies. The revised reading is that the painting is genuinely bivalent, and that its bivalence is more faithful to the condition than either pole. The same formal device — increasing facet density outward from a held face — supports reading the figure as dispersing and as radiating. Which reading a viewer reaches depends substantially on their position relative to the practice depicted.

This bivalence has theoretical consequences. The third order described by Baudrillard (1994) is customarily received as a diagnosis of loss, and the initial analysis inherited that inflection uncritically. But the order describes a structural condition — the generation of the real from models — not necessarily a subjective experience of impoverishment. A dancer whose practice is constituted partly through circulation is living in the third order without thereby experiencing deprivation. The circuit iconography in Figure 3 can therefore be read in two directions at once: as the body reconstituted as data, and as the body extended through a medium. The painting does not choose, and the study no longer asks it to.

What can be claimed with confidence is narrower and more secure. The work shows a social body — in the sense defined above, a body constituted by its relations — whose constituting relations now include a circulatory one that did not previously exist. The *gelungan* signals ritual and community obligation; the circuit signals distribution and audience; both are rendered in the same facets and cannot be separated in the picture. Whether this is enrichment or attenuation is precisely what is contested, and a painting that held the contest open is a more useful object than one that settled it.

The Trilogy as a Structure

Read together, the three works describe a movement across scales rather than a narrative of decline. Table 3 summarises the formal and theoretical structure.

Table 3. Formal and analytical summary of the trilogy

Work	Scale	Principal formal device	Confirmed perceptual effect	Order engaged
Dialektika Pikiran	Individual consciousness	Cropped head beneath a contested field; chromatic abutment on the head's axis	Upper field read as interior rather than background	Third (sign without referent admitted as equal)
Fun Run With Ida	Communal ritual space	Overlay at equal tonal weight; filming viewpoint; convergent palette	Sustained undecidability between ritual and screen (3 of 4 appraisers)	Second (event as reproducible content)
Arus Maya	Individual body and its circulation	Facet density decreasing toward a held face; circuit iconography	Bivalent: dispersal or radiance, dependent on viewer position	Third (body constituted through circulation)

Note. Effects reported are those corroborated by appraisal (Table 1); intended effects not so corroborated are excluded.

The trilogy moves from the interior of a single consciousness, through a communal space, to a body in circulation — a progression outward rather than downward. The material treatment is constant across all three: the same acrylic-emulsion, talc, and calcium carbonate ground, producing a surface that all four appraisers registered as consequential and that three connected unprompted to resistance against screen-like flatness (Table 1, criterion 4). This consistency is not incidental to the argument. A painting about the loss of material referents that was itself a smooth, screen-like surface would have conceded the case in its execution. The coarse ground is the trilogy's one unqualified assertion of the physical.

The findings support the contention of Surahman (2024) that digital media drives a gradual reduction of traditional norms and practices, but require a qualification that the paintings make visible and that discursive formulation tends to lose. Reduction is not what any of the three works actually shows. Each shows addition under conditions of competition: a second contending sign admitted alongside the first, a second reading of a space laid over the first without erasing it, a second mode of a body's existence added to its ritual mode. The bodies in these paintings are not emptied. They are overloaded, and it is the overload that fragments them.

This qualification bears on the debate over commodification in Balinese cultural production. Prasiasa et al. (2023, 2024) and Swandi et al. (2023) document mechanisms by which Balinese culture is constructed and consumed as image, and Picard (1996) established the reflexivity that made such construction possible. The present study adds that at the level of the individual social body, these mechanisms do not present themselves as subtraction. They present as an additional set of obligations — to be seen, to be legible, to circulate — layered onto existing ritual and communal obligations that have not been withdrawn. This is what the three paintings, taken together, make visible: not a culture being emptied out, but persons carrying more relations than a body can compose into a single posture.

Contribution to Practice-Led Method

The study's methodological contribution is the proposition that a technique can be selected as a theoretical commitment and defended as such. WPAP was not adopted because it suits contemporary subject matter or appeals to a young audience. It was adopted because its constitutive procedure — the substitution of colour for a colour better than the original, with the likeness surviving the loss of the referent — is a structural analogue of the operation the study set out to examine. This makes the technique an instrument rather than a style.

This proposition is transferable. The relevant question for a practice-led researcher becomes not only what to depict but what procedure would enact the condition under examination, so that the argument is carried by the making rather than added to it in commentary. Barrett and Bolt (2007) argue that studio enquiry reveals knowledge unavailable to other modes; Haseman (2006) argues that the symbolic outcome constitutes the finding. Technique-as-argument specifies one mechanism by which this occurs, and one that can be stated in advance and assessed against the resulting work.

The appraisal stage supplies the second methodological point. Its value in this study was not confirmation but contradiction: it identified a partial failure of reference in Figure 1 and overturned the intended reading of Figure 3. Neither would have surfaced through the artist's own reflection, because both concern what the works do for viewers differently positioned. Following Nelson (2013), a practice-led claim that has not been exposed to the possibility of disconfirmation is not yet a research claim. The cost of including such a stage is that some intentions do not survive it; that cost is the point.

CONCLUSION

This study asked how the mediation of Balinese ritual imagery registers on the social body of Balinese youth, and whether painting can make that registration visible. It answered through a practice-led enquiry producing three mixed-media paintings, analysed from formal description through perceptual effect to theoretical claim, and closed by a documented expert appraisal. The registration is not subtractive. Across all three works, what becomes visible is not a body emptied of cultural content but a body carrying an additional set of relations — circulatory, audience-directed, framed — layered onto ritual and communal relations that remain in force. Fragmentation in these paintings is the visible consequence of overload rather than of loss, and this qualifies the prevailing account of digital mediation as cultural reduction.

The effect most reliably produced across the trilogy is undecidability rather than diagnosis. *Fun Run With Ida* was reported by three of four appraisers as irresolvably suspended between ritual scene and screen surface, and *Arus Maya* proved genuinely bivalent, read as dissolution by some appraisers and as radiance by a dancer who rejected the reading of loss outright. That the works hold these questions open rather than settling them is treated here as their principal value, since the condition they address is itself unsettled. Alongside this substantive finding the study establishes technique-as-argument as a usable proposition in practice-led research: the substitution in WPAP of colour for a colour better than the original, with likeness surviving the abolition of the referent, is a structural analogue of the movement from the second to the third order of simulacra, and selecting a technique on that basis makes the making itself carry the theoretical claim rather than illustrating one arrived at elsewhere. For practitioners and for curators of contemporary Balinese art, this reframes the choice of idiom as an analytical decision open to scrutiny rather than a matter of taste.

Two limitations bound these conclusions. The appraisal panel was small and purposively selected, sufficient to introduce disconfirmation but not to establish reception. And the artist remained the analyst throughout, a constraint mitigated by the fixed order of analysis and the appraisal stage but not removed by them. Further work might proceed in two directions. A larger reception study, particularly with Balinese participants under thirty, would test whether the bivalence found in *Arus Maya* distributes systematically by position relative to the practice depicted. And the technique-as-argument proposition invites application to other procedures and other conditions: the question of which making procedures enact which theoretical operations is, so far as the authors are aware, largely unexamined.

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DECLARATIONS

Author contributions. I.B.M.D. — conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, studio practice, visualisation, writing (original draft); I.W.S. — formal analysis, validation, writing (review and editing); I.N.S. — supervision, methodology, writing (review and editing). All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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Ethical approval and informed consent. No institutional ethics board with jurisdiction over arts research exists at the authors' institution. Written informed consent was obtained from all four appraisers, who agreed to the recording of their responses and to being identified by role rather than by name. No identifiable person appears in the reproduced works, and consent to publish the images of the paintings was given by the first author as maker and rights holder.

Data availability. The field notes, photographic reference material, preparatory sketches, and the written appraisal responses underlying the findings are held by the first author at the Department of Art and Design, Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha, and may be consulted on reasonable request. The three paintings are in the artist's own collection.

Use of generative artificial intelligence. The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence tool was used in the conception, conduct, analysis, or writing of this research. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the article.

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