

Mountains and Rice Fields: Curating painting and environmental issues through the “Landscape of Nation” exhibition

Mikke Susanto

Institut Seni Indonesia Yogyakarta,
Yogyakarta, Indonesia

susantomikke@gmail.com
Tel: +6289651318766

Abstract

History has recorded many natural disasters caused by mountains in Indonesia. “Landscape of Nation” exhibition at the Basoeki Abdullah Museum explores the issue of mountains and rice fields. This research explains the curatorial exhibition. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method. Sixteen paintings in the exhibition were used to cultivate public appreciation for environmental issues. Research on the theme of mountains and rice fields greatly impacts Indonesian art society. This research significantly contributes to education, particularly in the humanities, art studies, natural sciences, and museology.

Keywords: Curatorial; landscape painting; art exhibition; art and environmental issues

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1.0 Introduction

Southeast Asian islands, including Indonesia, owe their formation to a subduction. The subduction, which began tens of millions of years ago, involved the collision of the Indo-Australian oceanic plate with the Eurasian continental plate (Hall et al., 1996). This process fuelled the creation of a chain of volcanoes ringing the Pacific Ocean. Naturally, the presence of these numerous mountains has a profound impact on the region's entire ecosystem.

Human civilization emerged in Indonesia thousands of years ago. However, comprehensive written records of natural disasters in Indonesia only date back to the arrival of Europeans roughly 400 years ago. Unfortunately, written accounts of natural disasters in Indonesia only record post-classical catastrophic events (Yulianto, 2021). Earlier records exist but are scarce and fragmentary, like references to volcanic eruptions and earthquakes in the *Negarakertagama* (Mulyana, 1979).

Mountains play a profound role on a cosmological scale. They shape life and culture while also holding the power to devastate civilizations. Mountains, cradling the civilization of rice fields, are often viewed as both a challenge and a life therapy or life balancer. Mountains and rice fields have become essential for humans, providing a vital food source. Every human depends on rice fields, which require continuous and sustainable planting cycles and care despite the occasional setbacks and disasters.

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The history of human life has been radically transformed since the adoption of agriculture. Rice fields (and mountains) led humans to abandon nomadic lifestyles. Humans tend to the fields and use their downtime for various crafts or activities. Mountains and rice fields have become recognized as symbols of the birth and development of culture (read: humanity).

The present article is driven by the growing recognition of art and creativity as powerful forces for social and environmental change. Interdisciplinary collaboration between art and the environment is crucial for tackling humanity's complex challenges. Art functions as an aesthetic medium and an educational and advocacy tool, influencing environmental and social policies. Exploring and understanding art in this context is key to contributing to environmental balance and human well-being.

It should be noted that art exhibitions serve a vital public function. They facilitate knowledge transfer and public advocacy on various issues. Furthermore, historical records of natural disasters caused by mountains are widely circulated. These historical records inspire artists in their works. Artists present their visions and messages about mountains in art exhibitions. The art exhibition "Landscape of Nation" at the Basoeki Abdullah Museum in 2011 explores the issue of mountains and rice fields. The aim is to mediate topics and studies about the natural environment, especially mountains and rice fields.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Curator and Curation

A curator acts like a catalyst, a substance that brings elements together. Curators bring together artists and audiences in an exhibition. They play the role of dialogue builders, weaving together various factors in an exhibition. In fact, "curating" has been more like direct discourse uttered by a respected person in an exhibition. From this opinion, it can be argued that curation is a work of "considering space": bringing together artists' works and the market-media-public in a discourse-atmosphere-place of an exhibition. Of course, curation also includes research on texts and objects, conceptualization, interpretation, planning, and promotion of exhibitions or collections. It could be said that curation is the core and main work behind exhibition management (Susanto, 2016).

2.2 Landscape Painting

Landscape painting, derived from the Dutch word "*landschap*", depicts natural scenery, typically featuring mountains, trees, rivers, ravines, and forests. Sky and climate are also key elements that shape the composition. Since the 1st century BC, Roman frescoes depicting scenic views have graced the buildings of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Landscape painting traditionally depicts the Earth's surface, but it can also encompass otherworldly views like moonscapes. By the early 15th century, landscape painting had emerged as an established genre in European art. The term "landscape painting" entered the English dictionaries in the 17th century (Susanto, 2018).

Landscape painting has played an essential role in human life from the prehistoric era to the present. However, a natural landscape is more of a visible, factual, realistic panorama of existing environmental elements (Baomar, 2020). "Landscape" refers to a vista or a bounded land area and its painted representation (Palma, 2016).

2.3 Art Exhibition

"Exhibition" can encompass conventions, expositions, forums, shows, and displays. The terms "exhibition" and "display," for example, are used interchangeably by anyone concerned, particularly in the world of economy and promotion. While the traditional distinction between "display" as a verb and "exhibition" as a noun (for example, to display in an exhibition) remains in dictionaries, the lines are blurred in everyday practice. In art jargon, both "exhibition" and "display" are referred to as "exhibition," even though subtle distinctions exist between them (Susanto, 2024: 31).

An exhibition is a strategic system of representation. This system organizes exhibitions to represent the optimal and engaging use of everything. This includes exhibition architecture that is always "political" (corresponding to "art as political"), "painting the walls" (read: installation or display of artworks) that is always full of psychological purposes, labels (of artworks) that are always educational, artistic presentations that are always full of ideological and structural power within their limited statements, dramatic lighting, security systems that are always a form of social security, and curatorial premises that are always dogmatic and professional (Ferguson, 1996).

2.4 Art and Environmental Issues

The relationship between environment and art is constantly evolving. According to Thornes, "environment" and "art" are subject to ongoing reinterpretation. Art evolves with new media. Environmental issues dominate political, economic, and scientific discourse, particularly climate change. The relationship between art and the environment can influence feelings about humans' daily experiences in the world (Thornes, 2008), including the negative impacts of ecological damage. Therefore, Thornes encourages us to appreciate both the beauty and fragility of our environment and our cultural responses to it. Among other things, it is essential to examine how past and present artists have depicted the environment in their paintings.

Anggrian and Iksan (2020) identified at least six personal motivations driving artists to create art centered on environmental awareness. These motivations include (1) personal spiritual practice, (2) positioning art as a cultural event, (3) empowering personal existence for society and the environment, (4) involvement in art projects to empower society, (5) building community awareness and sharing values, and (6) preserving local wisdom traditions.

3.0 Methodology




This research is descriptive and qualitative. It focused on curating an exhibition organised by the Basoeeki Abdullah Museum and Mikke Susanto, held on 24 September–22 October 2011. Primary data for this research consisted of observations, interviews, and documentation collected by the curator. Observations were conducted through visits and discussions with participating artists. Subsequently, an exhibition was held to disseminate knowledge related to the main topic. Additional observations were conducted at the exhibition venue, the Basoeeki Abdullah Museum. Interviews were conducted with each participating artist. The documentation technique was used to identify the values embedded in the mountain and rice field-themed exhibition. Data analysis employed Miles and Huberman's (2005) interactive qualitative analysis, involving data collection, reduction, display, and conclusion drawing.

4.0 Findings

In art, mountains and rice fields have served as an inexhaustible source of inspiration for landscape painting artists in Europe and Indonesia. Landscape paintings frequently feature mountains, rice fields, and mountains and forests (trees) as central elements. When interpreted by different artists, the same subject matter arises in diverse contexts. In the art exhibition "Landscape of Nation," the curator, through his curatorial practice, proposes a thesis exploring the theme of mountains and rice fields across various contexts. The following are intriguing findings regarding the diverse contexts in which mountains and rice fields are depicted in paintings:

4.1 Mountains & Rice Fields in the Context of Tradition and Romanticism

Table 1.


No.	Description of Painting	Photograph of Painting
1.	Basoeeki Abdullah, <i>Sungai Tak Pernah Kembali</i> , 125x200 cm, oil on canvas, date undetermined.	
2.	Wakidi, <i>Danau</i> , 70x128 cm, oil on canvas, c. 1930	
3.	Ernst Dezentje, <i>Pemandangan</i> , 70x50 cm, oil on canvas, date undetermined.	

(Source: The catalog of the exhibition "Landscape of Nation", the Basoeeki Abdullah Museum, 2011)

Within tradition and romanticism, the paintings of Abdullah Sr., Basoeeki Abdullah, Wakidi, and Ernst Dezentje are prime examples. These painters expanded upon the academically established conventions and traditions of landscape painting as upheld by European educational institutions. They prioritized dynamic and static compositions aimed at constructing new worlds to emotionally engage viewers as they observed the realities of mountainous and rice field landscapes. The reality these painters envision is rooted in romanticism (dramatic imagination or fantasy), emphasizing the sublime qualities of nature as both subject and object. In their works, we will not find anything deemed "ugly or useless" (such as electric poles or dilapidated houses). Their works exclusively present "the beautiful."

4.2 Mountains & Rice Fields in the Context of Nationalism

Table 2.



No.	Description of Painting	Photograph of Painting
4.	Dullah, <i>Menyambut Konferensi Asia Afrika</i> , 150x80 cm, oil on canvas, 1964	

(Source: The catalog of the exhibition "Landscape of Nation", the Basoeeki Abdullah Museum, 2011)

The context of nationalism is proposed as a curatorial framework for paintings that depict mountains and rice fields as both the setting and the medium for expressing nationalist sentiments. Nationalism, in this context, refers to an attitude that prioritizes the emergence of a desire for unity among individuals to achieve national goals. The central theme is Indonesian independence, linked to mountains as battlegrounds against colonial powers. Dullah's collaborative work, *Menyambut Konferensi Asia Afrika* (1964), is pivotal in this context.

4.3 Mountains & Rice Fields in Religious Context

Table 3.

No.	Description of Painting	Photograph of Painting
5.	Rustamadji, <i>Sunyi Sepi Permai Damai</i> , 120x82 cm, watercolor on paper, 1964	
6.	Ahmad Sadali, <i>Gunungan</i> , 61x52 cm, mixed media on paper, 1976	

(Source: The catalog of the exhibition "Landscape of Nation", the Basoeki Abdullah Museum, 2011)




This context posits the thesis that mountains serve as a significant symbol in the lives of various communities across the Indonesian Archipelago, particularly in Java, Bali, and Sumatra. Mountains are associated with notions of safety, balance, and religiosity. This religious framework represents mountains as *gunungan* (carved and painted mountain-shaped objects in traditional Indonesian puppetry). The *gunungan* symbolises life, often depicted as the Tree of Life inhabited by a menagerie of forest creatures such as tigers, bulls, monkeys, and peacocks.

At the base of the *gunungan*, a depiction of a *joglo* (a traditional Javanese house) is typically found. On either side of the *joglo*, enormous dragons are portrayed baring their fangs. The *gunungan* is rooted in a conception of divinity symbolized by the universe. The evolution of tradition and traditional arts has solidified the role of the mountain or the *gunungan* within the framework of divinity. The paintings of Rustamadji and Ahmad Sadali contribute to this discourse in a more modern context. Both artists dedicated their artistic skills to depicting mountains to remind us of the concept of divinity.

4.4 Mountains & Rice Fields in the Context of Social Documentation and Global Issues

Table 4.

No.	Description of Painting	Photograph of Painting
7.	D. Zawawi Imron, <i>Renungan di Tengah Alam Madura</i> , 2011	
8.	Dyan Anggraini, <i>Now to Know</i> , 120 x 150, 2011	
9.	Januri, <i>Nation of Landscape</i> , 150x150 cm, acrylic on canvas, 2011	
10.	Julnaldi MS, <i>Terbentang dan Terpotong</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2011	




11.	Rinaldi, <i>Gunung II</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2011	
12.	Totok Buchori, <i>Reboisasi</i> , 85 x 70 cm, oil on canvas, 2011	
13.	Widayat, <i>Tanggal 22 Nop. 1994, Merapi Meletus</i> , 145 x 178 cm, 1994	

(Source: The catalog of the exhibition "Landscape of Nation", the Basoeki Abdullah Museum, 2011)

Mountains and rice fields are the treasures of the Indonesian nation. They are the very breath of Indonesia. What will happen if mountains and rice fields are no longer in ecological balance? Undoubtedly, Indonesia will face numerous challenges and problems. In this context, the primary theme is the issues arising from human activities that disrupt the ecological balance of mountains and rice fields. Conditions such as deforestation and the shrinking or drought-stricken state of rice fields are realities frequently depicted by painters. D. Zawawi Imron, Dyan Anggraini, Hanafi, Januri, Julnaldi MS, Rinaldi, Totok Buchori, and Widayat are among the artists who address the problematic issues faced by our mountains and rice fields.

4.5 Mountains & Rice Fields in Personal and Fantastical Context

Table 5.

No.	Description of Painting	Photograph of Painting
14.	I Ketut Susena, <i>Nafas Merapi</i> , 145 x 200 cm, acrylic on canvas, 2011	
15.	Aidi Yupri, <i>Ladang Tanda</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2010	
16.	Yon Indra, <i>Ilusi Ruang dalam Terawang IV (seri relief)</i> , d. 80 cm, mixed media on canvas, 2011	

(Source: The catalog of the exhibition "Landscape of Nation", the Basoeki Abdullah Museum, 2011)

This context is closely related to the personal experiences and skills of the individual painters. Some painters have expressed that mountains and rice fields are part of themselves, unrelated to the other contexts mentioned above. Ketut Susena powerfully employs technical skills involving drips and splashes of paint and color. Armed with an abstract expressionist style, Susena gave birth to the idea of erupting lava. Susena's gesture demonstrates the spirit and dynamism of nature born from his imagination.

Yon Indra uses his canvas as a medium to understand the formal aspects or language of nature. Susena and Indra enrich the treasury of landscape paintings featuring mountains and rice fields with a contemporary approach without abandoning academic foundations.

Aidi Yupri's work depicts a rice field as if composed of letters. Using crop circle-like formations, he emphasizes that nature is a field of lessons and signs.

5.0 Discussion

The curated selection of sixteen paintings in the “Landscape of Nation” exhibition offers a platform for public appreciation of environmental concerns, focusing on mountains. By exploring five contextual frameworks, the artists not only depict mountains or rice fields as agricultural lands but also imply a symbolic play of signs. From another perspective, the interpretation of mountains and rice fields extends to sociological, fantastical, and even Sufi (religious) dimensions, fostering a sense of human faith in the Creator.

Mountains and rice fields are the lifeblood of many people, including the painter Basoeki Abdullah. Without them, Basoeki Abdullah's artistic narrative might have been entirely different. His series of landscape paintings in the exhibition is part of his statement that he not only reveals the beauty of nature but also articulates the discourse of natural landscapes as a form of personal identity. Unintentionally, he has introduced the concept of a “nation of mountains and rice fields” through his paintings.

Other artists have served as continuous observers of mountains and rice fields. They frequently undertake documentary and critical explorations of society and nature. By incorporating mountains and rice fields into their artworks, these artists seek to express human values and imagery. Their works delve into various compelling issues, including documenting specific locations, natural phenomena such as volcanic eruptions, land transformations, the destructive impact of human activities on the environment, and critical reflections on Indonesia's future. These artists also engage in creative explorations of nature for spiritual and nationalist expression.

As a nation in a region prone to volcanic activity and natural disasters, we should exercise prudence and adaptability, refraining from imposing foreign development models. Indonesia is a nation of nature, not concrete. Our land requires trees, not steel-reinforced concrete. If we continue to replace tree roots with iron ones, we risk reducing our natural landscapes to mere images or paintings. Ultimately, Indonesia would be left with a series of impending disasters.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The curated paintings in the “Landscape of Nation” exhibition have proven to be a valuable tool for illuminating environmental issues. Mountains and rice paddies, as the primary subjects of these works, offer rich layers of meaning and significance. Through various contextualization, these paintings of mountains and rice fields have positively impacted Indonesian people. The exhibition serves as a reminder to the Indonesian archipelago's inhabitants to remain vigilant and adaptable.

Based on the diverse contexts in the curated collection of sixteen paintings, two recommendations can be made. Firstly, the Basoeki Abdullah Museum should be encouraged to organize more exhibitions with similar themes. This aligns with the overarching themes present in Basoeki Abdullah's own body of organized paintings with descriptive narratives, which would significantly enhance the viewers' appreciation for the symbolic significance of mountains and rice fields. Secondly, viewers should be encouraged to cultivate a deeper awareness of historical and contemporary perspectives. Paintings can serve as a means of aesthetic and ethical learning, allowing viewers to understand the thoughts of both past and present artists in their explorations of the cultural significance of mountains and rice fields.

Acknowledgement

The artists, the Basoeki Abdullah Museum, farmers, and mountain rangers.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

Research on art and environmental issues makes significant contributions to the field of education, particularly in the humanities (relating to societal systems and daily life), art studies (concerning various genres, styles, and techniques in art), natural sciences (including geography, physics, biology, forestry, and agriculture), and museology (as well as curatorial studies that elevate the significance of exhibited objects within society).

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