

Appropriation as a Deconstructive Strategy in Yogyakarta Contemporary Art: Academic artists' engagement with meaning and context

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Abstract

Rooted in Derrida's concept of deconstruction, this study examines how academic artists in Yogyakarta employ appropriation to challenge modernist notions of originality and authenticity. Through in-depth interviews, document analysis, and two case studies, Setyo Priyo Nugroho's "Java 1830" and Amir Hamzah's "The Great Day T(erri)rouble," it reveals appropriation as a vital postcolonial strategy that renegotiates power dynamics between global and local contexts. The findings emphasize the use of parody, pastiche, and recontextualization as techniques for revealing cultural capital and the legacies of colonialism, positioning appropriation as a dynamic discourse within contemporary Indonesian art and aesthetics.

Keywords: Painting; deconstruction; art appropriation; yogyakarta contemporary art

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1.0 Introduction

In Yogyakarta, Indonesia, appropriation has likewise been central to academic artists who intertwine colonial history and global pop culture with local identity. Appropriation art is the use of found objects, collage, or preexisting art within a new creation (Aurelia et al., 2025). This helps examine how globalization shapes the artistic use of appropriation in hybrid cultural areas where local traditions and transnational symbols and images merge. Elements borrowed from Western media create palimpsests with hybrid aesthetics, complicating notions of purity, origins, and authorship. This reflects a "glocal" approach (Sucitra et al., 2021), in which artists use popular icons, colonial fragments, and traditional symbols to forge identities that are open, ironic, and situated between the center and the margins. Within this context, cultural appropriation is understood as the act of taking elements from another culture, often by a dominant group, without permission, in ways that reflect power asymmetries (Jackson, 2021). The study views appropriation not just as imitation but as a critical practice deeply rooted in modern Indonesian visual culture. Drawing on Derrida's deconstruction, this analysis examines how artists in Yogyakarta intentionally employ appropriation to generate meaning. Deconstructive recontextualization reveals power imbalances and challenges dominant narratives, treating cultural appropriation as rooted in unequal power relations. This approach enables artists to reframe historical memory, challenge authority, and broaden interpretations of Indonesian art within postcolonial and transnational contexts.

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Appropriation has been a visible strategy since the early 20th century, defined as the adoption of existing images, styles, or objects into new artistic compositions. These borrowed elements range from art-historical motifs and popular media imagery to techniques drawn from non-art fields. Welchman (2003) argues that the genealogy of modern art, even before Duchamp, has been fundamentally shaped by practices of borrowing and reinterpretation. From the 1980s onward, appropriation increasingly referred to the direct quotation of existing artworks to generate new meanings, as seen in the works of Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman in North America. This tendency suggests that the creative foundation of modern art lies in a continuous dialogue with external visual sources. Appropriation, therefore, is not merely a stylistic device but a critical operation involving the transfer, annexation, or contestation of cultural symbols within unequal power relations (Welchman, 2003). It disrupts traditional ideas of originality and authorship, revealing that meaning emerges through cultural circulation rather than isolated creation. Meaning-making in visual art is thus inseparable from the cultural and socio-historical environments within which artists operate (Sucitra & Lasiyo, 2023). Indonesian artists similarly employ appropriation to critique social, political, and cultural conditions. Furthermore, in local contexts, Susanto (2024) discusses how environmental issues are framed through curatorial strategies in the "Landscape of Nation" exhibition, using landscape painting as a medium to evoke ecological awareness and national identity.

Contemporary artists often navigate cultural appropriation through hybrid methodologies and transnational collaborations. This enables them to create new forms of cultural expression that transcend traditional boundaries, reflecting the interconnectedness of the modern world (Aurelia et al., 2025). Hoberek (2007) argues that this pattern is not a single postmodern movement but a diverse array of stylistic variations that calls for a cartographic approach rather than rigid categories. Terry-Smith (2011) elaborates on this critique by identifying three contemporary trends in art: remnants of modernism, postcolonial transnationalism, and digital participatory practices, within which appropriation serves as a dialectical negotiation between the past and present, the center and the margin. This study employs a descriptive method with an interpretive, global outlook, grounded in postmodern theory, aesthetics, art philosophy, and deconstructive hermeneutics. It primarily examines academic artists from the Faculty of Visual Arts and Design at ISI Yogyakarta who intentionally adopt appropriation as an artistic strategy. These artists, working within a complex network of intertextual references, use irony, parody, and critique to deconstruct dominant narratives through recontextualization. Modern techniques in art, design, and community-based creative projects provide valuable insights into Southeast Asian artistic expression (Legino et al., 2024). Appropriation, as a method of acquisition, therefore stands out as a significant discursive influence within Yogyakarta's contemporary art scene.

2.0 Literature Review

Appropriation is a key strategy in modern and contemporary art, challenging ideas of originality and authorship. Successful appropriation often creates new meanings or contexts for the borrowed work (Aurelia et al., 2025). This transformation can produce a "third meaning" that emerges from the juxtaposition of the original and the new context. In postmodern discourse, it shifted from a formal tool to a socio-political strategy that questions cultural authority (Hoberek, 2007). In Indonesia, appropriation is viewed through the lenses of hybridity, identity politics, and "glocal" strategies. Sucitra et al. (2021) and Sucitra and Lasiyo (2023) show how artists blend global imagery with traditional symbols and history to critique narratives. Yet little research applies deconstructive hermeneutics to Indonesian painting. This study fills that gap by examining appropriation as a deconstructive strategy used by Yogyakarta artists to renegotiate meaning, history, and authority.

3.0 Methodology

Contemporary life compels artists to conceptualize the world as interconnected realms: the natural world, the built environment (the second realm), virtual space (the third realm), and lived interiority (the human realm), as a complex, integrated whole (Smith, 2011). This study examines how Yogyakarta's academic artists represent these realms through visual language, focusing on depictions of people, places, objects, events, and things (Carroll, 2002). Adopting an interdisciplinary philosophical approach that integrates art representation and hermeneutics (Saidi, 2008), the research employs Derrida's deconstructive hermeneutics (2016) as its core framework. This model fundamentally rejects the pursuit of singular or authentic meanings in artworks. It methodically selects works (objects/texts) without assuming a single meaning, traces visual/textual traces that reveal differences within similarities, and identifies supplements (titles, labels, spatial context) as meaning-makers (Stocker, 2006).

This study adopts Derrida's hermeneutic model of deconstruction, which rejects the search for a single or authentic meaning in a text or work of art. Three key points in Derrida's deconstruction are that change is continuous; that this change originates within living systems, including language and text; and that deconstruction is not a word, tool, or technique used in a post-facto process without an interpretive subject (Bakri, 2020). Following Derrida, the study rejects any single "true" reading of art; meaning is ceaselessly remade from within language, life, and image. Deconstruction is neither a tool nor an afterthought but an ongoing interpretive act. Applied to Yogyakarta's current art, this lens exposes how works multiply narratives, unsettle dominant codes, and interrogate the representational and creative foundations that artists inherit and reimagine.

4.0 Findings

3.1 Appropriation of juxtaposition in Setyo Priyo Nugroho's painting



Fig. 1: Raden Saleh, *Penangkapan Pangeran Diponegoro*, 1857, oil on canvas, 187 cm X 111 cm
(Source: <https://archive.ivaa-online.org/artworks/detail/3698>)

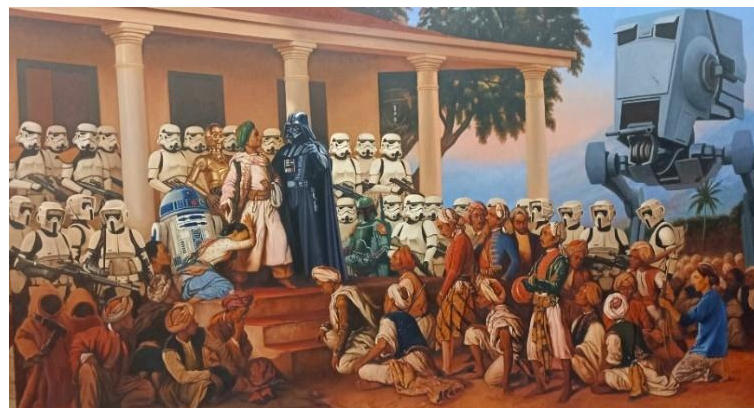


Fig. 2: Setyo Priyo Nugroho, *Java 1830*, 2024, oil on canvas, 240 cm X 140 cm
(Source: Evan Sapentri, 2025)

Setyo Priyo Nugroho sourced Star Wars imagery online, hand-sketching each character and revising them during composition. A Fine Arts graduate (ISI Yogyakarta, 1993) and now a lecturer there, he previously painted "Sepucuk Kalashnikov" (2019) and "Berbisik Leluhur" (2021) using visual citations. His fluency in appropriation stems from a decade (1993–2003) as a reproduction artist in Jakarta, where he meticulously copied canonical works. This immersion refined his technique and deepened his understanding of classical and modern visual codes, equipping him to reframe existing imagery within new contexts with deft skill. Since 1993, Nugroho has consistently collected Star Wars action figures, an interest rooted in the franchise's themes of resistance and rebellion. The Star Wars narrative, which intricately blends elements of science fiction, advanced technology, futuristic imagination, and war, resonates deeply with Nugroho's personal history, often marked by juxtaposition. His childhood was shaped by a close family connection to the military, a biographical context that likely influenced his fascination with the saga. This interest extends beyond collecting; Nugroho actively incorporates his favorite Star Wars characters into his artwork (interview, June 11, 2025). An example is his series of paintings on Javanese and colonial history, *Java 1830*, which reflects a deliberate, layered engagement with different historical contexts and events, juxtaposing them within a single visual frame with the fictional world of Star Wars and recontextualizing them within Indonesian history. This painting was inspired by Raden Saleh's famous artwork (Fig. 1), titled "Penangkapan Pangeran Diponegoro, 1857". The capture of Prince Diponegoro is not just a historical scene but a narrative of resistance that challenges colonial dominance through aesthetic subversion, symbolism, and artistic intervention. Raden Saleh transformed tragedy into a work that continues to inspire discourse on nationalism in Indonesia.

The artwork in Fig. 2 shows that deconstruction and appropriation converge in "Java 1830" as a double-edged operation that exposes the instability of historical "truth." Raden Saleh's canonical scene is first appropriated as a ready-made visual syntax, then subjected to a Derridean *démontage*: the fixed signifiers of colonial victimization (Diponegoro, Dutch troops, tropical landscape) are displaced by Star Wars avatars whose mythic pedigree is equally global and commodified. By substituting Darth Vader's mechanized empire for the Dutch, Nugroho stages what Derrida calls the "play of differences," in which meaning is never anchored in the original event but is endlessly deferred through new chains of signification.

The retention of Saleh's architecture, palette, and Diponegoro's silhouette functions as a "trace," evoking and eroding the source's authority; sci-fi figures expose constructed colonial and cinematic narratives. Nugroho's self-insertion, armed with a traditional bow in hybrid attire, merges author, viewer, and history, thereby literalizing Derrida's view that deconstruction is an internal intervention. The

painting thus reopens historical wounds, inviting viewers to explore where postcolonial identity and global pop culture continually intersect.

3.2 Visual Adaptation of Amir Hamzah Appropriation



Fig. 3: John Martin, *The Great Day of His Wrath*, 1851–1853, oil on canvas, 303.2 cm × 196.5 cm
(Source: <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-great-day-of-his-wrath-117730>)



Fig. 4: Amir Hamzah, *The Great Day T(erri)rouble*, 2024, oil on canvas, 240 cm × 140 cm
(Source: Evan Sapentri, 2025)

The Great Day T(erri)rouble is a painting by Amir Hamzah, executed using alla prima and glazing techniques. The artwork, produced by Hamzah between February and August 2024, is an oil painting on canvas measuring 240 cm x 140 cm. The work appropriates the visual structure, chromatic atmosphere, and compositional strategies of John Martin's painting *The Great Day of His Wrath* (1851–1853).

Table 1. Subject Matter of the Painting *The Great Day T(erri)rouble*

Bottom-right section	Central section	Bottom-left section
<i>Fountain</i> (1917) by Marcel Duchamp	Prehistoric cave paintings from Lascaux, France	<i>Keris</i> , a traditional Javanese weapon
<i>The Thinker</i> (1907) by Auguste Rodin	The statue of Venus de Milo	<i>Garuda</i> , Indonesia's national emblem
<i>Kapal Layar Bercadik</i> , an outrigger sailboat carved in the reliefs of Borobudur Temple, located in Magelang, Indonesia	The statue of Sukarno	Colorful helium balloons
	An ancient Egyptian mummy	
	The statue of Liberty	
	Symbolic floating bubbles	

(Source: Evan Sapentri, 2025)

Hamzah's reinterpretation of John Martin's apocalyptic vision (Fig. 3) offers a compelling visual dialogue on the power of nature and the evolving role of human agency in art. In Martin's original composition, nature is depicted as a violent force. Mountains twist, the earth folds upon itself, and human figures are strewn chaotically across the canvas, rendered helpless amid the devastation. These scattered bodies evoke human fragility and insignificance in the face of divine or natural wrath.

Hamzah's painting (Fig. 4) removes human figures, eliminating symbols of vulnerability. Instead, he inserts cultural artifacts from around the world, including Indonesian heritage, signaling a shift from depicting suffering to creating a symbolic archive of cultural

memory. By removing humans, the work emphasizes the enduring presence and vulnerability of cultural expression during crises. The absence invites reflection on loss and what remains: art, myths, and symbols. The interplay of destruction and resilience suggests that even if humans disappear, their creative voice endures through artifacts. Hamzah also deconstructs John Martin's composition using Derrida's theory, negating the human-nature hierarchy and adding supplements such as Duchamp's Fountain, a keris, Garuda, or Sukarno's statue (Table 1). This breaks Martin's apocalyptic logic into multiple meanings: colonialism, nationalism, consumerism, and globalization.

Deconstruction is evident when elements that appear to be "original" (Mona Lisa, Venus de Milo) are presented as double reproductions, rejecting the authority of the "original" while also displaying irony: sacred Western artifacts are reduced to the same fragile condition as the Lascaux cave paintings or the Borobudur boats. The absence of humans becomes a Derridean "trace": the void is not a loss but a space for viewers to fill with new meaning, showing that cultural identity is constantly in motion, fragmented, and reengineered. Thus, Hamzah's appropriation is not nostalgia but a critical act that exposes art history's dependence on discourses of power while offering an open visual archive for an unwritten future.

5.0 Discussion

The practice of appropriation-based art discussed in this article aims to broaden our horizons. It showcases a rich interweaving of global and local values, full of parody, irony, and surprise. The postmodernist paradigm challenges the notion that art has a single objective standard of value. Postmodernism holds that works of art are open to diverse interpretations. Appropriation of texts is a fundamental aspect of contemporary art, reflecting its intertextual nature (Sanders, 2015). Arthur Danto argues that this celebration of "openness" is a hallmark of postmodernism (Shusterman, 2005), which embraces the diversity of artistic traditions and expressions. Indonesian appropriation art is characterized by its engagement with cultural heritage, social and political issues, modern technology, popular culture, and hybridity. By appropriating diverse elements, Indonesian artists challenge traditional notions of art, identity, and culture, offering new perspectives on contemporary society. These themes not only enrich the artistic landscape but also provide a platform for critical dialogue and reflection.

Appropriation confronts myths, which are systems of communication and statement built from meta-language, often derived from stolen or appropriated language to normalize values and distort signification. Anything can become a myth, and the best counter is creating artificial myths. Barthes sees myths as composed of past stories and their modern expressions, like haunting ghosts. Appropriation can neutralize and re-meaning myths without eliminating them, often obscuring their core message. Heidegger's deconstruction critiques concepts to find their origins, while Derrida exposes their paradoxes (Romano, 2025).

In visual art, appropriation, the borrowing and reuse of existing images or concepts to create new works, has become a key deconstructive strategy in postmodern discourse. This practice fundamentally challenges traditional ideas of originality and authorship, central to deconstructive criticism of authority in art. An early example appeared in 1919, when Marcel Duchamp deconstructed the Mona Lisa icon by adding a mustache and beard to its reproduction, creating L.H.O.O.Q. (LaFarge, 1996). Duchamp's act was not mere vandalism but an active deconstruction of the aura and sacred status of canonical Western artworks. Indonesian artists have also critically adopted a similar deconstructive approach. Deconstruction through appropriation is also directed at colonial and national heritage. Artists such as Heri Dono ("Salah Tangkap Pangeran Diponegoro", 2007) and Agus Suwage ("Fragmen Pustaka #2 after Raden Saleh", 2018) intentionally take over and deconstruct the work of Raden Saleh, a central figure in Indonesian modern art closely connected to colonial history. Through appropriation, they dismantle established historical narratives and offer critical reinterpretations.

Duchamp's readymade, increasingly relevant in modern art, exemplifies postmodern deconstruction (Lucy, 2016). Schinckus describes it as "a copy that creates tension with the original," a reenactment that deconstructs notions of originality and aura. Calling it "a reproduction of itself" (Schinckus, 2020), this practice blurs creation and replica, challenging artistic hierarchy. Its influence from the early 20th century to today underpins appropriation as a deconstructive tool, exposing cultural power mechanisms and fostering new meanings through critical recontextualization.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that appropriation in Yogyakarta's contemporary academic art functions not merely as a visual quotation but as a deliberate deconstructive strategy that interrogates originality, authority, and historical meaning. Drawing on Derrida's deconstructive hermeneutics, the case studies of Setyo Priyo Nugroho's Java 1830 and Amir Hamzah's The Great Day T(eri)rouble reveal how appropriated images operate as traces and supplements that destabilize dominant colonial, modernist, and global narratives. Appropriation emerges as a critical global practice that engages global visual culture and local historical memory, rather than as an act of stylistic imitation. The findings confirm that academic artists in Yogyakarta consciously employ parody, irony, juxtaposition, and recontextualization to expose power relations embedded in art history, cultural capital, and visual authority. As for the recommendation, research in this context serves as an epistemological intervention that expands the space for interpreting contemporary Indonesian art and for utilizing AI image collages in the processing of visual creations with AI.

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Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

This study addresses an academic gap by applying Derrida's deconstruction to contemporary art in Yogyakarta. It examines how ISI Yogyakarta graduates critically appropriate Western and local cultures as a deconstructive strategy against colonial legacies, art commodification, and dominant discourses, thereby establishing urgency through its theoretical innovation and socio-political critique of Indonesian visual culture.

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