

## The Ancient Tantric in Balinese Contemporary Art

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**Abstract:** In recent years, artists from various cultures have increasingly drawn on the spiritual and philosophical principles of ancient tantra. This article explores the influence of ancient tantric traditions on contemporary Balinese arts. It employed an innovative art-based research methodology utilizing qualitative, interpretive, and practice-based research methods. These included observation, interviews, and document analysis while integrating theoretical frameworks, symbolic perspectives, and theo-aesthetic considerations. The research reveals how artists transform and reinterpret tantric themes in their work, highlighting the complex relationship between modern expressions and ancient inspirations. Balinese art, as the study shows, achieves beauty by blending opposites, such as masculine and feminine qualities, through the concept of *lanang-wadon*. By examining this topic, the research provides valuable insights into the evolving relationship between spirituality, creativity, and cultural exchange in Bali and the interconnected world. This study underscores the dynamic interplay between ancient traditions and contemporary artistic practices, showcasing a unique fusion that enriches both the art and its cultural context.

**Keywords:** ancient tantric; Balinese contemporary art; symbolic interpretation; transfiguration perspectives; theo-aesthetic

### 1. Introduction

In the dynamic realm of contemporary art, the fusion of ancient wisdom with present-day creativity sparks a captivating and thought-provoking dialogue. This article aims to explore the intricate interplay of ancient tantric traditions within contemporary artistic expression, highlighting its central convergence at the crossroads of evolving creative narratives. Over recent decades, artists from diverse cultural backgrounds have increasingly drawn inspiration from the spiritual and philosophical tenets of *tantra*, crafting artworks that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. In India, the cradle of Hindu civilization,

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the trajectory of tantric philosophy spans epochs, from pre-Vedic times through the Vedic, post-Vedic, early Buddhist, and Jain eras, culminating in the conceptualization of Sakti (Bhattacharyya, 2002). The process of Javanization continued with the arrival of the revered priests Dang Hyang Nirartha and Dang Hyang Astapaka, who are credited with founding the Balinese Śaiva-Buddha sect (Sastrodiwiryono, 1999 in Yoga Segara & Kuckreja, 2024). In Bali, a fascinating interdisciplinary exploration is underway, delving deep into the intricate relationship between art, tradition, religion, culture, and contemporary artistic expression. Tantric imagery serves as a guiding light, illuminating how artists interpret, adapt, and re-contextualize profound insights within their works. The artists skillfully blend ancient and contemporary elements, while also exploring the intricate relationship between sexuality and spirituality. This profound journey unveils layers of meaning as they navigate the intricate tapestry of Balinese artistry.

This research delved into the intricate relationship between contemporary and tantric art, showcasing how ancient tantric concepts intertwined with modern, contemporary artistic techniques. While it highlights the transformative potential of art for spiritual exploration and cross-cultural dialogue, it does not take up the inherent tension between traditional and contemporary aesthetics. By analyzing select contemporary artworks, the study aimed to broaden conventional perceptions. It invited art viewers to understand how the concept of opposing energies shapes the aesthetic formation of Balinese art.

The goal of this research was to explore the intersection between contemporary art and tantric traditions, aiming to provide insights into the evolving dynamics of spirituality, creativity, and cultural exchange in our interconnected world. Through this study, the author seeks to highlight the profound capacity of art to foster cross-cultural understanding and to deepen appreciation for the timeless wisdom inherent in the tantric tradition. Studying contemporary art with tantric ideas aims to explore how people seek transcendence, unity, and self-discovery.

This article makes a significant contribution by emphasizing the importance of integrating ancient concepts to strengthen the framework of contemporary art, especially Balinese painting. It highlights how *tantra* in Bali as a repository of local wisdom, offers invaluable insights for cultivating a mindset that celebrates diversity and fosters harmony and balance in life. By juxtaposing contrasting concepts such as male-female dynamics and the interplay of light and darkness, the research underscores how depth and beauty are manifested in Balinese contemporary art. Moreover, it asserts that contemporary art, devoid of tradition, lacks a solid foundation. Therefore, the study advocates for the continuous exploration and utilization of traditional values from the past to

shape the present artistic landscape. To narrow down the scope of this writing for this article we will focus only on the fine art form as one art form which developed in Bali.

## 2. Literature Review

Tantra occupies a unique and often misunderstood position in Western perceptions of Hindu spirituality. According to Andre Padoux in *The Hindu Tantric World: An Overview* (2017), there is a tendency in Western discourse to reduce tantra primarily to its carnal dimension, overshadowing its rich philosophical underpinnings and complex ritualistic traditions. This analysis underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of tantra beyond its sensationalized aspects, emphasizing its profound spiritual and cultural significance within the Hindu tradition. Padoux's insights highlight the importance of recognizing the depth and diversity of tantric practices, which encompass far more than their often misrepresented sexual elements.

Despite common misconceptions, tantra stands as one of the most influential and extraordinary spiritual traditions globally, blending sexuality and spirituality side by side. Bjonnes & Wilber (2010) in *Tantra and Veda: The Untold Story*, highlights this point, noting the recognition of tantra's significance by prominent Euro-American scholars such as Ken Wilber. Linda Madani (2011), a long-time student of the late Balinese healer Tjokorda Gede Rai and a yoga teacher from Canada, describes tantra in her Yoga Pranala Intensive as an ancient science that employs specialized techniques to expand and liberate consciousness from its constraints. Tantric shastras, scriptures originating from the tantric tradition, serve as guides to spiritual practices, often depicted as dialogues between Shiva and Shakti. These texts prescribe a holistic code of life encompassing ritual, worship, discipline, meditation, and the attainment of power. Dating back approximately 7,000 years, tantra's introduction to India is attributed to Sadashiva Yoga, a revered yogi whose teachings laid the foundation for this transformative spiritual path (Bjonnes, 2011).

D.E. Relin (2014) in "Tantra Teaching in Bali" explained the term 'tantric' extends beyond mere religious doctrines, encompassing a diverse array of rules, rituals, and systems, while also denoting literary works within non-Vedic literature, imbued with ritualistic sanctity, magic, and mysticism. I Wayan Budi Utama (2019) in *Lokalisasi Tantra di Bali (Localised Tantric Practices of Bali)* sheds light on the multifaceted nature of *tantra* in his work, seeking to transcend its often-misunderstood associations with sexuality to uncover its deeper spiritual essence. Through rituals, religious practices, art, and meditation, *tantra* manifests in various forms in Bali, as elucidated by Ngurah Nala (2006) *Aksara Bali Dalam Usada (Balinese Script in Traditional Healing)* which explores Balinese healing

scriptures. Within tantric teachings, it's believed that the human body has seven chakras, regulating various aspects of life, as detailed in *Kundalini Tantra* by Swami Satyananda Saraswati (2022). Fred B. Eiseman Jr. (2011), in *Bali: Sekala & Niskala (seen and unseen)*, delineates the concept of two worlds—the visible and the invisible—underscoring the intertwined nature of seen and unseen realities. Adopting a cross-regional perspective, this research delves into the origins of Tantric Buddhism and its dissemination to Bali (Calo, 2020), exploring the significance of the 'duality' and its sacred union in tantric traditions. I Wayan Ardika and Peter Bellwood (1991) in *Sembiran: The Beginnings of Indian Contact with Bali*, state that the most obvious cultural connection between India and Bali is their shared Hindu religion. Both believe their Hindu traditions come from the same source. Trade between Bali and India started about two thousand years ago. Hindu practices began influencing Bali in the first century AD. Besides religion, other cultural exchanges took place. For example, the Indian epics Mahabharata and Ramayana became part of Balinese culture after the twelfth century. However, Balinese Hinduism is not only based on its ties with India. According to Dutch historian Henk Schulte Nordholt in his article "The Making of Traditional Bali" (1994), Balinese culture sees itself as continuing the Hindu Majapahit Empire from Java in the fourteenth century (see Darma Putra, Verheijen, Ardika, & Yanthy, 2021).

In his book, *An Indian Tantric Tradition and Its Modern Global Revival: Contemporary Nondual Śaivism*, Douglas Osto (2020) explores the revival of this ancient Indian tradition in today's world. He traces its history, looks at key figures driving its resurgence, and shows how it's adapting to modern times in religion, economy, and technology. Caroline Turner's (1993) in *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, explained that today's art, rooted in tradition, shows how cultures evolve through encounters with the modern West and the impacts of economic and technological changes. Furthermore, Arnd Schneider (2020) in *Contemporary Art and Anthropology*, explained drawing inspiration from diverse cultural sources, contemporary art blurs boundaries between artistic expression and anthropology, echoing the trend of primitivism from the early 20th century in both fields.

In Balinese cosmology, there are two realms: the *sekala* realm, which includes our physical environment, and the *niskala* realm, which is the spiritual world with supernatural powers. The *sekala* realm involves tangible things, while the *niskala* realm involves the unseen. This concept is known as 'Rwa Bhineda' in Balinese view (Sari, et. al., 2022). I Made Ruta and Karja (2023) in *Balinese Hindu Philosophy in Mandala Painting*, discuss the artwork of I Dewa Nyoman Batuan with the philosophy of dualism, opposite entity (*rwabhineda*). Tantric and contemporary art both show how culture changes through symbols

and stories, highlighting connections between art, religion, and philosophy. In the author's work (2023<sup>b</sup>), *Abstract Paintings of Bali: A Fusion of Art, Religion, and Philosophy*, themes of transformation and enlightenment are explored. Tantric art focuses on spiritual fulfillment and the evolution of the soul by expanding energy beyond its physical form.

In his *Kosmologi Bali: Visualisasi Warna Pangider Bhuwana dalam Seni Lukis Kontemporer (Balinese Cosmology: Visualization of Pangider Bhuwana Colors in Contemporary Painting)* (2020), Wayan Karja explains transfiguration, three categories of Balinese art based on Hindu worship philosophy. The first category, visual narrative (*carita rupa*) tells stories through images. The second, symbolic art (*saguna rupa*), uses symbols to convey deeper meanings. The third, non-symbolic art (*nirguna rupa*), focuses on pure forms and colors to evoke emotions. These elements combine in contemporary Balinese painting, showcasing the island's rich cultural heritage. Transfiguration means to change a figure or form. It is defined in the *Collins English Dictionary* (2014) as the act or an instance of transfiguring or the state of being transfigured. Transfiguration is a process where someone or something undergoes remarkable changes. It often involves spiritual or divine transformations and has been discussed in various religious traditions. During the Renaissance and Enlightenment, it was linked to artistic encounters with the divine. While still religious, thinkers like Nietzsche and Foucault explored it in a secular context, contributing to modern understandings of human transformation.

Contemporary art, using modern styles and media, addresses current issues and personal identity. Both forms of art push creative boundaries and reflect the changing nature of culture and human consciousness. By integrating tantric traditions into artistic expression, contemporary artists in Bali enrich and strengthen the region's art and culture. Through the infusion of tantric concepts, artworks gain depth and resonance, offering viewers a transcendent experience that bridges the ancient and the contemporary. This fusion not only honors Bali's rich cultural heritage but also contributes to the ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity, fostering a deeper appreciation for the spiritual dimensions of art within the local and global community.

### 3. Method and Theory

#### 3.1 Method

The objects of this study are seven images: 1) the three lingam of the Elephant Cave (Goa Gajah); 2) the relief of *rerajahan* made of sandstone; 3) a painting by I Dewa Nyoman Batuan; 4) a painting by I Ketut Karta; and 5-7) three paintings by I Wayan Karja. By incorporating these diverse objects, the study provides a holistic view of Balinese art, capturing both historical

continuity and modern-contemporary transformation in artistic expressions. This study employed an innovative art-based research methodology (Leavy, 2020; Sullivan, 2010; McNiff, 2008), centered on the creation of artworks to delve into the nuanced meanings embedded within ancient tantric and contemporary art.

This study employed qualitative, interpretive, and practice-based research, integrating data gathered through observation, interviews, and documentary analysis while incorporating theoretical frameworks to derive conclusions. Conducted primarily in the Gianyar Regency, with a focus on the Ubud area, the research utilized seven carefully selected images to illustrate the evolution of tantric imagery across time; *lingam* and *yoni*, relief, and paintings. This approach bridged academic inquiry with practical artistry, weaving together insights from ancient tantric philosophy and contemporary artistic expression. By emphasizing visual exploration, the study transcended linguistic limitations, offering deeper insights into the subject matter. Art creation served as both the means and substance of the research, enriching our understanding through firsthand experiences. Integrating theoretical frameworks, symbolic interpretations, transfiguration perspectives, and theo-aesthetic considerations, the study aimed to derive comprehensive conclusions that shed light on the dynamic interplay between traditional, modern, and contemporary Balinese art.

### 3.2 Theory

Symbolic interpretation, transfiguration perspectives, and theo-aesthetic theory serve as robust theoretical frameworks to explore the ancient tantric in the selected works of Balinese contemporary art. Aniela Jaffe, in Carl Jung's work, *Man and His Symbols* (2012), discusses 'Symbolism in Visual Arts.' She explains that throughout history, symbolism suggests that everything can carry symbolic meanings: natural objects (rocks, plants, animals, humans, valleys, mountains, sun and moon, wind, water, and fire), man-made objects (like houses, boats, or cars), or even abstract forms (such as numbers, triangles, squares, and circles).

Drawing insights from Mookerjee's scholarship, *symbolic interpretation* delves into the profound cultural and spiritual dimensions of tantric art, enriching our understanding of the artworks (Mookerjee & Khanna, 2003). Through American art critic and philosopher, Arthur C. Danto's *transfiguration perspectives*, the research examines how ordinary elements are transformed into art, challenging conventional notions and unveiling the evolving nature of artistic expression (Danto, 1981), followed by the author's transfiguration concept on *Balinese Cosmology* (2020).



Furthermore, by embracing Swiss theologian and catholic priest, Hans Urs von Balthasar's theo-aesthetic theory, the research delves into the spiritual significance inherent in both ancient tantric traditions and contemporary art, revealing the transcendent qualities that resonate within the artworks (Dimech, 2019; Potter, 2022). Together, these theories offer a comprehensive framework for analyzing the complex interplay between tradition and modernity in art, shedding light on the enduring relevance of tantric principles in contemporary artistic practices.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

Essentially, anything in the universe has the potential to be seen as a symbol. The tantric tradition is one of the principal symbols in Hinduism and Buddhism, which dates back to ancient times and continues into the contemporary era. Trade between Bali and India started about two thousand years ago. Hindu practices began influencing Bali in the first century AD (Ardika & Bellwood, 1991). The evidence of this can be seen in the form of Yupa around the 4<sup>th</sup> century, inscribed poles or pillars, found in Kutai, the region of East Kalimantan (Sarip, 2020). These Yupa posts traditionally served diverse purposes in ancient times, including marking sacred places with *lingam* symbols and facilitating religious or ceremonial activities. The *lingam* is important in tantric traditions as it symbolizes divine masculine energy, often linked to Shiva. It represents creative power and the union of opposites, which practitioners seek through rituals like meditation. The *lingam's* shape also represents vitality and connection between the earthly and divine realms in tantric belief.

The term 'tantric' holds various meanings in old Javanese, encompassing orders, rules, and even divine and magical practices. Tantric imagery in Java explores the *Lingam-Yoni* shapes, such as the *Round Yoni* of Temanggung, *Liyangan Yoni*, and *Lingam-Yoni* of Sukuh Temple, offering invaluable insights for historical education (Andaka, 2023). These Lingga-Yoni shapes often symbolize the union of masculine and feminine energies, representing creation and the cosmic balance. In various Indonesian kingdoms like Sriwijaya, Mataram, and Majapahit, certain kings were involved in a spiritual practice known as *tantra*. For instance, in the 13th century, King Kertanegara of Singhasari engaged in rituals from the *Hevajra Tantra*. He identified as both a representative of Shiva and Buddha, embodying the synthesis of Hindu and Buddhist traditions (Kinney et al. 2003 in McDaniel, 2020).

Historical records show that the Hindu kingdom of Mataram was established in Central Java when Hindu teachings were written in Sanskrit and Pallava scripts, which were hard for common people to understand. Later, these teachings were translated into Old Javanese, or Kawi, making them

easier to understand. In the 13th century in East Java, Hinduism (Shaivism) and Buddhism were seen as similar religions. This idea is captured in the book of Sutasoma with the phrase *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika tan hana dharma mangrwa*, meaning ‘unity in diversity.’ (Ardhana & Wijaya, 2017).

In Bali, the practice of Hinduism and Buddhism emerged, with Hinduism becoming prominent after the fall of Majapahit, owing to its deep historical and cultural connections with Java. Balinese culture sees itself as continuing the Hindu Majapahit Empire from Java in the fourteenth century (Nordholt, 1994 in Darma Putra, Verheijen, Ardika, & Yanthy, 2021). Over time, Hinduism in Bali evolved into tantrism, a spiritual practice marked by the veneration of Parama-Shiva and the utilization of symbolic representations like the *lingam* (Figure. 1).



Figure 1. Three *Lingam* statues dated to *circa* the ninth to eleventh centuries. Century in the cave at Goa Gajah (Elephant Cave) in Bedulu Village, Blahbatuh District, Gianyar Regency (Source: Wayan Karja, 2022).

In tantric practices, the *lingam* is considered a significant symbol. It represents the divine masculine energy and is often associated with the Hindu god Shiva. *Lingam* worship is part of tantric rituals and is believed to symbolize creation and the union of male and female energies. These symbols also found expression in ancient scripts known as *rerajahan*, mystical drawings depicting images of power, inspiring various forms of art, including reliefs and paintings (Figure 2). Within the Balinese community’s beliefs, deities such as Shiva and Durga, as well as the God and Goddess of Love, Kamajaya and Kamaratih, hold



vital significance in tantric faith. As a visual artist and researcher, the author explored modern and contemporary painting styles, aiming to enhance the essence of abstract foundations with inspiration from ancient tantric art. It focuses on balancing opposing forces, day and night, light and dark, the full moon and new moon, to create beauty, balance, and harmony.

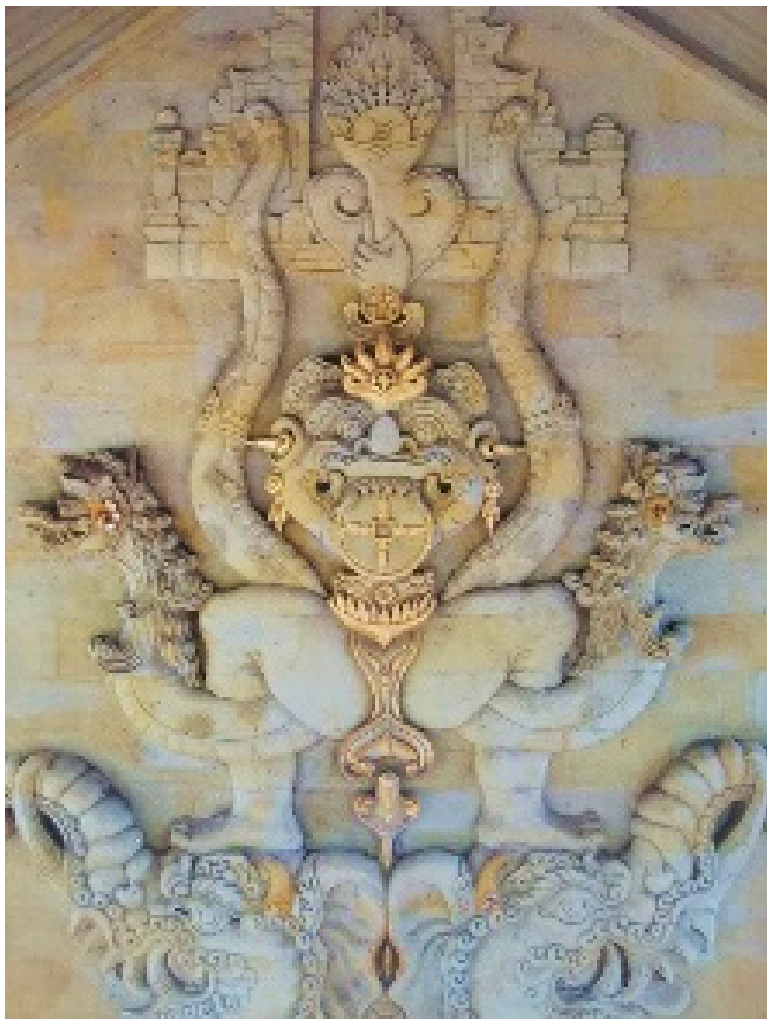


Figure 2. *Tantra* art image inspiration from *rerajahan*, 2011, in the form of relief with gold on hard rock stone, 100 x 150 cm, at Puri Negari, Singapadu Tengah Village, Sukawati District, Gianyar Regency. (Source: Intuitive Flow's document photo repro by Wayan Karja, 2023).

#### 4.1 Symbolic Interpretation

Putra and Stuart-Fox (1997) described Goa Gajah as a sacred site where Hindu and Buddhist monks lived together from the ninth to eleventh centuries. It holds great importance in Balinese Hindu society, revered for promoting

peace, a key theme in tantric tradition. In ancient Bali, the sacred *lingga* statue at Goa Gajah (Figure 1) was highly significant, alongside King Udayana (Ardhana & Setiawan, 2014). Art plays a crucial role in Balinese temples, forming part of daily religious practices. Tantric art in Bali emphasizes utility, aesthetics, and inner spirituality, reflecting the interconnectedness of the cosmic world. Inspired by ancient scripts, magical drawings are created in Balinese tradition, seen in modern and contemporary art. Balinese traditions blend beliefs in deities and harmony with nature, shown through the *tri hita karana* philosophy (the three causes of happiness).

Bali's Indigenous belief system, predating Hinduism, revered nature as a source of power, with Mount Batur representing masculinity, *lingam*, and Lake Batur representing femininity, *yoni*. This belief inspired balance and harmony in therapeutic painting and healing practices (Karja, 2023a). *Lingga* and *yoni*, central to the concept of duality, complement each other and are embodied in Balinese villages through figures like *barong* and *rangda*, symbolizing *Shiva* and *Durga*. The core teaching emphasizes the unification of masculine and feminine energies. *Tantrayana*, which flourished in Bali, was localized by integrating the island's pre-existing teachings. The *tantras* outline ceremonial procedures, sacred formulas, mystical diagrams, gestures, postures, initiation rituals, and various yoga practices (Singh, 2006 in Donder, 2021). Through these artworks, the author celebrates balance, harmony, and freedom in painting, aiming to enhance the values of truth and nobility for a more peaceful and prosperous life.

Analyzing the symbolism and iconography in tantric art reveals profound layers of meaning that contemporary painters skillfully incorporate into their works. By fusing ancient symbols with modern artistic expression, these painters blend masculine and feminine divine energies to convey deeper insights and evoke powerful emotions (interview with Dewa Nyoman Batuan, 2012; I Ketut Karta, 2021). The distinct personality of Balinese Hindus, shaped by their interpretation of Vedic teachings and local wisdom, sets them apart amidst the diverse Indonesian tribes. Notably, figures like Mookerjee (2003), revered for their mastery of tantric art, have contributed seminal works such as *The Tantric Way: Art, Science, Ritual* and *Kundalini: The Arousal of the Inner Energy*, delving into the rich symbolism, philosophy, and spirituality inherent in tantric art. Drawing from Mookerjee's insights, the author endeavors to explore the symbolic meanings embedded in Balinese tradition and contemporary artistic expressions within the realm of tantric art.



Figure 3. *Lingam and Yoni* is a Mandala painting interpreted through a modern-traditional lens of personal religious philosophy by Dewa Nyoman Batuan from Pengosekan, Ubud, Gianyar (Source: Dewa Nyoman Batuan, 2013).

In the painting of *Kamajaya* and *Kamaratih* by I Ketut Karta (Figure 4), these revered deities embody the essence of love, compassion, and relationships. *Kamajaya*, the God of Love or Desire, derives his name from the Sanskrit words ‘*Kama*’ for desire or love and ‘*Jaya*’ for victorious, symbolizing triumphant love and desire. He inspires feelings of love and attraction, particularly invoked in romantic relationships and marriages. *Kamaratih*, the Goddess of Compassion, combines *Kama* with *Ratih*, another name for the goddess of love in Hindu mythology. She embodies compassion, kindness, and empathy, guiding individuals in nurturing and sustaining loving relationships. *Kamaratih* represents the gentle, nurturing aspect of love, symbolizing understanding and emotional support. The gods of love, *Kama* and *Ratih*, are honored in the form of artistic offerings called *Banten Dewa-Dewi* during wedding ceremonies. These offerings symbolize eternal love, compassion, and fertility. In Balinese tradition,

tantric symbols like *Kamaratih* are included in wedding offerings, locally known as *biu-sumping* or *tipat-bantal* (Aryasih, 2022; Utama, 2016).



Figure 4. *Kamajaya & Kamaratih*, (God and Goddess of love and compassion), 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 100 cm, a modern with traditional technique painting by I Ketut Karta from Penestanan, Ubud, Gianyar (Source: Wayan Karja, 2023).

Modern-contemporary tantric art uses abstract symbols to express deep spiritual ideas and the unity of all things. These symbols, like the *lingam* and *yoni*, simply represent creation and life (Figure 5). By meditating on these symbols, people explore bigger concepts and connect with something greater. Tantric art helps us understand life and spirituality better, making us feel closer to the divine. Artists create balance and unity in their work by playing with line and color expression, drawing from *tantra's* rich visual language. They often include texts or stories in their art, exploring them further through visualization techniques or practice (Ruta, 2023; Timalsina, 2016). Contemporary Balinese art adeptly incorporates tantric ideas and cultural elements, drawing inspiration from traditional symbols. These artworks blend modern sensibilities with personal interpretations while embracing a global perspective through symbols. Alongside addressing social and environmental issues, they also reflect religious beliefs. *Tantra* in Bali serves as a spiritual system that merges Hindu practices, highlighting the importance of balance and harmony within opposing forces.

With strong ties to Balinese culture, tantric principles deeply influence the arts, infusing contemporary expressions with profound religious significance.

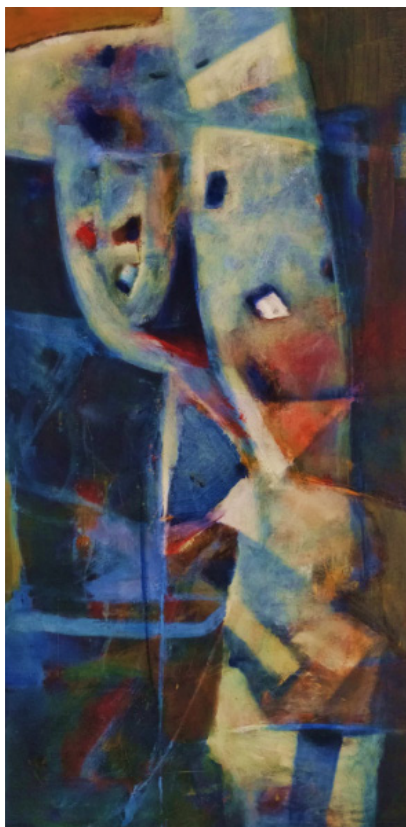


Figure 5. Sacred Union, a painting by I Wayan Karja, 1996, oil on canvas, 178 x 79 cm, the images in the form geometric rather than cubistic refers to the movement of Avant-garde in the modern European art scene (Source: Wayan Karja, 2023).

Tantric teachings in Java and Bali emphasize balancing masculine and feminine energies, seen as the universal force within us. They guide people in using these energies and include beliefs in spirit realms, reincarnation, and the power of certain body organs. Balinese Hindu ceremonies use symbols, chants, and benefits to balance energy and worship *Shakti*. This balance is crucial in tantric philosophy, evident in various symbolic forms and interpretations (Utama et. al, 2020; Eiseman, 2011; Andaka, 2023). While direct artifacts may not provide concrete proof, the ancient roots of Balinese civilization are clear through traditions passed down symbolically. Symbolism is deeply important in Balinese life, woven into their beliefs and daily practices. The island is seen as a mystical place where gods, humans, and demons coexist on different levels. Ancestors are honored in the volcanic peaks, while humans live in the middle



world between mountains and sea. Balinese society follows a traditional system to maintain harmony with nature as feminine energy, with Hinduism providing a flexible framework that adapts to different places, times, and conditions (Figure 6).



Figure 6. *Feminine Energy*, a warm yellow color painting by I Wayan Karja, 2000, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 245 cm, the images in the form of cracks, show the power of line, color, and shapes in late modernism (Source: Wayan Karja, 2023).

#### 4.2 *Transfiguration Perspectives*

Transfiguration, despite efforts to separate it from religion, remains deeply connected with spiritual concepts and contemporary ideas like transhumanism, encompassing profound changes in individuals and their worlds. From the ancient tantric *lingam*, which transforms a simple stone into a powerful symbol of divine energy, to contemporary Balinese art, where everyday materials are infused with new meanings, this phenomenon challenges conventional notions and unveils evolving artistic expressions. Transhumanism further reflects this by seeking to enhance human capabilities through technology, echoing the age-old desire to transcend human limits. Arthur Danto's theory on transforming ordinary objects into art underscores this ongoing transformation, highlighting how ordinary elements become extraordinary, reshaping our understanding of reality and artistic expression.

Transfiguration in Hinduism begins with the concepts of duality and non-duality (*dvaita* and *advaita*). Tantric art is an expression of this philosophy, blending art and religion to convey symbolic meanings. Since the decline of the Majapahit kingdom in the 14th century, Hindu and Buddhist arts witnessed a wane in development across most regions, but not in Bali. Despite being a small island amidst the vast archipelago of Indonesia, Bali stands out as a repository of the art and culture inherited from the Majapahit Kingdom, now transformed into local wisdom. Numerous cultural artifacts from this historical era still endure, bearing testament to the island's rich heritage. Moreover, the spirit of

artistic creation and innovation continues unabated, evolving as a contemporary expression of Majapahit's legacy (Ardika and Peter Bellwood, 1991; Nordholt, 1994; Darma Putra, Verheijen, Ardika, & Yanthy, 2021).

Tantric art, in particular, holds profound significance as a *dvaita* philosophical heritage underpinning Balinese art and culture today. The terms *advaita* and *dvaita* in Indian spirituality are very popular and come from the *Upanishads* (Ramabrahmam, 2024). *Dvaita* is a Hindu philosophy that focuses on the dualism between God and the individual soul. It was founded by Madhvacharya (1238-1317 AD), who emphasized the difference between Brahman (God) and Atman (the soul). *Dvaita* developed as a response to *Advaita Vedanta*, which teaches that Atman and Brahman are one (Putu, 2023). Central to this belief system is the concept of transfiguration, duality symbolized by the *lingga* and *yoni* energy, representing fertility: 1) the reinforcement of *Vedanta's* teachings is achieved through the creation of art, the role of duality and non-duality, *dvaita* and *advaita*; 2) painting on palm leaves, *lontar*, and its derivatives provide visual narratives of the essence of religious teachings and serves as part of offerings, *carita rupa*; 3) the creation of art as offerings are done symbolically, *saguna rupa*; 4) offering art is performed with the purity of heart or simply through the use of colors, *nirguna rupa* (see Figure 7).

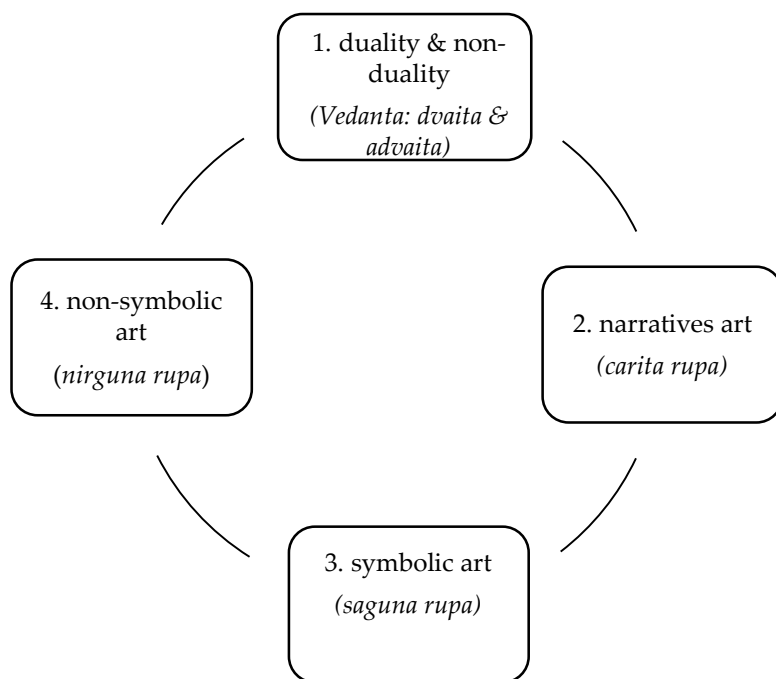


Figure 7. The concept of visual transfiguration is based on Hindu teachings in Bali (Karja, 2024).

In Balinese art representations, such as the transfiguration depicted in *rerajahan* form (Figure 2), classical elements like the head of an elephant, dragons, and demons are melded into modern compositions. The incorporation of gold and natural stone imparts a sense of natural mysticism and magical potency, offering a dramatic transformation. Echoing Danto's notion, the value of art transcends mere appearance, rooted instead in the context and interpretation within the art world. This challenges conventional perceptions of art and enriches our understanding of its intrinsic value (Danto, 1981). The transfiguration of images portraying mountains and lakes symbolizes a profound exploration of tantric concepts, integrating personal art practice as a research sample (Figures 5, 6, and 8). Vibrant color schemes and evocative imagery define the potency of these artworks, while techniques like positive and negative space utilization and push-pull methods contribute to the inherent duality within the pieces. Art evolves, blending modern techniques with tradition, creating a path for seekers of timeless truths. This convergence of opposites in tantric art leads to a spiritual journey, simplifying complexities. Through contemplative painting, opposing energies unite, fostering a meditative state. *Tantra's* focus on purification, employing *mantra*, *mandala*, and *mudra*, guides practitioners to detach from worldly desires. By purifying the mind, *tantra* deepens spiritual wisdom, offering clarity and peace. Transfiguration is also creating something from nothing; in Balinese, it is called *nyakalayang niskala* (Karja, 2020).

### 4.3 Theo-Aesthetics

The term 'theo-aesthetic' combines 'theo,' and 'aesthetic.' The word 'theology' is broken down into two Greek words: *theos* (God) and *logos* (word or discourse). Theology is thus discourse about God (McGrath, 2022). Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy focusing on art and our experience of it, along with how we perceive the natural world. It emerged as a separate field in the 18th century in Europe, coinciding with the development of theories about art, grouping various forms like painting, poetry, and music. The term "aesthetics" was coined by Baumgarten in 1735 (Audi, & Audi, 1999). Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar introduced the concept of theo-aesthetics, which bridges theology and aesthetics, suggesting that beauty and art can reveal divine truths as everything possesses a quality of self-emptying. Beauty serves as a central concept, with Garcia-Rivera emphasizing the importance of integrating philosophical and theological aesthetics with art to learn 'how to see again' (Potter, 2022). The British Museum's exhibition, *Tantra: Enlightenment to Revolution* (September 2020 – January 2021) aimed to clear up misconceptions about *tantra*, challenging the idea that it's just about sex (Ramos, 2020). This fusion of aesthetics, arts (relief, painting, sculpture), and religion reflects tantric philosophy, where the

union of the two is seen as a binary/opposite concept.

In Bali, art and religion are closely linked. The *lingam* and *yoni* symbols, representing male and female aspects, are key examples. They carry religious significance but are also artistic expressions, showing how beauty and belief intertwine in Balinese culture. In recent years, life's journey has been characterized by rapid and extreme changes, akin to a rollercoaster ride, from highs to lows, pleasant to painful experiences. Life undergoes drastic and dramatic shifts, often influenced by human behaviors seeking dominance over others. By exploring equilibrium in tantric art, Balinese artists across different styles can grasp the essence of fusing aesthetics to harmonize contrasting elements such as male and female attributes (Figure 8).



Figure 8. *Masculine Energy*, an ambiguous painting expressing contemporary themes, created using the technique play-flow-freedom by I Wayan Karja, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 140 x 250 cm, referring to a peacock, a large and colorful bird renowned for its extravagant plumage, particularly the male's long tail feathers that can be fanned out in a display, this image also alludes to the Flying Angel or the form of *lingam* for viewers (Source: I Wayan Karja, 2021).

Theo-aesthetics guides viewers to explore art and belief systems within a space of sublime transcendence. Beyond duality, there exists a singularity, manifested in relief and paintings that prompt self-reflection. The essence of art lies in inner stability, emanating from the depths of the heart and preserved by opposing energy forces such as feminine and masculine. Aesthetics heighten our awareness in life, akin to a daily or an offering cleansing practice. Creating art involves a challenging internal process to open the central channel and attain an untroubled mind, as described by Agnes Martin (Stiles & Selz, 2012). Balinese contemporary art is rooted in the fusion of Hinduism's religious, traditional, and philosophical elements. Tantric painting emphasizes the importance of understanding binary forms and colors. Colors evoke beauty, light, and aura in artworks, profoundly impacting emotions. Understanding color aesthetics plays a pivotal role in calming the mind and reconciling the heart. The process of creating art, comprehending color, and delving into tantric concepts serves as a therapeutic journey, merging aesthetics with religion on a local and global scale. Both the process and result of painting offer therapeutic benefits for healing (Karja, 2022; 2007).

Through tantric art and aesthetic practice, the concepts of inner and outer, Self and Universe converge within the human body, acknowledging one's existence as part of the universe. Tantric teachings offer profound insights, not merely through magical symbolism but also through energy and aesthetics. Interpreting positive tantric teachings via contemporary painting serves as a means of self cleansing, purging unnecessary elements from the body: physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. This purification encompasses all aspects of life, guided by an inward focus toward inner beauty, conveyed through line, shape, color, texture, and composition. Cultivating emotions and expressing them artistically and aesthetically is an internalization process that the author values as part of life's journey. Creating art transcends duality, embracing the concept of ancient tantric art.

Similarly, Buddhist psychology aims to gain the insight Buddha had to reduce suffering, focusing on the mind (*nama*) where pain, pleasure, and attachment exist. The mind interacts with "matter" (*rupa*), which is a basic form of perception refined by the mind (Figure 9). In Abhidhamma, both consciousness and its objects are important, as the mind's outputs become its inputs. This ethical system emphasizes that what is good for oneself is also good for others, in local terms called *tat tvam asi*. In Tantric Buddhism, *nama* and *rupa* are interconnected, highlighting the unity of mental and physical experiences to achieve spiritual insight. Additionally, the realms of existence: *kama dhatu* (desire realm), *rupa dhatu* (form realm), and *arupa dhatu* (formless realm) are



explored, showing the progression from physical desire to pure mental states in the pursuit of enlightenment.

In this context, Hindu and Buddhist tantric practices intertwine, emphasizing the union of the inner and outer worlds, and the interconnectedness of self and universe. Both traditions use art and aesthetics as a means of internal transformation and self-purification, seeking harmony and enlightenment by transcending duality and integrating contrasting elements. This shared focus on the unity of mind and matter, and the journey from physical existence to higher mental states, illustrates a profound convergence in their spiritual teachings.

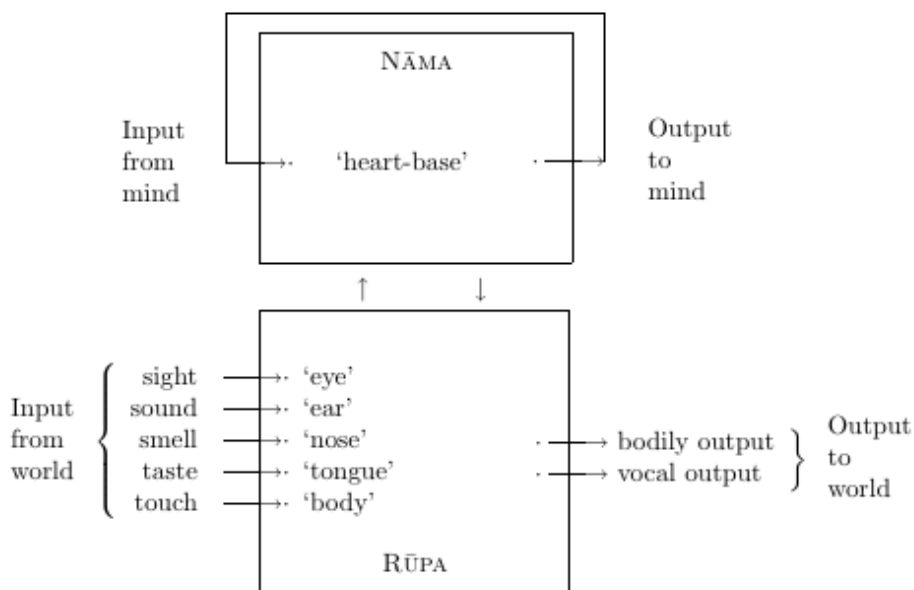


Figure 9. *Nāma Rūpa*: “Nāma refers to the mind and heart, while rūpa pertains to the physical forms perceived by the five senses.” (Source: Barendregt, 2005).

### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of ancient tantric traditions within contemporary Balinese art offers a fascinating glimpse into how spiritual wisdom shapes modern creative expression. This study highlights the relevance of tantric concepts moving together smoothly with theo-aesthetic, aesthetic transcendence, and self-discovery; which resonate deeply in today’s artworks. This study shows how Balinese art creates beauty by blending opposing elements, like male and female symbols, inspired by the sacred union, *lanang-wadon* concept. This approach mirrors tantric art principles, aiming to make art that is visually striking and spiritually deep guided by the divine inner creativity force, *taksu*. Through profound symbols like the *lingam* and *yoni*, these

artworks convey spiritual depth while reflecting cultural heritage. This fusion of tradition and innovation not only enriches Balinese contemporary art with local content but also invites contemplation on transfiguration in religion, art, and spirituality. It builds capacity and consciousness through visual narrative *carita rupa*, symbols *saguna rupa*, and non-representational, *nirguna rupa* or *padma hredaya*.

Ancient and contemporary is bridged by tantric concepts. The duality is the most important part of this tantric art practice, encouraging both artist and viewer to remain silent and centered; beyond the two. Through contemporary art practice, the author experiences both freedom and deep realization within. The author hopes that experience will also affect others. Furthermore, the author hopes that these article can also be additional reading material in the field of tantric art, especially for students, lecturers, and the wider community who want to study it. The author realizes that there are still many shortcomings and limitations of this study, so further research on this material is invited.

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