



Land of Fire

In the shadow of an ancient Javanese temple and some of the most destructive volcanoes on Earth, **Diana Hubbell** uncovers a thriving artistic movement.

IT'S 5 A.M. AND A FOG clings to my skin like a damp down blanket. As the sky softens to milky, opaque white, monsters and myths begin to emerge from the myst—the yawning maw of a mad-eyed giant whose jaw was blown to smithereens in the quest for immortality looms over my head and a chimera with the features of a lion, dragon and bull crouches at my feet. Although I'm far from alone, the crowd is silent, due to both the early hour and a certain uneasy awe that this massive edifice inspires. Borobudur, a miracle of Mahayana Buddhism in Central Java formed of interlocking volcanic stones, has a way of making one feel small. We've all come for that token shot of the sunrise, a daily spectacle akin to the one at Angkor Wat, but it never comes. Instead we wait, breathing in the syrupy perfume of ylang-ylang and jasmine that hangs in the thick morning air. A few disappointed visitors drop their selfie sticks and disperse, but I can't seem to look away.

COURTESY OF AMANJIWO (3)



COURTESY OF YOGI SETYAWAN



FROM TOP: Amanjiwo, tucked in the fold of rice paddies and grassy hills; a traditional Javanese masked dancer; the requisite and resplendent shot of Borobudur at sunrise. OPPOSITE: *Ritual Bulan Purnama*, an oil painting by Yogi Setyawan.

“This temple is not like your temples. There is no way to go inside to worship. It is an open Holy Book,” my guide Dator whispers to me. As the gloom lifts, I see what he means. One thousand four hundred and twenty intricately carved panels depicting scenes from the life of Buddha encircle the tiered structure in a wordless psalm. “Do you notice how everything here is cyclical? That’s because this sect believes that we keep reincarnating forever. Even after we reach Enlightenment, we come back to help others find their way.”

That emphasis on a never-ending cycle of destruction and rebirth seems fitting on an island that is one of Earth’s most naturally volatile. Precariously resting near the Sunda Trench, an oceanic gash where the Indo-Australian and Eurasian plates collide, this is a place born of spectacular tectonic violence. Forty-five active volcanoes still smolder here, more than on any other isle in the archipelago. “Java is a land of fire,” Dator tells me with a certain sadness. He’s lived in the shadow of these slumbering giants his whole life and has witnessed the tragedy they invoke firsthand. Mount Merapi, a stratovolcano that spews toxic pyroclastic flows roughly every four years, claimed 353 lives in its last major outburst. After all the insults Borobudur has weathered over the centuries—including the theft of dozens of reliefs by Dutch colonists in 1896 and a garish yellow paintjob by a bumbling archeologist in 1911—rains of corrosive ash from that devastating 2010 eruption

threatened to destroy it entirely. Yet, he adds, “As a result, it is also the most fertile. Everything grows in Java and our fruits are the sweetest.”

More than crops flourish in this culturally fertile region, the soul of which is tethered both to the awesome power of Merapi and the mysticism of this once-lost temple. Situated less than 40 kilometers from both, Yogyakarta and the surrounding lands are home to a vibrant art scene that deconstructs and reforges traditional Javanese tropes. The city’s creative side has grown organically in erratic bursts, cropping up in small shophouse galleries and studios scattered throughout the nearby villages. Much of it centers around the Indonesian Institute of the Arts, Yogyakarta, and the Biennale Jogja, but the source runs deeper and older than either of these institutions. The enduring presence of one of the ancient world’s greatest masterpieces in the face of death, upheaval and chaos continues to embolden new generations. In contrast to the more formulaic crafts for sale in Bali, Java has given rise to artists who flirt freely with the avant-garde. Here, you’ll find everything from classical painters to the politically dissident to eccentric types like Wawan Geni, whose naturalistic works are composed entirely of cigarette burns. It takes him 20 to 30 packs and a month and a half to finish a piece, all of which are snapped up by international collectors before the last singe mark cools.

Standing on Borobudur on a clear day, you can spy a pale, palatial reflection of the temple

in the distance. Framed by the greenest, wildest jungle imaginable and the distant silhouettes of volcanoes, Amanjiwo feels less like a resort and more like a grand monument in its own right. Its soaring limestone colonnades and domed roofs pay architectural homage to its ninth-century neighbor. Long before the arts community began to organize, it served as a platform for introducing the rest of the world to Javanese culture. For the past two decades, the resort has hosted dozens of exhibitions in its gallery and lifted more than a few talents from relative obscurity to the global spotlight. On January 1, to mark the beginning of its year-long 20th-anniversary celebrations, the resort launches a special retrospective with John van der Sterren, one of Java’s best-known painters and Amanjiwo’s resident artist for the past 19 years.

“There’s definitely a new wave of enthusiasm for Indonesian art,” general manager Ian White tells me over breakfast, a lavish spread including a fruit salad elaborate enough to put most Flemish still lifes to shame. Over the years, he’s had the chance to get to know many of the island’s artists personally and offer those with an exceptional gift the chance to show their pieces. “John [van der



FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF AMANJIWO; COURTESY OF YOGI SETYAWAN



FROM TOP LEFT: DIANA HUBBELL; COURTESY OF JOHN VAN DER STERREN (2)



Sterren] has spent whole afternoons with kids in the rice fields sketching or showing them how to draw a horse. Wawan Geni was brilliant. Last year, he would sit in the rotunda and work so people could watch the image evolve day by day.”

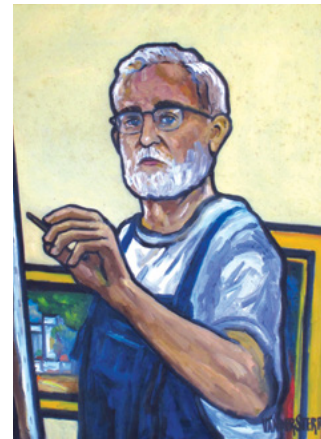
During my visit, Yogi Setyawan, a painter whose satirical works have captivated audiences abroad, is wrapping up his show at the resort. I’m due to meet him at his studio in a few hours, which gives me just enough time unkink my sore back muscles from all that time crammed in Coach. I check into my suite, a plush cocoon of warm neutrals and coral-colored marble stocked with all sorts of thoughtful extras, including a set of watercolors in case inspiration strikes. With a clear view of Borobudur framed by my garden terrace, it’s a tempting option, but I decide to put my dubious talent on hold and make a beeline for the spa. An hour and one pijat massage later, I emerge utterly blissed-out, ache-free, and with what feels like an entirely new set of vertebrae.

Before I meet Yogi in person, I see him through his own eyes in the sly self-portraits hidden in almost every one of his works. Though his subject matter tends to focus on the mundane, there’s a subversive quality to his cartoon world with its leering caricatures and squiggly line work that owes a debt to a young Rembrandt van Rijn. In dozens of depictions of Javanese life, I spot a man with a rockstar’s flowing mane and a grin that threatens to split his face in two. He shimmies at the end of a traditional Jathilan dance, gambles with manic glee, struts in leather with a punk biker gang, and joins a throng of leering tourists, all tangled limbs and cameras and cleavage, thrusting their arms into one of Borobudur’s stupas in an attempt to rub the Buddha within for luck.

Unlike his Hitchcockian cameos, the real Yogi has swapped the unruly curls of his youth for a more subdued trim and a newsboy cap, though the glint of mischief in his eye is the same. “For me, painting is all about finding the humor in daily life,” he tells me as Dator interprets. His English is minimal and my Bahasa nonexistent, but for some reason that doesn’t seem to hamper our repartee. After a few *Lost in Translation*-style exchanges, Yogi charges ahead with pantomime, exaggerated facial expressions and jokes. Somehow, it works and before long we’re both close to tears of laughter, language barrier be damned.

Of all the faces rendered in textured layers of oil and acrylic, it’s the crinkled, gap-toothed guffaw of Singodimedjo, Yogi’s 90-plus-year-old grandfather who passed away last year, that holds my attention. Even after his death, Yogi continued to paint his wizened features over and over, smoking a cigarette, posing in his old military clothes or generally goofing off. “I chose my grandfather, because he had a powerful sense of optimism for the future. He had a hard life, but it was always a happy one.” Yogi smiles and the expression is a deadringer for the one on the canvas.

A **HOMICIDAL MONKEY** screeches from behind bars and a half-dozen cats dart between my ankles as I wander through a treasure trove of oil canvases. “My house was not actually intended to be a showcase for art,” Umar Chusaeni tells me, shooing away a few felines. “But the community needed a place. The spirit of Borobudur is the center of culture in Java and all artists gather instinctively towards it.”



FROM LEFT: The ultra luxe Dalem Jiwo suite at Amanjiwo; artist Yogi Setyawan works on a portrait in his studio. OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT (BY JOHN VAN DER STERREN): The artist’s part-method, part-madness studio; a depiction of Mount Bromo, in east Java; a self-portrait of the artist.



FROM TOP: Brush-wielding Umar Chusaeni by one of his paintings; *Masih Kuat / Still Strong*, a work made entirely of cigarette burns on canvas, created by Wawan Geni.

While both he and his wife are painters, he's most proud of his work as a community organizer, arranging exhibitions, and publishing a quarterly magazine on the local cultural scene.

As he leads me through the gallery, he pauses to point out some of his favorite pieces. "Fifteen years ago, almost everyone focused on realistic works. Today, young artists are starting to explore different styles," he explains. The temple's capacity to evoke wonder inspires different people in different ways. "For instance, this one grew up right here in this village and every week he would go to the temple, so he could learn the color and character of the stones by heart. Now he specializes in painting statues from Borobudur, but in his own contemporary way."

Like many here, Umar has ties to Amanjiwo. When he was struggling to make ends meet, he worked as a chauffeur for the resort. Years later, they hosted one of his first major exhibitions. No one, though, has more authority on the subject of art at Amanjiwo than its resident artist, van der Sterren. A dignified, snowy-haired gentleman who remains remarkably prolific even in his late seventies, he was born in West Java and has called the island home for most of his life. Over the years, he's invited guests to parties at his home, sketching trips in the fields and visits of his studio. While his shows at the resort's

gallery are all very calm and orderly, when I meet him at his home, the scene is a little more... artistic.

"You'll have to forgive the mess. Artists are messy people," van der Sterren says cheerfully. Though he came to art as a second career later in life, he estimates that he's created more than 3,500 oil paintings, most either brilliantly hued Indonesian landscapes or evocative portraits. Friends, relatives, and passing strangers have often been asked to sit, and their facial expressions remain frozen in broad brushstrokes. "I guess you could say I did my first painting when I was 11, but I didn't paint for a very long time after that," he says. "I moved to New Zealand and in those days, you had the most fantastic artists who were stuck eating dog food. I didn't want that."

It took decades, but Java drew him back, as did art, which went from a hobby to a career when a French gallerist saw his work and offered him a solo exhibition on the spot. He remains modest about his considerable success and just as eager to praise the works of others as his own. He proudly shows me a piece by Nanang, his assistant for the past 20 years and a skilled painter in his own right, and a palm tree by his then-12-year-old daughter. After it got mixed up in the trash, a gardener salvaged it and sold it to a gallery in Jakarta. "Just goes to show that she should be the painter in the family, not me," he adds with a wink.

We come across two particularly striking works, one a stylized depiction of Borobudur and the other what appears to be a post-apocalyptic ruinscape. "After Merapi's 2010 eruption, 350,000 people came down off the mountain into Yogyakarta and crowded into stadiums and church halls," van der Sterren remembers. He gestures to an adjacent portrait of an elderly woman who stares at me in proud defiance. Her eyes tell a story of survival, and the quiet strength it takes to live and create in a place where time is short and life fragile. "We employed her just to give her some work. All of her coffee plants had withered, all the animals had died—everything was gone. The palm trees looked like broken umbrellas, there was so much ash."

In the undulating swirls of crimson, cobalt and vermillion, there's a sense of fearsome beauty and loss, of a place forever poised on the brink of destruction and something new.

Amanjiwo aman.com; doubles from US\$847. Private tours and studio visits can be arranged through the resort. 📍

FROM TOP: DIANA HUBBELL; COURTESY OF GOROBUDUR.COM