



AMALIA LAURENT

All that we see or seem, is but a scene within the scene

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How can we reread the history of colonialism from the perspective of the colonizer, and from the lens of the colonized? How is (political) identity formed through the contestation of the gaze, becoming something continually and dynamically reinterpreted? In the context of colonialism as an extension of cultural practice, is the notion of authentic ownership over cultural objects still relevant today? Amalia Laurent unpacks this series of questions through an artistic practice that functions as a space of pilgrimage, where the idea of tradition is reframed as a site of contested meaning, beyond mere nostalgia. Having grown up in France with only a faint exposure to Indonesian culture, Laurent developed a deep curiosity about the power tensions between European culture and colonized lands, particularly regarding how culture and tradition were uprooted during the colonial period. The circulation and distribution of value, objects, and knowledge eventually led Laurent to trace maps within the context of roots/routes. In her artistic statement, Laurent questions the forms of official maps, or territorial divisions, shaped by colonial history, in which Western systems of knowledge serve as the framework of justification. Laurent does not view maps solely as geographical classification, but rather as cartographies of resistance and, more intimately, of memory.

Over the past several years, Amalia has studied batik not only as an effort to trace her personal history, but also to reflect critically on Western dominance in the writing of history and the articulation of knowledge. In its historical context, batik is a symbolic representation of Javanese power, where philosophy is shaped by an understanding of cosmology and spirituality, so that every form and composition constitutes a form of knowledge. Along the way, these knowledges have been lost or their meanings displaced into “traditional expression,” reduced to heritage symbols, while the knowledge itself is no longer embodied. The acceleration of capitalism has even positioned batik as an economic commodity, where locality is seen as an image rather than something internalized in daily life. Such shifts are, of course, inevitable as consequences of colonialism and early globalization, yet how can we reclaim historical narratives and use our own language to reflect on that knowledge?

The batik cloths assembled by Laurent form an archive of her protracted pilgrimage across Europe, tracing Southern inheritances embedded in the very artifacts and social anatomies of empire. She reads architecture against its grain: not as the triumphant theatre of sovereign power, but as a sedimented record of seizure, erasure, and relegation.

Attending to the frescoes and mural surfaces of Europe's classical edifices, Laurent listens for the subtexts they cannot contain, then reinscribes their narratives – stitch by waxed stitch – using batik as a counter-metaphor, a textile grammar through which meaning itself is contested and reclaimed.

In her journey to study the meanings of various symbols, Laurent discovers how Javanese ancestors already employed socio-political anthropological concepts that can be placed in dialogue with contemporary cultural theory – especially those concerning maps and cartography. This exhibition thus focuses on batik motifs that embody philosophical meanings around these two concepts. The first category unfolds an understanding of boundary and territory through two registers: the feminine and the masculine. In Javanese philosophy, territory is never merely a matter of physical demarcation; it insists, rather, on the social and the spiritual. There are spaces guarded by unseen presences, or spaces collectively agreed upon as social systems.

Laurent selects the motifs Sekar Jagad and Poleng, both of which, in their usage, are more closely identified with women's collectives. Yet the very name Sekar Jagad itself announces a feminine quality – sekar, the blossom – brought into relation with the notion of the world – jagad. This juxtaposition signals how women have long been intimate with knowledge of the cosmos and the world, which can be read further as a representation of the encounter between two realms, rendered in a more structured articulation. The more abstract Poleng motif is deployed by Laurent to render visible the limits of that very perspective, appearing as intersecting lines of latitude and longitude – a cartography of the threshold itself. The second category concerns movement and exchange. As noted earlier, the idea of the map as route functions as an archive of trade histories and of displacement. Laurent turns to the Parang motif – long recognized as a classical design of the aristocratic houses – which, from its inception, imagines sea swells and water ripples as the ground of Javanese philosophy. The Mataram court held fast to the constitutive relation between mountain and sea, land and water. The image of the wave in Parang likewise projects a disposition toward voyaging: the search for new land and territory, and the knowledges entwined with tides, calendrical time, constellations of stars and moon, and so forth. These knowledges were later eclipsed, replaced by Western systems that often remain detached from local histories and

phenomena. Alongside Parang, Laurent chooses Mega Mendung – a motif from the Sultanate of Cirebon in West Java – to speak of movement: how the sky becomes the animating spirit of human life. She specifically tethers the motif to the site of its birth, Pelabuhan Muara Jati, linking it to histories of human migration, and to their resonance with our present condition.

For centuries, batik has been received as a sign of women's knowledge. In earlier times, every woman in Java – particularly those from middle and upper-class households – was expected to master batik for the cloths worn in various rites. Batik did not merely yield products; it became an intergenerational bridge for discerning how humans are bound to the cosmos. In later periods, batik was gradually repositioned as a vital trade commodity, and women thus entered the cultural workforce, even as their names vanished into anonymity, their labor rendered authorless. Mass industrialization has since estranged the skill of batik from the fabric of daily life, no longer serving as the social space through which women exercised genuine agency. While this discourse is not the explicit focus of her practice, Laurent nevertheless traces the contours of gendered asymmetry and the erasure of women's knowledges within this project. Among the motifs she presents, Sekar Jagad and Poleng tend toward feminine qualities, while Parang and Mega Mendung index masculine ones. Even as contemporary readings allow these categories to circulate more fluidly, certain motifs still emerge from embodied female experience, or from figures intimately tied to the rhythms of everyday life – such as those inspired by Dewi Sri, respected as the goddess of rice, with various rituals being prepared to get her blessing.

The gender categories that Laurent foregrounds, I believe, are not invoked to enforce boundaries but rather to substantiate the argument that women have long produced their own knowledges and cultivated self-agency through the labor of making batik. The categories themselves become an archive. Feminine and masculine motifs are now exchanged with greater fluidity, which likewise signals an expansion of women's social roles.

While developing critical thinking on post-colonial situation, re-drawing cartography and reconnecting to various ancestral practices, Laurent also recreates her personal pilgrimage that is more aware of power relationship between her two

identities. The whole mapping project represents a new way of navigating the shifting perception of belonging and cultural authorship. Laurent's practice advances a critique of the postcolonial condition through cartographic re-inscription and the reactivation of ancestral practices, while simultaneously performing a self-reflexive pilgrimage that accounts for the asymmetrical power relations embedded in her dual identities. As such, the mapping project functions as a methodology for inhabiting the contingencies of belonging and cultural authorship in a critical way. Yet, Laurent chooses to embrace poetic visual language, restaging the batik stamps and fabrics, as an intimate space of personal pilgrimage.



Alia Swastika (b. 1980, Yogyakarta) is a curator, researcher and writer whose practice over the last 10 years has expanded on issues and perspectives of decoloniality and feminism. Her different projects involve decentralising art, rewriting art history and encouraging local activism. She works as the Director of the Biennale Jogja Foundation, Yogyakarta, and continues her research on Indonesian female artists during Indonesia's New Order. She established and was Program Director for Ark Galerie, Yogyakarta (2007-2017). She was co-curator for the Biennale Jogja XI Equator #1 (2011); co-artistic director of the 9th Gwangju Biennale (2012); and roundtable curator for contemporary art exhibitions for the Europalia Arts Festival (2017), including presentations at Oude Kerk, Amsterdam; M HKA, Antwerp; and SMAK Ghent, Belgium. Her research on Indonesian women artists during the New Order was published in 2019.