

Title:

“Feels Strangely Good Ya?": Curating the Worlds of I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasih at Nottingham Contemporary

Introduction

“Feels Strangely Good Ya?”, currently on view at the Nottingham Contemporary (27th September—11th January), presents the first international institutional solo exhibition of the late Balinese artist I Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasih (1966—2006). Curated by Salma Tuqan, Katie Simpson, and Klara Szafrńska, the exhibition positions itself as a careful act of cultural mediation, constructing a framework through which Murni’s work can be encountered without dilution, exoticisation, or explanatory excess. Spanning two gallery spaces, the exhibition offers a rare opportunity to encounter Murni’s vivid, unapologetic explorations of sexuality, trauma, and power through a distinctly Indonesian lens. Writing as an Indonesian viewer, I approach the exhibition not from a neutral distance but as a culturally situated interpreter, navigating between Western institutional framing and lived familiarity. This positionality functions as a form of cultural translation, grounding the exhibition’s bridging strategies while exposing the limits of any singular viewpoint. This critique examines how the exhibition’s curatorial strategies, particularly its spatial design and dialogue with other artists, mediate viewers’ understanding of Murni’s radical artistic voice, while also situating her practice within the broader sociopolitical and gendered histories of Indonesia.

Gallery 1

Visitors enter Gallery 1 through a semi-partitioned wall that introduces the exhibition’s premise: a space dedicated to Murni’s uncompromising vision. On the reverse side of this entry wall, a curated selection of works by Edmondo Zanolini, I Dewa Putu Mokoh, and Oototol (Dewa Raram ‘Totol’) establishes a contextual framework. The juxtaposition of these artists, each addressing overlapping themes of humour, social commentary, and surreal figuration, functions as a prologue to Murni’s world.

A particularly striking work by Oototol depicts two animal-like figures with the heads of police officers, identifiable by their caps. Approaching this work as an Indonesian viewer, I immediately read it as a satirical critique of Indonesia’s police system, a reading shaped by lived proximity to state authority rather than metaphor alone. A sharp commentary that resonates powerfully within Indonesia’s recurring sociopolitical climate, particularly in light of the killing of Affan Kurniawan on August 28th, 2025, when he was run over by police tactical vehicles during protests opposing proposed increases in parliamentary allowances amid a domestic economic crisis. This incident has become emblematic of state violence and the violent dispersal of dissenting publics in post-authoritarian Indonesia. This connection underscores how the exhibition invites audiences to move beyond Western perceptions of Bali as a tranquil paradise, confronting instead Indonesia’s histories of corruption, dictatorship, and repression, the very conditions that Murni’s work implicitly resists.

The inclusion of this piece at the entrance thus serves a crucial curatorial function: it establishes a tone of mockery as critique, mirroring the humor and defiance central to Murni's artistic language. The wooden plank wall on which these works are displayed reinforces a sense of rusticity and locality, an aesthetic gesture that grounds the exhibition in Indonesian material culture while easing viewers into Murni's layered world.

Inside the main exhibition room, Murni's paintings unfold within a space painted in a soft green hue. This color choice lends the room an otherworldly atmosphere, calm yet charged, mirroring the surreal qualities of Murni's visual language. For a gallery in Nottingham, this Balinese context feels almost transportive: the viewer is drawn into the intimate terrain of Murni's imagination, shaped by her upbringing in a coastal Indonesian village.

A standout piece dominates the far wall: a large canvas set against a dark blue background, featuring two shrimp-like creatures, one wearing a high heel, the other a crown, with a vulva-like form rendered on its torso. These motifs—heels, crowns, and vulvas—recur throughout Murni's oeuvre as emblems of feminine agency, eroticism, and vulnerability. Although this room is often positioned as the more “family-friendly” section of the show, the imagery remains charged with sensual and psychological depth, hinting at the more explicit works awaiting in the second gallery space.

The layout alternates between small and large canvases, creating a rhythmic visual flow that reflects both the emotional and physical intensity of Murni's practice. Whether intentional or not, this sequencing echoes the oscillation between humor and trauma in her work, and demonstrates thoughtful curatorial attention to scale and pacing.

Gallery 2

The second gallery space marks a clear tonal shift. Its walls are painted a warm orange that both contrasts with and complements the soft green of the previous space. The chromatic change works almost like a signal flare, preparing visitors to enter more provocative ground. Here, Murni's works engage directly with sexuality, bodily pleasure, dominance, vulnerability, and the slippery interplay between them. The iconic pointed heel reappears at the entrance, a recurring symbol that anchors Murni's language of desire, humor, and defiance.

The spatial layout of this room heightens the psychological tension. Rather than the open sweep of the first gallery, the second space unfolds in tighter passages and angled corridors. Visitors move through it almost tentatively, peering around corners to glimpse what lies ahead. There is a faint sense of voyeurism in the way the room is navigated; the architecture encourages viewers to “seek” rather than simply look, echoing the intimate, sometimes uncomfortable confrontations embedded in the work. The room concludes with three wooden sculptures, grounding the exhibition in corporeal materiality and reinforcing the physical presence of the body as central to Murni's world.

Among the paintings on the left-hand wall, one in particular draws the viewer's attention: a pig applying makeup. At first glance, the image taps into a familiar Western idiom: “putting lipstick

on a pig”, an expression loaded with judgments about appearance, artifice, and the futility of transformation. But for me, as someone from Bali, the painting felt instantly local and recognisable. The pig’s body, posture, and facial expression resembled the stylised pigs of Balinese iconography: the pigs of temple offerings, of *babi guling* stalls, of restaurant signboards like Naughty Nuri’s. These associations introduced another layer, one that was not metaphorical or idiomatic but grounded in the everyday cultural language of Indonesia.

This doubled reading—Western cliché and Indonesian familiarity—captures what the exhibition does so well. It positions the artwork as what Umberto Eco describes as an “open work”: a field of meaning rather than a closed, determinate text. In *Opera Aperta* (1962), Eco argues that modern artworks require the active participation of viewers to complete meaning, allowing multiple interpretations to coexist without hierarchy. Here, the curatorial framework enables precisely that openness, while my role as a culturally situated viewer exposes how meaning shifts depending on context, experience, and proximity. The fundamental importance of this exhibition lies in the way art becomes a bridge, allowing people to recognise something of themselves while also acknowledging the limits of their own perspective. Humans often engage most deeply when something feels personally relevant; exhibitions like this disrupt that habit by insisting that relevance can come from stepping into someone else’s cultural world. This is exactly why it is so vital to present Indonesian art, particularly work as unapologetically grounded as Murni’s, on international stages: it expands the viewer’s sense of what reality looks like, and whose reality gets to be centred.

Audience Reception and Interpretation

The audience reactions during the walkthroughs reflected this shift in perception. In the curators’ walkthrough, many visitors described the first room as “portal-like”, immersive and dreamlike, while the second room initially felt unsettling or confrontational. Yet as viewers spent more time with the works, discomfort often softened into curiosity, then appreciation. The curatorial pacing nudges the audience toward this transformation, from ease, to tension, to reflection.

This process surfaced even more clearly during the walkthrough with Annie Jael Kwan. Her discussion situated Murni’s practice within Indonesia’s patriarchal and post-authoritarian histories, emphasising how Murni’s humor functions as both shield and weapon. In this context, the exhibition’s insistence on maintaining the specificity of Indonesian cultural references becomes essential rather than decorative. Female artists working in Indonesia have historically operated under restrictive social and political conditions, leaving their practices marginalised, overlooked, or rendered invisible within both local and global art histories. By foregrounding humor, sexuality, and direct self-representation, the exhibition frames Murni’s work as a form of feminist reclamation, resisting both local conservatism and the Western gaze that has historically exoticised Southeast Asian women artists by flattening their work into sensual otherness rather than political agency. Drawing from postcolonial feminist critique, the exhibition refuses this exoticising impulse by preserving cultural specificity rather than translating it into Western legibility.

Ultimately, the power of this second room lies in its ability to place a predominantly Western or displaced audience inside an Indonesian context without translation, apology, or simplification. It becomes a reminder that the viewer's own world is not the only reality, and that understanding another culture requires not just looking but allowing oneself to be repositioned. The room succeeds not only as a display of Murni's work but as a curatorial gesture toward a more expansive, more human kind of art encounter.

Conclusion

"Feels Strangely Good Ya?" stands out as a considered and culturally grounded curatorial achievement. Rather than relying on explanatory framing or Westernising shortcuts, the exhibition constructs an environment that enables viewers to meet Murni's practice on its own terms. The decision to open with works by Zanolini, Mokoh, and Oototol provides orientation without diluting specificity, setting a framework that clarifies the social and political textures surrounding Murni's work. The spatial progression between the two galleries, marked by shifts in colour, scale, pacing, and bodily proximity, further demonstrates how curatorial choices can guide affective and interpretive movement without becoming didactic.

The curators' refusal to neutralise Indonesian cultural references, their attention to humour as both aesthetic and political device, and their willingness to let multiple readings coexist contribute to an exhibition that feels rigorous yet accessible. While not transformative in a field-wide sense, it nonetheless models a thoughtful approach to presenting non-Western modernisms within European institutions. This approach resonates with broader curatorial shifts seen in exhibitions such as *documenta fifteen*, which challenged Western standpoint theory by centring Indigenous and non-Western collectives as curatorial agents rather than ethnographic subjects. In doing so, the exhibition offers a valuable example of how curatorial practice can foster cross-cultural understanding through sensitivity, structure, and respect for artistic autonomy. It honours Murni's legacy not through spectacle, but through a careful orchestration of space and context that allows her work to resonate with clarity and force.

Ultimately, the exhibition succeeds not only in honouring Murni's legacy, but in amplifying the voices of artists historically sidelined within global art histories. It feels strangely good not because it is comfortable, but because it dares to make discomfort meaningful.