ALMINE RECH

Roby Dwi Antono
Tilik Belik: Visiting the Ailing Spring

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Almine Rech Paris, Front Space is pleased to present Roby Dwi Antono's fourth solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from June 14 to July 26, 2025.

The arresting image of ‘A Ritualistic Purification of The Water Nymph’ provokes numerous questions. Who is lying down in what seems like a fish shroud? Is she going to survive? More questions emerge as we continue to consume the rest of the image and attempt to understand other elements that seem to defy logical thinking.

A self-taught painter based in Yogyakarta, Roby has never been one to over-articulate his motivations or inspiration. Even in interviews with the media, one gets the sense that Roby prefers to let his paintings do the talking:

“I would often say that my works contain a set of idioms which have very personal meanings to me. However, at the same time, I also challenge myself to be able to create works that can make people’s emotions arise. I leave some visual cues in my works which act as a melancholic conundrum, for my audiences to set their eyes and mind upon. I love it when people try to guess the message behind my works and in the end each person will have their own interpretation, which is good because it opens the way for another enriching dialogue between us. The human experience affects both the idea and visual aspect of my works.”[i]

Hence, how do we even begin to understand Roby’s images, especially in this latest series of works? Perhaps an entry point is to scour for certain elements that might be more familiar to us than we think.

Going back to the work A Ritualistic Purification of The Water Nymph, one will be able to notice a significant presence of water. Besides the character of the ‘water nymph’, the element of water as a sign of life is omnipresent, to replenish or perhaps to resuscitate a fallen being. Therein lies the first entry point into this current series of works. Subsequent works like 'Collecting Mourning Water' and 'Reviving Dying Springs' speak of a similar theme – water as both a source of grief and life.

In an online interview with the gallery, Roby spoke about the existence of small water springs in the village he grew up in, called belik. Found near riverbanks or nearby plantations, these springs are usually guarded by nearby villagers, maintained as a source of clean water supply for the surrounding communities. These water sources become even more crucial during the dry seasons. One particular belik remained permanent over the years, protected by the shade of an ancient banyan tree and enveloped in myth. It was believed to be guarded by a Kotes fish — a type of snakehead fish considered sacred by local elders. The presence of the Kotes signified that the spring was under supernatural protection. Disturbing the fish was believed to bring misfortune, thus discouraging interference and exploitation. Nearby stood a large rock known as Watu Ngorok, said to emit mysterious sounds at night. These myths and symbols, passed down through generations, served as powerful reminders of nature’s sanctity, instilling ecological restraint and respect. For Roby, these memories do not simply inform the atmosphere of his compositions—they underpin a deeper reflection on ancestral wisdom and environmental stewardship.

A resource that is considered a given and even taken for granted for most of us, the existence of the belik speaks of a

larger issue still affecting sections of the developing world – clean water supply for daily consumption. While this essay is not the occasion to discuss the reasons behind this issue, suffice it to say that the existence of the belik suggests either a failure on the part of policy-makers or local corporate entities that are managing water resources. What is more intriguing or relevant for the latest series of works however, is how Roby departs from his memories of the belik, and deploys them as visual cues and metaphors for his compositions.

In the abovementioned paintings, followers of Roby's work will have noticed a new development in his compositions as they grow more complex. While the melancholic figures are still visible, they are part of a larger landscape. Deliberately composed, these idyllic landscapes suggest a utopia where nostalgia and folk rituals coexist on a flat plane, forcing us to question our notions of science and progress.

If Roby's previous works can be understood as more personal and introspective, the current exhibition announces his engagement with larger contemporary issues surrounding global concerns with the environment, and more importantly, systems of knowledge and the role of what anthropologists have termed, 'folk knowledge'.

The female protagonists in the fish shroud depicted in the various paintings and drawings, while baffling to the uninitiated, seem to suggest a 'guardian' of sorts, in the tradition of historical folklores involving water nymphs. Whether they are seen as a warning or a symbol of vitality, our reading of these images ultimately depends on our long-held concepts of science and reason, progress and community; Roby invites us to reflect on these nuances in the only way he knows – through his pop surrealist compositions.

As someone who digs deep into his reservoir of memories and personal life experiences, Roby's works have often touched upon subjects of love, family, and childhood memories amongst others. However as his personal circumstances changed in recent years – welcoming the arrival of a newborn and grappling with increased global attention to his works– perhaps, Roby has cast his horizons further with a renewed vigour. This exhibition is a sign of things to come as Roby continues to reveal more of what he has to offer from his image-making repertoire.

The exhibition's title, Tilik Belik: Visiting the Ailing Spring, draws from a Javanese expression that traditionally refers to visiting someone who is unwell—a gesture of care, presence, and empathy. In this context, the act of tilik becomes a poetic metaphor for attending to a landscape in distress. The belik, once a vital water source intertwined with local myth and ecological balance, is now fading—both physically and culturally—under the weight of modernization. Yet by invoking this phrase, Roby offers a tender, almost ritualistic encounter with loss.

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https://hypebeast.com/2019/1/pen-and-paper-roby-dwi-antono-artist-interview

— Syed Muhd Hafiz, independent curator