

Roby Dwi Antono TUK

Jan 11 — Feb 17, 2024 | London, Grosvenor Hill

On the brink of a new decade, the 2010s in Yogyakarta/Jogja, the cultural capital city of Indonesia, a generation of young Indonesian artists spearheaded a new genre of art making, a localized hybrid of Pop Surrealism/low-brow art that heavily influenced the style of young painters around that time. Many of these artists carried a mix of Pop Surrealism blended with grass root sensibilities, with themes mainly explored everyday life, pop culture, local and global in each of their works. This community grew from an independent and underground spirit influenced by various subcultures like pop culture, indie movements, graphic novels, "lowbrow art", pop surrealism, streetstyle fashion, and more. These influences also reflected the development of Indonesian post-Reformation youth culture.

Roby Dwi Antono stands out from this generation with a slightly unconventional path with his self-taught background and distinctive style, which sets him apart from his peers who mostly came from Jogja's Indonesian Art Institute. Roby started working with acrylic paintings in 2011, but later focused on mastering oil on canvas as his preferred medium for his second solo exhibition, 'The Way of Grace' in 2012. Roby's paintings are mosaics of his visual memories, commentaries and fantasies – often drawn from childhood, with signature 'characters' such as rabbits, little children and humanoid animals in a dreamlike setting, all executed with distinctive style and immaculate precision in his technique. His signature style remained consistent from 2012-2018, evident in his solo exhibitions 'Januari di Utara' (2015) and 'Origins' (2018), marking his significant debut on the international stage.

However, around 2019-2020, subtle changes started to appear in Roby's paintings. The number of humanoids and childlike figures decreased, his visual became more simple and more abstracted, showcasing his evolving perspective on life and personal decisions, as demonstrated in his 2020 exhibition 'Midnight Garden' in San Francisco. Roby's artistic style took a radical turn in 2022, evident in his exhibition 'Rumpus' in Tokyo, showing a shift from Pop Surrealism to Naïve Figurative style, addressing deeper existential questions on life and self. This evolution continued in his solo show at Almine Rech Brussels in early 2023. The theme of self-understanding and its connection to the external world, focusing on mindfulness and presence towards simple, intangible aspects of life like breathing and feeling the pulse and heart, has been further explored for this London exhibition.

This solo exhibition presents Roby's works that he created since the birth of his firstborn daughter, Laut, in July 2023. Inspired by his experiences as a new father, the impact of starting a family, Roby confronts the challenges, joys and anxieties of parenthood all the while nurturing his hopes and dreams for the future. His maturing outlook on life has extended beyond comprehending his own life as an artist, but also of his role as a member of a family and community. This shift led him to explore a new artistic expression executed in rough, raw strokes and vivid colors. It is derived from a more domestic reality. It became more crucial to capture the ever-changing tension within him, rather than it is to depict a detailed landscape. The movement of his paint needs to articulate his emotion.

A recent imprinted recollection was of his daughter who accidentally swallowed his wife's amniotic fluid, if not treated in time it can cause serious breathing problem and even lead to pneumonia. He witnessed the struggle of his wife to produce breast milk as she tries to aid their baby to health, he realized the immense value of a single drop of milk. These early obstacles became a welcomed routine one that created a deep bonding between him, his wife, and their daughter. It also influences his artistic process he is guided by a more mindful state of mind towards a more purified sense of awareness.

For this new series, Roby has gone through a stylistic change from his earlier works, but his method of drawing from personal memory remains a constant. His childhood souvenirs of Ambarawa, central Java, where he had to create a man-made water source called "Belik", a traditional well, and "Tuk", a water spring that emerges from the well, are likened to their baby's experience of breast milk.

In Roby's village in the 1990s, many residents couldn't afford to install centralized water services. His family would share his neighbor's well, or they would often utilize the nearby river to wash and bath. During the dry season when things became scarce the villagers adapted a traditional method of sourcing and cleaning natural ground water. They needed to create a 'Belik' and this was done by digging a shallow area near the dried river until they discovered a Tuk', a spring, before the ground water was accumulated. Together they would distill and drain the murky water using stones and rocks until the impurities are filtered.

In Roby's words: "The act of creating a Belik to find a Tuk now feels like a metaphor to my journey as a family man. We are flawed beings with imperfections and there are traits I may carry and pass down unconsciously to my family.

As a member to this household, I must make a conscious effort to dig deep within so that I can understand my strengths and shortcomings. I need to filter existing and incoming 'impurities' so that I can build better habits for myself and my family. I must distill these experiences so that I can think rationally to avoid acting irrationally. All the while I have known how laborious it is to manually source a single drop of water can be, I have seen the same difficulties experienced by my wife when she had to produce that first milk for Laut. The notion of finding a Tuk – in essence the source of life, carried the same weight now as it did then."

Having gone through many hurdles as a new family, especially one that involved mainly his wife and their daughter, most of Roby's painting in this exhibition depicts a family unit of a mother, a father, and a child. These figures are often characterized as coup-like shape objects resembling a mother's breast, with some depicting what arguably looks like a squirt of milk or perhaps, an activated water spring. We see the re-appearance of an apple, this time in a figure like form, happily standing it represents the simple joy in life. Whenever an apple appear Roby is transported back to his childhood memory to when a gift of a cold apple by his father, is for a rare special occasion.

The analogy of Tuk resonates deeply with Roby as he sees his artwork as a source of nourishment and inspiration. Just as a Tuk provides clean water and sustains life, Roby's art draws on his personal memories and experiences, serving as a source of creativity and growth. The process of distilling the water, symbolized by Roby's artistic process, involves filtering out impurities and creating something pure and meaningful. Similarly, Roby filters out his emotions, memories, and observations to create artwork that reflects his inner self and stimulates the viewer's imagination. In this way, Roby's paintings become a metaphorical Tuk, offering a refreshing and authentic glimpse into his world and inviting the audience to reflect on their own experiences.

This solo exhibition signifies a new chapter in Roby's artistic progression, marking a fresh beginning that is far removed from the earlier days of Pop Surrealism. It represents a higher level of creative growth and maturity, signifying a state of purification and renewal, both artistically and personally.

— Farah Wardani, writer and curator