

ARIE SMIT

ARIE SMIT PURSUING THE BRILLIANCE OF BALI

By Putu Wirata

His full name is Adrianus Wilhelmus Smit, born on the 15th of April in 1916 in Zaandam, an industrial city. Arie actually was heir to a substantial fortune. His father, Johannes Smit, and his mother, Elizabeth Ahling, inherited the family business of Smit Enterprise, a trucking firm over two-hundred years old. However, Arie was not interested in carrying on the lucrative business. Since he was a child he already was enchanted by the beauty of color and artistry around him. So as a youth, he chose to enroll at the Academy of Arts in Rotterdam. Before completing his studies, he became interested in an offer from the Dutch military to serve in Netherlands Indies. He entered military service at the age of eighteen in 1934. After finishing the training period in 1938, Arie departed for the Netherlands Indies, a land of dreams. At Rotterdam he happened to be in the same class with Indies youth, who due to his dark complexion created a sensation for Arie. The tales of his friends about the tropical forests, striped tigers, lakes, and mountains sent shivers throughout Arie's body. How beautiful if, for only for a moment, he could set foot upon that dream land. At last it could actually come true.

In Batavia (Jakarta) he was assigned to the Topographical Service. Every Sunday, Arie liked bicycling around to see the surroundings. He drew sketches each time he was attracted to something. What a pity that those years of inspirations did not continue for long. In December 1941 war broke out against Japan. In a few weeks, Japan succeeded in subjugating the entire Netherlands Indies. The army of the Land of the Rising Sun captured a number of Dutch soldiers, including Arie. He was dragged deep into an experience that he will never forget. As a prisoner of war he did a forced labor by building a railway track in Banpong district of Thailand. It was there that the years full of suffering and hope went on, tales of inner strength by those who clearly kept their faith alive, even though the situation really was extremely uncertain. Indeed, history finally recorded that Japan surrendered the Allied Forces on the 1st of September in 1945 on the battleship Missouri after the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Arie had the chance to return to Indonesia, and again held his position at the Topographical Service. But this was not for long, because on 27 December 1949 Holland recognized the sovereignty of the Republic of Indonesia which had been proclaimed on 17 August 1945. The Dutch forces withdrew; only those who already

were employed could remain in Indonesia. Arie's status was changed to civilian and he was allowed to make a request to stay in Indonesia if he desired. He immediately took this opportunity and has been an Indonesian citizen since 1950. He removed his military uniform and lay aside his topographical tools, exchanging from them to paintbrush, color, and canvas. From 1950 to 1956, Arie taught graphic art and lithography in the fine arts department at the Bandung Institute of Technology. From conversations with several Dutch people who visited Bali, Arie became obsessed with the small island that was said to be extremely beautiful in its art and culture, a paradise.

In 1956 Arie departed from the City of Flowers, Bandung, and headed for the island of Bali. He left with the profits from the sale of his paintings in successful exhibitions at Plaju and Balikpapan. Before setting foot on the island, he imagined very sensational things. The ship Arie boarded made a stop at Buleleng, and immediately took off for Kintamani where he had the chance to stay overnight before continuing on to Ubud. On his journey from Kintamani to Ubud next day, he was astonished to see elegant and exotic Hindu temples with architecture full of deep philosophical values. He was amazed by women bathing nude in the rivers or strolling bare-breasted on the roads. He also saw men wearing sarongs and batik head-clothes, and old people chewing betel. In the unspoiled land around Ubud, traditional painters were everywhere, and natural carvers and dancers were not yet heavily influenced by tourism. The morning vistas in Ubud were very enchanting, with farmers leading cattle to the rice fields for plowing, and women bearing baskets of the rice on their heads for their husbands. Arie dreamed as if he were back in the Renaissance period of 17th century Europe.

The bright sun on this small island soon attracted his attention. Arie discovered light, poetry, and mystery. The extraordinary enchantment of the sun in Bali made him suddenly remember a scene in the Ramayana epic of worship to Surya, god of the sun. It is Surya who gives life to all beings on the face of the earth. In painting there also are works which are expressions of thanks to the glory of the sun whose rays give life to this world. And it is not unreasonable if he says that his paintings are like worshipping the glory of the sun whose rays give life to this world. And it is not unreasonable if he says that his paintings are like worshipping the glory of Surya. His works emanate from efforts to portray radiance.

Light is important because Arie was born in a country with four seasons, where illumination is far different from bright tropical lands like Indonesia and especially Bali. In Holland, his birthplace, the landscape is dominated by white, black, and grey. The

scenery is monotonous and boring, unstimulating for creativity and restraining the real richness of color nuances. Arie began to feel the deficiencies of the situation after observing what had happened in the canvases of European artists, like the classical paintings of the Rembrandt van Rijn or Jan Vermeer. From their sketches which he studied, it was clear how poor their colors were. A majority of their works were within the milieu of closed spaces. How poor was the palette, with only black, dark tones, white or grey. For Arie it was as though he had never seen a work that presented an outdoor scene.

Several modern Western painters have tried to use ingenuity. Artists like Vincent van Gogh, William Turner, Paul Cezanne, and Claude Monet, sought ways of reflecting radiance by painting fields or the open sea and selecting certain days to obtain moods when light showed more than just grey, black, and white. And they achieved impressionist works, the ambience scattered with strong tints color. The experiences of these artists made Arie daydream. He wishes to do something, and that he found in a tropical country, a place of light and multicolored radiance. Soon light became the basis for developing an obsession in his works. When bathed in the sunlight on Bali, he felt that he was intoxicated in paradise. How fertile and rich was the land of Bali with plants thriving everywhere, rivers flowing with undulating ripples of water, tree branches swaying in the soft breezes, droplets of rain sprinkling the ground. Arie was astonished at the sunlight that constantly radiated throughout this tropical world, continuously reflecting all kinds of colors. So he concluded that he had to create works with a full range of hues. His enthusiasm for radiance was due to the multicolored nuances. Color is poetry, as he expressed to Agus Dermawan T, author of the book *Puisi Warna Arie Smit*.

To welcome his introduction to Bali, Arie composed a work titled *Balinese Women Returning from The Market*. The Painting, in the collection of the late President Soekarno portrays two bare-breasted Balinese women carrying things on their heads from the market. However, the focal point of the work is not the two half-naked women. Arie merely passes them over as objects on the canvas, for what touched his soul was the bright yellow light in the temple courtyard behind them. He captured the intense radiance of the morning sunlight. Then in the painting *Flowers and Figurines*, also in the Soekarno collection, Arie shows the contrasting colors of objects in a room. He did not paint forms, but instead was enchanted by the rhythmic play of light that created a very poetic effect. It was as though the colors produced an internal reaction that led to lyricism.

At the start of his adventures in Bali, Arie mostly painted exotic things, places which he had explored for months. And he really wishes to discern the plants, the leaves swept away by breezes, women in front of temples, or coconut trees thrusting up into the sky. He really captured all of these with a personal subjectivity. Arie sometimes felt the sea was reddish, Hindu temples in Bali shimmered with golden yellow, trees turned orange when struck by moonlight. He contemplated the stimulation of light with feeling and his own internal working impulses with complete creative freedom.

During the 1970s Arie painted quickly with dense mosaics of color on canvas which rapidly led to compositions. Scenic images only emerged in impressions and forms which were composed abstractly. Then in the early 1980s in the work *Temple Interior (Inner Court)*, he leapt forward in his creative principles. His work ethic, that a thousand details cannot win over one good form, meant that in this painting Arie wanted to show details cannot win over one good form, meant that in this painting Arie wanted to show Hindu temple in yellow against a background full of orange and yellow dots. Around it two trees provide shade in nuances of light blue. It meant that detailed form disappeared in the outpouring of light; what remained was only color.

So by the end of the 1980s Arie mainly painted scenes and landscapes with numerous dots. He was lavish in this desire by applying paint with short brushes. Indeed this is how he saw sunlight in Bali that captivated him wherever it fell to earth. First of all, light lingered in cloud banks, then reflected onto tree tops, and finally was scattered by rustling leaves to the ground. This results in a thousand shadows, both small and large. Arie tried to recreate it in an impressionist-pointillist style.

Even up to the present (1996) at the age of eighty years, Arie has not changed his style of self-expression. He admires Raoul Dufy and those who perhaps remind him of the artistic concepts of Henri Matisse, the French painter and leader in the Fauvist movement. He was the one who put color as the main value in a work. The basic idea of Matisse differs, for he observed color by physically looking at it. He analyzed color with rational scientific theory. Arie, on the other hand, observes color with feelings of amazement. He regards it as a gift that mesmerizes through its magic.

In part, paintings only are pictorial descriptions of the real world. Those who imagine things in reality and draw them accurately are illustrators. But those who see the hidden forms and see color as shapes are painters. His works are realistic, but he avoids the harshness of actuality, the explicit. He does not want to paint precise forms and all their details. He attempts to bring about a poetic realism, a dreamy, soft

confrontations. His colors do not clash, they blend. Lines do not divide, but unite.

After receiving the Dharma Kusuma art award from the provincial government of Bali in 1992, Arie decided to live at the Villa Sanggingan owned by Pande Wayan Suteja Neka, founder of the Neka Art Museum in Ubud. He felt his connection with Neka like that between father and son, even though Arie never married.

The way in which they got to know each other is quite long. In 1973 when Arie lived in the village of Nyuhtebel in Karansem, Neka and his wife, Ni Gusti Made Srimin, came to visit. Neka already was a collector of paintings. Arie also knew for a while of the Neka Gallery from Rudolf Bonnet, who told him back then that Neka collected and sold non traditional paintings. Arie was interested and eventually felt compatible with Neka. From 1973 to the present, he has always been with the Neka Gallery. Arie feels free to paint and live anywhere.

Personally, Arie admits to a strong admiration for Neka, who built the Neka Art Museum with his own funds. Furthermore, Neka has cared for and developed it as befits his abilities. The museum collects paintings not only by Balinese, but also those from other places, even works by artists from abroad who were inspired by the natural beauty and culture of Bali. Neka has pioneered the establishment of a museum for collecting traditional and contemporary work of art. Due to Neka's commitment to the Neka Art Museum, Arie has not hesitated to donate several of his works to it. Not only that, Arie is very fond of motivating young artists. "If there are works which I like, I buy them and put them in my studio" he says. And after feeling satisfied enough to enjoying these paintings in his studio, he then donates them to the Neka Art Museum. So far, Arie has given around 50 paintings, almost half of them are works by other artists.

The friendship of Neka and Arie clearly deep. "It is more than just a relationship because of our similar appreciation of culture" comments Arie seriously. He reckons that in the midst of a strong consumer culture, Neka has the commitment to develop a great and complete museum. If he sold these paintings he could become a millionaire. But Neka does not want to do that. In the eyes of expert and art connoisseurs both at home and abroad, the Neka Art Museum has achieved a good image. From the provincial government of Bali, Neka received the Dharma Kusuma art award for his dedication to raising the quality of and preserving Balinese art and culture. The Hadiah Seni art prize, the highest honor in the field, was given to him in 1993 by the central government in Jakarta for his support of traditional and

contemporary fine art.

To raise the development and preservation of painting, Neka built the Arie Smit Pavilion as part of the Neka Art Museum. It was opened on the 3rd of September in 1994 with a preliminary Balinese ritual that coincided with Tumpek Landep, a ceremonial day for daggers, spears, and other tools, including the paintbrush as the most important implement of an artist. The commemorative plaque was signed by Arie himself in a private ceremony with the artist and the close family of Neka,

The Arie Smit Pavilion consists of two floors. The upper level is specifically for the permanent display of forty works by Arie. The lower level has works by the Young Artists, whose artists once received guidance from Arie. Also shown here are paintings created by contemporary Balinese artists. This pavilion is a reminder of and sign of respect to Arie Smit as an artist devoted to creativity and knowledge in the continued development of Balinese art and culture.