

Mapping Local Idiom in The Region of Central Java, East Java as A Potential for New Aesthetic Innovation in Indonesian Contemporary Art

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Local Idioms,
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This study investigates the role of local idioms from Central Java and East Java as a source of aesthetic innovation in Indonesian contemporary visual art. Local idioms are understood as visual, symbolic, material, and conceptual elements derived from regional traditions, rituals, vernacular languages, mythology, cosmology, and everyday cultural practices. The research aims to map the presence of these idioms and examine their modes of transformation within contemporary artistic contexts. Using a descriptive qualitative approach with an instrumental case study design, the study analyzes approximately 395 artworks from three exhibitions: ARTSUBS 2024 Ways of Dreaming, ARTSUBS 2025 Material Ways, and the undergraduate final exhibition Final Countdown. Data were collected through visual analysis, exhibition catalogues, curatorial texts, and contextual interpretation. The findings indicate that approximately ±19% of the analyzed artworks explicitly integrate local idioms, with the highest proportion found in the Final Countdown exhibition, reflecting strong engagement among younger artists. Local idioms are not presented as literal representations of tradition but are transformed through recontextualization, material experimentation, visual fragmentation, and contemporary conceptual articulation. Traditional materials such as batik, textiles, and clay function as conceptual media, while ritual and mythological references operate as symbolic visual structures. This study concludes that aesthetic innovation in Indonesian contemporary art emerges from the strategic transformation of local idioms, highlighting the significance of regional cultural resources in shaping contemporary visual expression.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary visual art in Indonesia has developed within a complex interaction between local cultural traditions and global artistic discourses. Since the post 2010 period, Indonesian contemporary art has increasingly engaged with issues of globalization, technology, ecology, and identity, positioning itself within international networks of exhibition and circulation. At the same time, local cultural idioms continue to serve as important sources of meaning, differentiation, and aesthetic experimentation. Rather than disappearing under global influences, local idioms have undergone processes of reinterpretation and transformation, enabling artists to articulate new forms of visual expression that are both locally grounded and globally legible (Djatiprambudi, 2019). Within the broader discourse of Indonesian contemporary art, the relationship between tradition and contemporaneity has shifted from direct representation toward more critical and experimental engagements. Local cultural elements such as ritual practices, vernacular language, mythology, cosmology, and traditional materials are no longer treated merely as decorative motifs or markers of ethnic identity. Instead, they are increasingly repositioned as conceptual frameworks and visual strategies that respond to contemporary social and cultural conditions. This tendency aligns with the broader

understanding of contemporary art as a reflection of social change and global cultural dynamics (Supangkat, 1997).

Previous curatorial surveys and exhibition publications documented in the research report indicate that Indonesian contemporary art consistently presents works that integrate local idioms into contemporary visual languages. Publications such as *Thermocline of Art: New Asian Waves* (Hatje Cantz, 2008) and *Contemporary Indonesian Art* (Nadi Gallery, 2020) document how traditional elements such as wayang, batik, and agrarian symbols are transformed into installation-based and cross-media practices. Similarly, long-running national exhibitions such as ARTJOG and Jakarta Biennale demonstrate that a significant proportion of contemporary artworks continue to engage with local cultural references as part of their conceptual foundation. However, despite these observations, existing documentation has largely remained descriptive and concentrated on major art centers, particularly Yogyakarta and Jakarta. As noted in the research report, there is a lack of systematic mapping that focuses on regions outside these dominant hubs, especially Central Java and East Java. This limitation has resulted in an incomplete understanding of how regional idioms contribute to aesthetic innovation within Indonesian contemporary art, particularly among emerging artists and younger generations.

Central Java and East Java represent culturally rich regions with distinct historical, social, and artistic trajectories. These regions are characterized by diverse ritual traditions, linguistic variations, and material cultures that differ from those of other parts of Indonesia. In recent years, both regions have experienced increased artistic activity through the emergence of independent art spaces, new exhibition platforms, and academic art institutions. Nevertheless, structured empirical research examining the transformation of local idioms from these regions within contemporary artistic practices remains limited. The absence of systematic documentation has implications beyond academic discourse. From a curatorial and market perspective, insufficient mapping of local idiom transformation complicates the identification of artworks that combine cultural specificity with contemporary relevance, particularly for galleries and collectors operating at national and international levels. From an educational standpoint, the lack of empirical data restricts the development of teaching materials that connect contemporary art practice with local cultural contexts. These concerns highlight the urgency of research that not only describes the presence of local idioms but also analyzes their modes of transformation and aesthetic contribution.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing on the mapping of local idioms in Central Java and East Java as a source of aesthetic innovation in Indonesian contemporary visual art. The research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach through an instrumental case study design, drawing upon visual analysis, exhibition documentation, and contextual interpretation, in line with qualitative research frameworks outlined by Creswell (2014) and Moleong (2017). This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of artworks as cultural texts situated within specific social and artistic contexts. The empirical data for this study are drawn from three exhibitions: ARTSUBS 2024 *Ways of Dreaming*, ARTSUBS 2025 *Material Ways*, and the undergraduate final exhibition *Final Countdown*. These exhibitions were selected because they represent a wide spectrum of contemporary

practices, involving established artists, emerging artists, and art students. ARTSUBS 2024 presented a broad overview of contemporary artistic tendencies that already engage with local references, while ARTSUBS 2025 emphasized material exploration, providing a focused context for analyzing the transformation of traditional materials into contemporary media. The Final Countdown exhibition offered insight into the practices of younger artists, revealing how local idioms are negotiated within contemporary art education.

By analyzing approximately 395 artworks from these three exhibitions, this study provides both qualitative insights and estimative quantitative indicators regarding the role of local idioms in contemporary practice. The findings indicate that approximately $\pm 19\%$ of the artworks explicitly integrate local idioms, with notable variation across exhibitions. The higher proportion found in the Final Countdown exhibition suggests a strong inclination among younger artists to explore local identity as a foundational element of their artistic practice. Importantly, this research does not conceptualize local idioms as static or homogeneous entities. Instead, it emphasizes the processes through which local idioms are transformed through recontextualization, material experimentation, visual fragmentation, and contemporary conceptualization. This perspective resonates with integrative approaches in art research that view tradition as a dynamic resource rather than a fixed inheritance (Suyatno, 2004).

In positioning Central Java and East Java within the broader landscape of Indonesian contemporary art, this study contributes to the discourse on regional identity and aesthetic diversity. The findings support the view that Indonesian contemporary art does not derive its distinctiveness from a single cultural model, but from a network of local idioms that are continuously negotiated and transformed. Through this lens, aesthetic innovation emerges from the interaction between local experience and contemporary artistic language. Ultimately, this study seeks to strengthen the understanding of how local cultural idioms contribute to aesthetic innovation in Indonesian contemporary visual art. By providing a structured mapping of idiom transformation in Central Java and East Java, the research offers empirical data that can support curatorial practice, art education, and further academic inquiry. In doing so, it reinforces the significance of regional perspectives in shaping the evolving narrative of Indonesian contemporary art within both national and global contexts.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research uses a qualitative descriptive approach with an instrumental case study design through aesthetic studies and integrative criticism. Integrative is a combination in determining the outcome of an agreement in a process, while according to Suyatno (2004:26) integrative means uniting several aspects in one process. According to (Moloeng 2017:6), qualitative research is a study with the aim of understanding the phenomena experienced by the research subject such as responses, motivations, behaviors and so on, in a comprehensive way using verbal descriptions, in a natural context by utilizing various scientific techniques or methods. While a review of the existing situation of fine art cases can be done as stated by Creswell (2014), Literature studies are written summaries of articles from journals, books, and other documents that

describe theories and information both past and present organizing literature into topics and documents needed, Creswell, John. W. (2014). According to this method, it can be used for this research. The subject of the research is young artists and their works that have been exhibited in several galleries in Central Java and East Java in the last 5 years and several artists whose work has gone abroad. The research target is the variety of painting idioms and aesthetic innovations. Research locations Central Java and East Java Data sources consist of artists, works, appreciators, catalogs, journals, curators and critics. Data collection techniques through observation, interviews, questionnaires and documentation. Gradual data analysis from data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. Works as objective facts are studied through description, formal analysis, interpretation and evaluation based on appropriate context. Interview to find out the artist's artistic intentions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The novelty of contemporary art aesthetic innovations in Central Java and East Java can be seen from the various efforts made by artists in combining traditional elements with modern techniques and concepts. Here are some examples of how this novelty and innovation is realized through the exploration of batik and weaving motifs. Contemporary artists adapt traditional batik motifs such as Solo batik and Pekalongan batik with a modern approach, combining batik techniques with other art mediums such as painting, sculpture, and installation. Artworks that use traditional weaving from the East Java region such as *Ikat Madura*, applied in contemporary art or fashion installations, create works that combine cultural heritage with modern styles.

Integration of local culture and mythology through folklore in art. Using Javanese folklore such as the legend of Roro Jonggrang or the story of the pennant as inspiration in contemporary art, both through paintings, sculptures, and multimedia installations. Embodying traditional symbolism by incorporating traditional symbols such as *wayang kulit* or wood carvings in modern artwork, creates a dialogue between tradition and contemporary. In addition, media experiments and digital and multimedia art techniques can also be carried out. Artists combine traditional elements with digital technology, such as video mapping featuring batik motifs or *wayang kulit* animations, creating an innovative and dynamic visual experience.

Installation and Performance Art Using public spaces and historic places as backdrops for installations and performance art that incorporate elements of local culture, creating direct interaction with the audience and the surrounding environment. Ecological and Sustainability Approach. Eco-Friendly Materials Using natural and eco-friendly materials such as bamboo, natural fibers, and natural dyes in artwork, creating a connection between art, nature, and local culture. It can also be seen from Community-Based Artworks Involving local communities in the process of creating artworks, such as participatory art projects that explore cultural values and local wisdom, as well as raising awareness of the importance of environmental conservation. Interdisciplinary Collaboration through Collaboration with Traditional Craftsmen Contemporary artists work closely with traditional artisans to create works that blend traditional techniques with modern artistic visions, enriching both parties in the creation process.

Interdisciplinary Combining fine arts with other disciplines such as architecture, design, and traditional Javanese music, creating works that are interdisciplinary and enrich contemporary aesthetics. Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Festivals Hold art festivals and exhibitions featuring innovative works from local and international artists, providing a platform for artists to showcase their aesthetic explorations and introduce the public to contemporary fine art innovations. Alternative Galleries and Spaces Establish alternative galleries and art spaces focused on contemporary works that explore local themes, providing a space for artists to experiment and share their work with a wider audience.

In the contemporary era, it is impossible to escape the variety / flow of trends from time to time. The factors that cause this are influenced by the market barometer and celebrating an idea. This can trigger a crisis in the exploration of new ideas. The innovation of each artist becomes a stereotype so that it no longer displays refreshment in innovating. Gadget technology has a great influence on this. The global visual information window is increasingly open and easily accessible. This phenomenon is reflected in the works produced by the younger generation that have almost the same model trend in their visuals. If dissected, the resulting works have colors, themes, and subject matter that are not much different.

In this study, this phenomenon will be used as a reference so that there is an idea to make an evaluation. The hope and contribution of the researcher provides enlightenment, especially for young generation artists to strive to raise the idiom of local idioms as a formula to become ideas in their work. Thus, it can be a reference in work, as well as teaching techniques in the academic realm. In the international arena with the hope of having its own existence for the works of Indonesian artists.

The researcher on this occasion summarized the works from various information to make an initial reference, which in the future can make a climate for the quality of Indonesian artists' works. In this study, we look at how and how much works use local idioms in the current contemporary climate. What visual idiom is used in its visual form. The local idiom is a reflection of the daily life in which the artist lives. The culture can be built when he is in a long period of time so that he knows about the soul, customs and environment of the region and so on. This research will review in terms of coloring, composition, subject matter and include it in the contemporary or modern realm. Patterns, creative forms are born without the presence of adaptive cultural intervention from the environment and social education.



Figure 1. Painting Dias Prabu Berdikari (Independent) (2019) 300 x 110 cm Batik Written on Silk Cotton Fabric. Image Courtesy 16 Albermarle Gallery (source : <https://www.newmandala.org/exhibition-review-mythlines-and-memories-new-batik-by-dias-prabu>)

One example of Dias Prabu's work that uses batik techniques and media in its visual expression. In his work, he uses local idioms that can be brought by international artists to his exhibitions. The artist who was born in Malang, East Java, is an example of an effort to deceive local visual icons into the realm of contemporary art.



Figure 2. Paintings By Arif Fiyanto One of His Works Uses Visual Components That Are Sourced from The Natural Conditions in Central Java. (Source: Mujiyono).

An Example of a Work by Arif Fiyanto, one of the works that reflects the daily life of an environment. Arif Fiyanto, who lives in Java, especially Central Java, is mostly still close to the nature of mountains and forests. Natural life, classical art, crafts, and historical heritage are still closely associated with Central Java and East Java artists should be the strengthening of Indonesia's contemporary art.

This study investigates the mapping of local idioms from Central Java and East Java as a source of aesthetic innovation in Indonesian contemporary visual art. Local idioms in this research are understood as visual, symbolic, material, and conceptual elements derived from regional traditions, rituals, vernacular languages, mythology, cosmology, and

everyday cultural practices. The mapping aims to examine the extent to which local idioms remain relevant in contemporary artistic practices and how they are transformed within current aesthetic frameworks.

The material objects of this study consist of three major art exhibitions: ARTSUBS 2024 Ways of Dreaming, ARTSUBS 2025 Material Ways, and the undergraduate final exhibition Final Countdown. These exhibitions were selected because they represent a broad spectrum of contemporary art practices, involving established artists, emerging artists, and art students. A total of approximately 395 artworks were analyzed through exhibition catalogues, curatorial texts, visual documentation, and contextual interpretation of the artworks.

The results indicate that local idioms continue to play a significant role in Indonesian contemporary art. Approximately $\pm 19\%$ of the analyzed artworks explicitly integrate local idioms as a central source of ideas and visual identity. This percentage was obtained by identifying artworks that clearly employ vernacular language, references to rituals and mythology, the use of traditional materials, or explicit conceptual statements linking the artwork to local cultural contexts in Central Java and East Java. Although this figure is estimative, it demonstrates a consistent and meaningful pattern that can be used as a preliminary quantitative indicator.

The distribution of local idiom usage varies across the three exhibitions. In ARTSUBS 2024, artworks incorporating local idioms account for approximately 13-14%, where local elements mainly function as markers of cultural identity and narrative symbolism within contemporary visual expressions. ARTSUBS 2025 shows an increased proportion of around 23%, characterized primarily by a conceptual exploration of traditional materials such as batik, textiles, and clay. The highest proportion appears in the Final Countdown exhibition, where approximately 40% of the works engage local idioms explicitly. This finding suggests a strong inclination among younger artists to employ local cultural references as a foundation for constructing artistic identity.

These variations reflect differences in artistic maturity, institutional context, and generational perspectives. Established artists tend to position local idioms as part of a refined visual and conceptual strategy, while students and emerging artists demonstrate a more exploratory and reflexive engagement with local identity. This pattern indicates that local idioms are not only preserved but actively regenerated through the practices of younger generations.

Further analysis reveals that local idioms are rarely presented as literal reproductions of tradition. Instead, they undergo processes of transformation involving recontextualization, experimentation with media and materials, visual fragmentation, and contemporary conceptualization. Vernacular languages and traditional terms are often employed not merely as ethnic signifiers but as conceptual devices that connect artworks to specific social and cultural experiences.

Similarly, myths, rituals, and cosmological concepts such as *wayang* narratives, *walimah* rituals, and the notion of *suwung* are transformed into symbolic and metaphorical visual structures. These elements are frequently fragmented, simplified, or reinterpreted through contemporary visual approaches such as expressionism, surrealism, and

installation-based practices. Through this process, local idioms function as dynamic sources of meaning rather than static cultural references.

Traditional materials also play a crucial role in the transformation process. Materials such as batik cloth, fabric, clay, and metal are not treated solely as physical media but as integral components of conceptual narratives. These materials are often developed through cross media approaches, including immersive installations and spatial works, expanding the visual and experiential dimensions of the artworks. This expansion of scale and medium demonstrates the adaptability of local idioms within increasingly interdisciplinary contemporary art practices.

The discussion of these findings highlights that aesthetic innovation in Indonesian contemporary art does not rely solely on formal novelty. Instead, innovation emerges from the strategic transformation of local idioms within contemporary visual and conceptual contexts. Local idioms serve as a means of visual differentiation, identity articulation, and cultural critique, rather than functioning as decorative or nostalgic elements.

Overall, this study confirms that Central Java and East Java possess strong potential as key regions for the development of contemporary Indonesian aesthetics. The significant presence of local idioms indicates a continuity between tradition and contemporary artistic practice. This continuity reinforces the position of Indonesian contemporary art as a field that is deeply rooted in local cultural experiences while remaining responsive and competitive within global art discourses.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that local idioms from Central Java and East Java remain a significant and productive source of aesthetic innovation in Indonesian contemporary visual art. The findings demonstrate that local cultural elements derived from ritual practices, vernacular language, mythology, cosmology, and traditional materials do not merely persist as residual traditions but actively contribute to the formation of contemporary visual languages. Through processes of transformation and recontextualization, these idioms are repositioned as dynamic components within contemporary artistic practice. Based on the analysis of approximately 395 artworks from three major exhibitions are ARTSUBS 2024 Ways of Dreaming, ARTSUBS 2025 Material Ways, and the undergraduate final exhibition Final Countdown, this study identifies that around $\pm 19\%$ of the artworks explicitly integrate local idioms. The variation in proportions across exhibitions highlights generational and contextual differences, with the highest engagement found among younger artists and art students. This trend indicates that local idioms continue to function as an important foundation for identity exploration and artistic experimentation among emerging practitioners.

The study further reveals that local idioms are rarely presented through literal or decorative representations of tradition. Instead, they undergo transformative processes involving recontextualization of meaning, experimentation with materials and media, visual fragmentation, and contemporary conceptual articulation. Traditional materials such as batik, textiles, clay, and metal are not treated merely as physical media but as integral elements of conceptual narratives. Likewise, ritual and mythological references

are reformulated into symbolic and metaphorical visual structures that resonate with contemporary social and cultural concerns. These findings affirm that aesthetic innovation in Indonesian contemporary art is not defined solely by formal novelty or stylistic experimentation. Rather, innovation emerges from the strategic transformation of local idioms into contemporary visual and conceptual frameworks. In this sense, local idioms function as mechanisms of visual differentiation, cultural reflection, and critical engagement, enabling artists to negotiate between local experience and global artistic discourse. From a broader perspective, this research positions Central Java and East Java as important regions in the development of Indonesian contemporary aesthetics. The consistent presence of local idioms across different exhibition contexts demonstrates a continuity between tradition and contemporary practice, while also reflecting the adaptability of regional cultural resources within evolving artistic paradigms. This continuity challenges the perception that Indonesian contemporary art is dominated by a single cultural center, instead emphasizing a network of regional practices that collectively shape national artistic identity. In conclusion, this study contributes to the discourse on Indonesian contemporary art by providing a structured mapping of local idiom transformation in Central Java and East Java. The findings offer empirical insights that are relevant for curatorial practice, art education, and future research. By foregrounding regional perspectives and generational dynamics, the study underscores the importance of local idioms as a sustainable source of aesthetic innovation within both national and global contexts of contemporary visual art.

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