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On the nature of botanical gardens

Decolonial aesthesis in Indonesian contemporary art

Sadiah Boonstra

Abstract

This article examines decolonial approaches to the nature of botanical gardens in Indonesia in the artworks of nine artists featured in the exhibition *On the nature of botanical gardens: contemporary Indonesian perspective* at Framer Framed, Amsterdam in 2020. Zico Albaiquini, Arahmaiani, Ade Darmawan, Edwin, Samuel Indratma, Lifepatch, Ipeh Nur, Elia Nurvista, and Sinta Tantra presented works which confronted the coloniality of botanical gardens. This article provides a historical reading of the content matter of the artworks presented from a decolonial standpoint as conceptualized by Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, and María Lugones. The article will demonstrate that the artists have applied various strategies and methods to uncover, criticize, and decolonize botanical gardens and their role in empire-building, knowledge development, and the exploitation of nature. Some artists take this farther and develop a decolonial aesthesis or sensibility in order to re-appropriate Indigenous knowledges and ways of being which were silenced and erased by coloniality.

Keywords

Colonial history; decoloniality; botanical gardens; art; knowledge.

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Botanical gardens and the coloniality of "nature"

The botanical garden in Bogor, known as Kebun Raya Bogor, has acquired fame as a haven of leisure and pleasure abounding in idyllic, exotic, and tropical nature. However, there is more to Kebun Raya Bogor than this idealized imagination of the garden suggests. This article explores Kebun Raya Bogor and the botanical garden as a concept, as a site in which knowledge, imperial politics, economics, and the aesthetics of plants and nature converge. It examines the coloniality of the botanical garden through the lens of contemporary artists from Indonesia.

The term "coloniality" was introduced in the late 1980s by the sociologist Aníbal Quijano as a reconceptualization of decolonization. Quijano proposed an analysis that, as María Lugones puts it, "provides us with a historical understanding of the inseparability of racialization and capitalist exploitation as constitutive of the capitalist system of power" (Lugones 2010: 745). This global, capitalist, colonial, modern system of power, or "coloniality of power" which Quijano describes began in the Americas in the sixteenth century and spread to other parts of the world, including Southeast Asia, and still continues to exist. Coloniality enabled imperial/colonial powers, like the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, French, British, German, and the United States to establish hierarchical colonial differences which eventually affected all organizational dimensions of life. Coloniality created organizing categories such as knowledge (epistemology), economics, politics, aesthetics, ethics, race, sex, and spirituality (religion). These creations enabled the establishment of hierarchical differentiations which were normalized by coloniality and made seemingly universal and inevitable. These differentiations work in a manner similar to Edward Said's conceptualization of "orientalism", which enabled the "othering" of people through representations of "the East" based on imagined essential differences (Said 1977).

Embedded in coloniality is the refusal to recognize knowledge production by the colonized peoples and a denial of Indigenous, pre-colonial, or non-modern systems of knowing, being, and creating. It is important to note that, in contrast to colonialism, coloniality is very much about the present as it reveals today's structures of power and control as continuations of structures and cultures which were implemented during the colonial period. In other words, coloniality can be understood as epistemic, *enduring* legacies of imperiality which continue to impact current cultural, social, economic, and political systems, including knowledge and its production (Quijano 2007; Lugones 2011; Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh 2018).

The concept of coloniality is paired with decoloniality. Decoloniality means acknowledging coloniality and seeks to understand the persistence of coloniality in the legacies of imperialism and current world structures. It aims to comprehend how western modes of thought and knowledge systems have been universalized. At the same time, decoloniality means to detach from structures of coloniality and to (re)establish old and new ways of thinking, languages, ways of life, and being in the world which coloniality

rejects. Decoloniality and decolonial thinking seek to highlight the plurality of systems of knowledge and thought, the simultaneous existence of multiple frameworks of knowledge, and think beyond the framework of coloniality (Mignolo and Walsh 2018).

Mignolo and Walsh (2018: 17) characterize decoloniality as follows:

> Decoloniality denotes ways of thinking, knowing, being, and doing that began with, but also precede, the colonial enterprise and invasion it implies the recognition and undoing of the hierarchical structures of race, gender, heteropatriarchy, and class that continue to control life, knowledge, spirituality, and thought, structures that are clearly intertwined with and constitutive of global capitalism and Western modernity. [...] decoloniality seeks to make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis and thought.

Decoloniality is an effort to engage in thinking and being outside of the categories, hierarchies, and binaries of coloniality and making an effort to relink with what has been made invisible and silenced by coloniality. To this concept, María Lugones has added the idea of the non-modern as ways of expression which are not pre-modern but exist beyond the categories and frameworks invented by coloniality. Non-modern knowledge, relations, values join ecological, economic, spiritual practices, and ways of being which fall outside the hierarchical logic of coloniality (Lugones 2010: 743).

The concepts of coloniality, decoloniality, and the non-modern are fundamental to the approach this article takes to the Kebun Raya Bogor. These concepts provide the analytical tools to scrutinize the Kebun Raya Bogor and the phenomenon of botanical gardens. Crucial to the coloniality inherent in the concept of the botanical garden is the notion that nature exists separately from humans and humanity. This is a distinction which has not always existed and is not ubiquitous as Philippe Descola clearly demonstrates in *Beyond nature and culture* (2013). Descola shows that the distinction between *nature* and *culture* is meaningless and does not exist in Indigenous cosmologies outside the European and Anglo-American realms.

Mignolo and Walsh describe how, after 1500, the distinction between man and nature emerged under the influence of Christian theology, the European Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. Prior to this, nature did not exist as such but, when man/humans became the centre of the universe during the Renaissance, man/humans began to distance themselves from nature. By the mid-eighteenth century, nature had been turned into something which could be controlled, dominated, and exploited by man/human, and was reduced even further to being natural resources. Nature, as distinct from man/humans, eventually straddled the domains of economics and politics and was utilized to establish power and build empires. The possibility for man to set himself apart from and dominate nature ultimately also enabled the denial and rejection of non-European local times and spaces and with the ways of life and

being (Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 155-164). These rejections ultimately enabled the denial of humanity to colonized people, enabling their racialization and dehumanization as beings (Lugones 2010: 748-751).

The notion that nature can be controlled and cultivated for the benefit of man/human is pivotal to the idea of the botanical garden. Medicinal herb gardens in sixteenth-century Europe were the immediate predecessors of botanical gardens. Knowledge of specific plants and their efficacy were crucial to fighting diseases on the long overseas voyages which Europeans undertook in their quest for spices and land. The ships of the Dutch East Indies Company (Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie or VOC) were instructed to bring back the branches and leaves of interesting plants in addition to the highly sought-after spices like pepper, nutmeg, mace, cloves, and cinnamon which made the European diet more palatable.

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, botanic knowledge had become an important aspect in controlling nature and the development of agriculture. Botanical knowledge also contributed to the establishment of the massive plantations which played an important role in colonial economies. These particular forms of scientific knowledge were institutionalized in botanical gardens which in turn became indispensable to the consolidation of empire. At that time, botany was an academic discipline only because knowledge of the properties of plants was important to European states for medicinal and economic purposes (Andrew Goss 2011; Zaheer Baber 2016; Andreas Weber 2018). Or as Baber puts it: "Botanical gardens can be regarded as a key site in which colonial power literally rooted" (Baber 2016: 676). The transplantation of not just plants but also of expertise, experience, and botanical knowledge took place through the extended networks which connected the colonies to Europe and vice-versa. These networks consisted of a wide range of actors including botanic amateurs and scientists, who worked individually or within an institutional context, connected to the global and the local (Weber 2018).

The historians Andreas Weber and Robert-Jan Wille (2018) have demonstrated that the botanical garden in Bogor functioned as a site of the colonial politics for Dutch imperialism. In 1744, the VOC established a garden and built a mansion on the site of the present Kebun Raya in what the Dutch called Buitenzorg. Between 1811-1816, the British turned the garden into a place of leisure. Two years later, in 1817, the Kebun Raya Bogor was officially founded as 's *Lands Plantentuin* by German-born botanist Caspar Georg Carl Reinwardt (1773-1854), who was then the head of agriculture, arts and science of the Netherlands colony. From the moment the garden was established, the economic potential of plants and seeds was the motor behind the collection and cultivation of botanical specimens from all over the world and the Archipelago (Weber 2018: 179-180).

The coloniality of botanical gardens, especially of the Kebun Raya Bogor, was the starting point of the exhibition *On the nature of botanical gardens: contemporary Indonesian perspective* curated by the author. It was held from 26 January to 16 August 2020, including a four-month closure on account of

a COVID-19 lockdown, in the cultural space Framer Framed in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The title of the exhibition carries a double meaning referring to the idea, concept or "nature" of botanical gardens, while simultaneously questioning to what extent botanical gardens can truly be regarded as "natural". Stemming from a desire to take a decolonial stance, my aspiration was that the exhibition would be a platform for various artistic voices from Indonesia to reflect on the complexities of the coloniality of botanical gardens. Nine artists from Indonesia, Zico Albaiquni, Arahmaiani, Ade Darmawan, Edwin, Samuel Indratma, Lifepatch, Ipeh Nur, Elia Nurvista, and Sinta Tantra offered fresh, creative perspectives on how power, knowledge, plants, nature, and aesthetics converge but also how these can be challenged, contested, and rejected through art.

This article makes an in-depth analysis of how the above-mentioned artists have addressed the coloniality of the Kebun Raya Bogor and botanical gardens as a concept and as nature. How do artists uncover, contest, and subvert coloniality? How do they visualize their concerns, comments, criticism, and questions? The artistic practices I encountered during the research period for the conceptualization and curation of the exhibition can be understood as decolonial or non-modern. This does not necessarily mean that the artists themselves consciously apply a decolonial approach or that they are even aware of the concept but their approaches can be understood as decolonial praxis which will be the thread of my article. Coloniality, decoloniality, and non-modern are simultaneously concepts and praxis which have enabled the analysis of the artistic practices I signalled in the field. Therefore, this article provides a historical reading of the content matter of the artwork presented through a decolonial lens. I aim to demonstrate that the artists selected have applied various strategies and methods, each taking a unique perspective and approach, to address the coloniality of botanical gardens. Not only do the artists look at the historical colonial roots of botanical gardens, they also ultimately investigate the legacies of the complex entanglement between coloniality, nature, violence, and economics in the present.

To examine the coloniality of botanical gardens as tools of empire-building in Indonesia, knowledge-building, and the economics of nature, I have identified three loose themes to structure the analysis. The first artists I discuss, Ade Darmawan, Ipeh Nur, and Sinta Tantra, address the economic exploitation of nature facilitated by botanical gardens. In the second section, I analyse the works of Edwin, Elia Nurvista, and Zico Albaiquni, whose creations lend insight into the coloniality of botanical gardens and simultaneously work towards decolonizing the Kebun Raya Bogor. My reading of Lifepatch, Samuel Indratma, and Arahmaiani in the final section shows that their decolonial or non-modern approach to nature rejects the distinction between man/human and nature and, instead, propagates non-modern ways of life and being.

Utilization and exploitation of plants and "nature"

Although, as mentioned, sixteenth-century medicinal herb gardens in Europe were the predecessors of botanical gardens, plants were considered

a commercial resource from the beginning of the European quest for natural resources, profits, and power. Not only did herbs and spices add flavour to European food, but European medical healing was still largely based on the herbs, spices, and the medical insights of traditional healers from the Indonesian Archipelago and India in the seventeenth century.[1] The natural botanical wealth available in the colony of the Netherlands East Indies was regarded as an ideal economic resource. Therefore, botanical inquiry was considered an important tool in the improvement of their exploitation and the development of the colony into a profitable extension of the Netherlands. The first director of the Kebun Raya Bogor, Reinwardt, cultivated both plants with economic potential for agriculture and industries and medicinal plants (Weber 2018: 178-184). This economic utilization of the natural resources in the Indonesian Archipelago facilitated the emergence of the Netherlands as a prominent European power in the seventeenth century and was of continued importance to the accumulation of wealth in the Netherlands until the 1950s (Susie Protschky 2011: 10).

The economics and exploitation of plants and "nature" are central themes in three works in the exhibition. The decolonial perspective which acknowledges nature as situated in the domains of economics and politics in the matrix of coloniality of power (Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 163-164) can be discerned in the work of Jakarta-based artist and curator Ade Darmawan *Arus balik* (2019) (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Ade Darmawan, *Arus Balik* (2019). (Courtesy of Eva Broekema/Framer Framed).

This work was inspired by the book of the same title *Arus balik* (1995) written by Indonesia's foremost novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Darmawan's installation mimics a laboratory setting consisting of large white tables with retorts placed

[1] From https://www.insideindonesia.org/the-triumph-of-jamu?highlight=WyJqYW11Iiwia mFtdSciXQ%3D%3D; accessed on 1 July 2021.

on them. As fits their purpose, the retorts are used for steam distillation. Each individual retort holds a different spice or leaves in a bulb set up on a base-bulb filled with water set up on top of a heating element. The steam created by the heated water rises through the bulb which holds the plant material and extracts the essential spice or leaf oils. Subsequently, the steam carries the essential oil into a tube where it is condensed and finally accumulated in a collecting vessel.

In his creation of the installation, Darmawan was specifically interested in the way the different characters in Ananta Toer's book make use of natural resources. Since Tuban in East Java plays a central role in the book, Darmawan undertook a research trip to that city and to the nearby town of Bojonegoro, a major producer of teakwood and tobacco. True to the geographic specificity of the book, all the natural resources in the installation were sourced from Tuban. Sandalwood, cinnamon, pepper, candlenut, clove-leaf, betel leaf, nipah palm, coconut fronds, and nutmeg, fundamental for its preservative qualities during a long sea voyage, were distilled. During exhibition opening hours, the steam distillation process filled the exhibition space with the aromas of the various spices and leaves, while the extracted oils dripped onto the pages of opened books which were published by Soeharto's New Order regime (1965-1998). To unite and contextualize the artwork, other elements in the installation included photographs of the environment, landscape and cityscape of Tuban, plus edible earth, sea-water plus rocks and fossils from Tuban.

Various interpretations can be read into Darmawan's *Arus balik*. Firstly, it can be understood as a metaphor for the various layers in history. The focus on natural resources can be viewed as a reminder that the struggle for control of the Indonesian Archipelago and its sea routes was first and foremost about the extraction of natural resources facilitated by a vast network of global trade relations. In connection with the book *Arus balik*, the placement of natural resources, as resources from the land, at the heart of the installation also highlights the transition from a maritime orientation towards land-oriented state ideologies with a specific reference or, perhaps more aptly, to Soeharto's rule. The distilled oil of the spices and leaves dripped onto the opened books produced by the Soeharto regime, defacing the nationalist ideas and policies which fill their pages. The resources of the country in the retorts destroy the regime's policy as committed to the pages of its books.

At the same time, *Arus balik* can be regarded as addressing the question of coloniality and decolonization. From a decolonial perspective, decolonization refers to the goal of Indigenous elites to take control of the state. This has been only half-successful in many cases around the world in which Indigenous elites have been able to take control of the state but have then to all intents and purposes left coloniality intact. Often, Indigenous elites have continued to follow the trail blazed by the colonizer, but did and now do so in the name of nationalism.[2] Economic development was also at the forefront of Soeharto's rule,

[2] E-International Relations 2017b. Interview - Walter Mignolo/Part 2: Key Concepts, https://www.e-ir.info/2017/01/21/interview-walter-mignolopart-2-key-concepts/; accessed on 19-8-2021.

only to result in the continuation of the exploitation of natural resources. From this perspective, Darmawan's *Arus balik* also seems to be raising the question of to what extent coloniality has truly ended in Indonesia.

Nutmeg, one of the spices used in Darmawan's installation, had also been subject to distillation experiments in the botanical gardens in the early 1820s (Weber and Wille 2018: 173). By the sixteenth century, nutmeg, the seed of the nutmeg tree (*Myristica fragrans*), was already known in Europe for its warm, intense flavour as well as for its powerful medicinal properties. Consequently, the quest for nutmeg was a driving force behind the voyages of the VOC to the Indonesian Archipelago, the only place in the world where nutmeg grew naturally. Because of their unique combination of climate and soil, the Banda Islands in the Moluccas are the single original habitat of the nutmeg. The European demand for the nutmeg in the seventeenth century made the seed as valuable as gold which led to a scramble for a trade monopoly on the rare seed. The refusal of the Bandanese to trade exclusively with the VOC led to violent clashes between the two. In 1621, the then Governor-General of the VOC, Jan Pieterszoon Coen (1587-1629), organized a punitive expedition against the Bandanese. Coen's military actions led to the killing of between fifty to one hundred people, while 2,500 people who had fled to the mountains died of hunger or disease. Another 1,200 Bandanese were enslaved and the number of people who committed suicide by jumping off the cliffs is unknown. Only between 300 to 500 people managed to escape by sea, which means that of the original 4,500-5,000 inhabitants of Banda Besar a mere 1,000 survived in Banda (Jur van Goor 2015: 462). *Perken* (2019), by Yogyakarta-based artist Ipeh Nur, confronts the atrocities committed by Coen to secure a monopoly on the nutmeg trade for the VOC (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Ipeh Nur, *Perken* (2019). (Courtesy of Eva Broekema/Framer Framed).

Perk is a Dutch word for a flower- or plant-bed transferred by the VOC to the area land allotted to the planting of trees on nutmeg plantations. The rows of neatly planted trees clearly visualize this. What immediately strikes

the viewer are the roots of the trees which do not grow from the soil but are rooted in decapitated heads and skulls. A large, curved knife is discernible amidst the trees as is also a human figure who seems to be praying or kneeling on the ground, perhaps in utter desperation. Whole nutmegs and a comb of bananas lie scattered on the ground. The scene is a chilling visualization of the violence and death Coen brought in his wake, in which the nutmeg trees were literally rooted. Ipeh's raw style in combination with the large size and materiality of the work amplifies the rawness of the violence depicted even more urgently. The artist has painted on *bagor* or rice-bags which are, like nutmeg was, used for trade.

After Coen established the VOC monopoly on the nutmeg trade, he replaced the murdered, fled, or enslaved Bandanese with thousands of enslaved people from other parts of the Archipelago, like Papua and Aru, also even as far away as India. This turned Banda into the first plantation and society of enslaved people in a Dutch colony which totalled 2,200 people by 1638 and would reach a number of 4,100 in 1794/1795, more than four times the number of Bandanese who had survived Coen's mass violence (Matthias van Rossum 2015: 22-3). Banda's modern culturally diverse society is the direct result of this historical violence and demonstrates how present-day identity can be connected to coloniality, violence, oppression, and the economic potential of plants. A younger generation of Indonesians to whom Nur belongs is highly aware of the importance of nutmeg to the colonization of the Indonesian Archipelago and its lingering social, cultural, and political legacies in today's society.

The notion of identity resonates more loosely in *Kebun Raya/Kebun Saya* (2020) by London-based Balinese artist Sinta Tantra, who connects identity to the commodification of plants and images of an idealized landscape (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Sinta Tantra, *Kebun Raya/Kebun Saya* (2020). (Courtesy of Eva Broekema/ Framer Framed).

Tantra's work, commissioned for the exhibition, is a large colourful mural with a bright pink background. Her work draws its inspiration from the botanical gardens in Bogor and in Bali. Geometric wall drawings are presented alongside historical materials and artefacts in a museum- or salon-like display. In this work, Tantra explores the gardens in Bogor and Bali as places of botany, leisure, and natural beauty, but also as a site in which past colonizers and today's tourists play a vital role in perpetuating their exotic connotation. She understands the botanical garden as a place which tames "the wild", "savage", and "raw" through the creation of a picturesque, "landscaped" Indonesia and asks when and to what extent Indonesia will be truly able to overcome its colonial past.

Two large shapes dominate the layout of the mural: on the left side is depicted a group of large irregular blue shapes which morph into abstract linear lines reminiscent of the Art-Nouveau lines of the 1920s. The irregular blue shapes are the outlines of the blueprint of the design of the botanical gardens in Bogor, while the abstract art-nouveau-like lines refer to the abstract layout of English gardens. Tantra is referring to her own identity as existing and living between Indonesia and England. At the same time, the juxtaposition of highly stylized and abstract forms comments on how landscaping eventually began to control "wild" and "savage" nature and people through botanical gardens. Tantra comments on how nature is turned into art as an idealized landscape and how this fantastic imagination of "nature" and its association is internalized and sustained in projections and expectations of the tropics (Protschky 2011).

Tantra calls the display of artefacts as part of her mural an "assemblage" whose purpose is to generate a dialogue between the past, as represented by the historical objects, and the present by the artwork as a whole. Different stories emerge from the artefacts included in the work. These reference natural resources which were cultivated in botanical gardens and illustrate how and to what extent the work of botanical gardens penetrated everyday life. The installation includes a tea caddy, a box of Javanese tea, and accompanying tea-cups drawing attention to tea cultivation and plantations in Indonesia. The mural also presents a small botanical map of Java indicating where tropical plants grow. Colonial photographs of the idealized landscape of waterlilies in the Kebun Raya Bogor present the botanical garden as a manicured leisure garden. A drawing of an orchid and a portrait of Thomas Stamford Raffles' wife, Sophia, are references to the English garden and to the British history of the Kebun Raya Bogor. The assemblage of forms, colour, and everyday objects invites the spectator to look and think about the historical construction of the botanical garden and its ongoing legacies today.

Darmawan's *Arus Balik* and Nur's *Perken* both comment on the economic exploitation of plants and nature which, in the case of *Perken*, is paired with violent conquest. Tantra's *Kebun Raya/Kebun Saya* highlights the everyday fruits of the economic exploitation of "nature" and the erasure of violence, even idealized imaginations of the Indonesian landscape, for economic interests.

The next section examines three works which not only uncover the coloniality of botanical gardens but also decolonize them.

UNCOVERING THE COLONIALITY OF THE BOTANICAL GARDENS

While the coloniality of botanical gardens was clearly intertwined with economic interests and imperial politics, the aesthetics of "nature" is another aspect of its coloniality. As Tantra's work has alluded to, the aesthetics of colonial Indonesia are associated with the idealized and exoticized landscapes of the *Mooi Indië* painting style. Another crucial element in relation to the coloniality of "nature" and the botanical garden is the notion of "tropicality" which developed in the wake of the colonization by European imperialism of regions around the Equator. As a concept of coloniality, the tropics contributed to the creation of colonial racialized differences between peoples and natures, labelling Indigenous people and "nature", "wild", and "savage" as opposed to "modest", "civilized", and "cultivated" (Anne McClintock 1995; Protschky 2011). These racialized ascriptions came to be associated with sensuous, physical experiences and imaginations of the tropics which contributed to the way the tropics grabbed the public imagination and were interpreted and imagined. In *Imperial leather* (1995), Anne McClintock studies the relationship between race, gender, and tropical nature in British colonial culture. She introduces the term "pornotropics" as one colonial notion of the tropics as a place "onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears" (McClintock 1995: 22).

"Pornotropics" and associated notions of sexual fantasy, desire, and racial difference are, as we shall see quite literally, the theme of Jakarta-based, award-winning, filmmaker Edwin's *Hortus* (2014) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Edwin, still from *Hortus* (2014). (Courtesy of Eva Broekema/Framer Framed).

Hortus explores the "pornotropics" of botanical gardens, on the one hand as a sexual fantasy of exoticized tropical beauty, and, on the other hand, as a site which created a distinction between man and nature and also thrust racial hierarchies to the forefront. Edwin's two-channel video work is an adaptation of his final examination project for the Netherlands Film Academy in Amsterdam. It has the look and feel of a black-and-white silent movie from the 1920s, with inserted text slides to provide a narrative context for the projected images. Archival material which Edwin sourced from the Eye Film Institute in Amsterdam and from the KITLV in Leiden is juxtaposed with newly shot material, which the artist filmed in the Hortus Botanicus in Amsterdam.

The film commences on the left channel with a text which narrates: "Jan is a botanist who studies tropical plants. He is happy in this beautiful, warm garden. He is concentrating on a flower. She comes closer to the flower, waiting to attract Jan's attention". We see Jan in a botanical garden taking notes on plants accompanied by a woman dressed in sarong and kebaya. She picks a flower and puts it behind her ear. "You mustn't do that! The flower was beautiful in the wild and now it is dead", Jan exclaims, after which, he and the woman, who is later identified as Dita, continue their, somewhat bickering, conversation. "I'm really sorry. Do you want me to show you another <u>flower</u>? [SB: underlining in the original]" asks Dita. From what follows, it becomes clear that "<u>flower</u>" is a sexual reference as the conversation leads to Jan and Dita having intercourse amid the plants and trees in the botanical garden. The film develops into an actual porn film and, as such, can be viewed as a representation of a sexual male fantasy projected onto tropical nature and Indonesian women.

Simultaneously with the projection of the pornographic footage, the collected archival material is shown on the right channel. This material consists of a montage of anthropological film material which was shot to obtain knowledge about Indigenous Indonesians, their cultures, and societies. These materials show alternating scenes of Indonesians serving *rijsttafels* to Europeans with a footage of school children at morning assembly. The subsequent footage is of tribal dances of people in *adat* costumes, followed by camera shots of young women weaving. In this scene, the camera zooms in, not on the threads, the textile or the hands to document the weaving process, but on the bare shoulders, torsos, and faces of the young women. The camera then zooms in on another recording of the face of a young woman gazing at the camera, which is followed by footage of a man high up in a palm tree cutting coconuts. Finally, we see a white man inspecting cotton which is followed by anthropological footage of a camera lens which scrutinizes the naked body of an Indigenous man from top to toe. At that same exact moment, on the left channel, Jan climaxes on top of Dita's rear.

In *Hortus*, Edwin connects "pornotropics" to the construction of knowledge of the tropics, not restricted to botany but also extended to the field of physical anthropology which conceptualized the human body as a recording instrument. In the case of "pornotropics" and (physical) anthropology, the bodies of Indigenous Indonesians were instrumentalized and objectified by the colonizers. *Hortus* could also be understood as a comment on sexuality as a trope for colonial

power relations, meaning that the sexual subjugation of (Indonesian) women stands for the structural power imbalances between colonial powers and the colonized in the manner Said sets out in *Orientalism* (Said 1977: 6). On a deeper level, Edwin is seeking to address the question of how complicit Indigenous Indonesians were in the colonization and exploitation of their lands. To what extent did Indigenous people enable knowledge production about local plants and to what extent did they play up to the idealized and exoticized imaginations of the tropics as a racial and sexual place? The work leaves these questions open to interpretation.

What is clear is that *Hortus* contests the racialized and sexualized imaginations of the tropics and Indigenous bodies. The juxtaposition of anthropological material produced in colonial Indonesia with a newly shot porno film reveals the perversity of colonial practices of exoticizing and sexualizing not only of nature but also of Indonesians. This perversity creates discomfort which compels the viewer to reflect on this colonial practice and pushes the viewer to revisit internalized ideas of nostalgia, guilt, explicit voyeurism, repetition, and exploitation embedded in coloniality and pornography. Edwin's work highlights the idea that imaginations of the tropics are ultimately about human encounters. It also brings to the fore the role the viewer plays in continuing preconceptions of racial hierarchies, exotic fantasies and other projections of the tropics. *Hortus* turns the spectator into an active viewer who cannot escape the raw reality of the pornographic material as an imagined idea of the tropics, an image of desire, and voyeurism. This realization opens up space for a new sense of seeing and forces the viewer to become aware of the idea that imaginations of the tropics are exoticized, sexualized, and racialized, and that these fantasies sit in a paradoxical relationship with the botanical gardens as a site of scientific knowledge.

Elia Nurvista's *Noble Savage Series #1-#3* (2018) and *Noble Savage Series #4-#5* (2019) also engage with the notion of exoticization (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Elia Nurvista, *Noble savage series #1-#3* (2018) and *Noble savage series #4-#5* (2019). (Courtesy of Eva Broekema/Framer Framed).

She made the *Noble Savage* series during a residency in Berlin in 2018-2019. In this series of artworks, Nurvista explores the relationship between people and fruits. She raises the question of why fruits and people from beyond Europe are regarded as "exotic", "foreign", and "wild" in Europe. *Noble Savage Series #1-#3* shows digitized images of scenes of historical paintings to which Nurvista has added contemporary references. For example, the parliament building of the European Union is set in an environment in which a colonial encounter is depicted. The parliament building is fenced off, keeping Indigenous people out. This suggests that "exotic" or "foreign" people are not welcome in Europe. In *Noble savage series #4-#5*, Nurvista has added brand labels and quality-control stickers to classical European still life paintings downloaded from the Internet. These additions to the works add a layer of criticality and transform them into works of art with a new meaning. Through these works, Nurvista asks the question: "What is the meaning of 'foreign'?" Some fruits, like pomegranates and figs, are hard to find in Indonesia and are also considered "exotic" there. The transplantation of such fruits from other countries to the Archipelago was facilitated by botanical knowledge and the vast trade networks established by imperialism. The artist explains that, during her residence in Germany, although fruits from "tropical" countries were considered "exotic" in a positive way, *people* from the same countries were regarded negatively and rejected as "foreign" or "alien".[3] Nurvista, therefore, addresses the effect of the coloniality of power. How coloniality affects someone depends on where that person is located, for instance, in South America, Africa, or Southeast Asia; each of these places has a very specific history of coloniality, affecting how a person is classified based on nationality, religion, language, sexuality, gender, and race (E-International Relations 2017b, Interview with Mignolo/Part 2).

The critical perspectives expressed by Edwin and Nurvista are carried further by the Bandung-based painter Zico Albaiquni in *Ruwatan Tanah Air Beta. Reciting rites in its sites* (2019) (see Figure 6). Albaiquni not only reveals the coloniality of the Kebun Raya Bogor, he pushes this a step farther by subverting colonial projections and uses of plants and "nature" in the botanical garden, and gives them Indonesian and Sundanese perspectives. Commissioned for the exhibition and in close consultation with the curator/author, Albaiquni has created a monumental work measuring 600 x 200 cm applying a strikingly colourful palette.[4] The painting is set inside the Kebun Raya Bogor surrounded by tall trees and heavy foliage and shows a number of clearly discernible scenes depicted using a more modest palette, in shades of purple and grey than that of their background and therefore stand out from it. The scenes depict places and objects in the Kebun Raya Bogor which were photographed during the colonial period. These colonial photographs are part of the collection of Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen in the Netherlands and have been ascribed meanings by museum staff and curators. Albaiquni

[3] Https://www.elianurvista.com/Fruchtlinge; accessed on 06-12-2021.

[4] After the closing of the exhibition, *Ruwatan Tanah Air Beta* was acquired by Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen.

reverses the Eurocentric perspectives which underlie the meanings assigned to the places and objects photographed in the museum's documentation. Subsequently, Albaiquni has transposed these meanings to Indonesian and sometimes specifically Sundanese perspectives.

The centre of the painting reveals a small pavilion, built during colonial times, in which President Soekarno is depicted seated. In front of the pavilion stands a small obelisk which was erected after Independence and inscribed with the Pancasila. It was called Paniisan Soekarno as a reference to the first president of Indonesia. Today, the pavilion serves the local spiritual community which regularly gathers in the Kebun Raya Bogor to observe its rituals. In the lower corner on the far-left side of the painting, a group of large stones, among them two recognizably statues, and a large slab on the right side of the group are depicted. One of the stone statues in the form of a cow is based on a colonial photograph taken by the photographer Isidore van Kinsbergen (1821-1905) in the collection of the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. In the museum, the statue is documented as the Hindu *wahana* (mount) of the God Siva, Nandi.[5] Albaiquni explains that in Wiwitan Sunda, Sundanese belief, the statue represents the Sundanese folklore prince, Mundinglaya. As said, the group of stones as a whole continues to function as a site for sacred rituals.

In the centre front of the painting stand a number of rice baskets filled with rice in a range of different colours. The flat rice baskets are a reference to the exhibition *basic values* by Dutch artist and pioneer of ecological art herman de vries. *basic values* held in the Erasmus Huis as part of the Jakarta Biennale 2015 and subsequently on display at Framer Framed in 2016. In *basic values*, de vries, trained as a biologist and natural scientist, displayed materials which for the artist represents basic needs of Indonesians. A variety of bamboo was on show as one of the most basic materials used, for example, to build houses. Several types of rice in baskets were also displayed, intended to illustrate the biological wealth of Indonesia. Interestingly, like many "armchair scholars" during colonial times, herman de vries has never set foot in Indonesia and bases his knowledge of Indonesia largely on books.[6] By taking this approach, herman de vries, continues a colonial practice, albeit perhaps unintentionally.

Albaiquni had visited *basic values* in Jakarta and comments on de vries' romanticized imagination of how Indigenous Indonesians live in harmony with nature with the incorporation of the image of rice baskets. Albaiquni points out that, for Sundanese, rice is imbued with a sacred meaning and yellow rice, for instance, is commonly used in *ruwatan* (cleansing rituals), which resonates with the painting's title.

[5] Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, collection number RV-1403-3790-1.

[6] Interview with herman de vries on the exhibition *basic values*, https://vimeo.com/158149448; accessed on 7-8-2021.

Figure 6. Zico Albaiquni, *Ruwatan Tanah Air Beta. Reciting rites in its sites* (2019), oil and synthetic polymer on canvas, 200 x 600 cm, Collection of the Tropenmuseum. (Courtesy of the artist and Yavuz Gallery).

On the far right, we see a depiction of the Dutch cemetery in the Kebun Raya Bogor, which was first painted by Indonesia's foremost painter Raden Saleh in his work *Het kerkhof in het park te Bogor met graven* (1871).[7] Raden Saleh (1811-1880) depicted six tombstones in the small cemetery which, at the time that he painted it, was already encroached on by bamboo. Today, the cemetery is enclosed by decorative bamboo fences and functions as a park including a children's playground. In Sundanese belief, bamboo is used as spiritual protection for both the living and the dead. The bamboo in the Dutch graveyard is believed to appease the Dutch spirits buried there.

In *Ruwatan Tanah Air Beta*, Albaiquni depicts identifiable scenes from the Kebun Raya Bogor which illustrate various historical layers present in the garden. All these places in the botanical garden were assigned meanings during colonial times but they also never ceased to carry meaning in Sundanese cosmology. Other places, such as the pavilion, have been imbued with an Indonesian nationalist significance but are also meaningful to the spiritual community which gathers in Kebun Raya Bogor. Albaiquni's commitment to Sundanese belief is given extra emphasis by another conceptual layer in the work. Prior to its creation, the artist connected with the spiritual community which regularly gathers in the botanical garden. He attended a *ruwatan*, a ritual believed to cleanse the world of bad omens and reconnect with nature, ancestor spirits, and God. The *ruwatan* which Albaiquni attended was held at the pavilion depicted in the centre of the painting. His intention was to show the local spiritual community his good intentions and to begin conversations about remembering, connecting, and re-imagining the different beliefs, practices, cultures, and histories of Sunda on the site of the botanical garden. This spiritual and conceptual layer adds considerable meaning to the different layers of meaning of the painting.

In *Ruwatan Tanah Air Beta*, Albaiquni has painted the various historical layers and narratives of the Kebun Raya Bogor, manifesting collective memories encompassing three different cultures and histories: the colonial, the Sundanese, and the Indonesian. The work not only criticizes colonially constructed meanings but explicitly reappropriates the Indigenous knowledges and spiritual practices also embedded in the Kebun Raya Bogor which were erased and silenced by coloniality. Understanding *Ruwatan Tanah Air Beta* as an actual *ruwatan,* as a symbolic ritual which connects present-day reality with Sundanese spirituality, knowledge, and memory, Albaiquni actively "relinks" and re-establishes Indigenous knowledges and practices not just related to nature but also Sundanese cosmology as a whole. In doing so, Albaiquni takes an explicit decolonial stance focused not merely on unveiling coloniality but on decentring ways of being and the re-appropriation of Indigenous knowledge and spirituality.

Albaiquni attempts to reveal and confront the coloniality of the Kebun Raya Bogor, whereas Edwin and Nurvista deal with the concept of "nature" and botanical gardens at large. The works of these three artists make visible

[7] Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen inventory number TM-0-432.

the persistent legacies of coloniality and show that colonial dynamics continue to exist today. Albaiquni takes this one step farther by moving away from colonial imaginations and interpretations of the Kebun Raya Bogor and foregrounding of Sundanese beliefs and perspectives.

This praxis is what Mignolo calls decolonial aesthesis, referring to a sensibility (sensing, aesthesis) which has been suppressed by the persistence of imperial imageries. Aesthesis (sensing) is embedded in everything we do and was incorporated into the colonial matrix of power from the sixteenth century onwards as aesthetics. Decolonial aesthesis takes as its starting point the premise that coloniality not only took control of the economy, politics, and knowledge, but also of the senses and perception. In other words, what is now considered global and universal aesthetics is, in principle, a hierarchy of sensing which regulates what is considered beautiful, aesthetic or contemporary in the colonial matrix of power. Decolonial aesthesis is a movement naming and articulating practices which challenge and subvert the dominance of colonial aesthetics. It sustains forms of being, experiencing, and relating to the world which are dormant and have been rendered invisible or were silenced by coloniality (Mignolo 2013). This is exactly what Albaiquni's work demonstrates and simultaneously challenges.

Decolonial aesthesis or the non-modern: Arahmaiani, Samuel, and Lifepatch

This final section will focus in greater depth on decolonial aesthesis as a confrontation with aesthetics and pinpoint artistic practices whose purpose is to decolonize the senses. The message is that decolonial aesthesis aims to liberate the senses from the normative authority of modern, post-modern, and contemporary aesthetics. Decoloniality proposes aesthesis as an option because it does not seek to create or regulate a canon, but allows the recognition of a plurality of ways of relating to and being in a world whose existence coloniality has rejected and denied (Mignolo 2013; E-International Relations 2017a, Interview with Mignolo/Part 1; Mignolo and Walsh 2018). The three artists discussed in this final section each exhibit decolonial aesthesis in their work; in some cases consciously and purposefully, in other cases more intuitively.

Lifepatch, an artist collective based in Yogyakarta, uses its artistic practice to uncover and criticize coloniality. The collective was invited by the curator/author to create new work for *On the nature of botanical gardens* which resulted in the development of the two-channel video work *Spectacular healing* (2020) (see Figure 7).

This work critiques commercial medicinal practices and proposes to reintroduce the Indigenous healing method of using *jamu*. This two-channel video work is part of Lifepatch's ongoing research related to the epistemic violence exerted against the Batak peoples in North Sumatra. For a number of years, Lifepatch has been collaborating with philologist Manguji Nababan to make transcriptions and translations of Batak *pustaha*, books containing knowledge of medicinal herbs and Batak healing practices. During the colonial

period, hundreds of *pustaha* were removed from Sumatra and ended up in European archives, collections and libraries leading to the Batak losing the knowledge which had been written down in them. *Pustaha* contain information on the Batak practice of gleaning herbs and using them as common, everyday medicines prior to the introduction of the constituents used in commercial healing practices. The Batak approach to medicinal plants is distinctly different from the European and North-American way of collecting and categorizing plants directed towards monopolizing knowledge and obtaining commercial patents on medication.

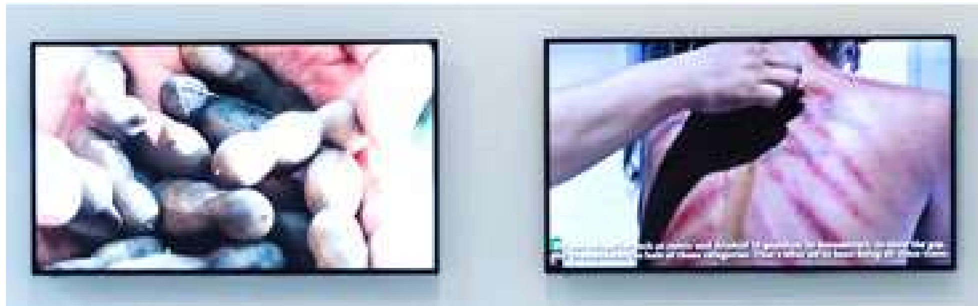

Figure 7. Lifepatch, *Spectacular healing* (2020). (Courtesy of Eva Broekema/Framer Framed).

On the one hand, *Spectacular healing* reacts against epistemic violence and injustice: the erasure of or discrimination against Indigenous forms of knowing or knowledge. This includes, for example, discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, culture, social background, and other similar factors. It is important to understand that this discriminatory practice results in the exclusion of certain people from the process of knowledge production. Epistemic injustice discounts knowledge systems which have been developed outside the matrix of coloniality of power. On the other hand, Lifepatch seeks epistemic justice which means acknowledging Indigenous healing systems as complementary to the biomedical system by relinking to Indigenous healing practices.

In the left video channel, Lifepatch shows the process of making the *jamu*, called *kunir asam*, for a menstruating woman. It documents the process of collecting the ingredients, such as spring onions, turmeric, tamarind, ginger, palm sugar, and water. The video is a parody of cooking videos and, in a similar manner, identifies the ingredients while a voiceover gives instructions for the preparation of *kunir asam*. The ingredients are crushed in a mortar, cooked and finally consumed by the maker and the woman who had requested the *jamu*. The second video can be regarded as a decolonial comment on epistemic violence as discussed during a focus group discussion organized by Lifepatch as part of their creative process. Lifepatch understands epistemic violence to be the disregard of and contempt for Indigenous knowledges and practices, which they attempt to undo by "relinking" to Indigenous plant knowledge

and healing practices. While the video shows footage of Indigenous healing practices such as cupping, reflexology, acupuncture, and *kerokan*, a therapy in which the edge of a coin is sharply pulled down the affected area, a voiceover gives insight into Lifepatch's decolonial thought process.

Lifepatch seeks to highlight the role of women shamans in producing and safeguarding Indigenous knowledge and practices related to plants. These female shamans embodied Indigenous knowledge in practice, memory, and rituals. European botanists needed to collaborate closely with them in order to poach on their plant knowledge. In the process of knowledge transfer, for commodification purposes, plant knowledge became separated from the embodied and ritual practices. Moreover, women shamans were largely erased from history and their knowledge obliterated or discredited by the biomedical healing system. Lifepatch calls the commodification and categorization of plants "plant capitalism". Similar to Edwin's and Nurvista's gestures against "exoticization", the artist collective counters the exoticization of knowledge by highlighting that Indigenous plant knowledge and healing practices are part and parcel of everyday life and ways of being. Finally, Lifepatch references Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's tactic of "strategic essentialism", a strategy which nationalities, ethnic groups, or minority groups can use to present themselves, as a source of inspiration (Spivak 1988: 13). Lifepatch applies this strategy to colonial categories like "exotic" and "oriental", thereby subverting such group identities to decolonize the very same concepts.

Yogyakarta-based artist Samuel Indratma does not comment on or criticize practices of coloniality, but offers a decolonial or, perhaps more aptly, a non-modern approach in the cosmology he creates in his works. The installation presented in *On the nature of botanical gardens* is a combination of three works which were developed over the course of three years. The installation began with the painting *Putri Penunggu Pohon* in 2018. Indratma created *Dewa and Dewi Penunggu Pohon* in 2019-2020 especially for *On the nature of botanical gardens* (see Figure 8).

Indratma's instalation consists of life-sized wayang, or shadow-play puppets, and an animation entitled *Sintren – Save the planet* (2019). The artist developed the latter two works in relation to the first and in relation to each other. The three works are also separate autonomous artworks. In the centre of the installation, *Putri Penunggu Pohon* shows a natural world of tall plants with one plant in particular standing out because of a human head which sprouts from the apex of the plant, as if the head were part of the plant. This is both a plant *and* a human, the Princess Tree Guardian. The other two works also show Indratma's holistic cosmology in which no distinction is made between human, nature, and animals. The artist has created creatures which are simultaneously animals, plants, and trees, all imbued with human traits and characteristics. They are all depicted as having a soul and a purpose, living in a cosmology in which no distinction is made between man and nature. The three-dimensional forest of shadow puppets represents a cosmology of trees and tree guardians whose forms are animal, vegetable, and human. The installation is informed

by the Javanese belief that forests and trees are each other's guardians; they look after themselves and those around them. According to the artist, all living creatures will flourish when knowledge of care and conservation of trees and forests have become commonplace.

Figure 8. Samuel Indratma, *Putri Penunggu Pohon* (2018), *Dewa and Dewi Penunggu Pohon* (2020), *Sintren – Save the planet* (2019). (Courtesy of Eva Broekema/Framer Framed).

This idea is developed in more depth by the animation with which Indratma breathes life into his work. The animation, featuring many creatures which are discernible in the installation, is a narrative about the climate crisis in the shape of flying creatures which eat animals and set the world on fire. The people realize they need to find a way to deal with the creatures which are bringing destruction. They find other creatures which can fight the havoc-wreakers and finally save the planet. In this animation, Indratma also represents the natural environment as alive, endowed with human features, behaviour, and feelings, which enable communication and interaction between all living beings. Indratma's approach to the environment seems to be rooted in a belief in coexistence or *complementary dualities* (and/and) – humans are plants and plants are human - rather than on *dichotomies* or *contradictory dualities* (either/or) – human *or* plant (Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 154).

Arahmaiani's *Memory of nature* (2014-ongoing) can be seen as propagating a similar message (see Figure 9). Arahmaiani is one of Indonesia's foremost women artists. She uses easily accessible, ready-made materials to create her installations with the goal of making her work "less intellectual" and easily understandable for all.[8] She also applies this approach to *Memory of nature*, which takes the shape of a wooden mandala with four "gates" filled with soil in which mung bean seeds have been sown to form a flower at its centre. As they grow, the seeds slowly begin to reveal the mandala flower and, as

[8] Wulan Dirgantoro (2015: 185).

they develop into mung beans, they can be harvested, which happened a few times over the course of the exhibition. Arahmaiani first created the work after she had actively begun working and studying on environmental issues with Buddhist monks on the Tibetan Plateau in 2010. These monks customarily make mandala sand paintings during rituals.

Figure 9. Arahmaiani, *Memory of nature* (2014-ongoing). (Courtesy of Eva Broekema/ Framer Framed).

The use of natural materials, such as wood, soil, and vegetation, in the artwork is a reference to nature and environmental issues. However, *Memory of nature* is also inspired by the spiritual and ritual significance of the mandala. It is a reflection and reinterpretation of the meaning of the mandala in today's context. The mandala shape of the artwork refers to the basic pattern of the Borobudur sanctuary in Yogyakarta, the largest Buddhist sanctuary in the world. In this sense *Memory of nature* is a reminder of the Buddhist knowledge which once had a strong presence in the western part of the Indonesian Archipelago. At the same time, the mandala, as a representation of the universe, is a reminder of our place in the universe. The mandala, as a sacred space for meditation, invites the viewer to evoke memories of the place humans once occupied as a part of nature instead of separate from it. According to Arahmaiani, there should be metaphysical values and ethics which support living in harmony with nature and respect for the environment. Without this, nature will be regarded simply as an object for people to exploit. For that purpose, the audience was invited to participate in the work and create mandalas with seeds, arranged on top of the four wooden tables which surrounded the main mandala, to contemplate our relation and place in the universe, including to our natural environment.

While Lifepatch pleads for a relinking, recovering, and epistemic justice for Indigenous healing knowledge and practice, Indratma's and Arahmaiani's creations are reminders of Indigenous cosmologies and the possibility of there being no distinction between man/human and nature. Arahmaiani's work in

particular invites the viewer to think in and learn from – not about – Indigenous concepts and engage in an Indigenous praxis of living and way of being.

CONCLUSION AND AFTERTHOUGHTS

The historical reading of the nine artworks on show in the exhibition *On the nature of botanical gardens: contemporary Indonesian perspective* at Framer Framed, Amsterdam, in 2020, enables us to understand the different sets of colonial differences to which each of the artists reacted. The artworks provide an understanding of how the coloniality of botanical gardens worked to denigrate, reject, silence and erase ways of understanding and relating to "nature" and knowledge of "nature" which differed from the Eurocentric ways of understanding.

The artists' question, criticize, challenge, and contest constructed hierarchical and racialized differences by uncovering and contesting the coloniality of the botanical garden. Each of the artists has visualized embodied experiences and knowledges which were discriminated against, rendered invisible and silenced, and displaced by coloniality. These decolonial approaches have resulted in the creation of spaces which are able to reform the universal claims of coloniality. The artworks can be understood as creative projects of decolonial aesthesis, providing decolonial narratives and legitimizing decolonial ways of doing and being.

The artists in the exhibition have merged conceptual thinking with artistic praxis which has contributed to shaping the decolonial and non-modern option as a non-normative space which welcomes the plurality of knowledges and ways of being. The "decolonial aesthesis" which the artists have embraced opens up a multitude of possibilities of sensing, doing and being, while delinking from the hegemony of coloniality. Instead, the artists have applied approaches and world views which are non-modern ways of being and living which exist *in parallel* to the existing coloniality of power. These options importantly demonstrate that there are many ways of existing and being in the world which have been, are, and will continue to be the lived realities of many.

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