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Critical Dialectics between the Natural and the Artificial in Mangu Putra's Paintings 1994-2000

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ABSTRACT
This study examines the critical dialectics between the natural and the artificial in Mangu Putra's nature-themed paintings produced between 1994 and 2000. The research investigates how natural phenomena are visually represented, transformed, and reconfigured through artistic modes of representation. The analysis combines Karl Popper's conceptual distinction between the natural and the artificial with the visual semiotic framework of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. Eight paintings are analyzed to identify recurring modes through which the natural-artificial relationship is constructed. The findings reveal eight modes and three interconnected levels of the natural-artificial dialectic. The study argues that Mangu Putra's criticality does not merely reside in depicting human intrusion into nature but also in revealing how nature itself becomes visually constructed, mediated, transformed, and objectified.

KEYWORDS
Mangu Putra, Painting, Criticality, Artificiality, Visual Semiotics

Introduction

Mangu Putra's paintings produced between 1994 and 2000 exemplify an intense engagement with nature as a central orienting force in his creative endeavors. This period witnessed a prolific exploration of natural phenomena and the inherent vitality within them, forming the core of Mangu Putra's artistic inquiry. Mangu Putra's unique perspective on nature is evident in his distinctive artistic interpretation. The representation of natural elements in his works deviates from straightforward empirical observation. Natural objects often appear artificial, as if mediated through advanced imaging technologies. This results in a paradoxical presentation of nature within his paintings, where nature appears unnatural, as though it has been profoundly impacted by human intervention. While his paintings prominently feature natural objects, careful analysis reveals subtle yet pervasive intrusions of the artificial. These intrusions manifest in

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various forms, including the introduction of colors and shapes rarely encountered in nature, the manipulation of materials and techniques to achieve hyperrealistic effects, and the creation of compositions that exhibit an almost unnatural orderliness.

Mangu Putra is a prominent figure within the contemporary Indonesian art scene. Over the past three decades, his artistic output has been consistently featured in numerous art exhibitions both domestically and internationally. Mangu Putra's artistic trajectory gained significant momentum in 1994 when his work was selected as an award recipient in the prestigious Philip Morris Indonesia Art Awards. This recognition garnered considerable attention, leading to his works being acquired by a diverse range of collectors and art institutions worldwide. Despite this prominent position, however, his artistic practice has received comparatively limited scholarly attention.

This limited scholarly attention is also situated within a broader context of research on contemporary Balinese art. Despite the significant contributions of numerous Balinese artists to the national and international art scene since Indonesia's independence, scholarly investigations into their works remain relatively scarce. Academic research dedicated to their creative achievements often focuses on a limited number of prominent figures. While scholarly discourse exists on the works of artists such as Nyoman Gunarsa [1], Nyoman Erawan [2], and I Wayan Sujana [3], a comprehensive examination of the broader artistic landscape remains largely unexplored. Furthermore, while scholarly attention has increasingly turned toward younger generations of Balinese artists, this focus remains relatively limited. Studies have emerged examining the works of artists such as I Made Arya Palguna [4], I Ketut Teja Astawa [5], and Ni Nyoman Sani [6], yet a substantial gap in scholarly understanding persists regarding the broader contributions of contemporary Balinese artists. Within this broader research context, Mangu Putra remains particularly underexamined.

Previous studies have situated Mangu Putra within the broader development of contemporary Balinese and Indonesian painting. Adnyana et al. [7], in their discussion of bodies in Indonesian contemporary painting, classify Mangu Putra's depiction of the body within the category of marginalized bodies. Vickers [8] positions Mangu Putra within the development of contemporary Balinese art and discusses the tensions between commercialization and the classification of Balinese art as modern or traditional. Vickers [9] further identifies Putra as a contemporary artist whose practice does not conform to the anti-aesthetic and anti-formalist tendencies associated with some contemporary art practices. Himawan et al. [10] likewise recognize Mangu Putra among Balinese artists of the 1990s who emphasized realism in their artistic practice. While brief mentions and cursory examinations of Mangu Putra's work appear in select studies, a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of his artistic practice, particularly his engagement with the theme of nature, has yet to be undertaken. This dearth of scholarly attention presents a significant gap in the understanding of Putra's unique artistic vision and its contribution to the evolution of contemporary Indonesian art.

Against this background, the present study focuses on an analysis of paintings by Mangu Putra that feature nature as their primary theme. The research object encompasses works created by the artist during the period of 1994-2000, representing a significant phase in the early stages of his artistic career. It endeavors to address the identified gap by conducting a focused analysis

of Mangu Putra's nature-themed paintings. The primary objective of this study is to contribute to the existing body of scholarly discourse within the field of Indonesian art by examining the work of a highly acclaimed artist whose oeuvre has received limited scholarly attention. Furthermore, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarly literature on the works of Balinese artists, particularly within the contemporary context. Additionally, this study seeks to enrich existing knowledge on the theme of nature, a recurring and significant subject matter within the realm of Indonesian painting.

Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative methodology, emphasizing in-depth analysis of data. Data collection encompassed a range of sources, including photographs of artworks, exhibition catalogs, artist biographies, and artist statements. Data were gathered through a multifaceted approach, encompassing observation, documentation, and extensive research utilizing both digital and traditional library resources. Observational data were collected through direct visual examination of artworks, either in person or through reproductions. Qualitative data analysis was conducted through a narrative approach, integrating descriptions of the artworks with insights gleaned from contextual research. Relevant scholarly literature from various library sources was utilized to support and validate the research findings.

The research object encompasses a selection of eight paintings created by Mangu Putra between 1994 and 2000, all featuring nature as their primary theme. These artworks were selected through purposive sampling, guided by the specific research objectives. The selected paintings are *Imagination under the Sea* (1994), *The Residence of the Stone* (1998), *Blue Fish* (1998), *Water Curtain* (1998), *Peeled* (1999), *Global Warming* (1999), *Slice of a Mountain* (2000), and *Exploitation* (2000).

The study employs two complementary theoretical perspectives to examine the relationship between the natural and the artificial in a selection of Mangu Putra's paintings created between 1994 and 2000. The first is Karl Popper's philosophical distinction between the natural and the artificial, which provides the conceptual foundation for identifying the two categories. The second is the visual semiotic framework developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, which provides analytical tools for examining how these categories are constructed and related through visual representation. Taken together, these perspectives enable the study to move from a philosophical distinction between natural and artificial phenomena toward an examination of how that distinction is materially and semiotically produced within painting.

Popper's distinction provides the conceptual foundation of the study. Popper [11] defines the natural as that which is innate, original, or divine in a thing, whereas the artificial refers to that which has subsequently been changed, added, or imposed by human beings through external intervention. This distinction enables the analysis to consider not only natural and human-made objects but also the processes through which natural entities may be transformed by human agency. The distinction is particularly useful for examining paintings in which natural forms remain recognizable while simultaneously undergoing formal, material, or representational interventions.

The distinction between the natural and the artificial does not emerge in isolation from broader intellectual debates about the relationship between human beings and nature. Stoffle et al. [12] observe that the question of the human-nature relationship has constituted a persistent concern in Western thought for millennia, extending back to ancient Greek philosophy. Within this intellectual history, human beings have been understood in different ways, either as an integral part of nature or as entities positioned in distinction from the natural world. This historical ambivalence is important for the present study because it suggests that the boundary between the natural and the artificial is not simply an empirical distinction between two types of objects, but also reflects changing conceptions of humanity's relationship with the natural world.

Horigan [13] further demonstrates that the opposition between nature and culture constitutes a longstanding theme in Western intellectual discourse, tracing it to classical philosophical debates such as Plato's *Cratylus*, where the relationship between language as a cultural construction and the objects it represents is examined through competing understandings of whether the connection between words and things is natural or conventional. This debate is relevant to visual representation because it raises the question of whether representations should be understood as transparent correspondences with reality or as culturally constructed systems of meaning, suggesting that the representation of nature in painting cannot be assumed to be an unmediated reproduction of the natural world.

The distinction between nature and culture subsequently acquired broader social and political implications during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when political philosophers employed the distinction between a state of nature and a state of culture to explain the emergence of organized political societies. Such conceptualizations positioned humanity and the natural world as distinct domains and are significant for this study because the natural–artificial distinction may similarly carry assumptions concerning human agency, technological intervention, control, and the transformation of nature.

Uggla [14] argues that the modern understanding of the human–nature relationship remains deeply shaped by a historical paradigm of separation influenced by European ideologies of conquest and domination, which positioned humanity as a dominant force over nature. Within this anthropocentric framework, nature can be reduced to a resource or commodity valued primarily in terms of human use, exploitation, and economic growth. The persistence of this divide can justify particular forms of resource exploitation. In the context of this study, the natural–artificial relationship can therefore be understood not simply as a formal opposition but as a historically constituted relationship involving competing understandings of human agency and the status of nature, enabling Mangu Putra's paintings to be read in relation to the broader tension between nature as an autonomous domain and nature as something subject to human intervention, transformation, representation, and use.

Kress and van Leeuwen's visual semiotics extends this philosophical and historical framework by examining how meanings are constructed through the organization of visual elements [15]. Their approach understands images as structured visual texts in which represented participants, processes, and relationships are organized through culturally motivated semiotic resources. Visual meaning therefore does not reside exclusively in the objects depicted but emerges from

the relations established among visual elements. This approach makes it possible to examine how the natural and the artificial are not merely represented as identifiable entities but are constructed through particular visual relations, arrangements, and modes of representation.

One important distinction is between narrative and conceptual representation. Narrative representation concerns processes, actions, and events, particularly through the presence of vectors that indicate directionality or interaction. Conceptual representation, by contrast, presents participants in terms of their relatively stable characteristics, identity, classification, or structure. This distinction makes it possible to examine whether natural forms are represented as dynamic processes or as relatively static visual objects. Such an approach is relevant to the broader question of how nature becomes visually organized, classified, transformed, and potentially objectified.

The concept of vector is particularly significant when visual lines, directions, or orientations transform otherwise static forms into representations of action, movement, or force. Kress and van Leeuwen demonstrate that geometrical forms such as triangles may acquire directional meaning and can consequently signify action, conflict, or tension. Visual processes therefore provide a means of examining how relationships between natural and artificial elements are represented dynamically rather than simply identified as opposing objects.

The framework also considers visual modality, through which images construct particular degrees of reality, naturalness, credibility, or visual truth. This is important because representations of nature do not necessarily constitute transparent reproductions of an external reality. The apparent naturalness of an image may itself be produced through particular visual choices concerning detail, color, texture, spatial organization, and other representational resources. Thus, artificiality may operate not only as a depicted object or external intervention but also through the mode by which nature is visually constructed.

Composition, salience, and framing provide further analytical resources for examining how visual elements acquire relative importance and how relationships among them are organized. Kress and van Leeuwen emphasize that visual elements may be heterogeneous but can be brought into a coherent semantic structure through their visual relations. These concepts enable the analysis to investigate which elements are emphasized, how they are separated or connected, and how the overall pictorial structure establishes relationships between natural and artificial orders. Such analysis is particularly useful for identifying situations in which artificial elements do not merely appear alongside natural elements but alter the visual hierarchy through which nature is perceived.

Kress and van Leeuwen's discussion of geometrical forms provides an additional means of interpreting the cultural meanings of angular and organic forms. Squares and rectangles are associated with mechanical, technological, and human-constructed orders, whereas curved forms are associated with organic and natural orders. These associations are culturally motivated rather than universally fixed, and their meanings may vary according to context and the interests involved in their production. Geometrical forms should therefore be understood as one among several visual resources through which the natural–artificial relationship may be constructed.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives establish a framework in which the natural and the artificial are understood as relational and historically constituted categories that become meaningful through visual representation. Popper provides the basic conceptual distinction between what is natural and what has been altered or imposed through human intervention. Stoffle et al., Horigan, and Uggla situate this distinction within the longer intellectual and cultural history of the nature–culture divide and demonstrate its implications for human agency, domination, and the status of nature. Kress and van Leeuwen provide the visual semiotic means to investigate how these relations are materialized through representation, process, vector, modality, composition, salience, framing, and formal qualities. The combined framework therefore allows the study to examine the natural–artificial dialectic at several interconnected levels, including the representation of natural entities, the visual construction of naturalness, the organization of natural and artificial forms, and the representation of human intervention into the natural world.

Result

The analysis of eight nature-themed paintings by Mangu Putra produced between 1994 and 2000 reveals a complex relationship between the natural and the artificial. Across the selected works, natural phenomena are not represented through a single visual strategy. Instead, they are transformed through different degrees of naturalistic rendering, pictorial manipulation, abstraction, geometrical organization, visual spectacle, and direct representation of human intervention. These variations provide the basis for identifying distinct modes through which the natural–artificial relationship is constructed in the paintings.

The results identify eight modes of natural–artificial dialectics: (1) hyperreal naturalism, represented by *The Residence of the Stone*; (2) objectification of the living organism, represented by *Blue Fish*; (3) abstraction and deformation of natural forms, represented by *Imagination under the Sea*; (4) spectacularization of nature, represented by *Peeled*; (5) construction of the illusion of natural movement, represented by *Water Curtain*; (6) geometrical intrusion into organic space, represented by *Slice of a Mountain*; (7) geometrical intervention associated with environmental crisis, represented by *Global Warming*; and (8) transformation of natural bodies through exploitation, represented by *Exploitation*. These modes demonstrate that artificiality emerges through different processes of visual representation, transformation, organization, and intervention.

Taken together, these modes can be further understood through three interconnected levels of the natural–artificial dialectic. The first is artificiality of representation, evident in *The Residence of the Stone*, *Blue Fish*, *Imagination under the Sea*, *Peeled*, and *Water Curtain*, where natural phenomena are transformed through hyperrealism, painterly manipulation, abstraction, deformation, spectacle, and the construction of visual movement. The second is artificiality as visual order, evident in *Slice of a Mountain* and *Global Warming*, where angular, geometrical, and technologically organized forms are positioned in relation to organic and irregular natural forms. The third is artificiality as intervention, most directly represented by *Exploitation*, where human agency transforms, fragments, arranges, and exploits natural bodies.

The synthesis of the eight modes and three levels demonstrates that artificiality does not have a single visual manifestation in Mangu Putra's paintings. It can emerge through excessive naturalism as well as abstraction, through pictorial material manipulation as well as geometrical intervention, and through the transformation of natural organisms into objects of human control. These findings indicate that the natural–artificial dialectic operates across a continuum, from the construction of visual representation to the organization of forms and the direct transformation of natural bodies.

The findings reveal a movement from nature as represented reality to nature as a mediated image, then to nature as a constructed visual object, and ultimately to nature as an object of technological intervention and exploitation. The natural–artificial dialectic operates simultaneously at the levels of representation, visual organization, and intervention. The three levels are progressively interconnected rather than mutually exclusive, allowing artificiality to be observed through the construction of the image itself, the organization of visual forms, and the representation of the direct transformation of natural life.

Discussion

Connecting cultural phenomena with nature constitutes a fundamental aspect of many Eastern worldviews. Balinese culture, for instance, embodies a profound understanding of human existence as inextricably intertwined with the natural world. Within this cosmological framework, humans are perceived as microcosms (*Bhwana Alit*), embodying within themselves the essence of the macrocosm (*Bhwana Agung*), the greater universe. This perspective posits an intricate and interconnected relationship between natural processes and human life, characterized by an inevitable chain of cause and effect. Within this context, artistic creation is often imbued with a deep reverence for nature, drawing its inspiration and philosophical underpinnings directly from the natural world.

Nature serves as a central motif within Mangu Putra's artistic oeuvre. Grounded in a realist aesthetic, his nature-themed paintings exemplify the profound creative engagement of an artist deeply attuned to the natural world. Realism, in its broadest philosophical sense, posits reality as an objective and immutable given. Within the context of art, realism implies a commitment to accurate and objective representation [16]. The overarching ideal of realism, therefore, is mimesis, understood as the faithful imitation of reality as it is perceived.

Grounded in both a realist aesthetic and a Balinese cosmological framework that emphasizes the inherent interconnectedness between humanity and nature, Mangu Putra's depictions of nature may initially evoke a sense of naivety. A superficial examination might suggest that his paintings do not explicitly distinguish between the objective reality of the non-human natural world and the culturally constructed reality of human experience. This apparent lack of distinction contributes to an initial impression of nature as an integrated and harmonious field of existence.

In Mangu Putra's oeuvre, nature and humanity appear seamlessly intertwined within a harmonious order governed by shared principles. The truth of nature, as depicted by Putra, often aligns with conventional perceptions of the natural world, mirroring familiar landscapes of

mountains, craters, rocks, trees, and expansive vistas of land and water teeming with diverse marine life. Celestial bodies such as the moon and the sky are also prominent features, often juxtaposed with human figures within the composition. Such representations can initially be understood as affirming a direct and harmonious relationship between human experience and the natural world.

At first glance, therefore, Mangu Putra's depictions of nature may appear to align with a romanticized view reminiscent of nineteenth-century Western Romantic thought. This artistic movement emphasized aesthetic appreciation and celebrated the notion of personal fulfillment through communion with the wild and pristine natural world [17]. Romantic ideals often idealized nature by emphasizing its inherent beauty and splendor. The visual attractiveness of Putra's paintings may similarly encourage an initial reading of nature as beautiful, harmonious, and worthy of aesthetic contemplation.

Mangu Putra's masterful command of visual detail and sophisticated technique may initially draw the viewer's attention primarily toward the surface beauty of ordinary natural objects. Furthermore, his abstract works effectively guide the viewer's imagination toward evocative representations of natural phenomena, such as the fluidity of water, the textures and colors of soil, and the rugged forms of rocks [18]. This emphasis on the aesthetic and evocative qualities of nature is unsurprising, given Putra's own admission that nature serves as a constant source of inspiration and informs every aspect of his artistic practice.

A deeper examination of Mangu Putra's paintings, however, reveals a more nuanced understanding of his engagement with nature. While his works may initially appear to adhere to a romanticized view, closer analysis suggests a more complex perspective. Putra's depictions of nature are not merely passive reflections of the natural world; rather, they are imbued with a progressive vision, indicative of an artist grappling with profound questions concerning the human–nature relationship.

Hyperreal Naturalism: *The Residence of the Stone* (1998)

The Residence of the Stone (see Figure 1) presents a mountainous and volcanic landscape dominated by a large crater in the foreground and a mountain rising behind it. The image is constructed through an intense accumulation of visual detail. Geological surfaces, ridges, cracks, earth formations, and variations of color are rendered with considerable precision. The painting evokes the precision and clarity of a high-resolution photograph. Rather than adhering to a strictly realistic representation, the depicted objects exhibit a hyperrealistic quality. Natural forms appear less like direct observations from the natural world and more like meticulously crafted digital images, characterized by an almost uncanny level of detail and clarity.



Figure 1. *The Residence of the Stone*
(Photo: Mangu Putra)

From the perspective of Kress and van Leeuwen, the significance of this work lies less in the presence of an identifiable artificial object than in the modality of the representation. The painting constructs a strong impression of visual reality through its detailed rendering. Yet the very intensity of this naturalism also makes the image appear highly constructed. The natural landscape is presented through a mode of seeing that exceeds ordinary empirical perception.

This produces a paradoxical relationship between the natural and the artificial. The represented object remains unequivocally natural—a mountain, crater, rock, and earth—while the representation itself becomes increasingly artificial through its heightened visual organization. The artificiality therefore resides not primarily within the represented landscape but within the construction of the landscape as an image.

The distinction developed by Kress and van Leeuwen between the properties of objects and the cultural values attached to their visual representation is particularly relevant here. Visual meaning is not simply inherent in the depicted object; it is produced through choices made by the image producer and through culturally available modes of seeing. Mangu Putra consequently transforms nature from an empirically encountered environment into a highly mediated visual object.

The critical implication is significant. The painting does not simply demonstrate that nature can be represented realistically. It suggests that contemporary viewers increasingly encounter nature through technologically informed visual conventions. The closer the painting approaches the visual credibility of photography, the more strongly it calls attention to the constructed character of that vision.

The Residence of the Stone exemplifies artificiality through intensified naturalism. Nature remains natural as an object, but its image becomes artificial as a visual construction. The painting suggests that Mangu Putra's engagement with nature transcends a simplistic or idealized representation. His depictions of nature are not merely passive reflections of an untouched reality. Instead, they reveal a critical awareness of how human perception, mediated through

technological advancements such as advanced imaging technologies, shapes our understanding of the natural world. The nature depicted in Mangu Putra's paintings is not a direct transcription of an objective reality, but rather a constructed image, a product of human interpretation and mediation.

Mangu Putra's depictions of nature reveal a critical undercurrent that challenges the traditional Balinese understanding of the interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world. This harmonious unity, a cornerstone of Balinese cosmology, appears to be disrupted in Mangu Putra's work. The natural and the artificial begin to diverge, with the natural laws governing the universe seemingly operating independently from human cultural movements. This suggests a subtle yet profound shift in Mangu Putra's perspective, one that acknowledges the growing distance between humanity and the natural world in the face of rapid technological and societal change.

Objectification of the Living Organism: *Blue Fish* (1998)

In works featuring fish as the primary subject, Mangu Putra employs a distinct artistic approach that introduces artificial elements into the depiction of natural forms. This is evident in the use of complex and visually rich patterns, characterized by dynamic interplay of lines and textures, and the deliberate manipulation of paint through techniques such as scratching, melting, and splashing. These artistic choices introduce a sense of artifice, akin to applying makeup to a natural object, subtly altering its appearance.

Blue Fish (see Figure 2) presents a large fish occupying most of the pictorial field. The fish is recognizable through its anatomical structure, eye, fins, body, and tail, but its body is simultaneously subjected to extensive pictorial intervention. The surface is fragmented by lines, scratches, tonal variations, and irregular marks. The fish consequently occupies an ambiguous position between biological organism and constructed pictorial object.

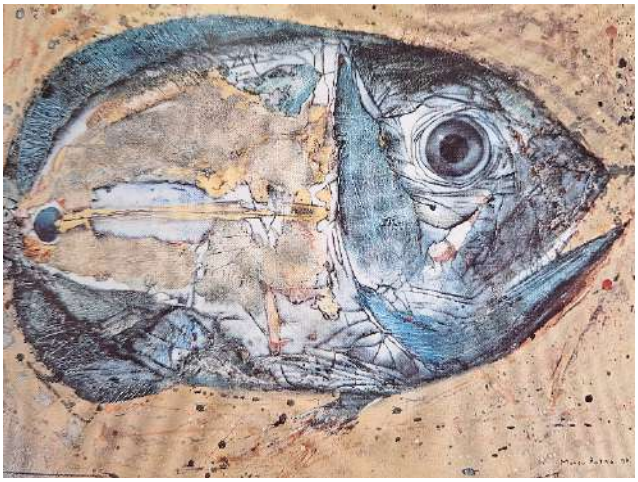


Figure 2. *Blue Fish*
(Photo: Mangu Putra)

This ambiguity can be understood through Kress and van Leeuwen's distinction between narrative and conceptual representation. Rather than depicting the fish as an actor engaged in an

unfolding event, the painting emphasizes the fish as a visual entity characterized by its form, surface, and attributes. Its body becomes something to be examined rather than an organism participating in a narrative process.

This is reinforced by the fish's unusually rigid appearance. Although its eye retains a suggestion of vitality, the body as a whole appears static and somewhat lifeless. The visual effect therefore creates a tension between life and objecthood.

The artificiality of the work emerges through this transformation. The fish is not represented simply as it might appear in direct observation. Its biological form becomes a surface upon which the artist performs processes of painterly interventions. The natural organism is consequently converted into a materially constructed visual object.

The visual characteristics of an object do not simply reproduce its natural identity; they contribute to the construction of a particular meaning. In *Blue Fish*, painterly intervention disrupts the expectation that a representation of a fish should preserve the visual coherence and vitality of a living organism. The work therefore does not merely represent a fish. It problematizes what happens when a living natural entity becomes an image. The fish is simultaneously natural in its referent and artificial in its pictorial existence. *Blue Fish* produces artificiality through the visible transformation and material manipulation of natural form.

Abstraction and Deformation of Natural Forms: *Imagination under the Sea* (1994)

Imagination under the Sea (see Figure 3) departs more radically from the naturalistic representation found in *The Residence of the Stone*. The composition presents multiple fish-like and marine forms, but their anatomical identities are partially dissolved through overlapping contours, fragmented surfaces, and painterly marks. Rather than providing a stable representation of an underwater environment, the painting creates a dense visual field in which natural forms become difficult to separate from one another.

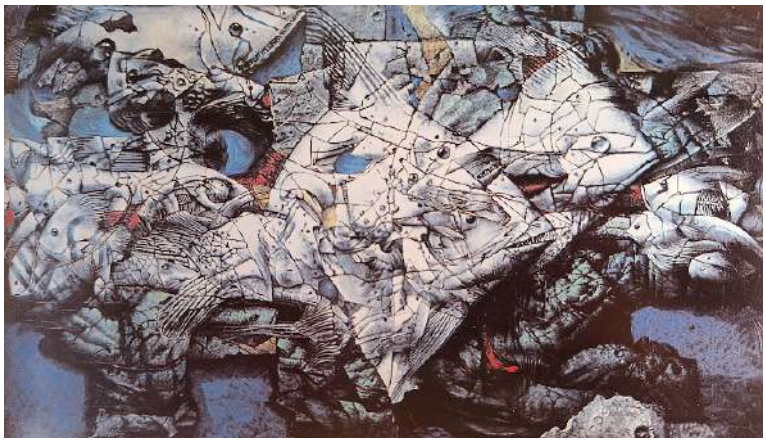


Figure 3. *Imagination under the Sea*
(Photo: Mangu Putra)

The work therefore demonstrates a different mode of artificialization. In *The Residence of the Stone*, the artificial is generated by an excess of naturalistic detail. In *Imagination under the*

Sea, it is generated by abstraction and deformation. Abstraction and deformation are strategies through which Mangu Putra distorts and reimagines natural forms.

From a visual-semiotic perspective, this transformation weakens the assumption that a natural object must retain a stable visual correspondence with its empirical appearance. The represented fish become visual participants whose identity depends increasingly on relationships of line, shape, texture, and spatial overlap.

This process is consistent with Kress and van Leeuwen's argument that visual meaning is generated through the organization and relationship of visual elements rather than through isolated objects. The natural therefore survives not as a literal transcription of marine reality but as a set of visual qualities that have been reorganized by the artist.

The title *Imagination under the Sea* further reinforces this shift. The work does not claim to provide documentary access to an underwater world. Instead, it explicitly foregrounds imagination as a mediating force. Nature is consequently transformed into an imaginative visual construct. The artificial here is therefore not an external object introduced into nature but an operation of representation that transforms nature into pictorial imagination.

Spectacularization of Nature: *Peeled* (1999)

Peeled (see Figure 4) presents one of the most radical transformations of natural imagery among the works examined. Although the underlying subject remains associated with a crater or geological landscape, the pictorial field is dominated by intense colors, vertical and diagonal divisions, layered surfaces, and strongly contrasted visual areas. The natural referent becomes increasingly difficult to isolate from the pictorial construction. The artificial elements become so pronounced that they threaten to overshadow the natural forms. The crater becomes transformed through color and composition into something resembling raw meat or a theatrical stage.



Figure 4. *Peeled*

(Photo: Mangu Putra)

Kress and van Leeuwen's concept of salience provides a productive way to understand this transformation. The viewer's attention is no longer directed primarily toward the recognition of a natural geological formation. Instead, the visual intensity of color, surface, contrast, and compositional organization becomes itself the dominant attraction. The natural object consequently becomes subordinated to its visual presentation. Nature is no longer simply something to be represented; it becomes something to be made visually compelling.

This is important in relation to contemporary visual culture. The painting demonstrates how an ordinary natural phenomenon can be transformed into an image whose primary power lies in spectacle. The crater becomes simultaneously geological object, pictorial surface, and theatrical visual event. The artificiality of *Peeled* therefore lies in spectacularization. Nature is not destroyed or replaced by an artificial object. Rather, it is aesthetically reconstructed so intensely that its status as an independently existing natural object becomes secondary to its status as a compelling visual image.

Construction of the Illusion of Natural Movement: *Water Curtain* (1998)

Water Curtain (see Figure 5) occupies a distinctive position because its principal subject is not a stable natural object but the movement of water. The painting is dominated by vertical streaks and layered bands of blue, white, gray, brown, and other colors. These marks create an impression of flowing or falling water despite the static nature of the painted surface. In this work, Mangu Putra employs artistic strategies reminiscent of the Futurist movement by attempting to capture the dynamism of movement within the static medium of painting. While Futurist artists sought to represent the speed and energy of modern life, Putra applies painterly techniques to evoke a sense of motion and fluidity, particularly in his depiction of water.



Figure 5. *Water Curtain*
(Photo: Mangu Putra)

This attempt to capture movement introduces a degree of artifice into the representation of nature. By its very nature, the painting freezes a fleeting phenomenon in time and consequently produces an illusion of motion. The vibrant colors, dynamic brushwork, and overall composition enhance the perception of movement. The emphasis on the visual representation of motion

reveals an artificial dimension inherent in the attempt to capture a fleeting natural phenomenon within the static confines of a two-dimensional artwork.

This condition can be further understood through the concept of visual representation as construction. The movement of water is not materially reproduced in the painting but translated into a system of visual signs. Verticality, repetition, directional brushwork, color variation, and layering function as visual resources through which movement is suggested. The painting therefore reveals another dimension of artificiality, namely the artificial construction of a natural process. The natural phenomenon is transformed into a semiotic process through which static forms generate the perception of dynamism.

Water Curtain thus demonstrates that artificiality can emerge from the fundamental condition of representation itself. A static artificial object, namely the painting, must construct the appearance of a dynamic natural process through visual means. The dialectic between the natural and the artificial consequently operates not only at the level of subject matter but also at the level of representation, where natural movement becomes an effect produced through artistic construction.

Geometrical Intrusion into Organic Space: *Slice of a Mountain* (2000)

Slice of a Mountain (see Figure 6) provides the clear visual encounter between organic and geometrical orders. The composition combines an irregular, rocky mountainous surface with three prominent vertical rectangular structures containing triangular or pyramid-like forms. The contrast between these elements is visually pronounced.



Figure 6. *Slice of a Mountain*
(Photo: Mangu Putra)

Kress and van Leeuwen's distinction between curved/organic and angular/geometrical forms is particularly appropriate here. They associate angular forms with the inorganic, crystalline, and technological order, while curved forms are associated with organic growth and the natural world. The rectangular structures consequently introduce a visual order fundamentally different from that of the surrounding geological forms. The natural landscape is irregular, fragmented, and materially complex, whereas the inserted structures are organized through vertical edges, rectangular boundaries, repetition, and geometric regularity.

The triangular forms intensify this tension. Kress and van Leeuwen note that triangles belong to the angular and mechanical-technological order, but, unlike squares, they can also function as vectors because their directional qualities enable them to point toward or act upon other elements. Consequently, triangles can convey meanings associated with processes, including action, conflict, and tension.

In *Slice of a Mountain*, the triangular forms should therefore not be understood merely as static geometric symbols. Their pointed configuration and repeated orientation establish a vectorial relationship with the surrounding mountainous forms. The geometrical forms appear to direct visual force into the natural field, creating an impression of penetration, interruption, or pressure upon the organic environment. Rather than producing a static opposition between natural and artificial, the composition establishes a dynamic relation in which the artificial appears to intrude upon, confront, and disrupt the natural.

The artificial is thus represented here as an organized technological order confronting and acting upon an irregular natural order. In *Slice of a Mountain*, artificiality becomes an explicit visual participant whose angular and vectorial properties establish a spatial and processual conflict with nature. The critical force of the painting consequently resides not merely in the juxtaposition of natural and artificial forms, but in the suggestion that the artificial has acquired a directional force capable of penetrating and transforming the natural environment.

Geometrical Intervention Associated with Environmental Crisis: *Global Warming* (1999)

Global Warming (see Figure 7) intensifies the relationship between artificial form and environmental crisis. The painting is dominated by an expansive red-orange field suggesting heat, while a natural or mountainous form occupies the central-left area. On the right, a vertically organized geometric structure introduces a contrasting visual order composed of rectangles, triangles, and small repeated forms. The fiery red produces a visceral sense of heat and urgency and identifies the pyramid-like objects as symbols of human intervention and potential environmental disruption.



Figure 7. *Global Warming*
(Photo: Mangu Putra)

Kress and van Leeuwen framework makes it possible to sharpen this interpretation. The geometric structure establishes a visual order based on straight lines, angularity, repetition, and

modular organization. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, these characteristics correspond to the technological and constructed order associated with geometrical forms. What is particularly significant is the juxtaposition between this geometrical order and the intensely organic, atmospheric, and apparently unstable red field. The painting constructs environmental anxiety not only through its title and color but through a formal opposition between two visual orders. The technological does not appear outside the environmental problem. It is visually embedded within the image of environmental crisis.

The title *Global Warming* further anchors the visual opposition within a contemporary ecological discourse. Consequently, the geometrical forms can be read as signs of human systems of construction and technological intervention whose consequences are registered in the natural environment. The work therefore demonstrates the movement from formal opposition to environmental critique.

Transformation of Natural Bodies through Exploitation: *Exploitation* (2000)

Exploitation (see Figure 8) presents perhaps the most direct representation of human intervention into the natural world. Several fish are arranged vertically against a relatively neutral background. Their bodies have been cut open, exposing internal flesh. Unlike *Blue Fish*, where the fish is transformed primarily through painterly manipulation, here the transformation is represented as a physical condition imposed upon the animal.

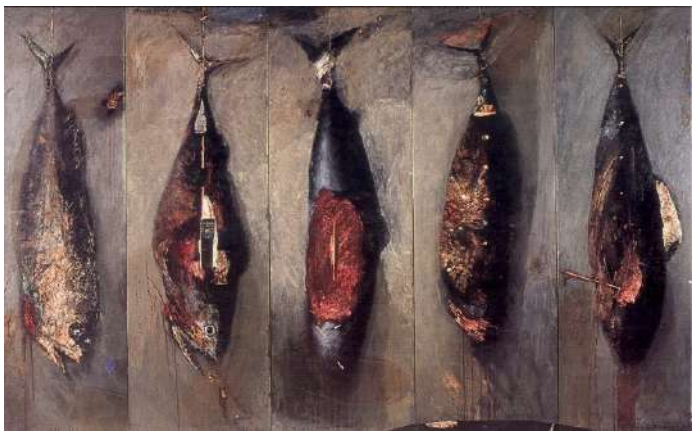


Figure 8. *Exploitation*
(Photo: Mangu Putra)

The composition is striking because the fish are individually separated yet placed in a repeated arrangement. Their bodies become visually comparable objects within a serial structure. The repetition reduces the individuality of each fish and encourages the viewer to perceive them as a group of similar units. This compositional organization reinforces the conceptual transformation of the fish from living organism into object. The fish are no longer represented primarily through movement, ecological context, or biological vitality. They become specimens or commodities subjected to human handling.

In *Exploitation*, Mangu Putra poignantly depicts the human impact on the natural world by portraying the dismembered bodies of fish. The meticulous rendering of the dissected fish, with their precise cuts and carefully arranged body parts, suggests a deliberate and methodical act

of human intervention. The clean, almost surgical precision of the cuts strongly implies that this is not the result of natural predation, but rather a deliberate act of human exploitation. This interpretation can be extended through Kress and van Leeuwen's distinction between visual representation and the social organization of represented participants. The artificiality here takes the form of human action imposed upon a natural body. The natural is materially transformed through cutting, opening, arranging, and displaying. This produces a particularly disturbing dialectic. The fish remains biologically recognizable, but its visual presentation denies the conditions associated with living nature. Its body has become a surface for human intervention.

This emphasis on the artificiality of the fish's condition, their bodies transformed by human agency, serves as a powerful indictment of human exploitation of natural resources. The painting evokes a sense of unease, highlighting the destructive impact of human activities on the delicate balance of the natural world. It moves beyond the representation of nature toward an indictment of the transformation of natural life into an object of human consumption and control.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Mangu Putra's nature-themed paintings produced between 1994 and 2000 construct a complex and dynamic dialectical relationship between the natural and the artificial. Rather than treating these categories as fixed opposites, the paintings reveal how nature and artificiality continuously interact through processes of representation, visual mediation, transformation, intervention, and objectification. The study identifies eight modes of natural–artificial dialectics in Mangu Putra's paintings: (1) hyperreal naturalism, (2) objectification of the living organism, (3) abstraction and deformation of natural forms, (4) spectacularization of nature, (5) construction of the illusion of natural movement, (6) geometrical intrusion into organic space, (7) geometrical intervention associated with environmental crisis, and (8) transformation of natural bodies through exploitation. These modes demonstrate that artificiality does not have a single visual manifestation. It can emerge through excessive naturalism as well as abstraction, through pictorial material manipulation as well as geometrical intervention, and through the transformation of natural organisms into objects of human control. The analysis further identifies three interconnected levels of the natural–artificial dialectic: (1) artificiality of representation, (2) artificiality as visual order, and (3) artificiality as intervention. These three levels should not be understood as separate categories but as interconnected dimensions through which artificiality progressively becomes visible in the representation of nature.

The study contributes to an understanding of Mangu Putra's early artistic practice by demonstrating that his engagement with nature is neither merely realist nor simply romantic or environmentalist. Instead, his paintings employ the tension between natural and artificial orders as a critical visual strategy. The central implication of this finding is that the critical question is not only how the artificial intrudes upon the natural, but also how the natural becomes artificial through representation itself. The natural–artificial dialectic thus becomes a means through which Mangu Putra interrogates contemporary ways of seeing nature and the increasingly

mediated, constructed, and exploitative relationship between human culture and the natural world. In this sense, Mangu Putra's criticality extends beyond a straightforward environmental critique. His paintings do not merely represent the intrusion of human-made objects into natural environments or the destruction of nature through exploitation. They also reveal that nature itself becomes artificialized through the processes by which it is seen, represented, organized, transformed, and circulated as an image. The artificial, therefore, does not simply stand outside nature as its opposite; rather, it operates within the visual construction of nature. This perspective positions the natural–artificial dialectic as a critical framework for understanding the changing relationship between human beings, technology, visual culture, and the natural environment in the contemporary era.

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