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The Role of Bali's Academic Ceramic Art in the Discussion of Contemporary Visual Art

I Wayan Suardana[a*], I Made Sumantra[a]

[a]Prodi Kriya Institut Seni Indonesia Bali, Indonesia

ABSTRACT
This article discusses the position of academic ceramic art in Bali within the discourse of contemporary visual art. Ceramic art in Bali has strong traditional roots and has evolved through the transmission of knowledge, skills, and local cultural values. The presence of art education in academic settings has created space for the development of ceramic art through conceptual, experimental, and interdisciplinary approaches. These conditions have driven a shift in the orientation of ceramic art from merely functional and decorative skills toward artistic practices that prioritize ideas, material exploration, aesthetics, and social and cultural discourse. Through a descriptive-analytical approach, this article examines the characteristics, development, and position of academic Balinese ceramic art within the context of contemporary visual art. The discussion reveals that Balinese academic ceramic craft holds a strategic position as a practice that bridges local traditions with contemporary artistic thought. Balinese cultural identity is no longer preserved solely through traditional forms and ornamentation but can be critically reinterpreted through the exploration of materials, forms, techniques, and concepts. Thus, Balinese academic ceramic art functions not only as a craft product but also as a medium for artistic expression and the production of knowledge that has the potential to strengthen the presence of craft within the field of contemporary visual art.

KEYWORDS
Ceramic Art, Academia, Contemporary Visual Art, Material Exploration

Introduction

Craft is one of the key fields in the development of Indonesian visual arts. Its existence is inextricably linked to the cultural history of communities that have used their skills in working with materials to meet ritual, functional, aesthetic, and symbolic needs. Craft art is a unique art form with distinct characteristics; it embodies symbolic, aesthetic, philosophical, and functional values, and its creation is supported by a high level of craftsmanship, resulting in works classified as masterpieces [1]. In the Balinese context, kriya holds a more complex position because it is closely tied to social systems, religion, customs, tourism, and cultural identity. Balinese kriya can be found in both sacred and secular contexts, including products

***Corresponding Author**
wynsuardana@isi-dps.ac.id

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related to ritual needs, daily life, decoration, and the tourism industry. [2], for example, highlights the distinction between sacred kriya, kriya for socio-cultural needs, and kriya that has developed within the context of tourism.

Ceramics is a branch of crafts that has seen significant development—in terms of form, type, function, technique, and materials used. Originally, ceramics served a variety of functions, ranging from containers for daily life to objects used in religious ceremonies [3]. Ceramics possess distinctive characteristics because their creation involves clay, water, firing, glazing, and a wide range of possible techniques and surface treatments. Therefore, ceramics not only produce objects but also open up possibilities for exploration of form, texture, color, space, symbolism, and concepts. These changes have become increasingly evident as the field of ceramics has entered the realm of higher education in the arts. Academic institutions not only teach technical skills but also introduce methods of research, creation, criticism, aesthetics, art history, cultural theory, and conceptual thinking. [4] explains that developments in education and the emergence of independent studios have broadened the understanding of ceramic arts, so that ceramics are no longer limited to traditional or mass production.

In the development of contemporary visual art, the boundaries between fine art, design, and craft are becoming increasingly blurred. This is the new paradigm of contemporary art, which embodies the neutral meaning of the concept of art today. Contemporary art can be viewed appreciatively as an intellectual awakening, serving as a foundation for growth as we embrace the new postmodern era [5]. Ceramics can emerge not only as functional objects but also evolve into sculpture, installations, conceptual objects, or components of cross-media art practices. Studies on contemporary Indonesian ceramics indicate that, over the past decade or so, there has been a trend toward the use of figurative forms, sculpture, and installations. The themes of these works have also evolved to address personal experiences, social issues, gender issues, local wisdom, and various aspects of contemporary life [6].

This situation becomes particularly interesting when viewed in the context of Bali. On the one hand, Balinese artists and scholars possess a rich and robust visual tradition. On the other hand, the development of contemporary visual art demands the ability to critically reinterpret that tradition. Thus, the issue at hand is not merely how to preserve traditional forms, but how tradition can serve as a source of knowledge and inspiration for the creation of new works.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach. This approach was chosen because the subject of study relates not only to the physical form of ceramic works but also to the social, cultural, academic, and aesthetic contexts, as well as the artistic discourse surrounding them.

Data collection was conducted through observation, interviews, and a literature review of journal articles, books on craft theory, studies of contemporary visual art, and academic publications related to Indonesian and Balinese ceramics. Some of the primary sources used include Satrio's study on the current state of ceramic arts, research on trends in contemporary

Indonesian ceramics, research on traditional Balinese wayang motifs in ceramics, and a study on Balinese arts and crafts (Mudra: 2024).

The analysis was conducted in three stages: data reduction, interpretation, and drawing conclusions. Data on academic ceramic practices were examined through the perspectives of craft and contemporary art. In this context, Glenn Adamson's concept of craft was used to understand the skills and materiality of craft, while Terry Smith's ideas were used to understand the concept of contemporaneity and shifts in the art field within a global context. Adamson positions craft not as a second-class category of art, but rather as a skill-based practice that can play a significant role in art, design, architecture, and contemporary practices.

Result

The presence of art education in higher education institutions has provided a space for Balinese ceramic art to evolve from a traditional craft toward a more experimental and conceptual creative practice [7]. This shift is significant in the context of contemporary Indonesian visual art, which is characterized by openness to various media, exploration of materials, a search for identity, and a dialogue between local traditions and global thought.

Thus, the achievements of academic Balinese ceramic art can be analyzed through several key aspects: the development of a visual language, the renewal of creative concepts, the exploration of local identity, the strengthening of art education and research, and its contribution to expanding the boundaries of contemporary Indonesian visual art.

1. The Expansion of Ceramics' Function from Everyday Objects to a Medium for Artistic Expression

One of the significant achievements of academic ceramic art in Bali is the evolving understanding of the function of ceramics [8], which is no longer oriented solely toward practical utility and economic value but has also transformed into an important medium for expressing personal experiences, philosophical ideas, and artists' critical perspectives on life.

This paradigm shift has had a significant impact on the orientation of artistic creation within academic circles. The first change is evident in a shift in creative focus, as artists are now moving away from merely producing utilitarian objects toward creating works that place far greater emphasis on the depth of ideas and freedom of expression.

In addition, there has also been a fundamental shift in the way objects are perceived. Ceramic forms are no longer constrained and no longer must always adhere to the conventional norms of containers or household items. Through this freedom of exploration, the value of the works has expanded where the quality of a ceramic piece is now assessed not merely by its technical skill and visual beauty, but is measured by the strength of its concept and the relevance of its meaning.

Within the discourse of contemporary Indonesian visual art, this achievement has helped establish ceramics as an artistic medium with a broader significance than that of a mere craft product.

2. Development of Visual Language and Material Experimentation

In the context of Bali, the progress of ceramic art can be observed through several key trends. The first aspect is evident in the exploration of form, characterized by the use of organic, figurative, and abstract shapes, as well as a much freer exploration of three-dimensional forms compared to previous conventions.

In addition to form, artistic exploration has also extended to the aspect of materials. Artists are experimenting with materials by combining clay with various other elements to create fresh new visual and textural characteristics. This effort goes hand in hand with technical exploration, which involves the development of shaping methods and surface finishes specifically tailored to meet the needs of each concept [8].

This shift in orientation has also influenced the way works are presented to the public. There has been a shift from the presentation of single objects toward complex arrangements of objects, sculptural works, and interactive spatial installations. Nevertheless, it should be noted that these various trends essentially constitute a general framework for interpreting contemporary Indonesian ceramics. Therefore, not all of these trends can be considered to have been uniformly realized by all academic ceramic artists in Bali.

3. Strengthening Education, Research, and Documentation of Works

Significant achievements in the academic field can be attributed to various aspects of institutional strengthening and creative processes. One of the most fundamental achievements is the establishment of a sustainable new generation of artists. Through formal educational institutions, students are provided with structured technical training, opportunities for the development of well-thought-out concepts, and the cultivation of a strong artistic character.

Furthermore, this academic climate has also fostered a growing culture of research among visual artists. The process of creating art is no longer driven solely by intuition but is accompanied by in-depth material analysis, thorough literature reviews, research into rich sources of inspiration, and critical aesthetic evaluation.

These processes have also led to the availability of comprehensive documentation of the works. Archives and student works from various periods can serve as valuable historical research materials for understanding shifts in artistic trends over time. Ultimately, this entire series of processes culminates in the development of graduates' professional capabilities, guiding them to not only create independently but also to excel in conducting research, curating exhibitions, teaching, and developing various creative ventures.

4. Expanding Opportunities for Appreciation Through Art Exhibitions and Networks

Exhibitions serve as vital spaces for showcasing works, testing ideas, and bringing artists together with the public, curators, researchers, and practitioners from diverse backgrounds. One recent example is the international craft exhibition *Becoming: Prakriti–Pustaka–Padma*, organized through a collaboration between ISI Bali and the Agung Rai Museum of Art (ARMA) from July 5–18, 2026 [9]. The exhibition features 79 works by 50 artists from eight countries,

including ceramic sculptures, terracotta pieces, vases, and installations. It demonstrates that Bali's craft ecosystem provides a space for cross-medium and cross-national encounters.

5. Strengthening the Role of Craft in the Discourse on Contemporary Visual Art

One of the most fundamental outcomes is the shifting position of kriya within the relationship between fine art and craft. In the modern visual arts paradigm, these two fields are often distinguished based on their functional orientation, technical skills, and artistic expression [6]. In the development of contemporary art, these boundaries have become increasingly open to question. In this context, academic Balinese ceramic craft has attained a significant position, as technical skill is no longer viewed as an end in itself but rather as a means to articulate artistic thought.

Within this framework, the most fundamental contribution of academic ceramic art in Bali is to shift the understanding of art from merely a practice of skill and the production of objects toward a creative practice that is reflective, conceptual, and open to cultural dialogue. However, its success in shaping the discourse of contemporary Indonesian visual art must continue to be evaluated based on the quality of the works, the strength of the ideas, the consistency of the practice, and the critical recognition it has received.

Discussion

1. Balinese Ceramics: Between Tradition and Change

Ceramics in Bali are inextricably linked to the development of the community's material culture. Clay has been used as a material to produce a variety of objects serving both practical and aesthetic purposes. Over time, Balinese ceramics have faced social and economic changes brought about by the growth of tourism, industry, technology, education, and globalization.

These conditions have led to a shift in the focus of ceramic production. Ceramics are no longer produced solely for household needs or traditional functions, but also as decorative items, souvenirs, works of art, and experimental pieces. Research on the development of ceramic-forming techniques in Bali shows that changing community needs have contributed to shifts in the form, function, focus, and techniques of ceramic production.

At the same time, tradition remains a source of innovative artistic creation. One example is the use of traditional Balinese wayang motifs in ceramic art. Research by Mudra, Raharja, and Sukarya shows that Balinese wayang motifs are incorporated into ceramic art through various forms, shaping techniques, and ornamentation techniques [10].

The use of tradition demonstrates that tradition is not always at odds with modernity. Tradition can serve as a visual, symbolic, philosophical, or conceptual source for the creation of new works.



Figure 1. Academic Ceramics by Prof. Dr. I Wayan Mudra, M.Sn

2. Academic Education as a Space for Creative Transformation

Higher education in the arts plays a crucial role in the paradigm shift in craft. In an academic setting, students are not only expected to master techniques such as shaping, firing, decoration, and glazing, but also to explain the ideas behind their work. This shifts the focus of creation from simply "making objects" to "developing ideas through objects." In other words, manual skills are not eliminated but are integrated as part of the artistic thought process.

This situation is in line with developments in the study of contemporary craft. Adamson points out that craft is closely linked to modern and contemporary art practices and should not be understood as a category opposed to art [11].

In the context of Bali, academic institutions such as the Indonesian Institute of the Arts Denpasar (ISI Bali) hold a strategic position because they are situated at the heart of Bali's vibrant cultural ecosystem. Craft programs are not only concerned with skill development but also with research and creation. The journal *Hastagina: Journal of Crafts and Creative Industries*, published by ISI Bali, explicitly covers research and creation in various fields of craft, including ceramic craft, as well as traditional, contemporary, and ecological approaches.

Thus, the academization of craft can be understood as the process of transforming craft knowledge into knowledge that is reflective, critical, documented, and capable of being developed methodologically.



Figure 2. Development of Traditional Ceramics by Students

3. The Shift from Functional Craft to Conceptual Craft

One significant change in ceramic art is the shift from a functional orientation to a conceptual one. Within the traditional framework, the value of a ceramic object is often determined by its function, beauty, craftsmanship, and the skill of its maker.

In contemporary art, these parameters have expanded. A ceramic work can be evaluated based on its concept, context, the issues it addresses, the creative process, its relationship to space, and its connection with the audience. This shift is evident in the development of contemporary Indonesian ceramics. Satrio's research indicates a trend toward figurative forms, sculpture, and installations in contemporary ceramic works. The themes that emerge also include personal experiences, social issues, gender, local wisdom, and community life [6].

Thus, ceramics no longer have to take the form of vases, plates, jars, or decorative objects. Ceramics can take the form of bodies, fragments, symbolic objects, spatial installations, and even serve as a medium for addressing social issues.



Figure 3. Academic Ceramics by Dr. Ni Made Rai Suarini, M.Si

4. Clay as an Artistic Medium

In academic ceramic art, clay is not merely a raw material. It can become part of the artistic language. The malleable nature of clay allows artists to deform, shape, join, cut, pierce, and engage in various other forms of exploration. The firing process then produces a permanent transformation of the material. Therefore, the process itself is an essential part of the creative process. Ceramic artists cannot fully control the final result due to factors such as shrinkage, cracking, color changes, glaze reactions, and the unpredictability of firing. This unpredictability can, in fact, become part of the work's aesthetic.

In an academic context, this experience with materials can be developed into artistic knowledge. Students not only learn "how to make ceramics," but also learn to understand the characteristics of clay, temperature, glazes, the firing atmosphere, and the relationship between technical processes and the concept behind the work.



Figure 4. Academic Ceramics by Prof. Dr. I Ketut Muka, M.Si

5. Bali as a Source of Contemporary Knowledge

One of the main strengths of academic ceramic art in Bali is its sense of place. Bali possesses a wealth of symbols, mythology, rituals, architecture, ornamentation, performing arts, nature, and social systems that can serve as sources of creativity. However, the use of local elements does not automatically make a work contemporary art. The mere decorative use of Balinese ornamentation does not necessarily yield a new interpretation of tradition. What is more important is how that tradition is reinterpreted. For example, the Balinese "jajan cacalan" (traditional snacks) rendered in the form of "Sarad" can be understood not merely as a decorative motif, but as a representation of natural flora that must be preserved in accordance with the concept of Tri Hita Karana. With this approach, tradition becomes a source of thought and reflection, rather than merely a source of creative inspiration. Staying within the concept of nature conservation, there are also academic ceramic artists who draw inspiration from the intertwined roots of mangroves—their interlocking, rope-like forms—as a source of creative ideas. These forms are imbued with profound meaning and significance and are expressed through contemporary art. Bali's natural wealth and the richness of its traditional and religious practices consistently inspire academic ceramic artists to generate new ideas and develop them into fresh creations with their own distinct identities. This demonstrates that contemporary Balinese artworks are deeply rooted in their local context.



Figure 5. Academic ceramics by Prof. Dr. I Wayan Suardana, M.Sn

6. Academic Ceramic Art and Discourses on Contemporary Visual Art

The concept of contemporary art cannot be adequately understood simply as art "created in the present day." Terry Smith emphasizes the concept of "contemporaneity"—a state of coexistence characterized by the simultaneous presence of diverse experiences, regions, histories, and cultures. Contemporary art thus develops within a pluralistic and interconnected global context. Contemporary ceramics by Indonesian artists are characterized by works featuring diverse forms of expression and varied content (messages, meanings, concepts). Nevertheless, the majority of contemporary ceramic forms are dominated by figurative works, sculptures, and installations [6]. This perspective is relevant for understanding academic ceramic art in Bali, where the creative works are quite diverse, each bearing the distinctive character of the individual artists. Balinese ceramics exist at the intersection of multiple layers of time: local tradition, modernity, academic education, the tourism industry, globalization, digital technology, and contemporary art discourse. Therefore, Balinese academic ceramic art need not choose between "traditional" and "contemporary." Rather, its strength lies in its ability to bring the two together.

Academic ceramic works that highlight Balinese traditions, for example, can simultaneously address environmental change, tourism, identity, social change, gender, consumption, or the relationship between humans and nature. In this context, traditional elements serve as a starting point for interpreting contemporary issues.

From this perspective, Balinese academic ceramic art can be understood as an artistic practice that exists within a global network yet retains a local foundation. Balinese academic ceramic artists refuse to be confined to traditional ceramic works which are strictly bound by form and function but instead remain dynamic, evolving, and seeking new alternatives, all while grounded in the strength of traditions that possess exceptionally high aesthetic value. It is a significant responsibility for academic ceramic artists to preserve local wisdom while keeping pace with the times, ensuring that their creations continue to resonate with the public and art critics alike.



Figure 6. Academic ceramic artwork by Dr. Ida Ayu Gede Artayani, M.Sn

7. The Place of Ceramic Art in the Hierarchy of the Arts

Historically, craft has often been placed beneath fine art because it is considered to place greater emphasis on skill, function, and material objects [12]. The distinction between fine art, craft, and design has resulted in a fairly rigid hierarchy in the history of modern art. The development of contemporary art has since complicated these boundaries. Artistic practices increasingly incorporate everyday objects, crafts, traditional materials, technology, performance, installations, and various interdisciplinary forms. In this context, ceramics has the opportunity to move beyond its subordinate position. Ceramics need not prove that it is "equal to fine art," but rather can offer its own distinctive strengths: materiality, craftsmanship, process, the touch of the hand, spatial experience, and cultural history. Adamson emphasizes that craft holds an important position in contemporary art practice and can be understood through the lens of skill and the relationship between the hand, materials, and the production process. Therefore, the position of Balinese academic ceramic craft within contemporary art can be defined as a material- and skill-based artistic practice capable of generating knowledge, aesthetic experiences, and socio-cultural discourse.

8. Opportunities for the Development of Academic Arts in Bali

Despite these challenges, academic ceramic art in Bali holds great potential, as Bali's cultural heritage provides a vast source of inspiration. Traditions can continue to be reinterpreted through new perspectives, evolving in line with the times. The emergence of technology enables new experiments through casting techniques, digital fabrication, 3D ceramic printing, digital design, and the combination of various materials. Balinese academic ceramics can also be developed through interdisciplinary practices, such as in architecture, design, visual arts, technology, environmental studies, anthropology, and the performing arts. The evolving discourse on contemporary art has opened up space for academic ceramics to take the form of installations and conceptual works. This phenomenon aligns with the trend in Indonesian contemporary ceramics, which increasingly employs the forms of sculpture and installation. Bali's status as a center of international cultural activity can serve as a foundation for introducing Balinese academic ceramics into a broader contemporary art network.

9. The Status of Academic Ceramic Art in Bali

Based on the discussion above, academic ceramic art in Bali holds a highly strategic position: as the custodian of traditional knowledge. Academic ceramic art remains connected to local knowledge regarding the types, forms, materials, symbols, techniques, and culture of Bali, serving as a space for experimentation with materials and techniques. Academic education allows for a more systematic and measured exploration of clay, glazes, forming techniques, firing, and supporting materials to achieve optimal results. Balinese academic ceramics also serve as a medium for personal expression in the quest to discover one's identity through artistic creation. Ceramics can serve as a medium to express the experiences, anxieties, identities, and personal perspectives of the artists who create them.

Balinese academic ceramics also offer opportunities for social and cultural critique. Ceramics can be used to address changes in society, the environment, tourism, identity, consumption, and various contemporary issues as part of contemporary visual art. Ceramic craft no longer

needs to be positioned as a practice outside of contemporary art. When a work demonstrates an awareness of materials, ideas, context, experimentation, and the ability to engage in dialogue with the issues of our time, ceramics gains legitimacy as a contemporary art practice.

Conclusion

Balinese academic ceramic art holds a strategic position in the development of contemporary Indonesian visual arts. Its significance is determined not only by technical skill in working with clay, but also by the art form's ability to generate ideas, knowledge, identity, and discourse—all created by the individual artists. Higher education in the arts enables ceramic art to evolve from experience-based skills toward a more reflective and conceptual creative practice. In this context, Balinese traditions need not be preserved in a static form but can be reinterpreted to address contemporary issues, thereby producing unique and compelling contemporary works.

Academic ceramic art in Bali also demonstrates that the relationship between tradition and the contemporary is not one in which one negates the other. Tradition can serve as a source of creativity in developing new ideas and concepts to discover the identity of a work. Bali's local context can serve as a foundation for engaging with global discourse, as long as local elements are not merely decorative but are developed as knowledge and ideas that can sustain the ever-evolving richness of its arts and culture. Thus, Balinese academic ceramic art can be positioned as a contemporary art practice rooted in ideas, concepts, materials, skills, techniques, and local knowledge—one that continually engages with social, technological, and environmental changes, as well as developments in the global art scene. Moving forward, the strengthening of Balinese academic ceramic art must be achieved through research, documentation, material experimentation, the development of craft theory, interdisciplinary collaboration, and increased participation in exhibitions and contemporary art networks. In this way, Balinese academic ceramic art will not only serve as a guardian of tradition but also become a key agent in shaping the discourse of contemporary Indonesian visual art. It is the task of curators to position Balinese academic ceramic art within the realm of contemporary visual art, which is rich in form, concept, and expression.

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