

The Peripatetic Artist: 14 Statements

In which artists—some from the West and some non-Western—express diverse opinions about global exhibitions, about nationalism vs. internationalism and about their relationships to cultures other than their own.

Marilyn Lerner

Marilyn Lerner is a painter who was born in 1942 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She is represented in New York by the John Good Gallery.

I have gone to Bali almost every summer for the past eight years. When I go, I usually stay around three months. Bali is one of the islands of Indonesia, but it is different from the others because it is Hindu. It has a very different spirit. I've seen a lot of places in Southeast Asia; of them, Bali is probably the most beautiful—it is excessively beautiful. Eight years ago, I heard a tape of Javanese gamelan music at a friend's house. I felt an immediate connection to it, a very strong affinity. The music sounded the way I wanted my work to look. I didn't know anything about gamelan music, I barely knew where Java was, but I knew I was going to go there to hear that music.

When I got to Bali, I found the most complete culture I had ever been in. Everything was of a piece. There was no separation between art, culture and religion. The Balinese believe that Bali is the center of the world, and they maintain that center for the rest of us.

I realized that I could work in Bali. I set up my studio there the same way I set it up in New York. I brought my materials and had a drawing table built. The Balinese live in compounds with their families. In these compounds, there's usually one or two extra houses so I rented one of them. I got to know a particular family and year after year I would go back. I was as comfortable working in Bali as I am in New York. In Bali, there are certain limitations because of problems of materials in the tropics, so I work on paper. It is necessary for me to get out of New York. I lose my clarity—not about my work, but about all other things. New York is my home but I love the idea of a studio elsewhere.

I have always been interested in non-Western cultures. These cultures have been altered by the presence of Westerners, yet the Balinese have kept theirs remarkably intact. In Bali, people are not threatened by art. It is natural to them. Everybody does something or makes something—people who work in the rice paddies, people who work in shops, people who do construction. For example, the offerings the women make are incredibly beautiful. The women take razor-sharp knives and cut up palm leaves into patterns and add them to fruits and flowers, making fabulous arrangements and designs. These offerings are sometimes four feet high, and the Balinese women—who are very small—carry them to the temples balanced on their heads. Dance and music play an important role in their religion and religion is the base of their way of life, so it is all related.

I was very much an outsider there. But after spending time in Bali, I think I understand a little more. Certainly, I feel connected to the art there. It has strengthened my work and opened me up to new experiences. I understand music in a different way now, and that changes my work because music has always been a very strong influence. Seeing how they use color and form also changes my work. How could anyone be in a culture so rich and so intense without being changed by it?

Two years ago, I heard some music which was new to me. It was called jaipong, and it really changed my way of thinking about color. Before, I was primarily using black and white. When I started to use color, I was listening to jaipong music. It was enormously compelling; there are parts that are slow, then intense, then melodic, and it is articulated so that the notes become sound notations which I translate as color notations.

It would be presumptuous of me to say that I understand Bali. I spend summers there, I have made friends there, I have friends who have gone

to live there, but I wouldn't say that I know it. What I do know is that it is a very special, very joyous place; I don't think I am romanticizing. There are things in Bali I don't like, such as some of the attitudes toward women, but I go there for so many reasons, including the art. It is an art that I feel a real kinship with. It has been a center for me, and I have tried to be respectful of their culture even if Westerners change things by merely being there.

—interviewed by Lilly Wei

