

The Will of Body
Text/ Yu Fei

Indeed a nation of volcanoes, Indonesia is located on one side of the Ring of Fire around the rim of the Pacific Ocean, with thousands of scattered islands surrounded by hundreds of closely packed volcanoes. Incessant eruptions have claimed countless lives and instantly destroyed homes, leaving many more residents displaced. Yet, nature perpetually maintains its own law of balance. Over the years, the volcanic ash that arises with eruptions is swept by the sea breeze over the years, drifting down on the slopes and sinking into the earth, resulting in exceptionally fertile soil, producing bountiful rice fields and the world's most desirable spices. The volcano thus becomes a sacred existence, simultaneously acting as an intimidating and dreading natural colossus and a generous patron.

Natasa Jones grew up in this country of islands where volcanoes define the exterior environment and intrinsic order. Of both Indonesian and Canadian descent, she was born in Java and raised in Bali. The region's complicated colonial history and religious heritage provide a more diverse and open cultural landscape than one might expect. With hundreds of ethnic groups and dialects around her and the intrinsic bi-cultural background, Jones has never been confined to a fixed identity or place of origin. Later, her studies and travels would lead her all the way to Amsterdam, Netherlands, where she settles down for now. Coincidentally, if we turn back the clock a few hundred years, the Dutch, who were the dominant maritime power at the time, opened up the Eastern route with the Dutch East India Company, and their pursuit of the spice trade drove them into Southeast Asia, expanding their colonization to the yet unified Indonesian Archipelago in 19th Century, which has led to the formation of Indonesia in the modern sense. Naturally, Jones' personal journey doesn't signify any reverse archeology in the postcolonial era; this in no way detracts from the fact that this migration, both unexpected and justified, constructs a closed loop in which individual history and national history are intertwined despite the passage of time.

To any ancient civilization, the worship of colossi and nature is nothing less than rare. Volcanoes, for Jones, have extremely personal and special implication grounded in national identity, burying the seeds of a covert connection between lives early on in her mind. The idea of the volcano has gradually occupied her paintings before she could realize it: first as a distant background to the figure, then as the primary subject within the small canvas—sometimes so close that it's almost at hand, sometimes so far it's out of reach. Until recently, when Jones began to place herself in the distant presence of a volcano from her homeland, her perspective shifted with her physical, nomadic experience, and a new subject thus emerged. In her latest series, *Volcano Girls*, the paintings never really seem static, like a surging force of primordial life cannot be restrained: the bare, coarse canvas, some of the paint poured out suddenly is aggregated into figures, some pieced into language. The woman's body becomes one with the volcano piled with white paint, her limbs completely interiorized, leaving only her face and chest wide open like windows. The texts are now an act of absolute physicality, an impulsive, spontaneous muttering and declaration, self-expressing while constantly shaping a new body. These bodies are not isolated but rooted downward, deeper and broader until they are connected to a matrix of nature. Painting indeed serves as a parallel channel for the internalized digestion of the exterior world and the external manifestation of the immanent world. The volcano, as the embodiment of unknown forces from

the outside world, is something to be dreaded and yearned for simultaneously. As such, Jones commits herself to this inner cycle of life, allowing them to become each other in a spiritual dimension created by painting.

The body has always occupied the center of Jones' canvas, and documenting even the slightest changes and growth trajectories of the body is the core of her practice. She is fascinated by the process of life's transformation; like observing the metamorphosis of butterflies and frogs, we are all aware of their different appearances at different stages, but if observations are made not daily but hourly or even shorter periods of time, the changes become so subtle as to be imperceptible, yet miraculous. When the exact familiar figure repeatedly appears in the paintings, a particular conviction about the experience of life is reinforced. *Silhouette of Growth* presents such a triptych. Red, white, and black fiercely confront each other, except for the pink, which acts as mitigation between the red and white, each composing a different part of the body. Behind it, the world is divided into two that can be reciprocally inverted, framing the solid pyramid-like body in the foreground, whose lower limbs are concealed. Under the uninterrupted self-examination, the three juxtaposed subjects are refined and interpreted out of the self, both acting as different versions of the self within the same moment and revealing the different stages of the same body. In parallel, Jones surreally connects the torso to the head with the neck substituted by the structure of a spiral staircase, thus spatializing the parts of the body at both ends of the staircase, let alone the entire body per se. Recalling her childhood house in Bali, such a spiral staircase connected Jones' bedroom to the playroom, while in her current home in Amsterdam, her separate studio is also reached by a spiral staircase. Spiraling up or down a vertical canal is like traveling between a more public and more private space. When this symbol appears in the painting, its meaning is no doubt manifold, both functioning as an intermediary between the visible body and the unseen mind and revealing the body's dual nature of the intimate and the public. It is easy for people to fall into the illusion of absolute control over the body and to consider it private. However, Judith Butler reminds us, "Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine." Confronted with the examination, critique, and discipline, Jones exposes her vulnerability with the naked bodies in her work, and make reconciliation with herself at the same time.

If the body can still be concealed and disguised, the face can hide almost nowhere as there is too much information not to be recognized or deciphered: skin color suggests ethnicity and social class, while expression implies disposition and mood. Yet, in Jones' work, this criterion is defeated. *Seeker Girls* features a series of self-portrait-like variations, which are so distinct but similar. The distinction lies in the different color palette composition that does not correspond to the skin tones in reality; they are similar in that the portraits of these girls have no emotionally charged expressions other than a straight gaze. Jones seeks, precisely, to construct the shared quality of each specific individual that has removed or obscured their cultural identity. Only the gaze possesses the power to penetrate, as it is a duality, a keen awareness of the external world, a dichotomy with the gaze of the other, and an uninterrupted dialogue and confrontation and exchange with the world within.

Painting certainly establishes a mirrored space in contrast to Jones' self. The figures in her work, along with her own, grow and transform discreetly in their dimension of time. In her earlier works, the figures occasionally appear as men when she was documenting and imagining the

other sex in an intimate relationship as an observer. Later, more gender-neutral and even androgynous figures dominate the paintings, and underlying is her more active construction of increasingly complex, unstable, and shifting subjects. Meanwhile, Jones is aware that her perception and comprehension of her gender as a woman are intricately and subconsciously constructed. There is a significant disparity between the standardized, refined, and uniform feminine aesthetics and her perception. These days, in her practice, Jones becomes increasingly focused on herself, and more figures she creates are derived from accumulated daily self-observation, which is the most personal, the most authentic, and the last fortification for her as an artist. The true universality is abstract and ineffable, and its origin always returns to the discussion of the specification. Roland Barthes emphasized, “my body is not the same as yours”, which should be the foundation and consensus of any communication. The vast array of self-images that Jones has projected in her works today is not just a diary of self-representation but more of an essential foundation for a sincere dialogue with others that transcends identity and gender.

Symbols with mystical implications often accompany the body in Jones’ work; some have a consensual symbolic significance, others more personal codes, forming subconscious statements in contrast to the figurative body. Among these, there is nothing more recurrent and easily recognizable than the infinity symbol. Just as it signifies boundlessness, it can be found in many disciplines, including theology, philosophy, and mathematics. For Jones, the pictorial form of the infinity symbol is as important as its implication. Therefore, it sometimes hovers on its own in an empty space, sometimes superimposed with symmetrical leaves or breasts. When the symmetry of a symbol and its derived spiritual significance of harmony, balance, circulation, reincarnation and infinity constitute the essential properties of nature, the infinity symbol, for Jones, is not only a representation of concrete objects in reality, but also an abstract manifestation of the law of nature. In *Our Glance*, the infinity symbol occupies the absolute part of the painting, suggesting the scale of the human body and all things, alluding to the object of the hourglass, thus opening up the perception and imagination of the mystery of time. The finite space of the hourglass seems to enclose an equally finite amount of time without realizing that in its inversion and repetition, the finite time is thus prolonged in an infinite cycle. Could it be then that all seemingly finite bodies in this world, with their material process of birth, exuberance, decay, and death, meet no eventual end, either? In the extensive history of humanity, the soul, because of its immortality, invisibility and absence of boundaries, has been perceived as superior to the body in almost every culture. But it is precisely the body that carries time and in which time is made tangible. Everything is in flux; Jones is convinced of that. Perhaps eternity does not mean imperishability but rather implies constant rebirth. The finite body is thus able to come infinitely closer to eternity.

Painting, writing, and video together define Jones’ creative practice. With the focus on painting, sometimes the fragments in her writing are submerged into her canvas as the image of texts, while her videos are pieces about her practice and life loosely woven together as essayistic documentaries. In her most recent video, Jones immerses herself in vast water veiled in pink, allowing her body to float and wander in the medium of video. Her physical journey has in doubt taken her afar, from Bali, where people worship the deities and supernatural powers, to Amsterdam, where the belief in humanity prevails and the land was reclaimed from the ocean. Yet no matter how far the distance, how separate the lands, how different the cultures and the

beliefs, the boundless ocean still wraps the two and connects them. Just so, with free will, the body can always set sail on new adventures anytime, anywhere.