

# THE PEAK

MALAYSIA

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JULY 2016



## THE ART ISSUE

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TAKE A BOW  
THE COUNTRY'S  
6 GREATEST  
LIVING ARTISTS

ORIENT  
EXPRESSION  
MALAYSIA'S OWN  
ADELINE OOI

A HAVEN FOR  
CREATIVITY  
DANIEL KOMALA'S  
UBUD RETREAT

## A LEGACY OF ART

KOMAN WAHYU SUTEJA  
- ART SCION  
& ACCIDENTAL  
HOTELIER



## THE PEAK INTERVIEW



Koman Wahyu Suteja  
is wearing **CANALI's**  
burgundy jacket  
(MYR8,500).

# OF ART & THE ACCIDENTAL HOTELIER

On an island famed for its legendary hospitality, world-class hotels and artistic heritage, there are still a few gems that outshine the others. *The Peak* travels to Bali to speak to someone whose role encompasses them all: meet Koman Wahyu Suteja, founder of the Komaneka group of hotels and scion of the famous Neka art family.



BY DIANA KHOO  
STYLING & ART DIRECTION PENNY CHEW  
PHOTOGRAPHY  
GERALD GOH / IMAGE ROM  
PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANTS  
NELSON CHONG & JASON LEE  
PRODUCTION SUPPORT  
METAL BEES  
PHOTOGRAPHED ON LOCATION AT  
THE KOMANEKA AT BISMA, UBUD



It's a glorious morning in Ubud, Bali's undeniable artistic and cultural heart. Surrounded by bamboo forests, dramatic gorges and the sacred Ayung River, it's easy to see why legions of artists and creative souls have long found it to be a haven, a refuge even, not to mention a source of tremendous inspiration. It is also within the island's innumerable galleries and art museums that aficionados can find a wealth of works that pay tribute to Bali's life-giving force, or, as it is called in Sanskrit, *prana*. Few collections, however, are as outstanding as the one housed within Ubud's celebrated Neka Art Museum.

### THE NEKA LEGACY

Founded in 1982, the Neka Art Museum was built by Suteja Neka, a former school teacher who, after visiting the great museums of Europe and realising that some of Bali's finest art couldn't even be seen on the island of their creation, decided to set-up a dedicated space to house Balinese masterpieces from his personal collection, which included priceless works by Indonesian masters such as Affandi, Widayat and Hendra Gunawan, as well as the island's most famous, homegrown names – local luminaries like I Gusti Nyoman Lempad, Anak Agung Gede Sobrat and Ida Bagus Made Poleng, and, of course, the foreign talents, namely Arie Smit, Donald Friend and Rudolf Bonnet, who came to Bali, fell in love and stayed on, and whose renditions of a ritual-rich island, filled with exotic beauty, catapulted Balinese art onto the global arena.

“My father built the Neka Museum to share his love of Balinese art with people,” says Koman Wahyu Suteja. Born, literally, into art, Koman made his grand entrance into the world at what-was-then the Neka Art Gallery. “My father had arrived home late and my mother, Gusti Made Srimin, had an unexpectedly quick labour. There was no time to get to the hospital, so she had to deliver on the premises of the gallery, which was then in a *ruko* (shophouse) as the museum hadn't been built yet. So, you could say I was born surrounded by art,” he laughs. Certainly, not every child can lay claim to knowing great masters from young. “My father regularly hosted artists at dinners and formed lasting friendships with most of them,” he says. Arie Smit lived for a time with the Nekas, while Hendra Gunawan moved in after being released from prison. Koman also remembers his father buying Antonio Blanco a bicycle and how, as a child, he'd thought the great Affandi “very strange and scary-looking”. “It was only when I was older that I truly began to appreciate art and all that my father had established. And, once you develop this realisation, you will feel so blessed – being able to love and appreciate art is the reward itself.”

At 48 years of age, the youthful-looking Koman has long stepped out from under the shadow of the Neka name by establishing one of Bali's most well-known names in bijou-but-luxurious places to stay. The Founder of the Komaneka group of hotels shares: “I learnt this life lesson

of wanting to share good things with people from my father. But, instead of just art, I can also share hospitality.” For those unfamiliar with the Komaneka brand (a portmanteau of both father-and-son's names), Koman has succeeded in building a thriving, lucrative business that already spans four hotels in Ubud, with one more to open in a new location next year.

### BACK TO THE ISLAND

Educated in Jakarta as well as California, the young Koman had initially found success working for an American company in Bandung producing ski jackets, but was persuaded to return home in order to take over his father's duties in the community. To those who don't know, Balinese life is deeply rooted in communal *banjars*. In Balinese, *banjar* essentially means ‘neighbourhood’ and is, in fact, an administrative structure recognised by the Indonesian government. Every hundred or so families form their own *banjar* and monthly meetings are mandatory. All married men and their spouses are required to be part of a *banjar*, which is subject to its own rules and obligations. A key pillar of Balinese life, it is a must for the couple to participate in numerous duties or risk being ejected from the community. “Bali follows the patrilineal system, and your position and duties within the *banjar* are passed from father to eldest son. If you don't have a son, you would adopt one into the family. It's that important,” Koman explains. “I'm actually the second boy of the house. My



MY FATHER BUILT THE NEKA MUSEUM TO SHARE HIS LOVE OF BALINESE ART WITH PEOPLE.



elder brother, a urologist, had decided to further his studies and specialise, so the duty fell to me... and I couldn't really delay my return as it takes time to learn all the customs and traditions of the *banjar* and the temples.”

“I'd already been away from Bali for a good 10 years and, contrary to what you might think, I didn't really have any plans when I returned,” he continues. “Although I grew up surrounded by art, I was, I suppose, rebellious initially and studied business.” Once home, however, deep-seated memories resurfaced and art proved alluring again, prompting Koman to begin his new life in Bali by starting his own art venture. Crafting a beautiful space along Ubud's popular Monkey Forest Road, the Komaneka Fine Art Gallery opened for business in 1997 and remains a simple, beautiful space, spanning 400 sq m across two levels. A grand piano stands in a corner and currently on display are artworks by Nyoman Sujana Keryem, Suklu and I Ketut Suwidiarta. “I



With his father, the legendary Suteja Neka, after attending an odalan ceremony



started with just five artists and then began adding three or so to the roster each year. My parents, naturally, questioned my decision initially as Bali already had so many galleries,” he says. “It would also have been easy for me to open with all the big names in art due to my father’s connections, but I made a decision to be honest with myself – to focus on contemporary art, which I love, and showing only works by young, up-and-coming artists. I wanted to make my own way.”

### **ROOM TO GROW**

After a year in operation, the idea occurred to Koman to utilise excess space at the back of the gallery. “I thought it’d be a good thing to build some bungalows and a studio which artists could use as a residency. But, oh, how that backfired,” he laughs, explaining that, once given comfortable shelter, the artists preferred to enjoy the space and not work. “I then decided to change the concept and create a place where art lovers or collectors could stay instead.”

All great businesses, it must be said, begin with the germ of a good idea and Koman, inadvertently, spotted his niche. At the time, accommodation in Ubud was limited to either highly luxurious, like Amandari, or backpacker-style places. “I found there was no decent hotel that could bridge the gap,” he notes. Starting out with just 12 rooms, the Komaneka at Monkey Forest officially opened in 1998. Fast forward 18 years, hotels have since grown to be the biggest component of Koman’s business interests, with his gallery moving down to second place. “I’m truly what you’d call an ‘accidental hotelier’. In fact, I still find it incredible as my family’s background was in art, not hospitality,” he says. But, as all visitors will attest, he wouldn’t have needed one as graciousness seems to be an inherent trait for all Balinese.

“I suppose,” Koman muses, “it is because Bali is not class-conscious. You’d notice how, traditionally, there are no chairs in local life as everyone sits on the floor – at the same level. Culturally, you are also taught, almost from birth, about



## ART COLLECTING 101

Koman Suteja's Top Tips. Please take note.

01

**"SEE AS MUCH ART AS YOU POSSIBLY CAN."**

02

**"NEVER RUSH INTO A DECISION. IF THE ARTWORK IS STILL ON YOUR MIND AFTER A DAY OR TWO, THEN RETURN TO THE GALLERY. I ALWAYS TELL CUSTOMERS: THE ART HAS GOT TO SPEAK TO YOU; IT HAS TO ASK YOU QUESTIONS."**

03

**"ABSTRACT ART IS THE MOST DIFFICULT TO CREATE BUT I ALWAYS JOKE THAT, WITH ABSTRACT ART, YOU GET FOUR DIFFERENT PAINTINGS FOR THE PRICE OF ONE, SIMPLY BY TURNING IT AROUND."**

04

**"BE DISCIPLINED. SET A BUDGET AND KEEP TO IT."**

05

**"NEVER START BY BUYING EXPENSIVE PIECES."**

07

**"IF YOU CAN, ALWAYS SPEAK TO THE ARTIST SO YOU CAN KNOW HIS/HER THOUGHT PROCESS AND THE IDEAS BEHIND THE WORKS."**

06

**"ALLOW YOUR ARTISTIC INSTINCT TO DEVELOP ORGANICALLY."**



## KOMAN SUTEJA AT A GLANCE

A quick look at the  
gallerist-hotelier's life.

### BORN

1968, at the Neka Art Gallery.

### EDUCATION

Jakarta and Berkeley, California.

### HOBBY

Collecting antique Balinese doors.

### FAVOURITE READ

"I can read Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* over and over again as it helps me regain perspective. After reading it, no matter what challenges you face, you'd realise you are just so tiny in the universal scheme of things."

### PASSION

"Music – I played the electric guitar, bass and violin in high school, and even had my own band called Road. We played country, jazz and a little bit of rock."

### TRAVEL STYLE

"I always make it a point to travel with my wife. I also very much enjoy travelling with artists as I am fascinated by how they see things differently. I loved visiting places like Machu Picchu and Morocco, but I'd really like to visit Beijing next."

hospitality and the way in which you treat others. In Bali, it is always assumed that, if you come from someplace else, you wouldn't have family and you'd need help. That is why, whenever Balinese meet a foreigner, they'd always ask: *Sudah makan?* ('Have you eaten?'), before offering them food and drink. It's innate."

Today, with four hotels under his belt, all in Ubud (two along Monkey Forest Road, with another in Bisma and one more in Tanggayuda), it would seem that the 'accidental' Ubud hotelier is finally ready to stretch his wings, branching out of Bali's artistic heart – this time, to Keramas, on the island's East Coast.

### THE CALL OF THE SEA

"This was another happy accident," he says, smiling. "I'd bought part of the land there in 1998 and I didn't tell my parents as it was just after the Asian Financial Crisis. Interest rates on loans then were around 60 per cent. This village chief, I don't know how, had tracked me down and offered the land to me as he couldn't maintain it. Keramas was such a remote location then – there wasn't even a ready road to the



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TRANSFORM.  
”

site. After one week of persuasion, I finally went to see the land. We had to travel through villages, by motorbike on dirt roads, before, finally, walking through rice fields to get to it."

"My father wouldn't have agreed, so I didn't tell him," he smiles, conspiratorially. "And, over time, I started buying up more and more land." Fortune, however, always favours the brave and, when the government opened up a new road from Sanur to Klungkung in 2011, it made travelling to Keramas all the easier, with a journey from the airport taking just 30 minutes. "Land prices have skyrocketed since then," grins a pleased-looking Koman. "I'd bought land for IDR4million per 100 sq m then. Now, it costs IDR400million!"

The timing also proved fortuitous as Ubud had already become too congested. "It was the right time to look at expansion," he notes. "And Keramas is actually a wonderful site. Its main village, which has a long history of culture, is famous for a type of Balinese opera, while the area is also known for its *ikat* textiles." Scheduled to open in 2017, the new Komaneka at Keramas will be set amidst rice fields, with the call of the blue sea just a breath away. "I'm very excited about this new hotel and all my children like it already,"





he adds, sharing that it was routine to spend weekends ensconced within a beach hotel, with the family favourite being Amankila in Manggis, just up the coast from where the latest Komaneka will be. “Now, our beach retreats will, of course, be in Keramas,” he says, happily.

On the career path life had inadvertently set him, Koman shares: “As a child, I’d wanted to be an architect. In fact, my maternal grandfather was an *undagi*, a type of Balinese architect-priest, as they could also conduct blessing ceremonies during the building’s construction. It wasn’t just a physical role but also a spiritual one.” Blessed with the opportunity to realise his dream, in a way, through his hotels, Koman readily acknowledges his blessings. “When I married, my father had built me a grand home but my wife Mansri and I had always wanted a space of our own style and preference, and Komaneka gave us that freedom to create.”

## THE BALI BALANCE

As a father of four, whose children range from 21 to 10 years of age, Koman still makes it a point to travel extensively – especially to luxury hotels of his preference, which he finds

inspiring as well as soothing. “I try to travel once every quarter, although I was away practically every month last year. Now, I have to slow down a little as I’d just gotten a call from one of the teachers, reporting how my kids didn’t want to study! So, on top of my *banjar* responsibilities and work, I now have homework-monitoring duty,” he laughs.

Certainly as passionate about five-star hospitality as he is about art, Koman’s preferred hotel brands are Amanresorts as well as Four Seasons. “I dislike flashy luxury and much prefer a cultured approach to hotels, which is something Aman does very well, as evident in its Siem Reap property, Amansara. I also like the Four Seasons Istanbul a lot – not the one along the Bosphorus but the one at Sultanahmet, which is set in a century-old former prison. It’s excellent.” It should come as no surprise then that Koman is a big fan of Ed Tuttle’s style of architecture as well as that of Geoffrey Bawa. “My father had known Bawa,” he volunteers, “whom he met through the Australian artist, Donald Friend, when he was in Bali working on the Batu Jimbar estates.”

And, just as Koman prefers to work with young artists for his gallery, he maintains a similar approach to staffing his

Koman Wahyu Suteja is wearing **DIOR HOMME**’s navy blue wool two-button jacket (POA).

Photographed on location at the **Komaneka Fine Art Gallery**.



Koman Wahyu Suteja is wearing **DIOR HOMME**'s navy blue wool two-button jacket (POA).

hotels. "I like grooming people," he says matter-of-factly, "and I think there is something immensely fulfilling seeing lives transform." If you happen to stay at Komaneka, you might notice a little booklet by your bedside, documenting the heartwarming life stories of Koman's long-staying staff, like Ketut Ariana, for example, who'd moved up the ladder from housekeeping to reservations manager, as well as numerous love stories, each of which continues to grow the Komaneka family 'organically', while giving the hotel brand a palpable sense of humanity and the touch of true 'family-style' hospitality – something all too rare in today's world.

"I like to measure success using the 'Bali benchmark'," he muses. "When I first decided to open Komaneka, I went

for a meeting with the village, telling them of my plans and asking if they had family members who wanted to work with me. I then gave them time to prepare for the roles they wanted – by learning computing, improving their language skills and so on. I wanted as much as possible to recruit from within and around. To be honest, I never had a business plan with quarterly forecasts. Of course, the business is run professionally but I prefer a more heartfelt way of working." It's a formula that has paid off handsomely, for sure. Staff feel a deep connection and profound loyalty to the brand and, as many guests will tell you, it feels less like a typical hotel and more like staying in the home of a friend – albeit a very rich, cultured and gracious one.

### THE WAY FORWARD

Amazingly grounded, Koman also warns of the dangers of greed. "This is why I find Bali offers the perfect balance of life," he says. "If you live here, normality will always pull you back to earth. There will be temple ceremonies to attend, ensuring you remember your place in the divine scheme of things, while community duties and obligations ensure you remain grounded. For those focused

primarily on profit, you must ask yourself: what is it you really want from life? Once you answer honestly, you'd realise you don't need all that much and it always boils down to ego. For me, I am so happy I am able to fulfil my duties to my family and community, while finding work most rewarding. The hotels have given me the freedom to support my passion for art without having to worry if I can sell the paintings or not, while this 'accidental career' has also enabled me to meet so many interesting people, from Nobel Laureates like Joseph Stiglitz to stars like Richard Gere. One really can't ask for more." In the course of conversation with Koman, you'd notice that 'blessed' is an adjective that crops up all-too often. But who can blame him? We'd feel exactly the same. 🙏