A Tale of Humanity; Visual Rhetoric of Photographic Imagery in Independent Comic

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Abstract

Photographic imagery is an element that appears only in a small portion of comics but is thought to have a particular function in building the story plot. Storytelling became a crucial element in the creation of independent comics in Indonesia after 2010 so they could reach a wider audience. The warmth of humanity's tale intersecting with stories of everyday life reflects on the readers, who immediately find a connection to the tale. In comics titled 'Pupus Putus Sekolah' by Kurnia Harta Winata and 'Left Behind' by Azisa Noor, which were created and self-published by the creators themselves, photographic imagery is presented as part of a visual narrative that bonds the relationships and reduces conflict between people, without losing its ability to remain entertaining.

This study aims to investigate the visual rhetoric of photographic imagery in independent comics with humanity stories. The photographic imagery examined in this research is illustrations that represent photographic media and not scene visualization using photographic techniques. This study uses a qualitative method, with descriptive analysis based on a visual rhetorical approach, to see the symbolic ability of photographic imagery in constructing the meaning of comic stories.

The result of the study showed that photographic imageries in independent comics were presented with the same illustration depiction style as the characters in the story through a photo framing code, whether in the form of a frame or a smartphone screen. The rhetoric of photographic imagery carries out visual descriptions that function as 'given information' in a sequential series, without which a comic story would have a completely different meaning.

Keywords:
independent comic, photographic imagery, visual rhetoric, humanity

Introduction

Independent comics are comics published independently by the creator, either individually or as a group. This cultural phenomenon can be traced to the works of 'indie comics' and the Indie Comics Movement in the mid-1990s to early 2000s. At that time, the independent comics produced mainly emphasized freedom in creation, were anti-narrative, and tried to go against the mainstream. Some independent comics are used to convey social commentary and criticism of

the government [1]. After 2010, several differences in independent comic creation began to consider reader acceptance. Storytelling became a crucial element in the creation of independent comics in Indonesia so they could reach a broader yet specific audience. The form can be a fictional story with the warmth of humanity's tale intersecting with stories of everyday life, which reflects on the readers, who immediately find a connection to the tale. In self-published comics with humanity story titled "Pupus Putus Sekolah" (2022)[2] by Kurnia Harta Winata and 'Left Behind' (2017)[3] by Azisa Noor, photographic imageries are presented as part of the visual narrative that bonds the relationships and reduces conflict between people, without losing its ability to remain entertaining. Photographic imagery may be an element that appears only a small portion of the comic but is thought to have a particular function in building and delivering the story plot.

A study of the visual rhetoric of photographic imageries in independent comics to convey the meaning of the story is essential to see the latest developments in this medium. So far, studies of independent comics in Indonesia have focused more on their phenomenal aspects as a form of symbolic resistance to the New Order regime [4]. Some studies discuss the emergence, social function, visual style, and distribution system of independent comics in the late 1990s to early 2000s—for example, a study of independent comic works produced by Athonk [5]. The relationship between comics and the medium of photography has been examined, as seen from its categorization [6], function in the story [7], and exploration [8]. Apart from the medium of photography, imaginative images that represent photos can be seen in their role in weaving comic stories [9]. A study of the visual rhetoric of photographic imagery in independent comics published after 2010 will complement the existing studies.

This study aims to investigate the visual rhetoric of photographic imagery in independent comics with humanity stories such as "Pupus Putus Sekolah" (2022) and "Left Behind" (2017) as the study cases. The photographic imageries examined in this research are illustrations that represent photographic media and not scene visualization using photographic techniques. This study wants to see the uniqueness of the creation model in comics published by the creators themselves after 2010. The study will pay attention to storytelling through the textual rhetoric of the comics themselves. It is hoped that the research results will add to the discussion regarding comic art, which influences the power of Indonesian comics, work creation, and the production of artistic knowledge.

The argument presented in the discussion is that the depiction of photographic images in the comic "Pupus Putus Sekolah" and the comic "Left Behind" have a critical rhetorical function in building the complete meaning of the story. The meaning of the story in the comics Pupus and Left Behind is that it places the relationship between characters in a humanistic situation, which targets the aesthetic response of the reader. The presence and way of displaying and arranging photographic imagery elements in a series of story-images cannot be separated from the reader's understanding of comic stories. Related to this, this study will examine how the visual rhetoric of photographic images presents the significance of the meaning of the story, which leads to relationships between humans and humanity.

Literature Review

Independent comics in Indonesia are often abbreviated as 'indie comics', which has a similar definition when referred to as 'indie label,' 'underground,' 'independent,' or 'alternative' comics, as

comics created independently and distributed by the creators themself [4][5]. The categories of development and characteristics of works in the history of British and American comics are divided into Underground, Independent, and Alternative periodizations, as stated by Roger Sabin [10][11]. So far, those categories have only been absorbed as names for objects, the self-published comic book and do not distinguish between periodizations in Indonesian comics culture. Having been recognized since 1995, independent comics in Indonesia were still present at the end of the 2010s [12].

Comics are multimodal media with a flexible narrative form; apart from using images and text, sometimes they also include other images in the form of photography. Photography as a record of events confirms the myth and becomes stronger when photography is visualized side by side or in juxtaposition with images in comics [7]. Photography in comics has an impact on the visual narrative practice of comics, which fulfills and exceeds its documentary function with the way it is presented. It can be in the form of a quasi-equal mix of photography and cartooning, cartoon-altered photographs reproduced, drawn photographs, even the photo comics themselves [8][6]. Apart from that, there are also forms of imagery that represent photography in comics, in the form of photographic images that exist in the world of the story without referring to specific photographic works. The photographic image in the picture story 'Taufan' (1973-1975) by Ganes TH, the recording process is told in a scene. The result, in the form of a single photo featuring a family, becomes the connecting line of a 600-page comic story that stretches from the Japanese colonial era to the New Order era. The photographic imagery in the picture story goes beyond its initial function as a passive visual recorder so that it can function actively as a recorder that continues and brings forth events [9].

Visual rhetoric highlights the relationship between an image and its ability to be understood by considering three characteristics: (1) The visual image is symbolic, (2) Involves human intervention, and (3) Presented to an audience [13]. A study of visual rhetoric in photography media shows several things. In portrait photos, the photographic rhetoric that is often displayed is the play of the framing portion, supported by technological and economic factors and production flows involving photographers and photo designers [14]. In newspaper advertisements, the rhetorical style of photos aims to persuade readers, reproducing discourse about attractiveness that is in line with technological, social, and political developments in Indonesia [15]. The study of photographic rhetoric shows that visual rhetoric in photographic imagery has a signifying function to achieve communication goals, with choices of rhetorical construction that socially reflect specific cultural contexts.

From a reader survey, the human side in superhero comics is defined as human weaknesses, philanthropic efforts, and reliance on more human skills [16]. The humanity side of comics is increasingly being presented in alternative comics or graphic novels, which previously started with biographical, autobiographical, and non-fiction stories in self-published comics [10]. The characters in these comics are ordinary people with everyday life struggles. One type of comic that presents and touches the human side is Graphic Medicine, which was introduced by Ian William (a general practitioner and also a comics creator) for works that explore the interaction between the comic medium and health discourse. Graphic medicine has more ability to touch its readers through openness, humor, detail, and sensitivity in depicting the subjective experiences of its creators and revealing matters related to disease [17]. The spatiotemporal dimension of comics, through closure between panels, encapsulation, and depiction, processes trauma/disease into 'imagetexts.' This allows the visual rhetoric of comics to be present in the form of accessible understanding by readers in articulating emotional notes from the comic creator's subjective experience. The unique structure

and formal accessibility of comic media broaden the reader's entry into subjective reality and also able to actualize the indescribable intricacies of human life [18].

Method

The research object is in the form of a photographic imagery or drawing that represents a photographic object in a panel, or series of panels, in the independent comic "Pupus Putus Sekolah" (2022) and 'Left Behind' in the anthology comic "Lesson" (2017). This study uses a qualitative method, with descriptive analysis based on a visual rhetorical approach, to see the symbolic ability of photographic imagery in constructing the meaning of comic stories. The data collected through the literature review in this research is the textual comics researched and literature that is related to comic studies, starting from the appreciation and creation of comic art by Scott McCloud [19][20] and the language of comic by Mario Saraceni [21].

The analysis process is carried out in two stages. The first is to pay attention to the presence of photographic images in comic stories and see them as elements in the story. The next stage of analysis is the interpretation of what was found in the first stage of analysis [22]. In this analysis stage, visual rhetoric studies are applied using the two orders of the signification process approach, introduced by Roland Barthes [23], where the signifiers in this layer are signs previously produced by the relationship between the signifier and signified in the first layer of signification.

Result & Discussion

Pupus Putus Sekolah! Anak Berharga

The comic book "Pupus Putus Sekolah!; Anak Berharga" was created and published independently by Kurnia Harta Winata in July 2022. This comic is A5 size (21x14cm), with a thickness of 128 pages, and is printed in color. The settings and objects in the comic are drawn in a realistic style and lighting, while the characters are drawn in a cartoon style with black outlines and flat colors. The comic book "Pupus Putus Sekolah" summarizes 33 story episodes that were previously broadcast in digital form via the Line Webtoon Indonesia platform. To publish in book format, each page was re-arranged from the scroll comic format version. On the back cover, there is text stating, "Graphic novel for children, teenagers, adults and parents who question the conventional education system." This shows that the diction choice 'Putus Sekolah' or 'Dropout of School' in the title has a symbolic meaning. The comic "Pupus" tells the story of Pupus, a girl in grade 1 of elementary school who did not continue her education after her grandmother died. Pupus is described as a child who is critical, outspoken, and very curious. While helping his uncle, who worked as a janitor at a university, Pupus met Professor Suryo, an elderly lecturer who has gray hair and walks with the help of a cane. Professor Suryo offered Pupus to stay with him, at his own expense and promised to help Pupus continue studying. She is allowed to study at a regular school, but Pupus is more interested in Professor Suryo's suggestion: to be able to study anywhere, anytime, and from anyone. From here, the story flows about Pupus, who learned directly from life experience under the tutelage of Professor Suryo.

Photographic imagery in "Pupus Putus Sekolah" appears in the 6th segment of the book, in the form of a photo of Professor Suryo's family when he was young, which is mounted on the wall of the front room of the house, facing the front, above a small table and rattan chair. Photos are displayed using gold-framed glass frames. This family photo was drawn by Kurnia in a style that is not much different from the comic setting, giving a realistic impression with gradient color

dimensions without outline. This shows that the photo image is an object in the setting. In the photo, Professor Suryo and his wife are seen in the back position, along with their two young daughters in the front. In order from left to right are the First Daughter (wearing a blue shirt), Prof Suryo (wearing a striped collared shirt), the Wife (wearing a white *encim* kebaya), and the Second Daughter (wearing a pink shirt), in a standing pose. The medium close-up angle shows the upper half of the family's body, backed by a dark brown gradient cloth typically used by photo studios. This photo of the Suryo family appears as an object in the living room setting in a series of morning tea-drinking scenes.

The family photo is explained in the dialogue between Pupus and the Professor. The emphasis occurs on the next panel, which shows a 'cropping' of the family photo, focusing on the figure of the Professor's Wife, who has a cool, smiling gaze. It was said that Professor Suryo's wife had died, and the cup he used to drink tea that morning was the cup his wife had bought him. Professor Suryo remembers his beloved wife. By continuing to drink tea from the cup of memories, he felt like he was kissing his wife. He asked Pupus to be careful with the cup, which was white and decorated with floral ornaments. The story escalates when Pupus carelessly breaks the cup.

There are 3 photographic imageries in this story segment, which are basically just one photo shown repeatedly with a narrowed framing portion (Figure 1). The first photographic imagery in the Pupus comic represents a photographic object: a 'family photo.' This family photo image is then recalled in a narrower framing portion, in the form of a comic panel containing a second photographic imagery: 'close up of the figure of the Professor's Wife.' In the scene when the cup falls, this close-up photo panel is recalled again, and the framing portion is narrowed more, becoming the third photographic image: 'photograph of the Professor's Wife.' The panel's photograph of the Professor's Wife returns to accompany the scene where Pupus goes to sleep.

Figure 1. Three Photographic Imageries in "Pupus Putus Sekolah!"
1.a. Family Photo, 1.b. 'Close-Up Of The Figure Of The Professor's Wife,' 1.c. 'The Professor's Wife'

Figure 2.
2.a. 'The Professor Wife' on the critical scene of the falling cup.
2. b. 'The Professor Wife' is a reference to the black shadow figure

In the first order of signification, the image represents the object 'family photo,' likewise when narrowed down to 'photo of the Professor's wife.' The second order of signification comes when the same 'photo of the Professor's Wife' is shown again, accompanying the critical scene of the cup falling and leading up to the horror scene when Pupus sleeps (Figure 2). This image represents the figure of 'The Professor's Wife' herself. In the diegesis of the story, 'The Professor's Wife' appears as a figure in Pupus' mind. Outside the story diegesis: as a mental awareness direction in the reader's mind that 'Professor's Wife': (1) is a good figure who touches the reader's heart, and also (2) a figure who monitors Pupus' behavior. The photographic imagery of the Professor's Wife, who is shady and smiling, is equivalent to a panopticon tower, whose symbolic presence makes a person feel constantly being watched and self-disciplined [24].

A sequence of panels creates a family photo initially as 'added information' or new information added to a panel. In the next panel, in the same or reduced form, the family photo becomes 'given information' or repeated information to present the story meaning [21]. The black shadow figure and 'ghost' of the Professor's Wife in Pupus' Nightmare has a silhouette contour and character attributes in the form of clothing and hairstyle that take reference from the figure of the 'Professor's Wife' (Figure 2. b). This depiction was, of course, intentional by Kurnia to refer to an existing 'given information,' that is, the figure of the Professor's Wife, based on the same silhouette shape and

attributes. The meaning of the story is an explosion of tension and surprise, which ultimately makes Pupus wake up and choose to be honest with the Professor about the cup he broke. Pupus in the story and readers who perceive this pictorial story only have one and only reference in recognizing the face and figure of Professor Suryo's Wife, namely from the photo. From this one reference, Kurnia processes the figure of the Professor's Wife into several story needs: "as a wife who is remembered," "as the Madam Professor who monitors and overshadows Pupus' actions," "as the Professor's Wife who touches the reader's affections," including making her "as a reference figure in Pupus' nightmare."

Visual rhetoric according to the needs of the story is present through Kurnia's arrangement of the grammatical composition of the comic. These photographic imageries, even though presented in separate panels among other visual symbols, are able to convey story meaning because the ability of closure also supports the composition. Closure is the ability to see parts and understand them as a whole. It is a structure that allows readers to connect visual symbols in comics and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality [19].

The object of the professor's family photo is displayed to represent the ability of the medium of photography to show 'reality' realistically and straightforwardly without losing its intimacy [25]. The nature of photographic reality is built on the style of depicting photographic images, which are maintained as photographic objects in the form of family photos. Straightforwardly, the photographic imagery can visually present the figure of the Professor's Wife with a distinctive charisma and intimate affection. A series of comic sequences constructs a photographic image as a rhetorical photo object into a symbolic figure. Photographic images make it easier for Kurnia to organize the rhetoric of picture stories in carrying out humanist story plots that show the purpose of this comic, about how Pupus can learn from her mistakes and then be honest, admitting her mistake, and also Professor Suryo who learns to forgive.

Left Behind

'Left Behind' is a 16-page short comic by Azisa Noor in the anthology "Lessons," which was published independently by the Archfriend collective in 2017. This black and white comic is A6 size (14.5x10cm) and is distributed directly by the maker at comic events. In accordance with the big theme of the anthology, the story 'Left Behind' is set in a high school, specifically class 3B, the students, and its mysterious class resident. This one resident is the background of the story. There are rumors that the class is haunted because a student in that class died before graduating, so he was 'left behind.' The characters in this comic are not given names. The majority of narrative texts are in the form of monologues from one of the characters. The panels show images that intersect with the text, where words and pictures work together in some respects while also contributing information independently [20]. The image is made using a manga-style approach, which has been processed to become a characteristic of Azisa's style, with a more dominant outline and slight shading in certain parts.

Figure 3.
Ghost Wefie Digital Photograph

Figure 3 displays the photographic imagery on page 3 of this comic, in the top panel, in the form of a photo on a smartphone screen. This is indicated by the image of the finger holding it and the 'edit' text that accompanies the photo image feature in the smartphone gallery. This photographic image itself shows the impression of a wefie, a photographic group portrait taken by one of the people in the photo. The photographic imagery shows the three students' faces clearly recorded, and another one at the back shows a transparent figure whose depiction is differentiated, with a thin and discontinuous outline and hair color that is not black. The elements that make up this figure's face are described as incomplete, in contrast to the three figures in front; eyes, nose, lips, and eyebrows clearly show facial expressions. The previous panel sequence shows the students' impression of shock because they captured the photo of the Ghost Student. In the panel that follows, they collectively stare at the smartphone screen intently and look closely at their photos together with the Ghost Student. The appearance of the Ghost Student in the photograph could be referred to as "photobombing," an act to intrude into the background of a photograph without the subject's knowledge [26].

In the significance of the first layer, the image represents the object of a 'ghost selfie photo,' which was recorded accidentally when carrying out selfie photo activities with a smartphone. Drawing a photo image on the smartphone screen represents a digital photo, a photo whose recording production is considered more accessible. People can see the results of digital photos without having to go through the printing process because they are data that can always be changed by the need but still perform similar quality [27]. The depiction of the photographic imagery has the

same style as the style of the characters in this comic, showing the realistic side of the digital photo. So rhetorically, the photographic imagery of a ghost selfie photo shows a description of a ghost figure in a 'realistic' digital photo recording, which becomes the basis for the logic and progress of the story plot. The signification process in the second stage of the 'ghost wefie photo' image shows confirmation of 'evidence of Ghost Students in class' in the story. Evidence of reality in the form of this photo is present in the diegesis of the story, exists, and is seen by the characters in the story, making the existence of the Ghost Student recognized.

Regarding the characteristic of photobombing, the Ghost Student as a transgressive entity within a conventional image setting, adding popular appeal and opening it up for public consumption with the possibility of going viral [26]. In the running story, after knowing the Ghost Student's existence, most likely because of the photograph, the other students treat him as a classmate. The Ghost Student's existence binds the spirit of class togetherness in their daily activities as students when preparing for the National Examination. The photographic image of a 'ghost wefie photo' presents a humanistic side, mutual respect, and cooperation, eliminating the boundaries of 'the otherness' between humans and spirits, even though they do not actually interact. This leads the story to close with a page containing the second photographic imagery panel in this comic, as shown in Figure 4.
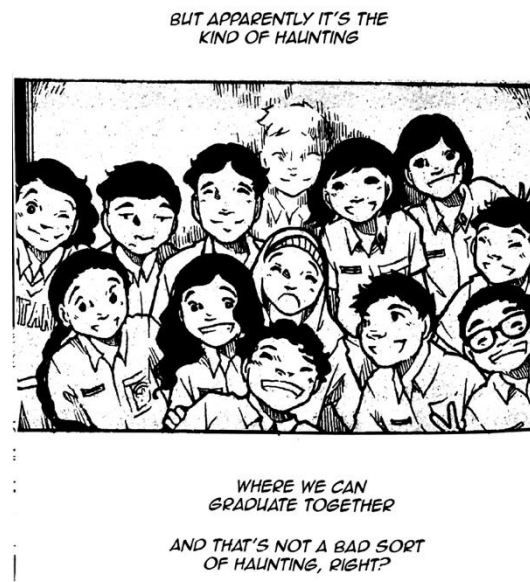

Figure 4.
"Class Graduation Photo"

Figure 4 displays a panel containing photographic imagery showing a group photograph of class 3B students standing together. And in the middle back position, Ghost Student is also present. In this image, the Ghost Student is depicted with a smiling face. This panel does not show a framing code that refers explicitly to the photographic medium. Still, instead, by looking at the gestures of the students in the picture, they show various poses as when people are photographed together. In the first order of signification, this image represents a photo with the classmates, which refers more specifically to the 'Class Graduation Photo.' The second order of signification comes along

with the comic composition, which places it at the conclusion of the story; the photographic image represents 'Graduation Achieved Together.' This is supported by a linguistic message in the form of narrative text, which shows that: "...It's The Kind Of Haunting Where We Can Graduate Together, And That's Not A Bad Sort Of Haunting, Right?"

The figure of the Ghost Student, who is also present, smiling in the photo, can be considered to have also graduated because he has studied together with other friends and also taken the exam. His figure appears as a mysterious moment that is "caught by the camera," present in a photographic image done using drawing techniques. The comic creator chooses the moment depicted as subjectively as possible, and the choice to display the drawing in the form of a photographic image makes it interpreted the same as the medium of photography which is generally perceived to capture a real moment literally [28]. The photographic image displays the realistic nature of the moment, supported by the depiction of the figures of the students in the photo with gestures that are typical of group photo moments. Many were smiling, some were not ready, some were not looking at the camera, some were showing two fingers as a symbol of victory, and some were crowding together to find the center point of the camera frame. Instead of presenting a photobombing as in the wefie photo, the graduation photo has a more robust impression as being a photograph of togetherness.

Rhetorically, this image that shows familiarity and togetherness communicates the story's meaning as the happy ending of the haunted class story. Even though it remains a mystery, Ghost Students are treated the same as other friends. This makes the comic storytelling 'Left Behind' confirms the uniqueness of Azisa Noor's unique horror-friendship-spiritual comics. The independent spirit frees up the creation of comic stories supported by a subjective and personal drawing art style without having an obligation to follow the hegemony of the industrial comic model to gain attention and appreciation.

Conclusion

The results of the study showed that photographic imageries in independent comics were presented with the same illustrative drawing depiction style as the characters and objects' drawings in the story. Photographic imagery confirmed its photography characteristic through a photo framing code, whether in the form of a wooden frame or a smartphone screen. The depiction of photographic imagery is an attempt to show a representation of the 'reality' as in the photographic medium, the authenticity of the recorded moments, and added to its function as a symbolic image in storytelling.

Rhetorically, photographic imagery in comics is metonymic. Its presence is only in the form of a snippet; the portion is small, but it represents a connecting line of the entire storytelling concept beyond the photo object itself. The rhetoric of photographic imagery carries out visual descriptions that function as 'given information' in a sequential series, without which a comic story would have a completely different story meaning. The attraction, twist, and plot of the story are arranged by utilizing the photographic imagery as an object of a photographic medium and, at the same time, as a symbol, making it easier for readers to understand. Visual rhetoric and readers' understanding cannot be separated from the way the photographic imagery is depicted and arranged, along with other elements in the sequential composition of comics.

The scientific contribution that this research can provide is knowledge regarding the use of photographic imagery elements to explore independent comic storytelling in Indonesia, which continues to develop. Contemporary independent comics are starting to place storytelling elements in visual narratives to increase reading interest, consumption, and appreciation of the comic medium itself. The creative control of independent comics, which is held entirely by the creators themselves, gives them the exploratory freedom to be able to present story-image rhetoric to touch and create a closer relationship with their readers through the use of photographic imagery in comics.

This research is still limited to the cases studied, and the discussion carried out is still limited to discussing visual rhetoric and its function in stories based on humanitarian themes. The use of independent comics as a medium for building human relations can be researched further.

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Seno Gumira Ajidarma was born in 1958, studying film at the Cinematography Department of the Jakarta Arts Education Institute (LPKJ). I completed the Basic Study Phase in 1980 and Strata 1 in 1994, when LPKJ became the Film and Television Faculty of the Jakarta Arts Institute (FFTV-IKJ). His thesis was published as "Layar Kata: Menengok 20 Skenario Pemenang Citra FFI 1973-1992" *(2000)*. Writing film criticism as a journalist since 1977. After graduating Strata 2 (Philosophy) and Strata 3 (Cultural Studies) from the Faculty of Cultural Sciences, University of Indonesia (FIB-UI), he still teaches at his alma mater - apart from the IKJ Postgraduate School, FIB Postgraduate Program -UI, European Regional Studies (KWE) UI Postgraduate School, Indonesian Art Institute (ISI) Surakarta Postgraduate Program, and Performing Arts and Visual Arts Studies Program (PSPSR) Gadjah Mada University (UGM) Postgraduate School. His thesis, "Fotografi Antara Dua Subjek: Perbincangan tentang Ada," published as "Kisah Mata," received the 2022 Nugra Jasa Dharma Pustaloka award from the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia. His study is about the comic "*Panji Tengkorak: Kebudayaan dalam Perbincangan"* (2011) and "*Ngobrolin Komik"* (2021). Also made comics with Aznar Zacky, *Jakarta 2039* (2001), *Sukab Intel Melayu* (2002), Sheila Rooswita Putri, *Conversation in the Waiting Room* (2020), Thomdean, *Macan* (2021), and Gerdy WK, *Layang-Layang* (2022).