

After the Storm:

Five artists from the Philippines

Christina Quisumbing Ramilo

Elaine

Roberto Navas

Jill Paz

Juan Alcazaren

Leslie de

Chavez

Godfrey

curated by Tony

WIZUMA GALLERY

16.10 — 14.11.2021

NEWS FROM AN OCCUPIED COUNTRY TONY GODFREY IN CONVERSATION WITH GAO YI YUAN

GAO YI YUAN

I thought the correct title for this exhibition was “After the Storm”?

TONY GODFREY

Yes, it is, but it turned out to be a poor choice. It would have been better to call it “News from an occupied country”. From 1940 to 1944, if you were a person in Britain or the USA and one interested in art, that was what you were desperate for. News from Paris, then the acknowledged centre for advanced art, and under Nazi occupation. What were Picasso, Matisse, and the other great masters doing? And, of course, if you knew people in either Singapore or the Philippines, both then occupied by the Japanese army, you were desperate for news from them too. In 1944, the first destination for many people on entering liberated Paris was the studio of Picasso. One of the first exhibitions mounted in London when peace finally came was of Picasso and Matisse – we wanted to catch up.

Cut off, save by the Internet, from the rest of the world since March last year by Covid the Philippines has felt like an occupied country.

So, my title for this exhibition, “After the Storm”, chosen six months ago in April, proved to be unduly optimistic: the storm, that is to say the pandemic, has never blown stronger in the Philippines than when this exhibition opens. By August, Manila had gone back into lockdown. Throughout the summer, the Delta variant spread inexorably. The hospitals were, and are, overflowing, the medical staff exhausted and disillusioned. Despite almost everyone wearing masks in public plus face-shields in shops and enclosed spaces, the scarcity of vaccines has left the population vulnerable. With the developing nations hogging the vaccines, it has taken painful months to get more than twenty percent of adult Filipinos vaccinated. Many artists have been taken ill, several seriously.

Now, this isn't an exhibition about Covid-19, but about how artists survived, and are surviving the pandemic. Since April, I asked the five artists in this exhibition these questions: "What work will we make now for after the pandemic? Has the pandemic just meant a nice quiet time in the studio or some angst? Will we just carry on as we did before, or is there some change that the events of the last year and the current situation will make us take?"

Their unspoken response was to make new work for this exhibition. The artists have never stopped working: some found they could spend longer in the studio, as suddenly there were no distractions or social obligations they had to attend. Others could not get to their studio and had to work in their kitchen. Not surprisingly, all but one of the artists include drawings or paper works in this show. Perhaps, above all, work made in the pandemic is marked by intimacy and thoughtfulness.

And for myself, I am interested in THE VOICE OF THE ARTIST.

GY

Can you explain what you mean by that?

TG

We do not only want news of those in an occupied country that we know or follow. We want to hear their voice. To be able to speak freely is the privilege and reward of liberation. Well, with travel restrictions, we can't bring the five artists to Singapore to talk to us at the Private View (what private view?) or at some public event. But I can speak to them and record our conversation so that you can get an idea of what we are thinking and talking about.

That is what I am trying to do here. And it is very overdue.

Over the past few years, and especially when researching my most recent book *The Story of Contemporary Art* (published 2020 Thames and Hudson/MIT) which was an attempt at a global perspective, I had become aware of how few interviews there are on the web with Asian artists, whereas there are so many for artists in the West. Google, for example, "Kiki Smith interview" or "Sophie Calle interview" and you can find several interviews with each. But do the same for their equivalents in South-east Asia and you are unlikely to find anything. Artists from this region are strangely voiceless. I want to do something about that.

The project I had been meaning to start in 2020 was a website for interviews with artists...

GY

But this is a catalogue.

INTRODUCTION:

- TG Yes, but it is also in effect what we might call the pilot issue of the website. A website I plan to launch early next year with these five interviews included and others.
- GYG Why a website? I associate you with books and essays printed in traditional paper catalogues or in magazines.
- TG Books, websites and email do different things. My books take years to research and write. Even when I have finished, the publisher will take over a year to prepare, design and print it. With my series of email “letters” *Tuesday in the Tropics* (1994-2020), I wanted to send informal up to date reports of what I saw. With a website it is out there quickly, accessible to all interested and free. Something to hopefully interest people who know little of what goes on in this area – and a resource for future researchers.
- Also, with a website, I can be more generous with words and images than any book or magazine. How often do you read an interview longer than 1,500 words?
- GYG Rarely! These interviews are long and also retrospective, not just about an artist’s recent work!
- TG In the UK, where I come from, all these artists would have been given retrospectives. We would know something about their past, the development of their work. But the museums and galleries that do that in the UK don’t exist in the Philippines and elsewhere.
- GYG You live in the Philippines now, but you used to live in Singapore. Do you plan to interview artists here too?
- TG I hope so, when travelling gets easier and if someone will cover my air fare. And hopefully also to Indonesia and Malaysia where I used to visit regularly– Maritime South-east Asia.
- GYG These five interviews were all done by email or messenger. Would you normally interview people live and record it?
- TG Of course, in their studio, but with Covid at its height, “talking” remotely was advisable. Also, they were all people I had worked with just before the pandemic.

INTRODUCTION:

GYG

Well, good luck with it!

TG

Thanks, and I am hoping for feedback; whether my approach is useful, my format the right one and so on. People can email me at Tony.Godfrey.Sing@gmail.com

Tony Godfrey has been writing and lecturing about contemporary art since 1978. His books have included *Conceptual Art* (1998) and *Painting Today* (2009) – both published by Phaidon press. He left London for Singapore in 2009 where he led the MA in Contemporary art at Sotheby's Institute, then worked as the curator at Equator Art Projects, Gillman Barracks. He now lives in the Philippines. His most recent books are *Ding Yi* (2020) published by Lund Humphries, and *The Story of Contemporary Art* (2020) published by Thames and Hudson and MIT. Yet to be published is *Far Away but Strangely Familiar: Twenty-three Artists from the Philippines*.

Gao Yi Yuan is a writer based in Singapore.



Tony Godfrey in Batangas by Mt. Maculot, with Geraldine Javier's dog Loki, 2020, photograph by Geraldine Javier.





Installation view of artworks by Jill Paz at Mizuma Gallery, 2021.



Jill Paz
The Three Graces
 2021
 acrylic on laser carved wood
 30.5 × 49 cm (12 × 19.3 inches)



Jill Paz
The Three Graces
 2021
 acrylic on laser carved wood
 30.5 × 50.8 cm (12 × 20 inches)



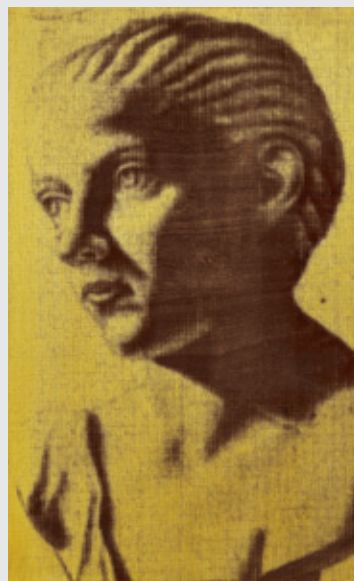
Jill Paz
The Three Graces
 2021
 acrylic on laser carved wood
 30 × 49 cm (11.8 × 19.3 inches)



Jill Paz
The Three Graces
 2021
 acrylic on laser carved wood
 23 × 37 cm (9 × 14.6 inches)



Jill Paz
The Three Graces
 2020
 acrylic on laser carved wood
 48.3 × 29.2 cm (19 × 11.5 inches)



Jill Paz
Untitled (After Hidalgo's Bust of a Girl)
 2021
 acrylic on laser carved wood
 37 × 23 cm (14.5 × 9 inches)



Jill Paz
The Three Graces
 2021
 graphite and charcoal on paper in artist's frame
 unframed: 19 × 28 cm (7.5 × 11 inches)
 framed: 27.3 × 36.5 cm (10.7 × 14.4 inches)



Jill Paz
The Three Graces
 2020
 graphite on paper in artist's frame
 unframed: 19 × 28 cm (7.5 × 11 inches)
 framed: 27.5 × 36.5 cm (10.8 × 14.4 inches)



Jill Paz
The Three Graces
 2021
 graphite on paper in artist's frame
 unframed: 16 × 25 cm (6.2 × 9.8 inches)
 framed: 24.5 × 33.3 cm (9.6 × 13.1 inches)



Jill Paz
The Three Graces
 2020
 graphite on paper in artist's frame
 unframed: 19 × 29 cm (7.5 × 11.4 inches)
 framed: 27.4 × 37.3 cm (10.8 × 14.7 inches)



Jill Paz
The Three Graces
 2021
 charcoal on paper in artist's frame
 unframed: 43 × 35 cm (17 × 13.8 inches)
 framed: 54.2 × 46 cm (21.3 × 18.1 inches)

02

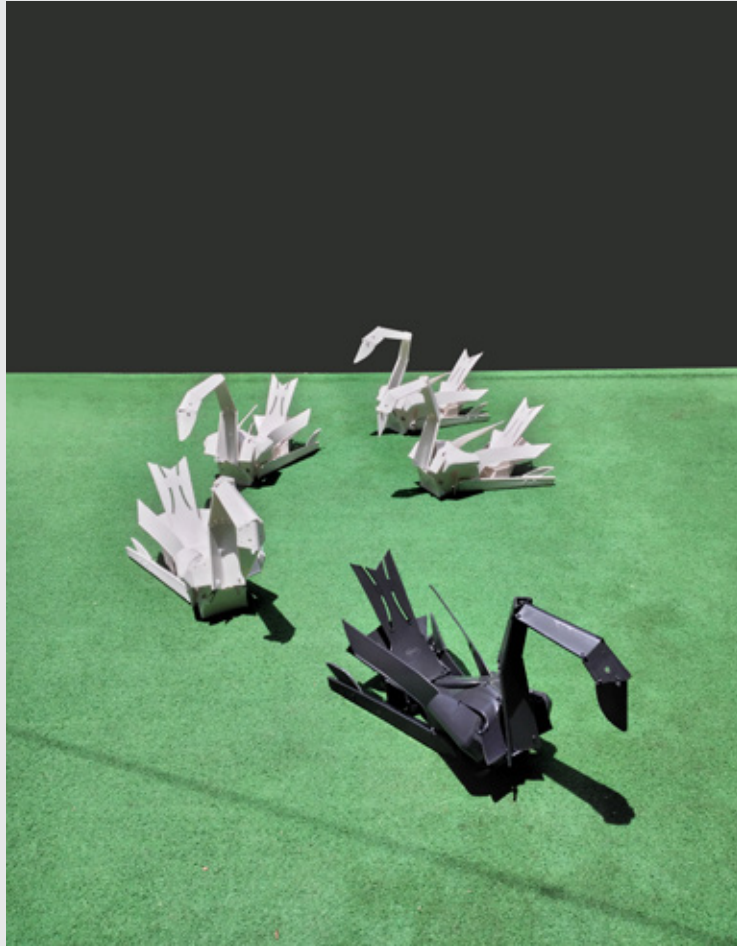
JUAN ALCAZAREN



Installation view of artwork by Juan Alcazaren at Mizuma Gallery, 2021.



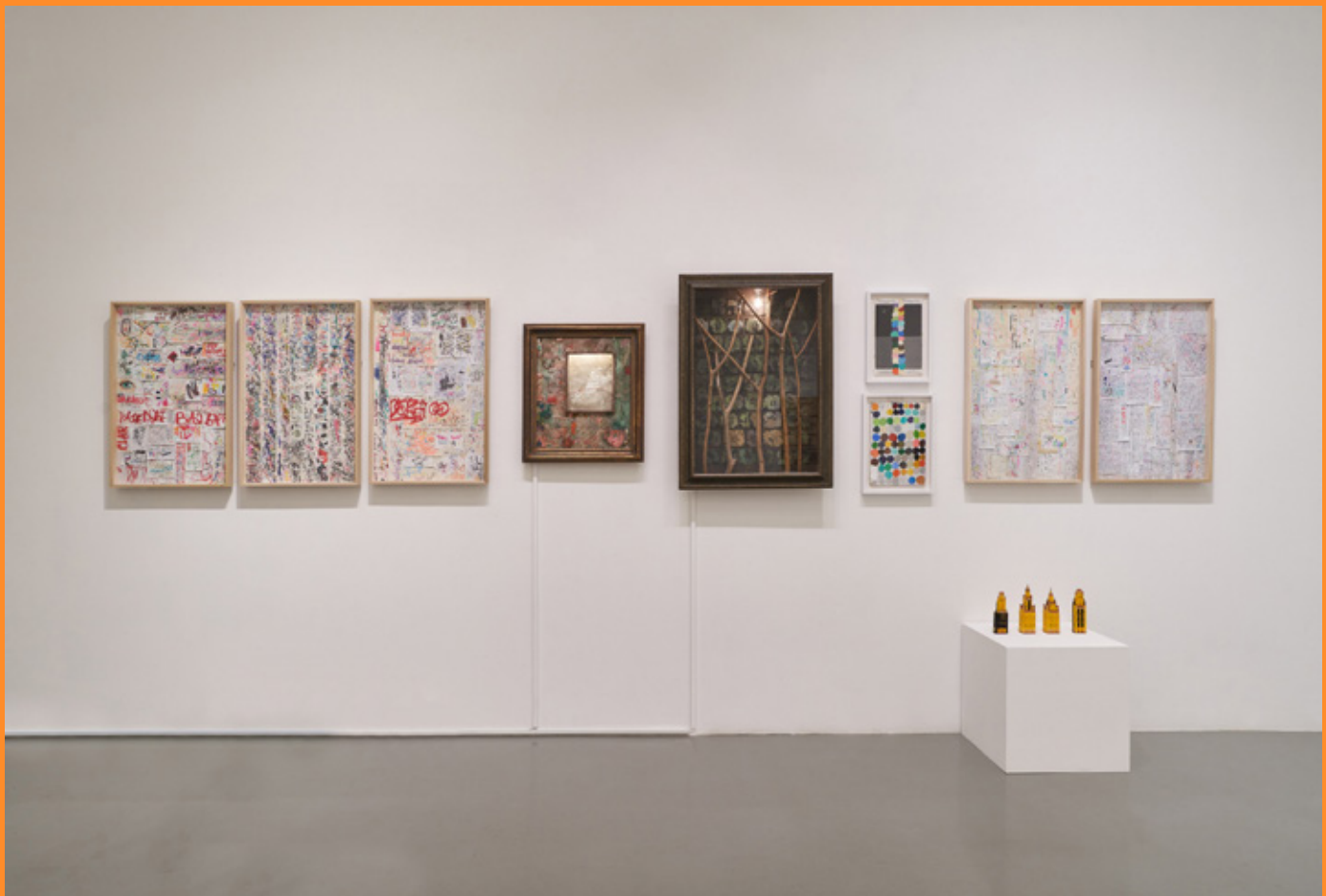
Juan Alcazaren
Monoswans (Standing swan)
2021
virgin plastic resin (cut up parts of plastic stacking chair)
65 × 45 × 65 cm (25.6 × 17.7 × 25.6 inches)



Juan Alcazaren
Monoswans (Swimming swan)
2021
virgin plastic resin (cut up parts of plastic stacking chair)
set of 5, 44 × 33 × 75 cm (17.3 × 13 × 29.5 inches) each

03

CHRISTINA QUISUMBING RAMILO



Installation view of artworks by Christina Quisumbing Ramilo at Mizuma Gallery, 2021.



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo

Scribbles 1

2021

ink markings on paper from art stores from Siem Reap, Taipei, Bangkok, Manila, Kuala Lumpur and Yogyakarta, on foam board and wood, map pins

82.6 × 53.3 × 5.1 cm (32.5 × 21 × 2 inches)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo

Scribbles 2

2021

ink markings on paper from art stores from Siem Reap, Taipei, Bangkok, Manila, Kuala Lumpur and Yogyakarta, on foam board and wood, map pins

82.6 × 53.3 × 5.1 cm (32.5 × 21 × 2 inches)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo

Scribbles 3

2021

ink markings on paper from art stores from Siem Reap, Taipei, Bangkok, Manila, Kuala Lumpur and Yogyakarta, on foam board and wood, map pins

82.6 × 53.3 × 5.1 cm (32.5 × 21 × 2 inches)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo

Scribbles 4

2021

ink markings on paper from art stores from Siem Reap, Taipei, Bangkok, Manila, Kuala Lumpur and Yogyakarta, on foam board and wood, map pins

82.6 × 53.3 × 5.1 cm (32.5 × 21 × 2 inches)



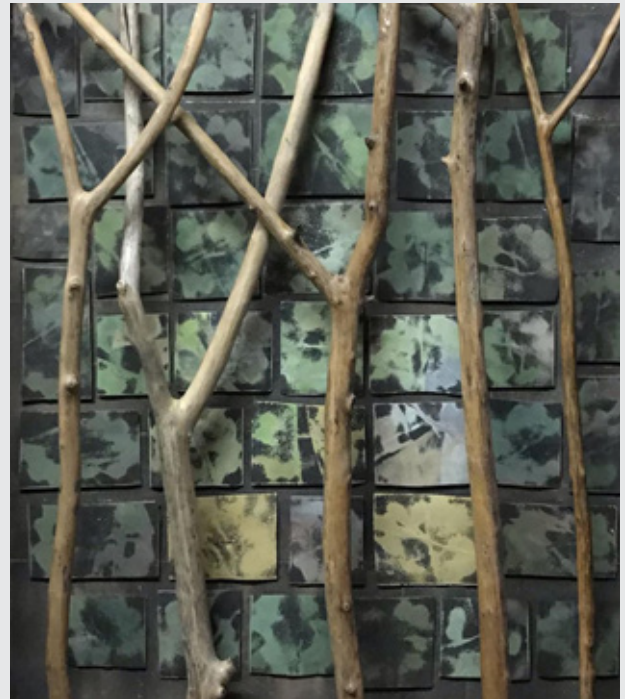
Christina Quisumbing Ramilo
Scribbles 5
 2021
 ink markings on paper from art stores from Siem Reap, Taipei, Bangkok, Manila, Kuala Lumpur and Yogyakarta, on foam board and wood, map pins
 82.6 × 53.3 × 5.1 cm (32.5 × 21 × 2 inches)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo
Portal
 2021
 old frames, wood discard from Dick Daroy, scrap wood, lighting
 62.2 × 54.6 × 7.6 cm (24.5 × 21.5 × 3 inches)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo
Kulimlim
 2021
 used sandpaper from Geraldine Javier, guava branches, wood, old wooden frame, glass lighting with dimmer
 95.3 × 68.6 × 12.7 cm (37.5 × 27 × 5 inches)



Details of *Kulimlim* (2021)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo
Circus
 2021
 paint swatches on cardboard from Veronica Peralejo, wood,
 glass frame
 45.1 × 32.4 × 3.8 cm (17.75 × 12.75 × 1.5 inches)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo
Playlist
 2021
 paint swatches on cardboard from Veronica Peralejo, wood,
 glass frame
 57.2 × 39.4 × 3.8 cm (22.5 × 15.5 × 1.5 inches)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo
Sampler
 2021
 paint swatches on cardboard from Veronica Peralejo, wood, glass frame
 41.9 × 29.2 × 3.8 cm (16.5 × 11.5 × 1.5 inches)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo

Naglutaw sa Daplin sa Dagat

2021

old matte board from West Gallery frame shop, rubber debris from the seashore from Martha Atienza

95.3 × 85.1 × 7.6 cm (37.5 × 33.5 × 3 inches)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo

Salin sa Inanod

2021

fragments of rubber slippers from the seashore from Martha Atienza, green wooden cutting board from UP College of Fine Arts Printing Department, wood frame with glass

62.9 × 62.2 × 7.6 cm (24.75 × 24.5 × 3 inches)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo
Broken
 2020
 used pencils, wood
 8.3 × 8.9 × 7.6 cm (3.25 × 3.5 × 3 inches)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo
Bundok
 2020
 used pencils, wood
 14 × 9.5 × 9.5 cm (5.5 × 3.75 × 3.75 inches)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo
Crowd 1
 2020
 used pencils, wood
 7 × 11.4 × 9.5 cm (2.75 × 4.5 × 3.75 inches)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo
Crowd 2
 2020
 used pencils, wood, glass beads
 8.9 × 12.1 × 10.2 cm (3.5 × 4.75 × 4 inches)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo
Prayer
2020
used pencils, wood
11.4 × 8.9 × 9.5 cm (4.5 × 3.5 × 3.75 inches)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo
Pocket Garden
2020
used pencils, wood, glass beads
5.7 × 10.2 × 8.3 cm (2.25 × 4 × 3.25 inches)



Details of *Pocket Garden* (2020)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo
Art Deco 1
2020
used pencils, wood
19.1 × 5.7 × 5.7 cm (7.5 × 2.25 × 2.25 inches)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo
Art Deco 2
2020
used pencils, wood
21 × 6.4 × 5.1 cm (8.25 × 2.5 × 2 inches)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo
Art Deco 3
2020
used pencils, wood
19.1 × 5.7 × 3.8 cm (7.5 × 2.25 × 1.5 inches)



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo
Art Deco 4
2020
used pencils, wood
17.8 × 5.7 × 3.8 cm (7 × 2.25 × 1.5 inches)

04

LESLIE DE CHAVEZ



After the Storm:
Five artists from the Philippines

Curated by Tony Godfrey
Christine Gudimberg Barrio
Ramon Roberto Nolasco
Jill Pua
Juan Villalobos
Leslie de Chavez
16 October - 18 November 2021



Installation view of artwork by Leslie de Chavez at Mizuma Gallery, 2021.



Leslie de Chavez
Begotten Jewels (Lot no. 1)
2021
found objects, plaster of Paris
set of 24 pieces, dimensions variable



Leslie de Chavez
The Rehearsal in Denial
 2021
 oil, gold leaf, and decal on acid-free paper
 160 × 211.2 cm (63 × 83 inches), set of 16 framed panels,
 40 × 52.8 cm (15.75 × 20.75 inches) each

05

ELAINE ROBERTO NAVAS



Installation view of artworks by Elaine Roberto Navas at Mizuma Gallery, 2021.



Elaine Roberto Navas
Ballet
 2021
 oil bar on canvas
 121.9 × 91.4 cm (48 × 36 inches)



Elaine Roberto Navas
Ballroom
 2021
 oil bar on canvas
 121.9 × 91.4 cm (48 × 36 inches)



Elaine Roberto Navas
Boogie-Woogie
 2021
 oil bar on canvas
 121.9 × 91.4 cm (48 × 36 inches)



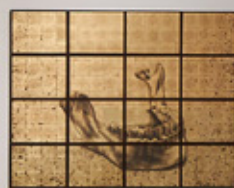
Elaine Roberto Navas
Jazz
 2021
 oil bar on canvas
 121.9 × 91.4 cm (48 × 36 inches)



Elaine Roberto Navas
Pose
 2021
 oil bar on canvas
 121.9 × 91.4 cm (48 × 36 inches)



Elaine Roberto Navas
Swing
 2021
 oil bar on canvas
 121.9 × 91.4 cm (48 × 36 inches)



After the Storm
Fragments from the Disasters
2011
2012
2013
2014
2015



JILL PAZ IN CONVERSATION WITH TONY GODFREY



Jill Paz in the ceramics studio, Columbus, August 2021. "Cleaning up some edges of clay, and to the lower left are experiments in glazes."



Jill Paz, *The Three Graces*, 2021, charcoal on paper in artist's frame, unframed: 43 × 35 cm (17 × 13.8 inches), framed: 54.2 × 46 cm (21.3 × 18.1 inches).

TONY GODFREY

Jill, you are just about to fly back to the USA for two months. What will you be doing and seeing there? Whenever I go back to the UK, apart from seeing my children and friends, drinking warm beer and eating English fish and chips, I spend as much time in museums as I can. Having lived in London, I am used to seeing a lot of art - old art, international contemporary art. I really miss that now that I live in the Philippines.

JILL PAZ

I am traveling with my husband Seth and we will be visiting his family in the Midwest - in Columbus, Ohio. Both his parents are ceramicists, each with their own studios and distinct styles. I love attending art residencies and for me, this summer back in the States, hanging out with ceramicists, seems like a perfect place to learn this medium and take on my own personal residency.

Yes, returning home, though Manila is also my home, but returning to my other home, where I grew up, in North America, I do just that. Drink beer (though not warm, and also not with ice cubes as they seem to do in South-east Asia), eat burgers, and visit museums in NYC if I have a chance. I really miss those days. I lived in NYC for a moment during undergraduate school days. I think I must have spent half my time just visiting museums, galleries, and artist studios.

During the lockdown I have been reading a lot of Alice Munro, and mixed in, politics in America. I just finished *After the Fall* by Ben Rhodes, which looks at democracy in America, among other things. It doesn't seem necessary to read Stephen King anymore when just reading and listening to America's political climate can bring chills!

TG

Drinking beer with ice in is one of the most horrible things about South-east Asia! US politics is truly terrifying at the moment and must be especially so to someone like you - a first generation immigrant and a person of what you Americans call "of color".

JP

Yes, US politics is truly terrifying. In the past few months, there have

been anti-Asian hate crimes aside from these debates on critical race theory. Aside from being cautious on mask wearing and social distancing, I need to take that into consideration.

I have been thinking of that actually, what it means to be a first generation immigrant and a person of color. Not to mention that I come from the Philippines, a country colonized by the States.

TG

You tell me this exhibition will be the first time you have exhibited drawings. What led you to do this?

JP

When Manila went into lockdown in March 2020, I was all of a sudden stuck at home. And then the same thing that happened to the whole world is that we were secluded in our domestic bubbles. My home in Manila, or to be more specific, in Quezon City, is a fairly decent sized condo, but my art studio is located in Silang, Cavite, which for months I was not able to visit. Getting back to drawing, a practice that I have not frequented since art school in the early 2000's, really began as a reprieve from everyday home life. I even started to bake bread at home and cook!

TG

I have been baking bread too during the lockdown! And reading lots: the lockdown has been so strict and prolonged in the Philippines.

Presumably, being as you were locked down in the Philippines, you drew from images on the internet or in a book.



Jill Paz, *The Three Graces*, 2021, graphite and charcoal on paper in artist's frame, unframed: 19 × 28 cm (7.5 × 11 inches), framed: 27.3 × 36.5 cm (10.7 × 14.4 inches).

JP

The drawings are from photographs on the internet. I was thinking of Remediation in art, which is the act of transferring the affects of one medium onto another. The all-around views of 'Three Graces' that I have been drawing and painting recently, look at the connection and relationship of photography and sculpture, and in particular

the methods used by archaeologists in the Nineteenth century: photographs of 360 degree panoramic views to reveal and show the physical tangible. Put another way, this method of archaeological illustrations creates an illusion of dimensionality, an image revolving in space.

TG Which particular sculpture was it you drew from?

JP The drawings are based on the classical sculpture *Three Graces*. Also due to the lockdown and this subsequent desire to travel and see art in person, I would visit the online viewing rooms that became and continue to be more readily available nowadays in museums and gallery websites. I was drawn to the subject matter of the Three Graces. This work of art and subject matter has been explored and depicted in dozens of paintings and sculptures, from artists like Peter Paul Rubens, Raphael, Botticelli, who all took up this motif to express notions about pleasure and relationships with one another. The comforting gaze, the embodiment of charm, beauty and creativity - I wondered what these age old tropes embody for us at this current time?

TG Botticelli, Raphael, Rubens. These are all men, of course. In their time you would have rarely, if ever, seen a woman drawing there. Or, indeed in the life room. The life room was exclusively for men.

JP Yes that these disciplines – sculpture, painting, drawing - unlike the subject matter! - are embodied as male, just goes to show how women have historically been stuck between allegory and a hard place. Now I cannot recall the female historian/critic who said this, but she said something along the lines that if women are to be part of art history, then all of it needs to be rewritten! I am, of course partial to that idea, of redefining, repairing our histories to be more inclusive. Remediation often has a political aspect, upturning accepted ideologies, be they racist, sexist, whatever.

TG You were a little hesitant to show the drawings at first. The “real works” are the laser cut pieces derived from them - do we call them drawings or sculptures or paintings? or indeed photographs! But I think to see them together will make clearer that your overall project is about “remediation” - and also in a complex way about archeology.



Jill Paz, *The Three Graces*, 2021, acrylic on laser carved wood, 30 × 49 cm (11.8 × 19.3 inches).

JP

I tend to call the laser cut pieces 'paintings'. (Do you?) Yes, I was hesitant to show the drawings. I think I still am actually but I am comfortable, perhaps even confident, that together with the wood panel pieces, the idea of remediation will become explicit.

TG

We will return to the idea (and politics) of remediation in a while. But first, can you fill in your background a bit. You left the Philippines when you were a year old. Can you tell me something about your life in the USA? What did your parents do? Which town and state did you grow up in? Where did you go to college? And what did you study?

JP

I am a Canadian American Filipina, that is I grew up in North America but I was born here. Though I had no memory of leaving Manila at age 1, it was 1983 or 84 and my family was seeking to fulfill an American dream, I visited Manila several times throughout my childhood and had a connection to it, the stories shared with me were an alarming paradox of romanticized nostalgic heydays of the 60s and 70s mixed with utter disdain with the government (I remember being on the front page of the University paper in Columbus in the 80s, I was just a toddler, bundled up in a blue coat with bunny ears, and holding a picket sign in protest of Marcos regime, seems like a good way to get some publicity).



The Lantern (Ohio State University, Feb. 26 1985) from front page.

In my understanding, I saw what the writer Nick Joaquin wrote, about this city being in ever-greening, ever-decaying. I remember for example a visit to Manila in the 90s and seeing the MRT trains building up along EDSA, the construction was truly a grand modernist feat, despite it taking longer than usual, the city and country was at a full speed toward modernism, but it seemed to me that this trajectory was on parallel with tyranny.

I grew up in Columbus Ohio, and then spent grade school years in Toronto, Ontario and then mostly Vancouver, BC, Canada, until we moved back to Columbus. When I moved out, I first tried out NYC and then went back to Pacific Northwest, to Vancouver and then Portland Oregon. A couple things about that--we moved a lot simply because my parents wanted to. My parents were architects and though I did not want to study architecture, I liked learning about its history and was inspired by it - the first images I sent you of the hanging mobile sculptures were drawn on Architecture programs. I studied art at several schools, from a private art college in the Midwest, Columbus College of Art and Design, it was their first year offering full scholarships to international students and I was fortunate to be the first beneficiary, to finishing up at Parsons in NYC and then taking up art history at the University of British Columbia, where I also landed my first job as an assistant at the Museum of Anthropology. I was fond of arts admin work, and felt like my calling was there, I had several years of experience teaching art from elementary to college level during graduate school. It was not until 2012 that I actually decided to get back to my own art studio practice, I began an MFA program at my alma mater, where I again received a scholarship to study. Higher education in the States is costly and I cannot imagine having been able to afford it without my scholarships.

I was considering pursuing a position as an adjunct professor in 2016, but I was exhausted with being in school! Instead I spent months going from one residency to the next, from the Catskills in NY to the Banff Centre in Canada and then to Dresden, Germany. In 2017, Seth and I moved to Manila, because my mother had been diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease and I am the only child.

TG You have a Filipino sense of filial duty!

JP And so this whole mothering from a distance in the States was not enough, and I had to be in the same city with her to oversee her healthcare. And that brings us up to the present moment where I am now, here in my condominium in Manila.

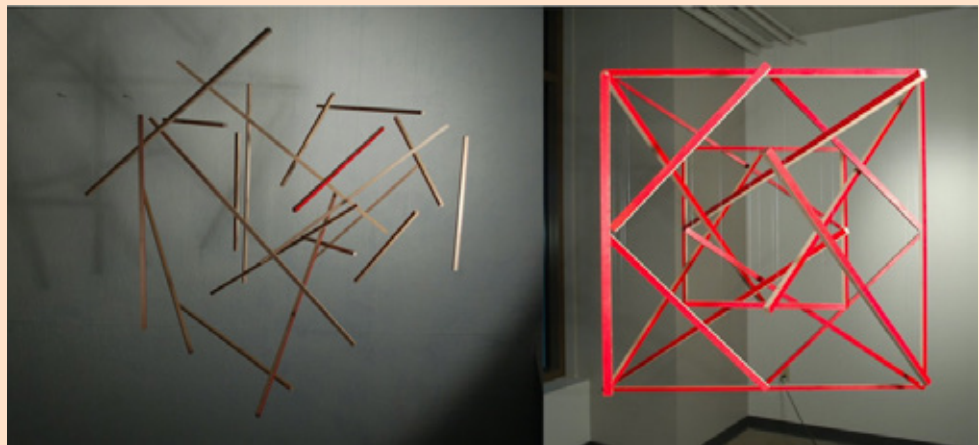
TG This sculpture from 2004 may have been made on an architecture programme but it avowedly references Mona Hatoum, an artist whose work is always very personal - dealing with issues of childhood, pain, isolation, the female body. So was your work although looking very constructivist also in some way personal?



Jill Paz, *After Mona Hatoum (Crib)*, 2004, wooden rods, monofilament,
120 × 290 × 120 cm (48 × 108 × 48 inches).

JP

After Mona Hatoum (Crib) takes Mona Hatoum's iconic sculpture from 1994 - *Silence* – a life-size glass crib. I may have not known these facts of the artist's personal history back then, I honestly cannot remember, but there was something about Hatoum's sculpture, the feeling of it, the hostility, and also the comforting, and then displaced sort of vibe that I get from her work, that was something I may have been unconsciously exploring then.



Jill Paz, *Avid Present Dense Intense*, 2011-2012, wooden rods, monofilament,
120 × 290 × 120 cm (48 × 108 × 48 inches).

I have included images of both *Avid Present Dense Intense*, 2011-2012 and *After Mona Hatoum (Crib)*, 2004, because my work continues that path. I often begin from an extreme personal close-up of my life, entering my work from there and then stretching to involve a more expanded view of history and the world. I like the idea of an artist or individual mining their own histories, finding things that may have been overlooked and finding inspiration from that, to make sense of the world. At the same time, these sculptures were done in a process that begins with a computer rendering. There is a duality to my work, of analog and digital, human and machine, and recently, my take on repair and preservation in the works that looks at Hidalgo's

destroyed paintings. And another thing, I am a fan of the unoriginal, of extracting something from an already identifiable existing object.

TG This is very interesting! I have always sensed that though your work seems quite analytical and dispassionate that it is always about, however elliptically presented, a personal life. Does *Avid Present Dense Intense* still exist - or only the documentation of it? Indeed can it only ever exist except as the photograph of it when the sticks are in perfect alignment?

JP The process in *Avid Present Dense Intense* is a systematic approach of a pictorial world. Also I think I may have taken that term from the David Salle book *How to See* when he was describing the artworks Roy Lichtenstein, who funny enough, and I am guilty here of speaking in tangents, Lichtenstein's was the first art exhibition I remember seeing back in Columbus Ohio.

OK! back to your question. I do not think *Avid Present Dense Intense* still exists, though the files most probably are in my old hard drive. During the move to Manila, I seemed to have misplaced objects from artworks to shoes.

As for the sculpture's existence, or rather its perfect alignment coming together only in the view frame of a camera, that brings it back to its original state, which is a computer rendering.

Let me also mention the artists that I gravitate to, aside from Mona Hatoum, I go back often to the strange curious works of Rosemarie Trockel, Martha Rosler's collages and videos of women's roles, the Minimalist Ab Ex paintings of Agnes Martin, the xerox copies of Barbara T. Smith, Doris Salcedo's counter monuments to power that is both personal and Conceptual in its making process. I also like Sheila Hicks, her craft to art to craft sort of installation.

TG Revealing choices! Trockel's work is frequently incomprehensible to me and then she will make something so precise and unsettling. Martin, Salcedo - these are understated but tense artists. [There is a very good biography of Agnes Martin incidentally!]

JP I like the term 'Romantic Conceptualism' to describe my work. Does this exist already to describe artworks?

TG Bas Jan Ader has been described as a romantic conceptualist - the Dutch artist whose work was about falling and who disappeared at sea.

JP That's right, his work has been described as that. I do like the work of Bas Jan Ader. I'm partial to artists who work in photography, using that medium to document sculpture, performance art, and land art.

TG So we come to Hidalgo and your works from 2014 onwards. You told me you would normally return with your family once a year and would stay for

a month or so in the old family house, where there were many paintings and drawings by your great grand uncle, the artist Félix Resurrección Hidalgo, seen with Juan Luna as the founder of Filipino painting. Sadly, many of the paintings in the family's Manila house were destroyed or damaged when the Japanese commandeered the house as an HQ. Paintings by him in other houses were destroyed in the battle of Manila – when the city became the most devastated city in the world after Warsaw.

Making paintings – do we call them paintings? - from Hidalgo: was this to do, however indirectly, with your childhood?

JP

Visiting my grandfather's home and getting to experience that place where the living and dining rooms were lined with our ancestor's paintings was truly inspiring. However, from my childhood memory, some rooms and parts of that home are akin to how Miss Havisham's house in *Great Expectations* was portrayed. Another element of that house is that it was believed to be a radio headquarters for the Japanese army during the Second World War. Before getting forced out of his own home, my grandfather saved the paintings bequeathed to him by Hidalgo: he took them up to a mountainside for safe keeping, there it was kept away for years. One of the rooms of the house used to be filled with charcoal drawings, sketches for the *La Barca de Aqueronte* painting, of Charon, the boatman to Hades. From that room, a spiral staircase leads down to the basement, where behind the bookshelves exists a tunnel and bunker. Its opening is filled in with concrete but it's still there up to now.



Jill Paz, *Untitled (After Hidalgo, Libertatem)*, 2014, laser carved cardboard, 243.8 × 167 cm (96 × 65.7 inches).

To get back to my work, I included the cardboard painting *Untitled (After Hidalgo, Libertatem)*, 2014. This was actually my first painting made on cardboard using the mark making of a laser machine and made during graduate school. And funnily enough, I decided to use this image, of Felix Resurrección Hidalgo's *Per Pacem et Libertatem (Through Peace and Liberty)*, an allegorical painting depicting

conditions of peace and liberty in the Philippines under American sovereignty. The painting shows Filipinas offering to America an olive branch symbolic of peace and homage. The original life-size painting, completed in 1904, was exhibited in the St. Louis World's Fair. The painting then returned to Manila and sadly was burned and totally destroyed during the liberation of Manila in 1945. Sketches of this painting were also in my grandfather's home in Manila.

Something I kept going back to in my art are questions on repair: What goes missing when a home, a person, or a society becomes renovated? What pulses behind the desire to re-build, or create an otherwise new veneer? And in what ways does the skeleton of the old inform the flesh of the new?

Since making *Untitled (After Hidalgo, Libertatem)*, 2014, I often go back to this: the need for and subsequent limitation to repair and renovation.

- TG Was this painting on any old cardboard or were you using unfolded *balikbayan* boxes for it? If Hidalgo is of high Filipino culture, the *balikbayan* box is everyday Filipino culture.
- JP This painting was just on cardboard, not *balikbayan* box cardboard. That's a good way of stating that.
- TG When did you start using *balikbayan* boxes? But, stop! I can hear a reader asking, "What is a *balikbayan* box?" I should explain! There are five million or more Filipinos working overseas – OFWs or Overseas Foreign Workers. The money they send back is vital to the economy of the Philippines. There is also a well-developed scheme for sending stuff back to: cardboard *balikbayan* boxes are given to the senders as kits to unfold, refold and tape together, then fill with toys, foodstuffs, candies and other luxuries to send to their relatives back home. People who send them (including myself whenever I am back in the UK) pride themselves on packing them well and squeezing in as much as possible. For the recipients unpacking a box is normally a family affair, the sender hopefully remembering all their relatives.



Jill Paz, *It's a Journey Back that I'm Always Taking (Balikbayan box)*, 2015, laser carved cardboard box, 60.9 × 45.7 × 60.9 cm (24 × 18 × 24 inches).

JP

I often say that the *balikbayan* box is the ubiquitous symbol of the Philippine diaspora.

I started using *balikbayan* boxes around 2014 with used *balikbayan* boxes that I had. The initial piece *It's a Journey Back that I'm Always Taking (Balikbayan Box)*, 2015, was from a recycled box that was returned to my US address. The box represents something unique to the angst and energy of this paradoxical relationship of being a *Balikbayan* here in Manila. It represents both engagement and estrangement. During the last 15 months, I've come across op-ed articles, particularly in the Post and the NYTimes, stories of family members, couples, friends, strained and surviving apart. The longing for one another, of feeling displaced, and in some cases, mothering from a distance, is a common facet of life for a *Balikbayan*. Not only do immigrants carry a feeling of being both being engaged and estranged, but they also continue a performance of diasporic intimacy. The *balikbayan* boxes tapped that identity, that technology of translocality. And similar to the works of artists I mentioned such as Salcedo and Hatoum, evoked a melancholy evident in the lives of those living apart.

The distinctive markings that the optical tool of a laser machine made on the medium of cardboard was happenstance in a way. But I was quick to see that in the breakdown of material, the way a laser can burn a mark onto a cardboard, was a sort of art trope that I wanted to explore. It really has been an exploration of the process, as well as the hierarchy of painting and the mundane banality of material.

TG

Am I correct in saying that *It's a Journey Back that I'm Always Taking (Balikbayan Box)* was the only one of these pieces to be shown re-assembled as a box? All the others, I am not sure how many you have made since then have been displayed flat against the wall. Were all of them after 2015 made on unfolded *balikbayan* boxes? And did all of them have images taken from Hidalgo paintings laser-cut or etched into them? This piece if I remember correctly has an interior etched inside it - the interior of Hidalgo's house.

JP

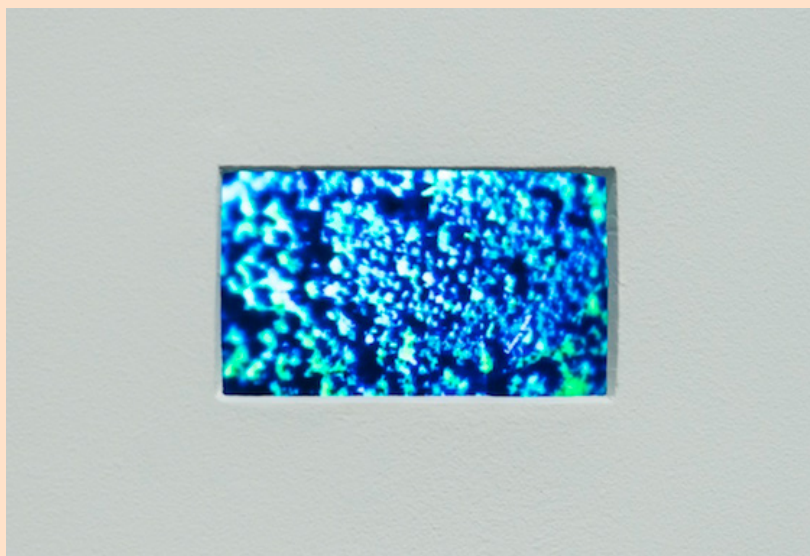
Yes correct, *It's a Journey Back that I'm Always Taking (Balikbayan Box)* was the only one of these pieces shown re-assembled as a box and all of the works in cardboard after 2015, were installed on the wall – like paintings.

Though I moved to Manila in 2017, I did not set up a studio space in Silang till the following year. I mostly lived there in Silang in 2018, taking walks each day around the neighborhood. This inspired me to make a body of work that I exhibited at 1335 MABINI in September 2018. Drawing from my daily experience compelled me to look at the genre of landscapes--in a way, I was trying to reorient myself and the landscape subject matter seemed fitting. From an outsider's perspective, it was alarming to see the juxtaposition of skyscrapers next to slums, and peppered in all this is nature—a tropical jungle

interlaced into every crack and corner of the urban jungle.

TG

I want to ask about the work shown in 2018 and subsequently, but two questions first: Going back to the box when I showed it in an exhibition in Slovakia that I curated I did not also show the video piece. Should I have? Do you see that as an integral part of the work? Secondly, is the work from 2016 you have chosen – *Untitled #12* - atypical or one of a larger series I do not know of? Works that are distressed like so much of your work, but essentially abstract?



Jill Paz, installation view of *It's a Journey Back that I'm Always Taking* (Ito ay isang paglalakbay na balik na palagi kong kinukuha), 2015, video, 4 minutes.



Jill Paz, installation view of *It's a Journey Back that I'm Always Taking* (Balikbayan Box), 2015 (foreground); and *It's a Journey Back that I'm Always Taking* (Ito ay isang paglalakbay na balik na palagi kong kinukuha), 2015.

JP

In response to your first question: the box and video do not need to be together. I wanted to include an image of the video just prior to the last image I included in the PDF from 2016, because in my personal timeline, that video's mapping from the US to Manila, is intrinsic to

my move or return migration to Manila. Though the video lacks a refined aesthetic of a videographer, there is something haunting or foreboding about its non-narrative documentation.



Jill Paz, *Untitled #12*, 2016, gesso on laser carved canvas, 60.9 × 45.7 cm (24 × 18 inches).

Untitled #12, from 2016, was made during a summer and autumn residency in Dresden, Germany that year. Here is a link to my website of the Vector paintings: <https://jillpaz.com/works/vector-paintings>. They are distressed as you stated, but no, they are not abstract. The image is actually taken from a single scanned photograph of a crumpled piece of paper, blown up, and copied, re-photographed and then though painterly in appearance, burned into the canvas or Belgian linen by a laser machine. I was repeating the rasterizing or burning/etching process on successive areas of the canvas, for the larger scroll-like canvases, and allowing for imperfections to creep into this precise mode of technology. I am fascinated with how images traverse our visual and material culture. And when it comes to my paintings, I am questioning the very idea of painting itself, which falls within a longstanding artistic reconsideration of the idea of what a painting entails.

TG

How do you view Hidalgo's paintings aesthetically? What did they entail at the time? What do they entail today? I remember you telling me your unease that in the Philippines he is seen as a Great Master, but in Art History as written in the West he is not even a footnote.

JP

There are several rooms in the National Gallery Singapore that showcase South-east Asian artists from the 19th century--a period of colonization in the Philippines. It was surprising to see the amount of work that depicted romantic landscapes, a subject matter that did not speak of the trials and burdens of European colonization. Since I have been focused on my ancestor's work these past few years, I realize now that Hidalgo touched on the subject at least once, and not inadvertently, with the painting *The Assassination of Governor*

General Bustamante, which is on permanent display at the National Museum here in Manila.

Aesthetically, I find Hidalgo's work appealing and made with an Academic hand. To be honest, his work made in the Neoclassical style, of 'La Barca' for example, was a bit dated. However the landscape and seascape paintings and sketches of the early 20th century begin to reveal a painter more confident and looser on his brushwork. In the bigger picture, he was not written into Art History; he is a marginalized figure even here in the Philippines next to his counterpart, the painter Juan Luna. In the Frick Collection library in NYC, where I spent an afternoon searching for his name in the 19th century books that documented the salons of Paris all I was able to find was a single phrase that mentioned his name.

TG So you are more interested in calling attention to him as a neglected artist, like most artists working on the geographical periphery, than critiquing him?

JP Yes I am more interested in calling attention to him as a neglected artist. From a personal point of view, my works that take his destroyed paintings as compositions and subject matter is a way for me to unearth marginalized stories that are overlooked, while also understanding more of my own history and culture in the process.

TG You have a one-woman show coming up at Silverlens gallery in Manila. Are your concerns and methods the same? Which work would you like to show me from that show?

JP Yes I have an exhibition coming up at Silverlens opening September 9th, a little before the Singapore exhibition. I think the concerns and methods follow the path, process and trajectory of my themes.

I have a statement or blurb for that exhibition: Recently I have been exploring the abstractions, repetitions, and systems of our everyday lives that often get neglected. My domestic life has been magnified in the midst of this pandemic; and though I am not seeking an overtly personal project, my starting point is the pre-existing composition of my ancestral home. From there, I am extracting something new from identifiable objects, as well as textile grid patterns that are deeply rooted in the history of Modernism and Abstraction. By exploring formalist tensions and the breakdown of material, I continue to ask myself: what is the meaning of repair and preservation? And what does it mean to craft a visual vocabulary that speaks of formal elements such as repetition and the slow time of domesticity? The new body of work titled *Domestic Abstractions* consists of 20 intimately scaled panel paintings. Each painting has an intricately detailed surface, made by the digital optical tool of a laser machine and then layered with acrylic washes on top of a gesso ground. This rigorous consistency of the framework appears to be a conceptual

process, but within these systematic conditions opens up the possibilities of exploring a pictorial world.



Jill Paz, *Untitled (Green Painting Vertical)*, 2021, acrylic on laser carved wood in artist's frame, 63.5 x 42 cm (25 x 16.5 inches).



Jill Paz, installation view of solo exhibition at Silverlens, September 2021.

TG

What about the future? Do you have ideas on what comes next? Will you try and work with ceramics when you return to the Philippines in September? And will you do what you spoke of before: move to the country? I think like many other people, you find the noise, pollution, traffic jams and general over-crowding just too much!

JP

Since the lockdown and getting stuck in our domestic bubble in the city, I have been dreaming of being out in nature. I've been making plans to build a house on a piece of land that I purchased a few years ago in Silang, Cavite. In the meantime, our architect, who also happens to be my dad, has completed the blueprint and

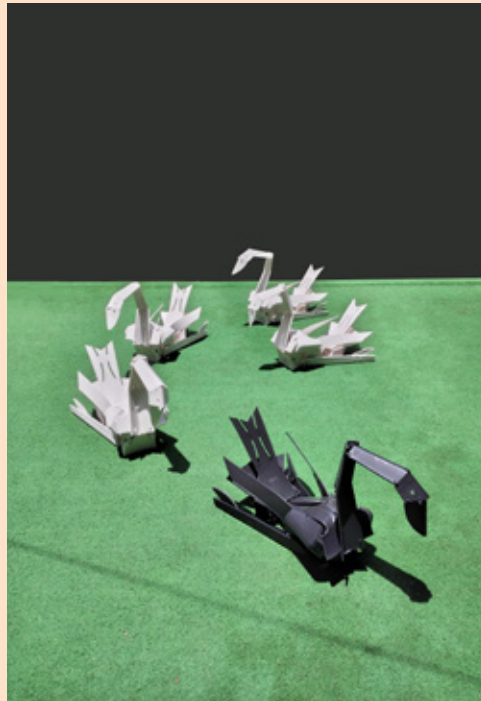
is getting involved with finding the materials and engineering of the house. I'm just waiting out this rainy season for construction to begin. Hopefully the Philippines will be looking safer from this pandemic too.

Perhaps I might even make an additional space for a ceramics studio. As for this summer back in the States, I am pretty excited and also nervous. Travel has never looked so meticulous and finicky. But having the opportunity to learn ceramics in Columbus will be such a treat. I often come into my studio with a set of guidelines for how to start; but coming into ceramics, I have no idea where to begin. Perhaps the potential for art is in those fallible attempts.

Filipino-Canadian **Jill Paz** (b. 1982 in Manila, Philippines) emigrated to North America in the early eighties and in 2017, returned to Manila where she now lives and works. As such Paz is informed by her experience as an immigrant, and her artworks are suffused with the lyrical tone of diasporic intimacy. Her emphatically process-oriented approach to painting combines analog and digital techniques to create intricate approximations that explore themes of repair and preservation. Paz graduated with a MFA and BFA at the Columbus College of Art and Design, USA; studied Art History at the University of British Columbia, Canada; and attended a studio program at Parsons The New School for Design, New York, USA. Paz has attended artist residencies at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, Canada; Centre Intermondes, La Rochelle, France; and Mildred's Lane, Narrowsburg, New York, USA. She was the recipient of the 2016 Visual Arts Fellowship for the Columbus Museum of Art and Saxony State Ministry and subsequently attended a residency at GEH8, Dresden, Germany. Paz's works are in the collection of Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan, and private collections internationally.

JUAN ALCAZAREN IN CONVERSATION WITH TONY GODFREY





Juan Alcazaren, *Monoswans (Swimming swan)*, 2021, virgin plastic resin (cut up parts of plastic stacking chair), set of 5 sculptures, 44 × 33 × 75 cm (17.3 × 13 × 29.5 inches) each.

THURSDAY, 12TH AUGUST 2021

- TONY GODFREY I wanted to start by asking about your new work for Singapore: six swans, each made from a cut up monobloc chair. Originally you planned to make crows; then Myna birds. Why did you end up making swans?
- JUAN ALCAZAREN Yes, I had to change the type of birds because when I cut up the chairs, I saw swans right off. Also, the two other birds were too small to make recognizable.
- TG So, the key was the act of making, not the symbolic resonance of the bird - crows are urban predatory birds in Europe as Myna birds are in Singapore. Both kings of the street! Which swans aren't - I guess they are more queens of the lakes and rivers.
- JA It was important they were recognizable as coming from plastic monobloc chairs right away.
- TG That was the key thing? That the viewer could spot or deduce that these had been cut from monobloc chairs? What exactly is a monobloc chair? Is it a brand or just type of plastic stackable chair?
- JA Monobloc is a brand name, I think, just like toothpaste is called Colgate here. Yes, those are the stackable plastic chairs used for funerals and such. Been obsessed with those for a few years now.

They're very easy to cut up and stitch together with plastic cable ties or steel bolts.

TG To add - for non-Asian readers - white, not black, is the colour associated with death and funerals here. Is that important to you? or irrelevant?

JA That is true for Chinese Filipinos, though that wasn't on my mind. It was more of the ubiquity of those things here, in food stalls, schools, and now, supermarket social distancing queues and vaccination queues.

TG Having lived in Hougang, an HDB¹ area of Singapore, I associate white plastic stacking chairs with void deck funerals – the void deck being the open ground floor of HDB blocks. The coffin of the deceased will be displayed for some time. Food is provided and many white plastic chairs for mourners to sit on.

JA To add, plastic chairs are a great equalizer. Everyone has sat on one of those at one point or another, I think. Didn't Barack Obama sit with Bourdain at a Singapore hawker stall some time ago?

TG I will check it out. Who is Bourdain?

JA Anthony Bourdain, the chef and food critic (now deceased).

TG Of course! Now, again, touching on symbolism: you are placing the white swans following the solitary black swan. What does this signify?

JA When I was researching pictures of swans, I noticed this phenomenon of whites following one black in several photos, but I went no deeper than that observation - sorry. Yes, I often imagine what kind of human emotions these inanimate things are witness to in their useful lives.

TG So, your work is a sort of philosophical *Toy Story* where everyday objects get to simulate or comment on human behaviour? Or am I speaking pretentiously?

JA Yes, but I like the way you put that. I do try to give objects a say in things.

TG When did you start working in this way, cutting everyday things up and re-assembling them to have different identities or meaning?

JA Probably in the late 90s when I started to use whatever was at hand to avoid spending for new material, but more because made objects already have some kind of form that to me calls for conversion into something else.

¹ Housing Development Board - residential tower blocks constructed by the state for the ordinary people.

- TG I am reminded of some British sculptors - Bill Woodrow, Tony Cragg especially - who in the early 80s started to make sculptures out of plastic detritus or car doors or disused fridges. They were hailed at the time for political savviness, but liked mainly because of the dexterity and ingenuity in how they made things from junk. They were often referred to as “bricoleurs”, the French for the odd job man who mends or makes things with what few tools he has. The ethnologist Claude Levi-Strauss used the term to explain how people in rival communities construct myths - from whatever is to hand. Did you know about people like Woodrow or the cultural discussion about bricoleurs or bricolage?
- JA I’m familiar with Tony Cragg’s work, not Woodrow, though. I’m happy to be called a bricoleur. I’m more familiar with it in the craft and design sense like Simon Rodia who built the Watts towers in LA out of ceramic pots. I also like how discarded things are given new life as lamps or chairs. Before we leave the subject of plastic chairs, I just have to tell a funny story: my father, who was a doctor, always wanted me to become a plastic surgeon, so here I am.
- TG What sort of doctor was your father? The father of the American sculptor Janine Antoni was a plastic surgeon. She said it had an impact on her as a child seeing women coming to see her pa and going away looking more beautiful. I guess plastic surgeons are a sort of bricoleur too!
- JA Yes, they are! My father was in Physical medicine and Rehabilitation. He fixed up people’s damaged limbs to work again. He also wanted me to emulate Frank Netter, an American painter known for his medical illustrations.
- TG Did you ever try to draw like Frank Netter?
- JA No. I could not bear to look at them as a kid because they were grotesque, with limbs and bodies cut open in surgery. I wonder if Netter ever took his sketch pad into the operating theatre. My best attempt at that are those ballpoint pen drawings of hands I made on faux leather.
- TG Let’s look at those later. So, you never went to your Dad’s surgery or drew from cadavers as some artists did - and a few still do?
- JA Never did that. I guess that’s quite impossible nowadays.
- TG As we are talking about your father, can we go back to the start. When and where did you grow up? Did your Mum do anything apart from being a mum? When did you start getting interested in art?
- JA My mother and father were Med school classmates in UP².

² University of the Philippines – a large state-run university.

They married in the 50s and had 8 “mistakes” of which I am the 5th. They had a birthing clinic right in our house in Cubao but I was too young to remember that. I do still have some of their instruments with me. My mom went on to teach Physiology at UE (University of the East) while my dad practiced in a few hospitals. We moved to Pasig in the late 60s and I’ve been here since. I got interested in art in early grade school. I went to Don Bosco in Mandaluyong. The Italian priests taught us woodworking, machine shop and electronics. That’s where I got my skills.

Other Don Bosco artists are Mark Justiniani and Gary-Ross Pastrana.

TG My youngest son went to a Don Bosco school in London. They were very good with problem or struggling kids. And, of course, it was originally geared to the needs of the poor - hence an emphasis on practical things such as woodworking. Mark and Gary as artists, like you, both like fiddling with things and making! Obviously, there is a secret Don Bosco school of Art! Did they have actual art classes there?

JA Well, St. John Bosco is credited with the saying “An idle mind is the devil’s workshop.” Art classes there were obviously designed just to meet Department of Education requirements and Imelda Marcos’ beautification programs.

My biggest regret was not playing enough football when I was there.

TG Do you mean real football as the Italians and English play it or that tedious game the gringos play?

JA Haha! Yes, real football. The priests used to play in their full white cassocks! The boys from Don Bosco Tondo always beat us resoundingly, and they played barefoot.

TG After that, where did you go to college? Who did you study with?

JA After that I studied Architecture at UP.

TG Did you take no fine art classes at UP?

JA I went to Fine Arts after I finished Landscape Architecture. FA was my second course.

TG You did four years of landscape architecture and then four of Fine Art?

JA Give or take a few semesters. I was quite unfocused. I was also doing film animation in between with my siblings and I practically lived on the Tennis courts even playing professionally a short while, though I never really ranked anywhere.

TG So how long were you at UP? Did you graduate in the end?

Let us just say I was there for more than 10 years. I finished Landscape Architecture and worked a couple of years in that field as a draughtsman and apprentice designer. I am some credits short of a degree in FA but never finished it because my siblings and I were making a good living doing animated TV commercials. I was just starting to exhibit also. My first solo was at the CCP (Cultural Center of the Philippines) Small gallery.

TG And do you still play tennis?

JA I stopped playing a few years back because of my not so good knees. I taught at UPCFA (UP College of Fine Arts) in the mid 90s as a lecturer. Geraldine Javier, your partner, was my student.

TG Do your siblings - brothers? - still work in animation? Did none of them become artists like you? And did none of them become doctors or nurses?

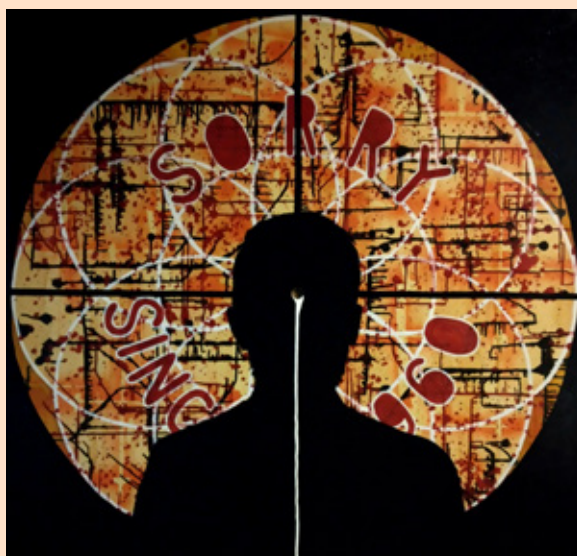
JA Only my oldest brother became a doctor. 4 of us are practicing artists (one of whom is a film director). Another brother an architect, another one an engineer, and 1 sister a statistician.

TG Your parents must be wondering where they went wrong!

JA I guess my parents did everything they could to convince us to follow in their footsteps, but the lure of more creative endeavours won out.

TG Did you enjoy teaching? Did it help you with your own work - or did it hinder it? At what point did you stop teaching?

JA I only taught for four semesters. It surely helped me with my confidence, but teaching is not my calling so I decided to focus on my art.



Juan Alcazaren, *Self-portrait*, 1999/2011/2020, oil, ink, acrylic and enamel on canvas, 121.9 × 121.9 cm (48 × 48 inches).

- TG OK. The earliest work you have chosen to talk about is from 1999 - a self-portrait. But it isn't really because you reworked it in 2011 and again in 2020. Were you a painter back in 1999? Why did you change it in 2011? And why again in 2020? In an earlier email you referred to "my so-called career". Do you have negative feelings about your early works? If I read your comments about it correctly, the last adjustment in 2020 was making a hole in the middle - as if you had shot your own profile - and then pouring paint out through it.
- JA I was starting to experiment with painting then. I've painted over a few canvasses because I was not happy with the outcome, and because I was saving on materials. Works that remain in my studio are in constant danger of getting reworked or reused, mostly for practical reasons. I am not really sure why I feel no attachment to old works or ideas. Perhaps that's why I put a hole in my old self's head.
- TG Perhaps like most engineers you are a problem solver and you don't see your oeuvre or career as something organic and coherent. Some artists love their work as if they were their children. They are so proud of it that they have to stand in front of it at private views - as Barnett Newman used to. You are obviously the opposite! You recycle your "children"! Anyway, in 1999 you were experimenting with painting? What had your work been focussed on before that? and why did you not persist with painting?
- JA Haha! I am creating a race of super-children! Before '99, I was working more with steel, wood and found material. I still use all these things and I still paint. There are times when I don't know what I am doing, there are times when I am completely sure but the results for me will always be flawed. However, the swans I really like!
- TG It is a shame you can't go to Singapore and stand by them as if you were Barnett Newman!
- JA Really? Is Singapore closed to travellers or just to Filipinos?
- TG Well, I think it is currently a three-weeks quarantine for you and I if we go to Singapore! and then ten days here coming back.
- JA Three weeks and ten days? Too much! I am definitely not going!



Juan Alcazaren, *Erithrina Objectalis*, 2007 oil, ink, acrylic, enamel and varnish on canvas, 121.9 × 121.9 cm (48 × 48 inches).

- TG In 2007 you made *Erithrina Objectalis*. I can see that this connects with your non-painterly work. Objects are presented as if they are parts of a plastic construction kit - waiting to be snapped off and fitted together as a plane or ship. Also, the background is like a blurry electric circuit diagram. Did you carry on making paintings in this style or did you get bored?
- JA Yes, we could describe this also as a kind of bricolage in painting with random imagery from my memory. I have done some paintings like those as recently as 2019 for Finale. Those looked like work-shed tool hanger walls except all the tools are gone and just the silhouettes of tools remain.
- TG How interesting that you say work-shed, not studio! What sort of space do you work in?
- JA My work space is literally a shed I constructed on our roof-deck to keep my kids from bothering me, but of course they pop out there all the time.
- TG Is it large? Do you have loads of stuff in it? I imagine it as more like a hardware store or an industrial junkyard than an elegant painter's studio.
- JA I'll send you a photo! My wife calls the roof-deck "Ground Zero". When I paint, I work in a rented "studio" down the street. My siblings and I got that to shoot animation and videos in - and other less dirty work. I'm working on a large painting there now. I'll send you a photo of that too.
- TG Got it! I am looking at the picture of your shed you just sent. How big is it?



Juan Alcazaren's work shed.

JA The shed is four by four metres. The yellow wall part is the staircase leading downstairs. It is crammed inside - but in an organized way. I know where to find things.

TG Do you still do a lot of advertising work? I assume you can't survive by selling works?

JA Advertising has changed much in recent times and the projects we used to get as our bread and butter now get done by youngsters in half the time and for peanuts. So now I rely completely on selling work. So far so good, could be better.

TG The next work you included was also a painting - or what you call a drawing: ball point on faux leather. This and related works must be based on some sort of medical image. Was it not part of a collaboration with Bernardo Pacquing? Are you a natural collaborator?



Juan Alcazaren, *Fig18*, 2008, ballpoint pen on leatherette, 121.9 × 121.9 cm (48 × 48 inches).

- JA That is a drawing. Yes. I've had three shows with Bernie. I'm not a natural collaborator, but Bernie and Nilo Ilarde are friends, so it's good fun to work with them.
- TG So, you see art as about amity, not challenge and struggle?
- JA It's all of the above.
- TG Do these drawings still exist or are they, like much else, destroyed?
- JA Those still exist, rolled up, but the ink bled on most of the surface so it doesn't look good.
- TG The imagery suggests you still have an interest in your medical background - or your parent's background.
- JA Yes, they influence me profoundly even if they couldn't get me to go to med school.
- TG And was the next work *See Evil* to do with your Catholic upbringing?



Juan Alcazaren, *See Evil*, 2017, mirror, hand etched mirror shards, steel slotted bars, LED lights, 50.8 x 35.6 x 35.6 cm (20 x 14 x 14 inches).

- JA For sure it is about that!
- TG BTW did you make several versions of this? Geraldine owns one but the word "Evil" is coloured green.
- JA Yes, I think I did six of these in different colours, because evil is attractive.
- TG Now you have got your old teachers at Don Bosco worried! Resist! Resist!

JA Hahaha! Struggle!

TG Is it normal for you to work in series?

JA Yes, I normally do. If I only get to finish one work, for sure, in my head, I imagine a series of them.

TG Shall we take a break? We could finish talking tomorrow morning if that suits you - or any other time Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Because of the lockdown my diary is very empty!

JA OK. Saturday morning's good for me. Till then, thanks!

SATURDAY, 14TH AUGUST 2021

JA Good morning Tony, I'm good to go.

TG And me too - just settling down with coffee and some toast.

JA BTW Google told me there was an earthquake last night near your area. Did you feel it?

TG Yes, the bed wobbled for about twenty seconds just before I fell asleep. I am getting used to these earthquakes! OK, your piece *One and twenty-one chairs*.



Juan Alcazaren, *One and twenty-one chairs*, 2020, plastic resin stackable chair, approx. 12.7 × 12.7 × 10.2 cm (5 × 5 × 4 inches) each.

As you told me this is a reference to Joseph Kosuth. A lot of your work - for example, the very large word-based commission you have made for Ateneo Art Gallery - builds on issues and strategies associated with conceptual art. Did you get interested in Conceptual art when you were in UP where Roberto Chabet taught? You must have known him. Did he teach you at all or did you

teach alongside him?

JA I sat in his classes when I was teaching but I was never an official

TG You remained an independent and didn't become a Chabetee³. Did you get on with him?

JA Perhaps, I became a Chabetee by osmosis. I did find it all a bit over my head at times but Chabet was very supportive of how I did things and knew how to draw things out of us.

TG It is interesting that you reference chatting with Nilo and Gerry as your source, not reading Lucy Lippard's book on Conceptual Art or scanning Art Forum. Were you a big reader of art magazines and books?

JA My earlier influence was Abueva who taught me steel welding and wood carving. I do not read as much as I should but I did read your book on Conceptual art. I think Nilo gave me a copy in the early 2000s. You signed it for me a couple of years ago.

TG Like any Filipino of your generation you lived through difficult times: Marcos, Martial law, the EDSA protests. Was your work ever political directly or indirectly? Of course, whether conceptual art is implicitly politically or ideologically radical is a vexed question.

JA My work was never overtly political like that of the Salingpusa group who were my classmates, like Manny Garibay, Mark Justiniani or Joy Mallari. I felt the oppression like everyone else but I guess I was too self-absorbed to care enough to put it in my work.

TG So, could we say that your work is a dialogue with material culture - manufactured objects - not politics or social issues. Though of course material culture is always entangled with social and ideological issues.

JA Yes, we can say that.

TG I sense you are wary of a theoretical analysis here. Did you and your generation read, for example, Roland Barthes on ideology and how objects and images construct meaning? As someone who worked in advertising you must be very aware of how imagery can affect or manipulate us!

JA Haha, yes I am wary of that. I'm sure I did most of the required reading in school but hardly on my own. I preferred to infer the ideology while being entertained by fictional writing. Yes, advertising imagery is powerful because it is appealing (like evil). I would like to say my work is more supernatural or spiritual, but I'm afraid I will not be able to defend that well enough.

³ The many ex-students of Roberto Chabet who remain devoted to him are often referred to as "Chabetees."

- JA I just read this morning (though not fictional) some scripture about the prophet Joshua who propped a large stone up against an oak tree and declared that inanimate object as witness to the covenant between God and his chosen people. This resonates with me.
- TG How interesting! The monks at Don Bosco will be glad to hear you are still reading your bible! Do you still attend mass regularly? Do you have statues of the Virgin Mary or Santo Nino⁴ in your house? And I recall you are working on a religious building.
- JA I read the bible (online) and attend mass (now online) daily. I have a statue of the Virgin and the Archangel Rafael in my shed upstairs (my second name is Rafael). I'm still part of the fundraising shows with Mike Munoz to raise funds to restore the old San Sebastian Basilica in Recto. It's made of steel and is rusting from the inside. We were asked to incorporate some of the removed rust into our works for that show.
- TG How is the restoration going?
- JA Good! A lot of scientists are involved in that project. But there is a long way to go. At least nothing has fallen on any mass-goer's head so far, but we all can guess what will be said about that if it happens, haha.
- TG You have never made a religious icon though? Or been commissioned to make one?
- JA I've done some crucifixes out of steel for individual's homes but nothing for a church so far.
- TG Let's hope a commission comes soon! I would love to see what you would make! Going back to *One and twenty-one chairs*, what I found fascinating is that each of the twenty-one tiny chairs still looks modernist. It is as if modernism is in the plastic's DNA or is a disease that has spread through the chair.
- JA Haha, that's right! It could also be my age. Mid-century design aesthetic is a disease that has spread completely into my psyche.
- TG Haha! Has your father diagnosed you as suffering from Alvar Aalto?
- JA Or Eero Saarinenitis, haha.
- TG Is that why in the next work - *Cronenberg Lamps* - you have tried to make the chairs look Gothic? To escape modernism, or to heal yourself?
- JA
- TG

⁴ Santo Nino is the name of the Christ child, but treated here as an independent saint.



Juan Alcazaren, *Cronenberg Lamps*, 2020, plastic resin stackable chairs, LED lights, approx. 61 × 25.4 × 25.4 cm (24 × 10 × 10 inches) each.

JA That wasn't a real intention, they just turned out that way like a failed teleportation experiment.

TG Was it a response just to that one film, not to Cronenberg's wider body of work?

JA Yes, *The Fly*.

TG While we are talking about movies, what sort do you enjoy? And also, you mentioned reading novels rather than art criticism. What novels are your favourites?

JA Mostly sci-fi films. I read a bit of *Flatland* after you recommended it but didn't finish yet. Though not sci-fi, I liked Michel Tournier's *Friday*, a retelling of the Robinson Crusoe story. I sometimes imagine myself as stranded in a place where I need to build things and make do with what's available.

Recently watched *TENET* by Chris Nolan but couldn't understand it. Need to watch it again.

TG You like books and movies about other worlds - and imagine yourself as a bricoleur there!

JA Right!

TG How about music? When you are in the work-shed or the painting studio do you have music on - if so, what do you prefer? Or do you work in monastic silence?

JA It is never silent up there, I hear the street. My work is also quite noisy at times so I can't hear the music. I try sometimes but get distracted

and also need to hear if tiny footsteps are approaching so I can shut down the grinder or welder.

TG

SBWF - what does this title mean? I believe you made this work for a show celebrating your sixtieth birthday.



Juan Alcazaren, *SBWF*, *Seasoned Beginner, Finders Weepers series*, 2020, exhibition view at Underground Gallery, Manila, Philippines, plastic play sculpture parts, wood, steel, enamel, approx. 35.6 × 17.8 cm (14 × 7 inches) each.

JA

Ah yes, it means Seasoned Beginner, Finders Weepers. I think of myself as starting over from scratch every time I work on a show, probably to mirror my struggle of daily conversion as a spiritual person. I've gotten good at beginning, but the trick is to endure to the end. Finders weepers is a play on finders keepers. Weeping is the reaction to finding the end.

The painting *Snakes and/or Ladders* was supposed to be in that show but didn't make it. The game is about falling and getting up again. Are you familiar with that game in England?



Juan Alcazaren, *Snakes and/or Ladders* (work in progress), 2021, water-based enamel on canvas, 243.8 × 243.8 cm (96 × 96 inches).

- TG Yes, we are to the point that snakes and ladders is used as a metaphor for life, and its unpredictability. They are very big snakes you have painted!
- JA I guess that says it all. The painting is supposed to be an oversized version of the board. I will show it in Finale next year at the Tall gallery along with some oversized chairs and maybe rulers.
- TG I look forward to that! I am aware that there are many things we have not talked about: your word pieces and your continuing love affair with iron, steel and rust, but to conclude can I ask how the pandemic has affected you. Has it been a good or bad time to work? Has it made you stand back and think about what you do - and why?
- JA It might be insensitive so say the pandemic has done me good, but somehow it has. I am more focused on tasks at hand and more importantly attentive to my interior and family life. Strangely enough, I've had more sales during the pandemic than a whole pandemic-free year. Perhaps it's the "revenge spending" of the collectors. I am a consummate beginner of things with a pronounced fear of finishing. Lockdowns have made me more conscious of that and more committed to actually finishing things.
- TG I think that is a nice spot to stop on. Thanks for your patience, Johnny.
- JA Thanks Tony, I enjoyed this. Thank you too and my regards to Geraldine!
- TG Will do! Have a good day!

Juan Alcazaren (b. 1960 in Manila, Philippines) challenges preconceived traditional definitions of "sculpture" by working with a wide variety of materials ranging from old toys to household and industrial flotsam and jetsam. He coaxes the ephemeral and overlooked into the world of the permanent and covetable by giving them unexpected form, combining a bricoleur's obsessiveness with a steel welder's resoluteness, often manufacturing profundity by incorporating text in his work. Alcazaren is also an animator working mostly in stop-motion animation. He and his siblings were pioneers of this technique in the Philippines in the '80s and have won multiple awards for their work. Alcazaren was conferred the CCP Thirteen Artists Award in 2000. He continues to actively exhibit in major local and regional galleries. Notably, he was part of the Chabet 50 years tribute exhibitions in 2104 and *Filipiniana* at the Centro Conde Duque in Madrid, Spain (2006). In 2017, Alcazaren was commissioned to create a permanent installation at the Areté in Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, Philippines (2017). Juan Alcazaren has a Bachelor's Degree in Landscape Architecture and studied sculpture at the University of the Philippines, where he also was a lecturer in 1995 at the College of Fine Arts. He lives and works in Pasig City, Philippines.

CHRISTINA QUISUMBING RAMILO IN CONVERSATION WITH TONY GODFREY



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo in her studio in Quezon City, Philippines,
photograph by MM Yu.



(We talked at the same time as we were agreeing which works to include in the exhibition *After the Storm* at Mizuma Gallery, Singapore.)

I thought we could start by talking about your scribble works - the scribbles. An obvious question: are the scribbles by you? If not, by whom?

The Scribbles were collected over a span of several years, and from different places: Manila, Siem Reap, Taipei, KL, Bangkok, Jogja, etc. developing nations hogging the vaccines, it has taken painful months to get more than twenty percent of adult Filipinos vaccinated. Many artists have been taken ill, several seriously.

- TG They are not made by you?
- CQR No. They are scrap pieces of paper that people use to test pens and markers.
- TG But they are never doodles where people in boring meetings make comic and ridiculous drawings?
- CQR No. Most of them come from art supply stores and bookshops.
- TG Do you collect them all personally or do friends collect for you too?
- CQR Mostly me. About 98%.
- TG Is that important? That from the start you choose what to take?
- CQR Yes.
- It's part of the process of acquiring them. I take as many as I can and edit them when I get home. The not so interesting ones are put underneath, like an underpainting to sort of give the work a layer.
- TG So, once selected they just become materials. You never make scribbles solely using scribbles found in Manila or Jogja or Taipei?
- CQR Actually, they are mostly arranged that way. Mostly from one city since it's difficult to get a lot from one store alone. Though in Manila, it's easy to go back to National Bookstore many times.
- TG I suppose what I am getting at is whether you see yourself as an artist or an anthropologist? Do you compose them as you would an abstract painting or to reveal how a particular group of people scribble?
- CQR I guess it's like making a documentary. Things unfold and you work with what you have. It's also like creating a painting with the underpainting/layering – but with the materials that I have collected. I am limited to the materials that I have on hand so it takes me a long time to finish a work because I need to collect enough. It has to stay authentic so they can't just be mixed up.
- TG “Authentic” is an intriguing word! Is that something you feel intuitively as you work?
- CQR Absolutely. It's easier to use extra materials to make things more attractive but part of the challenge is to do as little intervention to the materials that I use.

TG So, in fact, you are like an anthropologist presenting her findings from a field trip?

CQR I guess you could say that, but with some artistic license. 😊

TG How long exactly do you work on each scribble work? How do you know one is finished or complete? BTW I find them very beautiful. 🙌

CQR Thank you! It all depends. It usually takes me several years to collect enough materials to do a work. I have countless bins of different materials. I would say for the whole scribble series, it took me maybe 4-5 years to collect enough. Once I have enough for a work, I work on several pieces at a time then work on other unrelated works so that when I come back to it, I can see the works more objectively. I like the impermanence of using pins rather than glue because I can still move things around. I also like that even at the end they are not completely glued.

TG Returning to the question of when a work is finished: that is, I presume, an intuitive thing, though based on years of experience.

CQR Yes, very intuitive. That's why I hardly work on a piece uninterrupted from beginning to end. I usually work on several works at a time so as to give them breathing space.

TG You speak as if you think of them as organic, living entities.

CQR Because I use a lot of different materials, their origins are important to me. They all have history. I am thinking of including these two works as well:



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo, Left: *Naglutaw sa Daplin sa Dagat*, 2021, old matte board from West Gallery frame shop, rubber debris from the seashore from Martha Atienza, 95.3 × 85.1 × 7.6 cm (37.5 × 33.5 × 3 inches); Right: *Salin sa Inanod*, 2021, fragments of rubber slippers from the seashore from Martha Atienza, green wooden cutting board from UP College of Fine Arts Printing Department, wood frame with glass, 62.9 × 62.2 × 7.6 cm (24.75 × 24.5 × 3 inches).

- TG I agree. You should include them. They seem very connected to me. Mute, human objects. Things that have drifted over the ocean I presume.
- CQR The objects were given to me by Martha Atienza from the shores of Bantayan Island. The blue background is from the West gallery frame shop where they cut boards. And the green background is from the UP College of Fine Arts Printing dept where they cut their plates.
- TG Obviously, it is important to you that the background came from West Gallery and the objects were given by Martha. It seems the works are a little bit like a diary. Do you ever list who or where you get elements? I know you do this for used paint brushes - naming the artist who gave them to you.
- CQR Always. I always name who owned it or gave it to me. Unless I found an object on the street or from a thrift shop.
- TG When did you make your first scribble piece?
- CQR Early this year.
- TG But you have been collecting the actual scribbles for many years!
- CQR Yes. Usually, the idea comes years earlier. It's just a matter of collecting enough to make a work. In *Kulimlim*, a piece with used sandpapers given to me by Geraldine Javier, for example, it took me forever to work on it because I didn't have much to play with. When I finally finished it, it needed something more so I added the guava branches – working in a way that is similar to her aesthetics.



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo, *Kulimlim*, 2021, used sandpaper from Geraldine Javier, guava branches, wood, old wooden frame, glass lighting with dimmer, 95.3 × 68.6 × 12.7 cm (37.5 × 27 × 5 inches).

- TG May I ask a bit more about the scribbles: Will you carry on collecting scribbles and making scribble works? Or are these the last?

CQR With the current situation, it's hard to collect them. Travel is also close to impossible.

TG And in terms of composing, you were talking of planning this wall of your works in Singapore. How are you doing that: are you laying pieces down on the floor and seeing which ones go well together or are you planning it digitally on a screen - or is it just planned in your head?

CQR I usually do a sketch on my math notebook. I'm low tech.

TG Like me! OK, the pencil works - when did you first make one of those?



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo, Left: *Broken*, 2020, used pencils, wood, 8.3 × 8.9 × 7.6 cm (3.25 × 3.5 × 3 inches); Right: *Art Deco 1*, 2020, used pencils, wood, 19.1 × 5.7 × 5.7 cm (7.5 × 2.25 × 2.25 inches).

CQR I made my first pencil work in 2008 from pencil stubs found at the construction site while renovating my grandmother's house. The piece *Broken* is from a collection of broken pencils that I've collected for years. I've been doing those on and off for over a decade; but when the pandemic started, I still had so many that I started to do some works again. This was mainly to keep myself busy and sane. I use some of them to doodle or scribble if they are too sharp. So, I have a lot of doodles made from the pencils.

TG One day will you make a scribble piece from your own?

CQR Maybe.

TG I like it that the connection between the pencil pieces and the scribble works is being emphasised!

CQR It was a nice break to make smaller works. More introspective. Intimate.

TG Yes, pandemic works made at the kitchen table!

CQR

Exactly!

TG

When I look at the pencil works, I often think of Dan Flavin's neon pieces: *Homage to V. I. Tatlin*. The scribble pieces sometimes make me think of the collages of Kurt Schwitters or Daniel Spoerri. Are these artists that interested you? Were there important "influences" or models for you?

CQR

Not consciously. I love the New York Skyline so the pencil structures are very art deco. And some are based on temples from Cambodia and Indonesia. I am familiar with Dan Flavin's work and Tatlin. And Kurt Schwitters.

TG

Do you see yourself in a collage tradition which would, I guess, include artists such as Braque, Picasso, Joseph Cornell, Schwitters etc.

CQR

I have always wanted to do collages but so far have not experimented enough, apart from my sandpaper works. I am a big fan of Joseph Cornell.

TG

Is it possible to include this work, *Portal*, in the Singapore exhibition? I think it works well with the work that uses Geraldine's used sandpaper.

CQR

I agree.



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo, *Portal*, 2021, old frames, wood discard from Dick Daroy, scrap wood, lighting, 62.2 × 54.6 × 7.6 cm (24.5 × 21.5 × 3 inches).

CQR

The old frame and colourful facade belonged to the late Dick Daroy.

TG

I don't know who he is.

CQR

He passed away a few years back and his works dealt with decay. He collected old frames - something I do as well - so after he passed, I got the opportunity to use some that he left behind, as a tribute to his legacy.

- TG OK. Maybe this is the point where we go back to the beginning and talk about when and why you went to the US and what you did there.
- CQR I moved to New York in 1985 right after I graduated from UP. I went there to take my Master's in Studio Art and Art Education. Then I just stayed for 23 years.
- TG Before that, who taught you in UP? What sort of work did you make there?
- CQR Fernando Modesto had an impact on me - he was unorthodox in the way he taught. I studied Editorial Design and Illustration. I wanted to be a children's book illustrator. Actually, I really wanted to study Painting but my parents thought I wouldn't survive as a painter. But, eventually, they agreed to let me study Painting when I promised that if they let me, I would never be a burden to them or my family. I was pretty persuasive! Naive too, I guess.
- TG Can I ask what your parents did? Were you brought up a Catholic or Buddhist? Were you a country girl or a townie?
- CQR My father was a government employee. My mom was a teacher. I grew up very Catholic. I grew up in the city. My mom also taught arts and crafts.
- TG Did you learn a lot from her - about working with materials?
- CQR Yes, I guess, and recycling stuff too. I hated it growing up but look where and what I ended up with! 😂 My father loved wood and used to varnish and revarnish our furniture. He was pretty good. I learned mostly from watching them. They didn't want to be disturbed. My mom did a lot of beadwork and loved to bake - that I didn't inherit!
- TG How did you survive in NYC?
- CQR My aunt (my mom's sister) adopted me legally so she paid for my schooling and after I graduated, I had to work to support myself. Mostly art related jobs. I worked in a fine arts bronze foundry where they would make Erte sculptures and a whole series of Yoko Ono works. Then I worked at the Frick Art Reference Art Library for nine years as a Page Supervisor. I had access to a multitude of art references and rare books, I loved the images. After that, I did freelance work, working in galleries at the office and installing works.
- TG What about your own work? Were you mainly making paintings in New York?
- CQR I would paint weekends and I managed to show here and there. When I quit my full-time job, I just wanted to paint and do just enough part time work to pay bills. Then I realized that my parents were getting old and that it made sense to move back home and do my

art here and take care of my parents. I figured that I had had my fill of New York and having a lifestyle of a twenty-something year old.

TG Do you want to reproduce one of the works you made in New York or is that all behind you now, and you began again as an artist when you returned to the Philippines in 2008?

CQR I was painting mostly figurative works and powerline paintings. My works totally changed when I moved back here.

TG Initially you were based in the countryside, I believe.

CQR I lived in Quezon City, where I renovated my grandmother's house. That made me shift to more 3D works. Eventually I moved my studio to Cavite and I tried living there for a few years but transporting works was expensive and it was hard to find a good carpenter to assist me. I hardly go there now. It's hard to live alone.

TG I visited you there a few years ago. In my memory it was a house of many doors, an artwork in its own right - as is your house in Manila.

CQR Yes, it was. I call them both functional assemblages.

TUESDAY, 7TH SEPTEMBER 2021

TG Hi Ling. How are you?

CQR I just got a Covid test.

TG Are you OK?

CQR Yes, negative! Phew!

TG That is good to hear. Shall we talk about ART?

CQR OK.

TG You said that it was when you built your house of doors that you started making smaller art works?

CQR I initially had an architect redesign my grandmother's house in Quezon City, but I eventually scrapped the plan. I bought a whole lot of old doors and windows and sort of collaged it to the skeletal structure. I made small and big works there.

TG What was wrong with the plan? Boring? Impracticable? Too expensive? Or just not you?

CQR Nothing was wrong with it. I just wanted to use the doors and

windows and other architectural details that I had bought. It was a major renovation of my grandmother's house. It was actually more expensive to renovate than build anew.

TG It normally is! Just to be clear: the house of doors was your grandmother's house?

CQR Yes. I left parts of the house that weren't in bad shape - like some of the flooring and old windows and grills. My architect was supportive and she would come every week to check on my plans and designs. But actually both of them were.

TG So, having collected the doors and windows you made plans, not just improvised as you went along? But I assume the project was effectively led by the materials or objects you had to hand.

CQR Yes. I was hands on, I would make the sketches and measurements and be on site to make sure it was done how I wanted. The leftover scraps from the construction led me to start creating 3D works.

TG In making the house were you looking at the work of other architects? the early work of Frank Gehry or outsider art like the Watts Towers?

CQR It was a mixture of Filipino and Western Art Deco. I'm also a fan of Frank Lloyd Wright and Japanese aesthetics.

TG Yes, when I visited the house, I was very aware of the Japanese feeling - the sense of intimacy, enclosure, but also light and space.

CQR It has a bit of a Sarah Winchester Mansion feel to it too, but on a much smaller scale.

TG Sorry, Ling, but I don't know what Sarah Winchester Mansion is.

CQR It's an eccentric house in California built by the widow of the man who owned the Winchester firearms company, and was funded by money from that business. Many doors and stairs that go nowhere.

TG Your house in Alfonso also struck me as a house of lairs. There were so many doors leading to unknown rooms and hiding places.



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo's house in Alfonso, Cavite, Philippines.

- CQR Yes. But unlike the Winchester Mansion, all the doors open up to something.
- TG There are no hiding places in your house!
- CQR Oh yes, there are! 😂
- TG But it doesn't have that scary, alienating, discombobulating feel that the multi-room installations of Mike Nelson or Gregor Schneider do?
- CQR I realized when I built it that I must be claustrophobic! Too many windows and doors to exit from! The house is pretty open.
- TG Yes - the exact opposite of Nelson or Schneider!
- CQR I don't know their work. I need to google them later.
- TG Check out Gregor Schneider's installation *Totes Haus u r* at the Venice Biennale in 2001 and Mike Nelson's installation *The Coral Reef* at Matt's gallery in 2000. So, your sculptures from the start were both non-representational and architectural.
- CQR Yes, they were combinations of stuff. I had too many things in my house - as I do now! I used a lot of stairway stringers. I guess it was my tribute to Brancusi.
- TG Could we say that at heart you are a collector and like most collectors you always buy too many things so you eventually crowd yourself out of your own house?
- CQR Yes. If I wasn't an artist, I would just be a hoarder. Objects interest me a lot. Their usage and history.
- TG "The artist as hoarder" would be a very interesting exhibition. So, each work begins with your interest in an object, its history and usage.
- CQR And then I think the challenge is what to combine with what so that it creates another story. I see too many possibilities with discarded materials: it becomes a problem: I am running out of space to store them!
- TG It is interesting that you use the word "story". I always feel, though I am not sure if I can articulate quite why, that your works are story-telling.
- CQR I guess what I feel is that all objects have a story and that when combined sometimes, it gives you a clue, a snippet of something that, hopefully, the viewer can be curious about.
- TG Can we say that they are the materials for the viewer to make a story with?

CQR I guess. Everything has a history. Even when I use old wood with paint on it, I know what colour paint that period came from.

TG Perhaps in another life you will be an archaeologist, dating the ruined frescoes and mosaics of ancient buildings.

CQR Perhaps.

TG You selected four older works to talk about. One - *MATA* - uses animal bones. I know of two other female artists who used chicken and pork bones like this: the Mexican surrealist Remedios Varo and the Australian artist Linde Ivimey. But both of them made or make sculptures that are animal-like or anthropomorphic. Yours is always abstract. At heart you may be a storyteller but at heart you are also something of a minimalist - *MATA* is a simple spiral just as used by Richard Long or Robert Smithson.



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo, *MATA*, 2018, used chicken bones, 97.8 × 97.8 × 5.7 cm (38.5 × 38.5 × 2.25 inches).

CQR I mostly use chicken wishbones. They are very hard to collect and cleaning them is tedious. *Mata* refers to the eye of the storm. The two bigger works I did with the bones were calendars. One was Leap Year but it was arranged by week with a flower design. One wish per day 😊. For a whole year.

TG What a nice thought! But the bones are very clearly cleaned. Recently I bought some Igorot ritual objects. Bones held together with old cloth, mud and probably dried blood. They spooked Geraldine out so much I had to take them back to the gallery. Your works are the antithesis of that. I think you are more of a minimalist than a witch doctor or shaman.

CQR Haha, I am very sensitive so I try not to use objects that I think might have bad juju. I clean most of them with salt.

TG Why salt?

CQR It's supposed to take out the bad spirits. A sort of cleansing. I mix it with the soap when I'm cleaning objects and add salt if I'm boiling

bones to take out the extra meat and blood. Whatever works! I sometimes even sage a room.

TG Clearly, like other Filipinos you believe in spirits. You are part Catholic, part animist. Did this concern with spirits happen when you returned home? And what do you mean by “sage a room”?

CQR It's happened to me in New York and here. In New York, I used to buy a lot of old furniture and things, and there was one week when I had a migraine headache for all seven days and I was exhausted. I asked a friend/healer to check my apartment and she said there were many spirits in my apartment. The next day, I flew to SF and the whole time there I had no migraine, but once I got back, the migraine returned. My friend came and did a ritual with frankincense and sage.

Here, they always tell you to put a medallion of St Michael on the windows and I also put salt sometimes on leaves then throw it out after a day or two. There was also an incident in Alfonso, but maybe some other time.

TG Why not now?

CQR OK. I bought this two-piece Japanese cabinet from a surplus store. I put it in the living room where Rose, my assistant, used to sleep. She complained that she was hearing scratches inside around three AM. I told her it must be the humidity and the wood moving.

On the third night, she knocked on my door and asked if she could sleep in my room because she was hearing the scratches again.

But I could hear them too!

So, in the morning, I told her I had a blessed rosary and I would put it on top of it and that would fix it. When I did, I felt a strong surge of energy from my hand all over my body. The energy spread so we put the cabinet outside and left.

We couldn't find an available priest, but my sister had been given a prayer to exorcise. So, we returned and prayed and as we were reaching the centre of the house, my sister's voice started to shake. We all felt the energy.

So, the next day, I burnt sage, incense and sprinkled holy water and put salt all over the cabinet and returned it to the store. I didn't even ask for my money back!

I was too scared to burn it.

Needless to say, I don't buy old furniture anymore 😂

TG Very sensible! I am far more aware of experiences like that here than I ever was in the UK. We used to have bad feelings from the old mango tree between my library and the guest rooms. Eventually a visitor from the US sleeping in one of the guest rooms became possessed and tried to throw herself out of the upstairs window; she was speaking in a voice other than hers. In the morning she was unaware that she had acted so weirdly and had woken everyone up in the middle of the night with her screams. We had the house exorcised by a faith healer and then by a regular priest, and we built a little spirit house beneath the tree. That assuaged whatever or whoever it was.

CQR Scary shit! Do these things happen in England?

TG Yes, but less so, and most people won't believe them. Getting back to Minimalism which is non-scary (unless like Robert Smithson you think it was uncanny), can we talk about the brick sculpture or installation you made in a gallery's basement in Indonesia? Again, it is potentially narrative – either a stairway to heaven or to nowhere? But it is also made in a very straightforward, minimal way - brick on brick.

What made you want to make a staircase - one that would have to be demolished at the end of the exhibition?



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo, *Oro Plata Mata*, 2016, bricks, approx. 345.4 (L) × 86.4 (W) × 289.6 (H) cm (136 × 24 × 114 inches).

CQR I liked the idea of using the basement with a stair going nowhere. I liked the process of building something that, as in the case of most of my installations, was impermanent. It was also to do with labouring after something. Like the steep stairways in temples. Also, there was the influence of the Sarah Winchester stairs that mostly go nowhere.

TG Or the horribly steep staircases on the temples in Mexico.

CQR Yes, exactly! Also, a tribute to Carl Andre.

TG I believe those stairs in temples are a symbol of an ascent to the heavens, to get closer to the divine in a physical sense.

CQR I use the stair structure a lot, but, mostly, they don't really go anywhere.

TG Apart from Filipino animism, it seems you are still sincerely Catholic. Do you still go to mass or confession on a regular basis?

CQR Yes, still Catholic. I go to mass on Christmas and New Year. Can I show you two other works?



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo, Top: *Flight*, 2019, wood, cement, 43.2 × 12.7 × 77.2 cm (17 × 5 × 30.4 inches); Bottom: *No One is to Blame*, 2014, painted wood, left bridge: 183.5 × 198.1 × 34.3 cm (72.25 × 78 × 13.5 inches), right bridge: 154.3 × 162.6 × 33.7 cm (60.75 × 64 × 13.25 inches), and *Trust Me (Salvavida/lifesaver)*, 2014, concrete, d. 62.2 × 15.2 cm (d. 24.5 × 6 inches).

TG Yes. Both works demand to be seen as metaphors. Catholicism is a religion of metaphors.

CQR The second image is a bridge under construction. However, when they meet at the centre, they won't be aligned. Below, at the centre, is a *Salvavida*, a lifesaver, but it's made of concrete.



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo, *Endless Days*, 2018, used sandpaper from Soler Santos, 243.8 × 365.8 cm (96 × 144 inches).

- TG The material I associate you most with is sandpaper - used sandpaper. I know that the giant triptych, *Endless Days*, which you made of pieces of used sand paper given to you by friends is especially important to you. Do these bits of used sandpaper carry some metaphor?
- CQR Yes, of anonymous labour. Except for some that were given to me by Soler Santos, Leo Abaya, Geraldine and a few others I found discarded by people I do not know.
- TG So, normally you just gather it as you do scribbles?
- CQR Yes, these are all markings of different people.
- TG A homage to the unknown craftsman.
- CQR However, the first few years when I was making these, I knew the people who used them and where they were used. This was when they were building the house.
- I also love the texture.
- I also love that you can guess when it was used or what was built.
- It's authentic!
- TG The fourth work you selected, the library of wood was a wonderful installation - one that really resonated for me, though I was surprised you chose its installation at the Manila Art Fair, rather than in a private museum where it actually felt like a library with room you could enter.



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo, *Forest for the Trees*,
wooden books and shelves, 2019.

CQR

Let me send you an image of the one at the Sanso museum that you liked best. It was the most organized. It was, by the way, important for me to use the scrap wood from Las Casas Acuzar because that was from historic and ancestral houses.



Christina Quisumbing Ramilo, *Forest for the Trees*, 2019,
wooden books and shelves, Fundacion Sansó.

TG

Which iteration did you prefer?

CQR

They are all different - and all hell to install! but I especially loved the feedback I got from the third one I made at the Jogja Biennale because they seem to really get the point, and the books were all written upon by the audience with chalk.

TG

You asked them to write on them in Jogja?

CQR

Yes. The same for all three installations. The wood I used in Jogja was from old Javanese houses they were tearing down to make modern concrete houses or to convert into boutique hotels.

- TG So, the wood had rich associations just as old books have a rich feel to them - things lovingly made and handled.
- CQR Yes! And full of history being demolished to make “room for progress”. The viewers were invited to write their proposed title or story with chalk on the wooden books.
- TG OK. I remember now, but didn’t do that. I am not a big joiner-in. One last question. What will be your next big project: do you have something in mind? Or, after the big show at Finale are you just letting things settle?
- CQR Honestly, for the first time in a long time, I’m in a blank! I guess I’m taking Geraldine’s long overdue advice to take it easy. I’m taking care of my mental health mostly. I’ve been sleeping a lot and watching Netflix.
- I think for a while I just want to do small works or works that I can just have fun with.
- TG I think everyone has to do that sometimes. It’s a bit like crop rotation - sometimes you have to leave the field fallow, nothing much happening except the soil recharging itself with nutrients and rain and sunlight.

Christina Quisumbing Ramilo (b. 1961 in Manila, Philippines) examines and reimagines objects and their contexts through comprehension of material. Her artistic practice involves an interest in and respect for the life and history of objects. With minimal intervention on their surfaces, she arranges them or reconfigures their parts, presenting other perspectives to their forms and functions. Often using unconventional materials (construction discards, architectural fragments, casts, recycled paper), and utilizing objects themselves as material (mirrors, bottles, old frames, clothing), most of which have been collected for years, she constructs the works in parts over long periods of time, never completely finished. Conferred with titles that employ wit and humor, they ultimately express her personal poetics. A graduate of the University of the Philippines, Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1985, and of New York University with a Master’s Degree in Studio Arts and Art Education in 1988, Ramilo lives and works in Manila, Philippines.

LESLIE DE CHAVEZ IN CONVERSATION WITH TONY GODFREY





Leslie de Chavez, *Begotten Jewels (Lot no. 1)*, 2021, assembled found objects wrapped in plaster of Paris, 24 pieces, dimensions variable.

TONY GODFREY Good afternoon Leslie!

LESLIE DE CHAVEZ Hi Tony, good afternoon!

TG I am fascinated by your recent set of sculptures, *Begotten Jewels (Lot no. 1)*. But can you explain what the title means and why there are now only 24 pieces. Originally I know you planned to make 30 small pieces.

LDC Well, the work is actually an offshoot of the installation piece from my Silverlens show titled *I Like Art Fairs and Art Fairs Like Me*, where as an element/part of that piece, are found objects wrapped with plaster of Paris bandage.

TG The title is, I presume, ironic. Personally speaking, I loathe art fairs. I hope now that I am retired I will never have to go to one again in my life. Artworks taken out of their social and historical context, displayed badly, crammed together with too many disparate art works, all reduced to the level of dried goods.

LDC The title “Begotten Jewels” aims to suggest reinvention, reconfiguration, and maybe curation (if you like) of ordinary/banal objects that are considered residues of capitalism as manifested in our consumerist lifestyles. “Jewels” because these are objects that used to have meanings and value - as well as memory, history, and attachments.

TG If they are bandaged one could read them as damaged - or to be discarded.

LDC Yes, one could read them like that as well. The sheer quantity of things we've accumulated, saved, and kept through the years became apparent during the pandemic lockdowns. Since all of us were forced to stay home, the amount of objects that we were supposed to, let's say, let go of, give away, discard, and fix, have become not just an idea or a thought but a sort of reality we need to confront and deal with.

And I don't want to easily give in to adding more to the environmental problem these objects will cause should I just discard them.

I was thinking of connecting the idea of the number of days in a month. That's why at first I thought of doing 30 pieces, but then when I thought of the title relating to jewels, I came to put more weight on the idea of "value."

TG Ok, so it is about the responsibility of acquisition and ownership in a world which has too much stuff in it already. Is that 24 as in the measurement for gold: 1-24 carats?

LDC Yes. I intend to relate it to the measurement of gold and jewels, "carats."



Leslie de Chavez, *I Like Art Fairs and Art Fairs Like Me*, 2021, FRP, decal, side mirrors, found objects wrapped in plaster of Paris, framed laser prints on paper, burlap, wood, brass plate, LED lights, dimensions variable.

TG *I Like Art Fairs and Art Fairs Like Me* was a very elegant and very complex work with 36 small bandaged elements displayed on a grid on a suspended platform with to either side mirrors the end of long (fake) sticks. The mirrors had the words of the title inscribed on them. There was also a bench at the end of the corridor the work was installed in which was inaccessible as the work blocked the passage. We can talk about that work later. I liked it very much but remained puzzled as to exactly what it might mean - and

I didn't want to look up the catalogue to be told what. Lot no. 1 also suggests auctions: that this is the first of a series of other collections of bandaged items to be put up for sale. Am I correct?

LDC

You're right. After I finished this work (*Begotten Jewels: Lot no. 1*), I realized that I can make this into a series, but in diverse iterations. "Lot no.1" came from the auction structure (lacking proper label here), a wordplay on the title, but also to suggest the idea of objects participating in the exchange of value, of how they gain and lose them through time and context, of yes, "acquisition and ownership". And yeah, I was also thinking of how I can give these objects a new life and put it back in the market to be put up for sale.

TG

As *Begotten Jewels (Lot no. 1)* is about exchange and the market. The fact that it is for sale is part of it. As is the price. What is the price?

LDC

I haven't thought of the price, actually.

TG

Would you be tempted to send another such "lot" to Sotheby's or Christie's or one of the local auction houses?

LDC

Come to think of it, yeah why not? I could send one of these "lots" to one of these auction houses, but its adventure to these context would be part of the conceptual framework of objects of art vis-a-vis life/value in the market, hahaha. Which mean, it could be a separate work, intended to penetrate the same platform or form of circulation that gives these same objects value.

TG

I look forward to bidding! As a European of a certain generation they reminded me of something you probably aren't aware of: Franz West and his *pass-stücke* or *adaptives* - bandaged or papier-mâché objects you were allowed to fondle and play with as if they were psychic/physical extensions of the self. Will people be allowed to touch and hold the pieces in Singapore? In the Silverlens show the 36 objects seemed very precious and inaccessible. BTW I can send you some images of myself and my teenage daughter posing with *Passsstücken* in the Franz West show in Venice 1990.



Franz West, *Passsstücken (Adaptives)* in Austrian Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 1990
- held by Tony Godfrey and Heloise Godfrey.

LDC No. I'm not familiar with Franz West's *pass-stücke* or his bandaged objects.

Begotten Jewels: Lot No. 1 was produced in such a way that it characterized fragility, and never in the context of play, participation or interactivity with the audience. The least that the viewers can do is probably figure out or identify for themselves some objects that they recognize from the set, just by looking at them.

TG Toy soldiers, old tools, cutlery etc.

LDC Actually, the selected objects in *Silverlens* were laid out in a grid format, but it was supposed to be interactive. I told the staff of the gallery that they may suggest to the viewers that they're allowed to rearrange the objects according to their liking.

I was meaning to put an instruction on the wall, actually.

One could also use the single stick and mirror on the left side to view/reflect the black and white digital print reproduction of Amorsolo's *Market Scene* under the hanging platform.

TG It is always difficult to gauge how much information to give viewers. Maybe we can return to that later.

TG The painting you are sending to Singapore, *The Rehearsal in Denial*, uses gold paint or gold leaf, was this to connect it to the sculptures or is gold just a medium you have used a lot recently?



Leslie de Chavez, *The Rehearsal in Denial*, 2021, oil, gold leaf, decal on acid-free paper, 160 × 211.2 cm (63 × 83 inches), set of 16 framed panels, 40 × 52.8 cm (15.75 × 20.75 inches) each.

LDC Yes, a medium I've been using a lot recently.

TG Because you like the medium, or to suggest financial value?

- LDC As a medium, I am for its association/affinities with our colonial history. Of how this precious material is utilized to insinuate or propagate Catholic religion's idea of holiness as equivalent to preciousness, and later on with Imelda's "the true, the good, and the beautiful." In this work, I dwell more on the idea of the invaluable or irreplaceable or things/ideas that need to be treasured like life, freedom, and nature.
- TG You have mentioned the issue of colonialism and Filipino politics, perhaps we can put that to one side for a moment. But first I want to ask about your use of poetry. You take your poetry seriously. Do you publish it in its own right or only as an element of your art works?
- LDC I love poetry. I realized that there are so many things that we cannot articulate in pictures or imagery but can be more effective or meaningful if put into words. I can hardly write, I am not even confident with my skills in writing. I am not confident enough to publish them in their own right. I was supposed to include a book of poetry in my Silverlens exhibition, a series of quatrains. I wrote one hundred of them but in Tagalog (Filipino). I stamped them on copper sheets, but was not able to finish them because I ran out of metal sheets and could not go to Manila to buy more because of the series of unpredictable quarantine restrictions implemented in the city. The work could have been in two books, 50 pages each.
- The poems were my meditations/reflection on the socio-political happenings in the country amidst the pandemic. I'd like to call it *Tayabas Copperplates, Book I & II*, a parallel articulation on the earliest known evidence of written literature in the history of the Philippines known as the "Laguna Copperplate."
- TG You write about art too, but unlike everyone else I know in the Philippines in Tagalog, not in English. This use of a native language is a political statement, right?
- LDC Yes, it is.
- TG So let's talk about your background and your "position." I believe you were born in or near Lucban, a town in the mountains south of Manila. To me it is rather like a hill town in Tuscany with narrow streets. But it always seems to be raining when I go there - unlike the towns in Tuscany. Were you born in the town or the countryside nearby? What sort of family were you born into? Was there a history or knowledge of art making?
- LDC I was born in Pasig, Metro Manila, but grew up and studied elementary and high school in Lucban. It is a small town, and because Lucban is located at the foot of Mt. Banahaw, the weather is always cool and most of the time rainy. Lucban is an agricultural town and famous for its local fiesta, the San Isidro Pahiyas Festival. This festival originated as a thanks-giving tradition of the town to the

patron saint of the farmers, San Isidro Labrador.

I came from a middle class family. My parents ran a small bicycle shop in Lucban until my college days. Lucban is known as the summer capital of Quezon province because of its beauty, colorful traditions and artistic vibrancy, and a few years back was designated as the Art Capital of Quezon province.

- TG It is evident from your work and our conversations that you are angered by the corruption in politics here and that you loathe the Duterte administration - like most artists. Was your family politically active?
- LDC If active, meaning they made sure to be updated regularly of the many things happening around us, yes, they were and are active. And they're frustrated too, with the current administration. Within the family, we can converse with/about current events and issues, and they don't shy away from giving opinions as well.
- TG They are also, I believe, devout Catholics and you are too. Even though some of your paintings attack the clergy as corrupt, you are a regular church attendee. As you know, it intrigues me, coming from a country where few artists follow a formal church to see how many artists here remain wholly within the Catholic faith and practice. Is your faith an aspect of your work?
- LDC Not really. I believe I have come to separate my faith from my idea of using art to make commentaries about Catholic religion.
- TG You went to study in Manila at UP. You were not, I believe, influenced by the most famous teacher there, Roberto Chabet. Were the social realist painters a more potent influence? And what sort of work did you make as a student?
- LDC Honestly, I was not aware of the different schools of thought back then. I was in Chabet's class for a couple of subjects in my third and fourth year in UP. I was busy trying my best to finish college on time because I did not have the luxury to really spend more money or time for studying. So, I just went and got through Chabet's class, but did not really pay attention to his teachings or philosophy about art. I was already outside UP when I became interested with social realism, not really the social realist painters or group. Only when I began taking a closer look at the social realist works that I got to know these artists, one by one.
- TG What was the first work where you felt you had discovered your own artistic voice? How soon after leaving college was that? And can we see an image of it?
- LDC It was three or four years after graduating, probably. The works I made from my first solo show in 2003 paved the way to the kind of artistic trajectory I pursued from that time on. The piece titled "The King" is one of them.

- TG Before we discuss that piece can you tell me what year exactly did you graduate and when did you return to Lucban? Unlike almost all other young artists, you did not stay in Manila where the “art scene” is centred.
- LDC I graduated in 1999, then returned to Lucban in 2007.
- TG So in fact you stayed in Manila for seven years after college. Who were you close to then? How did you survive financially?
- LDC After graduation, I worked as a graphic designer, first, for a small design studio in Cubao, then in the publications department of a science and mathematics institute in UP (UPNISMED), then finally, in Ayala Museum, in Makati. It was during my time in Ayala that I frequently got to go out and discuss about Philippine art, history, and art in general, with curator Bobi Valenzuela, who I considered my mentor and very close friend. And in 2001, I went full time with art and opened my own design studio so that I can do graphic design works independently/part time.
- It was after I came back from Korea that I decided to return to Lucban. My stint in Korea gave me a new energy, direction, as well as confidence that I could pursue art outside or away from Manila. It was also during this time that I started Project Space Pilipinas not only as an artistic platform but also as an extension that fuels my practice.
- TG Ah, what happened in Korea? What year was that? Why were you there?
- LDC I was in a residency program of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Goyang (IASK), Korea, for a year (2005-2006).
- TG Did Korea change your life?
- LDC Yes. Korea was a turning point in my life and career. It was towards the end of the residency in 2006 that Arario signed me up in their gallery.
- TG What sort of work were you making then? Did the Korean audience respond to your Filipino orientated subject matter?
- LDC I was already producing socio-political works when I arrived there. It was because of these kinds of paintings that Arario took me on their team. I believe they responded well because they were also curious about the kind of art and subject matters that we Filipinos tackle in art. And there was also a growing tide of interest in South and Southeast Asian Art during that time. I made sure to relate to them some historical experiences we’ve had in common with the Americans in terms of colonial history and cultural imperialism.
- TG I was aware of this years later when I was with you for an opening in Seoul.

TG I saw they could instantly connect your references to the Marcos dictatorship with their own experience under a military dictatorship.

LDC Yeah, that's true.

They too, have a social realist movement almost in the same period parallel to that of the Philippines in the 80s called Minjung Art.

TG Why, after returning from Korea, did you not stay in Manila?

LDC I tried for a year, but felt Manila was not conducive any more for my art practice. Since then, it has become even more congested, expensive, and precarious.

TG I presume it was cheaper to have a studio in Lucban than Manila?

LDC Yes, having a studio in Lucban was way cheaper than in Manila. And it is easier and more affordable to get help and assistance during productions of sculptural and installation works.

TG Did you set up Project Space Pilipinas immediately on return?

LDC I spent a year working in my Mandaluyong studio, I acclimatized first, literally and metaphorically, before I put up Project Space Pilipinas. That whole year was spent brewing the vision-mission behind PSP as well as the strengthening of my newly built artistic networks as well as renewing my past connections in the local art scene.

TG OK. Let's stop there and talk more about it tomorrow.

THURSDAY, 30TH SEPTEMBER

TG Good afternoon Leslie! How are you today?

LDC I'm good, doing some reading (review) and thinking. Kind of research mode.

TG Ah, you are in in-between exhibition mode. Let's talk about *The King*. Its iconography is very clear: Jesus and Coke. Is it a sort of self-portrait or an everyman Filipino?



Leslie de Chavez, *The King*, 2003, oil on canvas, 153 x 122 cm (60.2 x 48 inches).

- LDC Yes. It is not my self-portrait *per se*, but of every Filipino.
- TG I remember curating a show for a Filipino artist in Singapore and when we finally, late at night, finished installing, I took him and the team to McDonalds. He regarded it as a great treat, not cheap convenience food. The burger is aspirational in the Philippines, as is the US as a work destination. The Dude is eating food a poor person can eat in the UK or US but is only really readily available to middle class Filipinos. Correct?
- LDC Indeed! Throughout our history there's always a strong desire for many Filipinos to emulate the American lifestyle.
- TG If I compare the painting to those of the social realists it has a different rhetoric to them; one more related to pop art even. The brush work is dispassionate. Your way of not blending the brush-marks on flesh has what Brecht would call an A effect. You employ irony, not expressionist exaggeration.
- LDC It was an attempt, or rather a conscious effort to distinguish myself from the early social realists in the Philippines.
- TG And a successful one.
- LDC I really hope so.
- TG Which social realists were you most influenced by, or, rather, acting against most?
- LDC In the early 2000, I was amazed by the mural works by Sanggawa, an artist collective composed of Mark Justiniani, Elmer Borlongan, Karen Flores, Federico Sievert, Joy Mallari, and Manny Garibay. That's why their influence is also evident in my large-scale works like *Signus* and *Detritus*. I made those works as some sort of exploration

on how I could push more or reinvent Filipino figurative painting in terms of rendition, symbolism, and narrative.

TG

Was *Signus* done in Korea? Was it a commission?



Leslie de Chavez, *Signus*, 2006, oil on canvas, 190 × 670 cm (74.8 × 263.8 inches).

LDC

I was working on a study for a large-scale painting during the first quarter of 2005. It was as if I was preparing something big, a “dream painting” if you like, although I was not exactly sure how I could accomplish or complete the work considering that during that time I didn’t have a studio, nor the resources to fund a big work like that. I just dared say to myself, “I will make this big work, no matter what!” Around May, came the opportunity, an invitation to do a residency in Korea, a very well supported residency that could really provide me the time, space, and the funds to produce the works that I had dreamt of doing.

So, there I created *Signus* not as a commissioned work but just a piece that I wanted to be realized given the resources I was given.

Signus was also the painting that led Arario gallery, or specifically Mr. Kim, its owner, to invite me to be part of their roster of artists.

TG

Under the table are the poor of this earth, drowning. Above the table the powerful, heavy in sleaze. At the centre of this depraved last supper Captain America embraces a traditional politician - who always wears these traditional white shirts. *Trapo* (traditional politician) is in Filipino slang a euphemism for a corrupt one. Below them, the painter associates with the poor and drowning - but of course he is dependent on purchases by those at the table. Obviously, the allegory goes into much greater detail.

LDC

Very well read. I know the work is almost literal, very accessible indeed.



Leslie de Chavez, *Detritus*, 2013, oil on canvas, 240 × 570 cm (94.5 × 224.4 inches).

- TG But it is very complex. Did you ever provide a key?
- LDC What do you mean by: “Did you ever provide a key?”
- TG An explanation such as Courbet gave for his manifesto painting *The Studio of the Artist* listing who everyone was and what they represented.
- LDC Ah, not really. But whenever people asked me at that time. I just give them some historical background, a story, characterization, or some sort of context.
- TG The problem with any key or explanation is that, if too detailed or specific, it closes down meaning. Am I right in assuming the *trapo* is not a specific person, but a type?
- LDC Yes, you’re right.
- TG *Detritus* six years later is even more pessimistic. Was this the painting you made for the Singapore Biennale?
- LDC Yes, that’s the one. There is a kind of “recentness” in *Detritus* in terms of narratives, and histories, unlike *Signus* which was more of a historical contextualization of the Filipino.
- TG It certainly reeks of Manila in all its smelly, dilapidated clutter of wealth and poverty.
- LDC Yeah, all in one picture. A *horror vacui* as many would say.

- TG Were you in any way influenced by cartoon book artists such as Francisco Botong?
- LDC He was one of my favourite artists when I was in high school.
- TG *Horror vacui* is definitely a Filipino trait. I have seen so many interiors here that are absolutely choc-a-bloc with stuff. I guess it partly stems from the Catholic Baroque, and partly from American capitalism's lust for products.
- LDC True, ha ha, very Pinoy!
- TG Do you still look at Botong?
- LDC Yes. I consider him as one of the best figurative painters we've ever had.
- TG Maybe we should choose an example of his work to show our readers? Can you pick one?
- LDC Of course! I even appropriated this piece by Botong:



Botong Francisco, detail of *Filipino Struggles Through History*, 1964, oil on canvas, set of 10 panels, 270 x 794 cm (8.9 x 26 ft) each.

- LDC In my work *Revolutionary Past for Future Doubts*:



Leslie de Chavez, *Revolutionary Past for Future Doubts*, 2011, oil on shaped canvas (200 x 300 cm each), neon lights.

- TG By 2012, you were firmly ensconced back in Lucban, surviving by selling your work in Korea, Singapore, and the Philippines. What was Project Space Pilipinas? and why did you set it up?
- LDC Project Space Pilipinas (PSP) is an artist-run initiative I started in 2007. I envisioned it to be a platform for young emerging artists to further their artistic endeavours through exchanges, collaboration, discourse, exhibition, and residency. I set it up after the experience I had during my residency in Korea, learning the importance of having/ providing a space, time, and modest support (at least) to pursue an artistic practice.
- TG What space did you use initially?
- LDC PSP was first opened in Mandaluyong [a district of Manila] in 2007, then I transferred it to Lucban in 2012.
- TG Using your old studio in Lucban?
- LDC Even the space in Mandaluyong was my former studio. And yes, Lucban was my former studio as well.
- TG In Lucban did you invite artists from outside the town or focus on the artists working in it or nearby?
- LDC I am very conscious of the position of PSP in the local art scene. I don't know, but unlike the past artist-run spaces in Manila, I'd like PSP to contribute to the decentralization of art and art making in the country. Therefore, part of our consideration is always to invite artists coming from other regions in the country as well as outside the Philippines to do collaborations with us.
- TG How many residencies have you been able to sponsor since 2012? And how many exhibitions have you mounted? There have been publications too and a festival.
- LDC Quite a number already. We've done exhibitions, residencies, exchanges, collaborations, festivals, and, yeah, publications. I will send you a list. (see endnotes for details)
- TG The studio became vacant because you had bought a house outside Lucban. Correct?
- LDC Yes, our house was built from 2011 to 2012. During these times, I still maintained the studio in Mandaluyong and Lucban. When we finally transferred to our new house, I gave up the Mandaluyong space, then transformed the Lucban studio into PSP.
- TG Before we discuss the changes the new house/studio may have led to, can I ask at what point did you start making installations? and why?

LDC

It was in 2000 when I started to go out and learn (and unlearn) from Bobi Valenzuela. Among the many things he taught me as an artist is not to be confined to painting alone. So, when we collaborated for my first solo show in 2003 titled, *Bahid* (Stain) with Bobi as the curator, I'd already established the diversity of my practice which included installation, drawing, video, and painting. During this period, I was looking at and studying the art and practice of Santiago Bose, Roberto Feleo, and Charlie Co, through Bobi Valenzuela. I don't really want to claim it as some kind of mentorship, because there never was any formality about it. I was just being enthusiastic about learning new things about art, but more especially in the context of Philippine art history and contemporary Philippine art.



Leslie de Chavez, *Jeep Nation, Traveling Without Moving*, 2003, mixed media on canvas, photographs, video loop with sound, horn, stickers, installation view at *Bahid* (Stain) in Kulay Diwa Gallery, Manila, 2003.

TG

On principle then you never do exhibitions of paintings and nothing but paintings – which, of course, is what the market would like! Presumably most of your paintings sell but most of your installations don't! A common situation in South-east Asia - witness Geraldine, Agus Suwage, etc.

LDC

Yes, because I do believe that painting alone can be very limiting. I remember Bobi telling me that an artist's first solo exhibition is usually a "make or break," and that it is important for one to establish the kind of artist that he/she wants to be, the kind of ideas and forms he/she wants to discuss and articulate with. Therefore, for my first solo show, I presented a series of paintings, an installation composed of video, photographs and sound, together with a series of drawings on paper.

TG

I presume your paintings begin with sketches or drawings but the installations begin by collecting objects and then improvising. Am I correct?

LDC

With the paintings, yes, that's how I proceed. But with installation works, sometimes I start by deciding on the idea/concept that I'd like to tackle, or sometimes I find or accidentally find some existing materials that already embody ideas and a history which I can use as a departure point.

- TG So, the associations of an object or what it represents are crucial?
- LDC Always. I hardly ever use objects for their poetry or strangeness - or absurdity, if you like.
- TG If you had to choose one or two installations from the past ten years, which would you choose?
- LDC Maybe the one we exhibited in Shanghai? The five Michael Jacksons with water features in it? *I Just Can't Stop Loving You* from 2014. The work was also part of a group exhibition in Lopez Museum in Manila.
- TG The image of a black man trying to wash away his skin pigmentation resonates with a country rife with adverts for skin whitening!



Leslie de Chavez, *I Just Can't Stop Loving You*, 2014, found antique sculptures, trabesa wood, rusted G.I. sheet, copper tubes, lacquer spray, LED lights, water pump, water, stainless wash basins, installation size variable.

- LDC Yes, that's right! Haha
- TG And in a culture rife with proselytising also the image of washing away your sins.
- LDC Yes, that works as well in *Household Virtue No.1*, a series of cast legs of crucified Christ, made of soap (lye, glycerine, seven tropical fruit scents), with the text above that says "*Laging maghugas ng kamay*" or "always wash your hands".



Leslie de Chavez, *Household Virtue No.1*, 2010, lye, glycerine, wood, stainless steel bowls, coins, water, oil stick, dimensions variable.

TG It is a work that uses religious imagery without becoming sacrilegious - which is true of the painting the king. Christ stands as a witness.

LDC I couldn't agree more. I am actually very cautious also, whenever I use iconography.

TG One that resonates with me is the big installation you showed at Ateneo with all the heads of Ferdinand Marcos.

LDC You mean the piece *Palingenesis*:



Leslie de Chavez, *Palingenesis*, 2016, 14 pieces cast concrete, steel chains, wood, cast iron, assorted fabric, antique wax, stainless ball, dimensions variable.

TG Yes, the imagery is overt in *Palingenesis*: the heads of Marcos attached to chains or flails. You must be pissed that his son Bongbong Marcos is standing for president and has a good chance of being elected. Perhaps it is as shocking as if the AFD in Germany, (the Neo-Nazi party) were poised for electoral success and their leader was the grandson of Adolf Hitler. Marcos and Marcos-ism is like a virus stuck in the Filipino body politic. You are so caught up in the myth of the "strong" leader who will sort out the chaos.

LDC It's really frustrating, I know. Thanks to the Filipinos love for action stars, movies and TV series, which, as you know, would always feature the hero, the saviour, and the Mr. Nice Guy.

TG Who are normally also Pinoy Rambos touting big machine guns.

- LDC Yes! Rambo and the Terminator.
- TG Yes, endlessly coming back! What can you do? As citizens support better candidates. As artists just bear witness. Art rarely changes opinions - though it can subtly over the years nibble away at ideologies.
- LDC Yes, I am aware that Art will never be enough. We can only offer a possibility for change through our brainchildren, but will hardly make a dent, yet maybe other forms or practices which truly involve or engage with the people can do something.
- TG Is that something you could consider. I don't know what. Posters for better candidates? Cartoon books lampooning the *trapos*? Social actions?
- LDC I've also been practicing this kind of socially-engaged for more than five years now through our programs and projects at Project Space Pilipinas, as well as by collaborating with artists who do or lean toward social practice and relational aesthetics. Most of our programs now at PSP are geared towards the development of our local audience by offering exhibitions, collaborations, and participations that would contribute in the development of their visual literacy.
- TG Coming back to your house. Like many artists, you live in a gated community. At first, I found this strange: it is a thing rarely seen in the UK, though I lived in one - on a street once notorious for crime. Does it bug you or is it just a necessary precaution in a country with a serious crime problem? Is the estate you are in a good place to work - away from the bustle of Manila or the claustrophobia of Lucban?
- LDC It is not necessary, but as you can see, it is a problem and a reality everyone needs to deal with in this country. I must admit it is a good place to work if given the opportunity.
- TG And have you finally built a proper studio?
- LDC Hahahaha, not yet. But I really, really want to for a long time now!
- TG You still spread your work all over the ground floor and the garage!
- LDC Yesssss!!! Hahaha!
- TG Is there one more recent painting we could show and discuss? One you like or have problems with.
- LDC How about this work:



Leslie de Chavez, *Alaala ng Pag-ibig ng Isang Traydor (Memoirs of a Traitor's Love)*, 2017, oil, enamel, lacquer spray, metallic leaf, glassine, epoxy, FRP, brass, wood, decal, installation size variable.

TG That was a fantastic work - one you had problems selling because it isn't a regular painting that could be framed or hang neatly on the wall. The main image if I remember right is a Goya of dubious provenance once owned by Imelda Marcos. You need to see the tiny hanging image with its reference to the American mistress of Ferdinand Marcos, to get the full association. Do you have any details about that?

LDC No, unfortunately I do not have a detail of that hanging image of that controversial character in the love/life story of the Marcoses.

TG But I do! Taken at Art Fair Philippines 2017 where you first showed it. Front and backside view of one element of an intriguing complex work.



Leslie de Chavez, *Alaala ng Pag-ibig ng Isang Traydor (Memoirs of a Traitor's Love)*, 2017, details.

TG Did you sell this work in the end?

LDC Not yet. This piece is still with Arario Gallery.

TG How many installations or non-regular paintings like this do you manage to sell?

LDC

Well today, I just heard from Silverlens that they've sold the *Rosary* installation piece from my recent solo show in their gallery titled, *Latigong Tinik ng Bitukang Halang*.



Leslie de Chavez, *Latigong Tinik ng Bitukang Halang*, 2021, FRP, bamboo, stainless steel, iron, encapsulated plaster of Paris, cast brass, antique wax, dimensions variable.

TG

More heads of Marcos!

LDC

Actually in this piece, I produced 59 pieces of clenched fist-size heads of Duterte and only one head by Ferdinand Marcos. But yeah, at least one of this kind of work sells whenever I have solo exhibitions.

TG

That is not too bad. Collectors are getting a bit more adventurous - and getting bigger spaces.

TG

Last question: What are you working on next or what are you planning to work on next?

LDC

I am currently working on my pieces for an exhibition commitment for next month and at the same time preparing to wrap up the exhibition projects for the year at Project Space Pilipinas in Lucban.

TG

Thanks Leslie.

Leslie de Chavez (b. 1978 in Manila, Philippines) has been widely recognized for his incisive and sensible forays into history, cultural imperialism, religion, and contemporary life. Responding to urgent material conditions through his deconstructions of master texts, icons, and the symbols of his times, de Chavez strikes a balance between iconoclasm and an affirmative outlook to the relevance and accountability of art to one's milieu. Leslie de Chavez has held several solo exhibitions in the Philippines, China, Korea, Singapore, UK, and Switzerland. He has also participated in several notable exhibitions and art festivals, which include *London Biennale: Masks, Mirages and the Morphic Mirror*, New York, London, Berlin, Lucban (2020); *Far Away But Strangely Familiar*, Danubiana Meulensteen Art Museum, Slovakia (2019); *The Vexed Contemporary*, Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, La Salle St. Benilde, Manila, Philippines (2015), Singapore Biennale 2013 (2013), 3rd Asian Art Biennale in Taiwan (2011), 3rd Nanjing Triennial in China (2008), and First Pocheon Asia Biennale in South Korea (2007). His most recent solo exhibitions include *A Lonely Picket in the Balcony* at Silverlens Galleries, Manila, Philippines (2021); *The Allegory of the Cave* at Arario Gallery, Shanghai, China (2018); and *Higa sa Hangin (Lying Down in Air)* at Finale Art File, Manila, Philippines (2018). A two-time awardee (2010/2014) of the Ateneo Art Awards for Visual Art, Leslie de Chavez is also the director/founder of the artist-run initiative Project Space Pilipinas, in Lucban, Quezon, Philippines.

ENDNOTES

Project Space Pilipinas is an artist-initiated platform committed to art and cultural practices. It provides venue, assistance and support for artists, cultural workers and individuals with artistic interests. With a holistic framework, it hopes to serve as a vehicle for the various practices of art through traditional, alternative and emerging approaches. Its primary objectives are to provide creative opportunities and make art accessible to various audiences. Its core programs include artist residencies, exhibitions, education, and collaborations.

Core Programs: The Core Programs are open to local and foreign art practitioners as well as individuals and groups interested in the different projects.

Artist Residency: Designed to serve as a springboard to further artistic endeavors through substantial art interactions and creative discourse. At the same time the Artist-in-Residence Program is envisioned to establish effective networks in creating opportunities for possible collaborations with foreign artists.

Exhibitions: The Exhibitions Program provides opportunities for creative productions, art and cultural exchanges, and outputs for innovative, exploratory, and relevant projects. Project proposals are accepted from artists, curators, groups, and other interested parties.

Education: Valuing the need for continuous learning, the Education Program organizes forums, artist talks, workshops and seminars related to art and its production.

Collaborations: Working on a collaborative and collective conscious practice, the Collaborations Program initiates projects and activities involving art and cultural practitioners including individuals and groups with shared concerns.

Founded: Manila, Philippines, 2007

Director: Leslie de Chavez (Founder)

Program Managers: Jacqueline Ali, Christopher Zamora, Dyan Corachea

Studio Manager: John Mark Galutera, Allyza Tresvalles

Address: No.6 Jose Eleazar Street, Lucban, Quezon, 4328 Philippines

Contact no: +63 9175603642

Email: projectspacepilipinas@gmail.com

Neo-Emerging Artist Residency, Manila (NEAR Manila/Lucban), Past Resident Artists:

Carlo Gabuco (Manila, Philippines, 2007)
 Christopher Zamora (Manila, Philippines, 2008)
 Jinsuk Che (Seoul, South Korea, 2009)
 Michael Alvin Adrao (Manila, Philippines, 2009)
 Crisanto de Leon (Manila, Philippines, 2009)
 Roedil Geraldo (Bacolod, Philippines, 2009)
 Israel Mark Gonzales (Bacolod, Philippines, 2009)
 Amer Mira (Manila, Philippines, 2010)
 Soyeon Park (Seoul, South Korea, 2010)*
 Byungsung Kho (Seoul, South Korea, 2010)*
 Soyoung Lee (Seoul, South Korea, 2010)*
 Juyeon Lee (Seoul, South Korea, 2010)*
 Tristram Miravalles (Bacolod, Philippines, 2011)
 Caloy Gernale (Manila, Philippines, 2011)
 Marc Vincent Cosico (Laguna, Philippines, 2011)*
 Junyeong Jang (Seoul, South Korea, 2011)*
 Ranelle Dial (Manila, Philippines, 2011)
 Guinnevere Decena (Bacolod, Philippines, 2011)
 Patricia Thoma (Berlin, Germany, 2012)
 Chong Kim Chew (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2012)**
 Suddin Lappo (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2012)**
 Nugroho Heri Cahyono (Jogjakarta, Indonesia, 2012)**

Choiruddin (Jogjakarta, Indonesia, 2012)**
 Iggy Rodriguez (Manila, Philippines, 2012)**
 Zean Cabangis (Manila, Philippines, 2012)**
 Andi Ramdani Imron (Jogjakarta, Indonesia, 2013)**
 Iqro' Ahmad Ibrahim (Jogjakarta, Indonesia, 2013)**
 Zelin Seah (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2013)**
 Fadly Sabran (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2013)**
 Mervin Fabro Pimentel (Pangasinan, Philippines, 2013)**
 Yeoh Choo Kuan (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2014)**
 Wisnuaji Putu (Jogjakarta, Indonesia, 2014)**
 Didi-tujusembalintujuh Jember (Jogjakarta, Indonesia, 2014)**
 Paul Eric Roca (Lucena, Philippines, 2014)
 Jomar Galutera (Manila, Philippines, 2014)
 Wahyu Catur Natalianto (Jogjakarta, Indonesia, 2014)
 Johannes Wiener (Vienna, Austria, 2020)
 Christina Lopez (Manila, Philippines, 2022)

*exchange artist (Art Space Plastic / Stone & Water Residencies, South, Korea)

**exchange artist (Southeast Asian Artist Group Exchange Residency, SAGER)

Exhibitions:

POINT-BLANK: Carlo Acerden Gabuco solo exhibition, Cultural Center of the Philippines (2008)
 ARTRIANGLE: Paintings from Kuala Lumpur, Jogjakarta, Manila, & Singapore, HOM Malaysia (2008)
 TENGGARA: Recent Paintings, Kuala Lumpur, Jogjakarta, Manila, NOVAS Gallery, Liverpool UK (2008)
 INFECTIOUS: Christopher Zamora solo exhibition, West Gallery, Quezon City (2009)
 Open Studio: Jinsuk Che, Byongho Koh, Youngeun Lee, PSP Mandaluyong City (2009)
 SORROWFUL MYSTERIES: Christopher Zamora solo exhibition, PSP Mandaluyong City (2009)
 Open Studio: Michael Alvin Adrao, PSP Mandaluyong City (2009)
 PLASTIC SYNDROME: Group exhibition, Art Space Plastic, Incheon, South Korea (2009)
 Open Studio: Seoksu Art Project with Marc Vincent Cosico, Seoul, South Korea (2010)
 ART TRIANGLE 3: Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, National Art Gallery, Malaysia (2010)
 REFLECTION: Group exhibition, Philippines + Korea, Bupyeong Arts Center, South Korea (2010)
 WE WAS THERE: Group exhibition, Philippines + Korea, Yuchengco Museum, Philippines (2011)
 BLACK GATE: Carlo Gernale + Tristram Miravalles, PSP Mandaluyong City (2011)
 FRESHLY BREWED: Group exhibition, Republikha Art Gallery, (2011)
 Open Studio: Junyeong Jang, PSP x Stone & Water Exchange Program, PSP Mandaluyong City (2011)
 QUICKSAND: Christopher Zamora solo exhibition, Republikha Art Gallery, (2011)
 YOGYAKARTA: SAGE 2, Group exhibition, Sangkring Art Project, Jogjakarta Indonesia, (2011)
 GLITTERING SURFACES: Patricia Thoma solo exhibition, Boston Gallery, Manila, Philippines (2012)
 MANILA: SAGE 2, Group exhibition, Boston Gallery, Manila, Philippines (2012)
 SAMA-SAMA: SAGE 3, Group exhibition, Boston Gallery, Manila, Philippines (2012)
 NO RANDOM NON-SENSE: Group exhibition, Boston Gallery, Manila, Philippines (2013)
 CONCURRENCE: Group exhibition, West Gallery, Manila, Philippines (2014)
 UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING: Group exhibition, Finale Art File, Manila, Philippines (2014)
 RELOAD: Group exhibition, PSP-Lucban, Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2014)
 iii: Paul Eric Roca, Jomar Galutera, Guinnevere Decena, PSP-Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2014)
 MULTIPLE LANGUAGES: Group exhibition, Silverlens Galleries, Manila, Philippines (2014)
 PAPERVIEWS14: On Immanence, Group exhibition, PSP-Lucban, Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2014)
 STRANGE GAZE: Insung Lee & B-Cone, PSP-Lucban, Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2014)
 PULSE: LUCBAN ARTISTS' GUILD, Group exhibition, PSP-Lucban, Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2014)
 IMPARTIAL ORIGINS: Group exhibitions, VivaExCon 14, Bacolod City, Philippines (2014)
 SIGHTINGS: John Mark Galutera solo exhibition, PSP-Lucban, Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2014)
 BALANCE: Wahyu Catur Natalianto solo exhibition, PSP-Lucban, Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2014)
 UNDER THE INFLUENCE: Leslie de Chavez solo exhibition, PSP-Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2015)
 IMAGO MUNDI: Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone, Group exhibition, Venice, Italy (2015)

FIRST LUCBAN ASSEMBLY: PAMUMUHUNAN, PSP, Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2015)
 BARTER: Jason Dy SJ solo exhibition, PSP/Brgy.Piis, Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2016)
 DENY ME, BE DOOMED: Karize Uy solo exhibition, PSP Lucban, Quezon Philippines (2017)
 SaLang#1: CRAFT-MINE-CRAP, Leslie de Chavez, PSP Lucban, Quezon Philippines (2017)
 SaLang#2: REMEDYO, Eric Zamuco, PSP Lucban, Quezon Philippines (2017)
 SaLang#3: APPETITE FOR DESTRUCTION, Christopher Zamora, PSP Lucban, Quezon Philippines (2017)
 SaLang#4: HYPERVISUAL, Karl Castro, PSP Lucban, Quezon Philippines (2017)
 SaLang#5: PHENOMENON, Gregory Halili, PSP Lucban, Quezon Philippines (2017)
 SaLang#6: ROAD TO MOUNTAIN, Poklong Anading, PSP Lucban, Quezon Philippines (2017)
 SaLang#7: THE WHITE ELEPHANT PROJECT, Jomar Galutera, PSP Lucban, Quezon Philippines (2017)
 SaLang#8: NO PAINTING, Lyra Garcellano, PSP Lucban, Quezon Philippines (2017)
 SaLang#9: DEAR EARTHLINGS, Geraldine Javier, PSP Lucban, Quezon Philippines (2017)
 SaLang#10: MUSEO BANAHAW, Mark Salvatus, PSP Lucban, Quezon Philippines (2017)
 SaLang#1 vol.2: NOT ONE LESS, Jason Dy SJ, PSP Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2018)
 SaLang#2 vol.2: DYIPFIE, Dansoy Coquilla, PSP Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2018)
 SaLang#3 vol.2: PETALS SIGNALS IN THE SKY, Mondrian Fan Club * David Medalla/Adam Nankervis, PSP Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2018)
 SaLang#4 vol.2: DIRT TO MAN, Tristram Miravalles, PSP Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2018)
 SaLang#5 vol.2: ANATOMY OF POISON IN THE BLOODSTREAM, Mike Adrao, PSP Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2018)
 CHRONIC CONDITIONS, Finale Art File, Makati City, Philippines (2018)
 SaLang#6 vol.2: CROSSED, HATCHED, Paul Eric Roca, PSP Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2019)
 SaLang#7 vol.2: FROM THE DARK DEPTHS, Kiri Dalena, PSP Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2019)
 SaLang#8 vol.2: LAKO, Marc Vincent Cosico, PSP Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2019)
 SALANG, SaLang Vol.1 group exhibition, West Gallery, Quezon City, Philippines (2019)
 CHRONIC CONDITIONS II, Project Space Pilipinas, Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2019)
 KAHAWIG/KAHALINTULAD, Lucban Artists Guild x PSP, Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2019)
 Kabit Sabit: Load Na Dito, Project Space Pilipinas, Lucban, Quezon (2019)
 FACES OF ECOCIDE: Johannes Wiener, Project Space Pilipinas, Lucban, Quezon (2020)
 PAG-IBIG! SANA ALLI, Project Space Pilipinas, Lucban, Quezon (2020)
 QUARANTINED LIVES, online/onsite video art, Project Space Pilipinas, Lucban, Quezon (2020)
 PAIMBULOG, Lucban Artists Guild x PSP, Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2020)
 SA ARAW-ARAW NA GINAWA NG DIYOS: Bea Rabe, Project Space Pilipinas, Lucban, Quezon (2021)
 HITHERTO I: To Ride A Jet Ski And Plant A Flag (group show) PSP Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2021)
 HITHERTO II: I Dream of Burning Your Idol (group show) PSP Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2021)
 HITHERTO III: House Party (group show) PSP Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2021)

Education:

SAGE 2: Artist Talk, Project Space Pilipinas, Lucban, Quezon (2012)
 PALIHAN sa Lucban, Project Space Pilipinas, Lucban, Quezon (2013)
 SAGE 3: Artist Talk, Gallery Orange, Bacolod City (2013)
 TAMBAY HOURS: Artist Talk, UPAA Quezon Chapter, Project Space Pilipinas, Lucban, Quezon (2013)
 STRANGE GAZE: Artist Talk, Insung Lee & B-Cone, Project Space Pilipinas, Lucban, Quezon (2014)
 INGRESS: Roundtable Discussion on Art and Society, Project Space Pilipinas, Lucban, Quezon (2014)
 FIRST LUCBAN ASSEMBLY: PAGPAG, PSP, Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2015)
 LONDON BIENNALE MANILA POLLINATION, Bulwagan ng Dangal, University of the Philippines (2016)
 PAGHILOM ART TALK: Artletics, Alfonso Cavite, Philippines, (2017)
 SaLang ART PRESENTATION: Lucban Academy, Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2018)
 SaLang ART TALK: Southern Luzon State University, Lucban, Quezon, Philippines (2018)
 Linangan 1: Paul Eric Roca, Project Space Pilipinas, Lucban, Quezon (2019)
 Artist Talk: Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Manila (2019)
 Artist Talk: Calayan Educational Foundation, Inc. (CEFI) Lucena, City, Philippines (2019)
 Linangan 2: Jowie de los Reyes, Calayan Educational Foundation, Inc., Lucena, City, Philippines (2019)

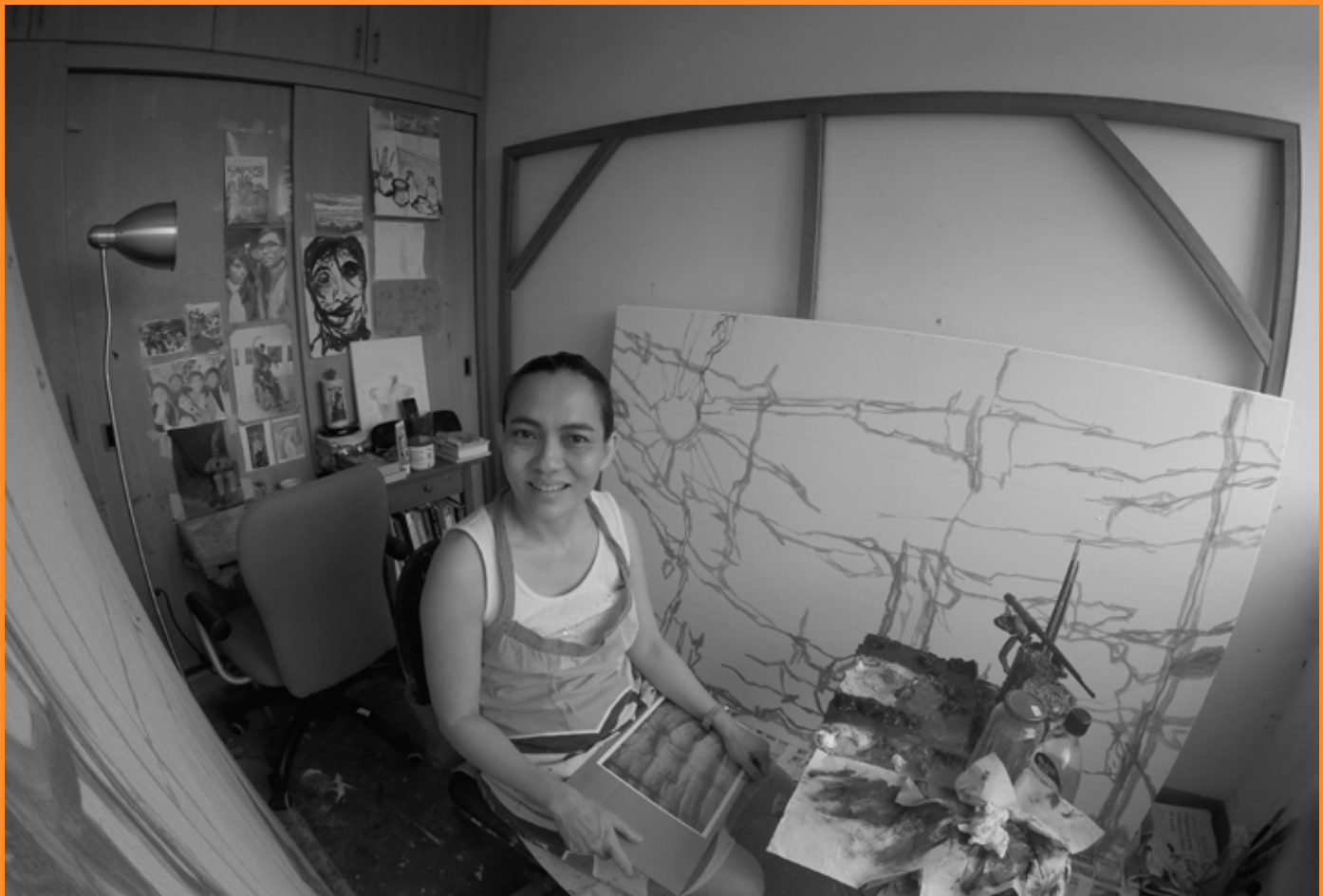
Collaborations:

Southeast Asian Artist-Group Exchange Residency (SAGER) 2011-2013
 House of Matahati (HOM Trans), Kuala Lumpur Malaysia
 Sangkring Art Space, Jogjakarta, Indonesia
 Art Space Plastic, Incheon, South Korea
 Seoksu Art Project, Stone & Water, Seoul, South Korea
 SAGE Jog
 Perahu Art, Jogjakarta, Indonesia
 Boston Gallery, Cubao, Quezon City, Philippines
 Yuchengco Museum, Makati City, Philippines
 Republikha, Pasig City, Philippines
 Orange Gallery, Bacolod City, Philippines
 West Gallery, Quezon City, Philippines
 Finale Art File, Makati City, Philippines
 Silverlens Gallery, Makati City, Philippines
 Artletics Inc.
 Sining Bugkos
 CANVAS Inc.
 Discussion Lab
 Lucban Artists' Guild
 UP Alumni Association, Quezon Chapter
 Mite-Ugro, Gwangju, South Korea
 Project Bakawan
 Ateneo Art Gallery
 Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Manila
 1335 Mabini Gallery
 Tin-aw Art Gallery

Publications:

Traffic Vol.1 & 2, 2018/2019

ELAINE ROBERTO NAVAS IN CONVERSATION WITH TONY GODFREY



Elaine Roberto Navas in her studio, 2016, photograph by her daughter Ariel.



Elaine Roberto Navas, *Ballroom*, 2021, oil bar on canvas, 121.9 × 91.4 cm (48 × 36 inches).

TONY GODFREY

Elaine, to kick it off I always start by asking about the most recent work, so here is my first question - or maybe its two questions: you wrote me that these are “drawings of my favorite trees during the pandemic, I walk at the park across us to let off steam.” Even without being told that, I would have guessed they are pandemic works. So many artists have turned to nature in the last year. So many artists have fled Manila for the provinces. Being with nature, growing plants, is restorative. Whenever Geraldine and I think of still being in Manila in a house with a garden scarcely bigger than your studio which, as we know is very small, we shudder. At least in Singapore you have so many parks, so much greenery.

Nevertheless, have you felt homesick for the Philippines? I presume you have not been back since the pandemic began 18 months ago.

And how exactly did you make these drawings? Did you make them in the park itself *en plein air*? Or work from memory back in your studio?

ELAINE ROBERTO
NAVAS

Your guess is spot on, these are pandemic works. I took pictures of my favorite trees during my walks in the park across our place. It was truly restorative and comforting, at the same time, I felt indifferent to everything - all the suffering happening in our own backyards, and all over the world.

Yes Tony, I am homesick. I never thought I could miss the openings of

my shows. I used to dread them because I'm shy. Also, by the time I finish a show I'm like a zombie because I usually work by cramming. It's a sickness. So, my energy level is sub-zero at my openings. I do love going to friends' openings. They were the happiest part of an exhibit, seeing friends again. And making new ones.

I made these tree drawings based on photographs I took during my walks. Last year, I tried to make a tree painting. It was a failure! I could paint foliage but never a tree in itself. So I tried to draw them instead.

But first I had to warm up my hand by copying Rembrandt's drawings and etchings. His book is on my left, my sketch pad on the right. It's like having a teacher inside the book. After copying around 13 Rembrandt landscapes, I mustered enough confidence to start on my own. I haven't drawn in such a long time, I realized that to be in a drawing zone is so much different than painting.

TG Was it strange to you that Rembrandt's drawings and prints are quite small, a few inches across, whereas your drawings are much larger - larger than most of his paintings?

ERN It was not strange to me, as I intended to warm up my hand. The same way you warm up the engine of your car when it's very cold and you let it run for a few minutes before you put it to drive.

TG So, drawing to you is as natural a thing as eating and walking. I have been reading the big biography of Van Gogh by Naifeh and Smith and was surprised to learn that his mother was a keen amateur artist who taught all her children (including difficult Vincent) to draw. Did you draw as a child? And did you grow up with nature around you or in Manila, a city with depressingly few trees?

ERN Yes Tony, drawing and art is a natural thing as eating and walking. Whenever I can draw or paint, I feel like my true self. If I don't allow myself to work, I feel uneasy and angry that I'm not using it.

I'm surprised too that Van Gogh's mother was an artist! I wonder if she was secretly happy that Van Gogh pursued art.

I drew as a child. I used to draw clothes for our paper dolls, make birthday cards for my parents. I drew my teacher's portraits to keep myself awake during lectures in university. I made a drawing of myself and Rene for our wedding invitation, it's a pop-up. Up to now I draw my cards for my husband and children.

I didn't grow up with nature around me, but I've always been attracted to trees, especially the gnarly kind. I'm a black thumb (or is it brown?) because plants don't survive with me. So, when I'm painting foliage, I feel I'm bringing them back to life.

TG Vincent was always the difficult problem child. His parents wanted him to settle down, go to church regularly and be happy. If he had to be an artist, they wanted him to be a respectable one who made easy on the eyes, sellable stuff.

The university you went to was UP – am I correct? Were the lectures really that boring? You studied with Roberto Chabet: did you fall asleep in his classes too?

ERN Roberto Chabet's classes were thrilling. I used to fall asleep during lectures at Ateneo during classes like Economics, Theology, Chemistry, and Math. I was a Psychology Major before I studied at UP.

TG Did you graduate at Ateneo or leave mid-course? What made you go to UP? To do Fine Art?

ERN I graduated from Ateneo, full course in Psychology. I wanted to be a Psychiatrist, but I failed my higher Chemistry subjects in my third year. I owe a lot to my German teacher, Fr Schmidt, for telling me to give it up. I went to UP because after graduation from Ateneo, my father asked me what I really wanted to be. That morning I was hitching with him to Makati to go to an interview for an HR position. I was wearing office clothes, which I think my dad found weird. I told him I wanted to be a painter. He said that I should study again and that he would support me. I always wanted to be an artist but I had decided to study psychology instead, for practical reasons.

TG What a great dad!

ERN He is!

He would always buy crayons, colouring books, art books, frame any work I left on my desk and hang it on our wall.

If he hadn't offered to pay for my studies at UP, I wouldn't have persevered. I was too ashamed to ask for more support.

TG Two questions: 1. Has that psychology degree informed your work as an artist? 2. How did you find UP after your time at Ateneo?

ERN 1. That psychology degree helped me navigate relationships with my family of origin, outside world, and then the family I formed with Rene. Maybe subconsciously it's seeped into my work. When I look back at all that I've done, the subject matters I choose, I try to analyze what it's about. 2. UP was like heaven to me! It was the first time in my life where I loved to go to school. I remember walking towards the FA building on the sidewalk of the sunken gardens, thinking how lucky I am! The people there I felt were on the same planet as me. It was like Christmas in Mr. Chabet's class! He would lend us his own books, he shared his love for art with his students.

At first, I wanted to be an art therapist, so that I could justify studying fine arts. But when I made my first painting in Sir's class I got addicted.

TG For non-Filipino readers, I should add that sir is commonly used as an honorific or sign of respect in the Philippines. I am often referred to as Sir Tony.

ERN Who calls you Sir Tony? :)

TG People in shops. Our helpers. Maybe they call me that because I am so old!

ERN Haha! That's just a sign of respect.

TG What year did you actually graduate from UP? and who were your batch mates?

ERN I graduated in 1991 from UP. My batch mates were Jonathan Olazo, Chitz Ramirez, Katti Sta Ana, and Kora Dandan.

TG Let's talk about Chabet. When I first met you and asked to come to your studio you asked him first for his approval. I think we could say you still saw him 20 years after leaving UP as your mentor. (I had written an article he had taken umbrage at.) I find that touching. He was, or had become, essentially a conceptual artist. Did he try to turn you away from painting, or encourage you to carry on painting?

ERN I'd like to talk about Sir Chabet. I thought you had forgotten about that part! I informed him about your studio visit here and that I would find it difficult to work with you since he felt hurt by your article. He admired you, so it must have been a big blow. When you left our place after your visit, I told him about our conversation. He told me that you have a right to your own opinion, and that any conflict between you two shouldn't stop me from painting for you. Yes, truly Sir is a conceptual artist. It was Sir who encouraged me to paint. He never forced me to be conceptual, or make installations or pursue other art forms. He would observe what I liked to paint, and then he would tell me to look up artists who had the same style and subject matter. Best yet, he continued to give me books even after graduation. When he saw that I painted water for Finale, he gave me his Roni Horn *Another Water* book that Lani Maestro gave him. Five years later I painted water based on that book. Sir told me he was waiting for me to paint this at last. He also guided me on curating my shows – for example, if I made water paintings, or foliage, what is next? I learned that it's important to have a concept for the shows that are given to us.

TG Sadly, he rather misunderstood the article in that I was pointing out that much of his work looked like work made by earlier, for instance Pistoletto, but I was asking whether the problem I was having with this was, in fact, a sign

of my own colonial attitudes. Anyway, it was a shame we never got to meet properly and talk together.

Roni Horn was an interesting artist. I spent some time talking to her. I visited her in New York, got her to do a lecture for my students. I really liked the drawings and writings - I have some of her early books I can show you.

ERN Oh, I bet you and Sir could have had great conversations!

TG Yes, that is a shame!

ERN What was Roni Horn's lecture about?

TG Herself and her work. She was very clear about what she was doing - like most American artists, but touchy about questions. Many people find her a bit prickly.

But back to you! Is the painting of the opened papaya you sent me the earliest of your chosen works? What year was it made?



Elaine Roberto Navas, *Kabiyak (Kanan)*, 2014, oil on canvas, 121.9 × 121.9 cm (48 × 48 inches).

ERN The papaya I sent you was made in 2014. My first papaya was made in 1994.

TG Was it in an exhibition just of papaya paintings?

ERN It was a show of vegetables and fruits, at West Gallery (Megamall). That was a breakthrough piece for me because I liked it when I finished it. I was satisfied.

Since then, I have made several papaya paintings, but in different stages of decay.

TG Is that a *memento mori* thing? Or did you just like the colours?

ERN

It was a *memento mori* thing, if I analyze it now. But at that time, I didn't intend to make a papaya with mould on it. It took a week to complete the painting, by that time the mould had already formed. The apartment was a humid petri dish. After this show at West, I'd make works about worn out teddy bears, old dolls, toys of my children strewn on our floor, food ingredients like dressed chickens, heads of pigs, hanging ducks and chickens at hawker centres in Singapore, decrepit gates in Manila, the sea. Looking back, I understand what I was painting. It was a *memento mori* thing.



Elaine Roberto Navas, *Hari-Manok*, 1995, oil on canvas, 121.9 × 121.9 cm (48 × 48 inches).

TG

In your paintings with their lush Rubensian brushwork there is an appeal to the sensuous and the synaesthetic - here not only touch, but smell and taste. Was this something you aimed for, or it just happened?

ERN

Oh, thank you! The brushwork is not intentional but a survival technique.

TG

That is interesting! What do you mean by “a survival technique”?

ERN

Survival because I had to solve the problem of painting the image as fast as possible. Deadlines! That's the only way I could paint, I tried to make the paint smooth and blended well but it never worked out.

TG

Going back to that show in 1994, did Chabet curate it?

ERN

Yes, Chabet curated that show, all of my shows were. He asked Soler Santos to give me a slot at West.

TG

How did he approach curating your show? Did he get involved in the whole process of making works, choosing them, writing about them, or just hang them?

ERN

Sir Chabet was involved in the whole process of my shows from beginning to end. First, he would ask the galleries to give me a show. There were only 4 main galleries at the time I graduated from UP. Sir told Soler Santos that West Gallery was our only hope. One time I approached a gallery, to ask how I can apply for a show there. The

one in charge told me that they only accept name artists. But how can someone become a “name artist” if they can’t begin somewhere? I didn’t say this. I would be hearing this message from other galleries too. So, can you imagine how much Sir helped us all when he would make sure that we had exhibitions in inaccessible venues? He would even give his slot to us, or make his solo into a group show with his students. So once there was a show on the horizon, first I would show Sir what I intended to do. It was usually a book or other references. We’d choose which imagery to include or exclude. Then he would decide on the dimensions, depending on the space. The part that I found touching was when Sir would make studio visits to our apartment. He would climb the stairs (he was still strong then) to see the works in progress. It was fun since other close artist friends came along too sometimes. I was as scared of him the same way as I was in the classroom. It took a while to shake it off, I made sure that I did my best work. I’ll never forget Sir’s studio visits spanning from 1991 until 2013. The message I got from these actions is that he found my work important. The culmination would be the setting-up day where Sir curated - with Nilo Ilarde by his side. You can’t talk to him while he’s curating, it was like you’d be disturbing him while he was working on his own art work. It became a tradition to hang out and tell each other stories over food, before or after a hang, or both!

TG

How interesting! Were the 1994 paintings very different from the 2014 one? Do you have a good image of one of those 1994 paintings? It would be good to see it.

ERN

I can show you these images of the show at West.



Elaine Roberto Navas, *Still Life, Still Spaces*, West Gallery, SM Megamall, Mandaluyong, Philippines, 1994.

ERN

We used to do ribbon cutting, haha.



ERN That's my father on my left, Sir on my right, my nephew Matt squeezing in.

TG It is hard for me to tell just from these images how the work has changed from 1994 to 2014. What do you see as the changes?

ERN A friend told me that my work changed when I moved to Singapore. My strokes were more "abstract" or more expressive before the move.

TG Perhaps the earlier works were more confrontational, more "in your face". OK we are talking about a significant change in your life. When did you move to Singapore? and why? But that raises the question of Rene. When did you marry him? And when did you have children? And, although I have met Rene many times at art events and always chatted to him, I can't remember what he does as a job.

ERN Rene is a lawyer! I met him at EDSA at the People Power Revolution in 1986.

We moved to Singapore because Rene got promoted. He said we'll stay for only 2 years. It's been 23!

TG Of course he is! What year was it that you moved to Singapore? When were your children born?

ERN We moved to Singapore in 1998. My son was born in 1991, my daughter in 1993. As for changes in my paintings, I think the expressiveness depends on the subject matter. For example, early works looked like this.



Elaine Roberto Navas, Left: *76 Scout Chuatoco st, Roxas District, QC*; Right: *Shadow*; 1995, oil on canvas, 30.5 × 22.9 cm (12 × 9 inches) each.

ERN

This is the gate of our first home in Quezon City, Manila, near where Ling (Quisumbing) lives now. I was obsessed with that gate because our apartment was broken into four times.



Elaine Roberto Navas, Left: *Puddle*; Right: *Mother-in-law*; 1995, oil on canvas, 30.5 × 22.9 cm (12 × 9 inches) each.

TG

Like Van Gogh in his early years, you seem to be obsessed with black.

ERN

Therefore my parents gave us funds to build a higher, fiercer gate.

TG

Is it the new one you painted?

ERN

Yes, the original gate was much lower.

TG

How many times have you been broken into since arriving in Singapore?

ERN

We were never broken into in Singapore! Even if you leave your door unlocked here, it's safe. All the break-ins were in that apartment in Quezon City.

The last image is the entrance to the gate of my mother-in-law. This

was the start of my obsession with gates. I painted them across the years, until 2016 at Blanc at a two man show with Jonathan Ching.

TG Gates for you were, and have remained, potent symbols of safety, home and refuge - provided the gate is big enough!

ERN Correct! And they were also found objects for painting.

TG These are very small images of your early gate paintings that I am looking at, but they look to me far more desperate than your later gate paintings, which are more dispassionate, more about colour.

ERN Thank you for your observation, it's spot on! I was desperate while making the small gates. We were newly married with toddlers, I didn't know if I could keep on painting with everything going on, there was no security at home since the robbers could come back.

TG What sort of studio did you have back then in Quezon City?

ERN Yikes, my studio was the space at the top of the stairs before entering the 2 small bedrooms. We stayed in a small apartment.

TG You mean your studio then was even smaller than your Singapore studio?!!!! It is one of the shocks I had when I met Filipino artists - what tiny studios they had. As in "I am doing my paintings in my sister's bedroom".

ERN Yes! I feel lucky I have a whole room now in Singapore, haha! Alvin Zafra was so funny when he saw my studio here. It is the spare room of our apartment and very small. Space is expensive in Singapore! He said he will never complain ever again about his studio in Manila.

TG Did your painting change once you were settled in Singapore? Were you so motivated to paint once you had left your motherland? And was it difficult to be an artist and mother?

ERN My painting was also desperate in Singapore, but I was very distracted and that showed in my work. The only thing that kept me sane here was painting. The same thing was true when we had to live in the US: Rene had to take his masters in law in NY. When the children were asleep, I would paint in the kitchen. For fun I applied to the NY galleries. And then one curator called me back! This is from the gallery on top of Leo Castelli's gallery. She asked if she could make a studio visit, to look at more works, but I didn't have any! I was drowning in housework and caring for my toddlers.

It was difficult to be a mother and an artist.

TG You are not the only one to find that!

- ERN Yasmin, Isabel Aquilizan, Annie, Pam will all tell you that!
- TG How long were you in New York? Did you get to the museums at all?
- ERN OMG! We were in NY for a total of six months. The first try to enter the Met, we were at the lobby queuing for tickets. Then my two toddlers started to cry! We had to turn back and go home. My heart sank to the floor.

SATURDAY, 2ND OCTOBER 2021

- TG Although you have lived in Singapore since 1998, you have remained focussed on the gallery scene here and on staying in touch with fellow Filipino artists. How often did you come to the Philippines – that is before Covid blocked the planes?
- ERN I used to come home at least twice a year. I notice that being away made me closer to artists I never was able to talk to in Manila. This is because whenever artists visit Singapore, they come over to see me, something I really looked forward to.
- TG They often stayed with you I believe. Did you always come back for Art Fair Philippines - that being the best place to meet lots of people? And before that did you stay in touch with everything and everyone here on Facebook?
- ERN Yes, they did! I always came back for Art Fair Philippines; I usually made the work there, so the paintings were always wet. I always stayed in touch here on Facebook! I even made new artist friends here and on Instagram. I met Ling Quisumbing and Gregory Halili on Instagram. Also, Raena Abella, Lec Cruz, Jan Balquin, Ayka Go, and others who are my friends now.
- TG It is harder to think of a bigger contrast than between Singapore and Manila. The most orderly, cleanest city versus one of the most chaotic and grubby! When I lived between Singapore and the Philippines, I always felt I was back in the Philippines the moment I got on the plane and I could hear everyone talking excitedly in Tagalog. It was like being in the middle of a flock of noisily chattering birds. Which city do you feel most at home in now?
- ERN Of course, I feel most at home in the Philippines. It is exciting to hear the chattering in the plane coming home, you can feel the anticipation and joy.
- TG When I lived in Singapore, Manila felt wonderfully organic. Now I live in the Philippines, I love coming to Singapore where everything works and getting about is easy.
- ERN That's the word – "organic!" It is wonderfully organic in the Philippines! But Rene loves it here because everything works.

TG Did you ever get involved with the art scene in Singapore or meet up with Singaporean artists?

ERN I never got into the Singapore art scene. I think I live in my own bubble here. The only time I met Singaporean artists was when you invited me to join the group show you curated for Equator Art Projects in Singapore on small paintings. Fast forward to 2020, when Stephanie Fong invited me to a group show, *Come Together*, I felt a semblance of being with the art community, online at Fost.

The bubble that I mentioned earlier, it happened that my children bequeathed to us their friends. So, when our children left for University, we became closer to their friends who kept us in their lives.

I wonder if it was a big adjustment for you to move to the Philippines?

TG I have to admit I get frustrated at times with the dilapidated infrastructure of this country. I must also say that when I lived in Singapore, I got to know several very good Singaporean artists who I have remained good friends with. It seems a shame that never happened to you. But let us get back to the gates. You sent me an image of a later painting of a gate. When was it made? Whose gate was it? Did that matter or was it just a ready-made image to paint with?

ERN The title of this is *Cry Baby*. Made in 2016 and based on a photograph by Sam Kiyoumars's - a Pinoy artist photographer who takes very gritty street photos. That is how I met him.



Elaine Roberto Navas, *Cry Baby (after Sam Kiyoumars)*, 2016, oil on canvas, 121.9 × 182.9 cm (48 × 72 inches).

TG So, you haven't actually seen this gate? But you recognise it as the sort of mucked up gate one sees all over Manila?



Elaine Roberto Navas, *Sir's Gate*, 2004, oil on canvas, diptych, 182.9 × 243.8 cm (72 × 96 inches).

ERN The early gate paintings that I showed you (4 small dark ones), were done live - en plain air. I didn't see this actual gate but I could relate to it. They're all over Manila, that's what I miss!

TG Have you always worked from photographs or only since you moved to Singapore?

ERN I usually work from photographs, even if I was in the Philippines. The subjects are ready-mades which I have to photograph, since most of the time I can't return there and make the painting in front of it. I would block the street if I did!

TG Once you have the photograph, did you copy it quite precisely? Do you grid it up for transfer as Chabet probably taught you, or use a projector, or just copy free hand?

ERN I use the grid to guide the drawing of the gate. But if I'm making a small painting, I use free hand. I think this is why I miss drawing because it's all free hand.

There is some distortion that happens in free hand which I enjoy. This gate is from Sir Chabet! He took the photo on one of his jogs in his neighbourhood. He used to send me photos of gates that were interesting whenever he did his daily run. He knew I was painting them, so he was on the lookout for other gates in his neighbourhood.

TG With a painting like this or *Cry Baby*, do you eventually forget what it is you are painting and just get it work formally – eg. effectively as an abstract painting?

ERN Spot on, yes. I forget what I'm painting, especially when I use the grid. Sir taught us to block off all the other grids and just concentrate on one grid at a time, and paint it upside down. So, each part of the grid did look like an abstract painting.

ERN Then I'm always anticipating, asking myself, what are you doing? When the painting is done, I'm scared to face it, it's a reckoning, like meeting a person for the first time.

TG Do you paint each square upside down?

ERN Not anymore, I don't recognize anything anyway, even right side up.

TG I am curious and charmed that you always send installation shots of your painting in situ. I can see this is in your studio and that you have stood in the doorway so you could stand back enough. What are the dimensions of your studio?

ERN Thank you, Tony. It helps me to take those studio shots of my works in progress because it can tell me if I made mistakes or give a clue where I can improve on things. The studio is small, but the camera can take a panoramic shot which allows me to see it as a whole. Hmm, I haven't measured the dimensions of my studio yet, but as an indicator, if my 6 by 8 foot stretcher falls forward, it won't land on the floor. It will form an angle touching the opposite wall! I see my studio as a cocoon or a womb.

TG When asked, Barnett Newman said the ideal distance to view his large paintings was 18 inches. Do you agree? In your studio you must always be immersed in the painting. Should the viewer go equally close and get immersed?

ERN I agree! It's good to know this. 18 inches is enough, it's the space that's in between me and the canvas!

I wish that the viewer will see it up close and then step farther away little by little, because the image changes.

For the viewer to be immersed in - that is a heart-warming thought!

TG And I spy a ghetto blaster just to the left of *Cry Baby*! Do you play music when you work? If so, what sort of music? Or do you listen to audiobooks as you paint like Geraldine and so many other painters?

ERN Haha, correct! I cannot work without music. Or audiobooks. Wow! Ghe (Geraldine Javier) also listens to them! Yasmin Sison and Mariano Ching taught me about listening to audiobooks, they even sent the ones they downloaded. Also, Jonathan Ching sent me his audiobook thumb drive through the mail from Manila to Singapore.

It helps us all concentrate, I think! I apply a reward system, when I stop painting, I won't be able to know what happens next in the story.

When I'm very desperate Tony, I listen to the whole soundtrack of *The Lord of the Rings*. Unabridged.

TG Wow! A big dose of Enya!

ERN Truly!!! I tell myself if Frodo was able to do it, I can too! If I'm not so desperate, I listen to the playlist my daughter gave me for Mother's Day: she put such strange songs in there, also old lovely ones, or I listen to playlists I made through Spotify. When I see each painting that I have made, I remember the songs that I listened to.

TG I think the issue of free hand and working from photographs is especially germane for portraits. The drawn portrait you sent – is it recent? Who is it of - he looks familiar? And you also sent a presumably much earlier painting of a girl with beside it a photograph of her in a blue T-shirt. When was that made? Who is she?



Elaine Roberto Navas, *Jayson Oliveria*, 2009, charcoal on paper, 99.6 × 69.9 cm (39.2 × 27.5 inches), image courtesy of the artist and MO_Space.

ERN The drawn portrait of Jayson Oliveria is not recent, I made it in 2009.

TG It looks good - do you do many drawings like that?



Elaine Roberto Navas, *Joy Melencio*, 1997, oil on canvas, 91.4 × 76.2 cm (36 × 30 inches).

ERN Thank you! I did make more. I love drawing portraits. This oil portrait is of Joy Melencio, she's a fellow artist from UP days. I made this in 1997, part of my artists portraits show at Ayala Museum.

TG Did you paint Melencio from life or a photo?

ERN From a photo, through this photo I took of her during an opening. I have never painted anyone live yet, only drawn them. That's why I really admire Alice Neel and Lucian Freud – artists who paint from life.

TG I think it would be fascinating to see you try. Are you having a show at Finale later this year? What will the concept be: Portraits? Water or trees?

ERN I'll try! It's on my wish list. I'm having a show at Finale upstairs gallery in April next year. I'm doing a tug of war with myself as I can't make up my mind! At first, I planned on making palette paintings, and then small landscapes, then I thought of "rebultos" (religious statues) I saw in a shop in Ilocos or portraits or drawings.

TG Is the small painting of a tree you showed me the sort of thing you were thinking of? It seems more of a "composition" than normal - less all over.

ERN Yes, I was thinking of making a series of small landscapes. When I saw Chaim Soutine's small landscapes in a museum, I wanted to try. I had an idea of putting the small paintings in nice wooden frames, and painting the wall with an intense colour (dark fuchsia) just like in a museum.



Elaine Roberto Navas, *Bread of Stone*, 2018, oil on canvas, 182.9 × 182.9 cm (72 × 72 inches).

- ERN In a way it also follows on from a larger painting such as *Bread of Stone*.
- TG Sounds good to me!
- ERN Really? I keep on dismissing that idea, because I talk to myself in my head all day long.
- TG Well, as we all know, the studio is a place to be professionally lonely.
- ERN I get so tired just talking in my head, it's like a vortex with no resolution until it's time to cram.
- Truly. Maybe this is why I cram. That's why music and audiobooks are so good.
- TG Do you keep talking about art in the evening when Rene comes home?
- ERN I do talk to Rene about my next plans for a show, but I try not to bother him too much because he has a lot of work. I do appreciate that he takes care of all the logistics, from buying my paint (the staff at Art Friend know him already), printing all the photos that are the source of my paintings, booking flights to the Philippines so that he could stay with me while I'm working. Because I cannot sleep without him. There was a time I was sleep deprived for two weeks because he couldn't get away from work/meetings in Singapore.
- TG Being a painter is a very weird thing. Someone told me once that self-employed people often get a bit weird. Who is more self-employed than an artist?
- ERN What about writers, or musicians?
- TG I gather that the great joy for musicians is playing with each other. Writing is as lonely as painting - and we can't even listen to audiobooks as we work!
- ERN Oh, that's really lonely: to write!
- This is what I miss a lot, when artists are together and we talk about these things, we warn each other and give tips. They always tell the truth if your work stinks or not.
- TG Can we finish by talking about one of your water paintings?



Elaine Roberto Navas, *Whatever is Moved is Moved by Another (After Ling Quisumbing)*, 2017, oil on canvas, 121.9 × 152.4 cm (48 × 60 inches).

- ERN This is based on Ling Quisumbing's sea photos. This is how I became friends with Ling, from me needing her photographs!
- TG Do you ever go look at the sea in Singapore?
- ERN Yes, I do, I take photos when the waves are rough, usually at 6 PM.
- TG Do you work from those sometimes, or do you prefer using other people's photographs?
- ERN I prefer using other people's photographs because they are way more beautiful.
- TG And because they are distanced from your own life or history.
- ERN Yes, they are distanced but at the same time I can relate to them. I can't find dilapidated gates here in Singapore, but my friends can, back at home. The seas in Mindoro (where Ling took the photographs) or La Union, Hawaii (I painted from photos I took there) have more life than the seas here.
- TG So, like beauty, the sea is always somewhere else. Are these the most abstract paintings you made? and the ones most clearly about a search for beauty? Or are they about the constant flux of the sea?
- ERN When I look at landscapes by Soutine, Van Gogh, or the water gardens by Monet, I can identify with the paintings even if I haven't seen the place that they based their works on.
- Yes, the sea is always somewhere else, in my case because of location. I think they are the most abstract works I've made.

However, after some thought, I believe that my palette paintings were the most abstract, second to my gates. With water it was obvious.



Elaine Roberto Navas, *Ariel*, 2018, oil on canvas, 182.9 × 121.9 cm (72 × 48 inches), with Ariel, on whose palette it was based, standing beside.

ERN In retrospect, I feel they are all about making something beautiful, whether it's water, clouds, gates, portraits, drawings. I liked very much what Richter said about painting something beautiful. He said that it is subversive. Talking about beauty, I believe that it isn't necessarily somewhere else. It can be right in front of you.

TG Thanks Elaine. I think that is a good point to stop. I will go to my library where I can be professionally lonely and edit this straight away, so that you can check it later today or tomorrow and we can meet our publishing deadline!

ERN Haha, professionally lonely! Thanks Tony, I learned a lot from this interview. Good luck on your deadline!

TG Thank you! I have enjoyed it too.

Elaine Roberto Navas (b. 1964 in Manila, Philippines) graduated with Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from the Ateneo de Manila University in 1985 prior to entering University of the Philippines College of Fine Arts, graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts majoring in Painting in 1991. In University of the Philippines (UP), Navas learned under the tutelage of her mentor, Roberto Chabet, who would later curate several of her exhibitions, including her first solo exhibition at the Ayala Museum in 1997. Since then, she has been exhibiting her works in solo and group exhibitions in the Philippines and in Singapore. Some of her major exhibitions include *We Cannot Step Twice Into The Same River* at Fost Gallery, Singapore (2020), *Pauses of Possibilities* in Lopez Museum, Philippines (2017) and *What does it all matter, as long as the wounds fit the arrows?*, a tribute to Roberto Chabet at the Cultural Center of the Philippines (2014). Elaine Roberto Navas lives and works in Singapore, where she has resided with her family since 1998.

Executive Director Suelo Mizuma established Mizuma Art Gallery in Tokyo in 1994. Since its opening in Gillman Barracks, Singapore in 2012, the gallery aims for the promotion of East Asian artists in the region as well as the introduction of Southeast Asian artists to the international art scene. From 2014 to 2019, the artist residency space “Rumah Kijang Mizuma” operated in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, providing a new platform for dialogue by supporting exchanges between East Asia and Southeast Asia. In 2018, a new gallery space, “Mizuma & Kips” in New York, USA, as a shared collaboration between Mizuma Gallery from Tokyo and Singapore, and Kips Gallery from New York.

Mizuma Gallery features the works of Japanese artists including Aida Makoto, Aiko Miyana, Amano Yoshitaka, Ikeda Manabu, Tenmyouya Hisashi, and Yamaguchi Akira. Moreover, it showcases the works of renowned East Asian artists such as Ai Weiwei, Du Kun, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, Ken + Julia Yonetani, and Zhao Zhao. The gallery also features the creations of prominent and emerging artists from the region including Agan Harahap, Albert Yonathan Setyawan, Angki Purbandono, Entang Wiharso, Gilang Fradika, Heri Dono, indieguerillas, Made Wianta, Mark Justiniani, Nasirun, Budi Agung Kuswara, Robert Zhao Renhui, Zen Teh, Ashley Yeo, and Ben Loong. Mizuma Gallery participates annually in international art fairs including Art Basel Hong Kong and The Armory Show New York, promoting Asian artists on an international scale.

GILLMAN BARRACKS

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