



PERIPHERALS
Antipas Delotavo
47.2 x 47.2 in., Oil on canvas . 2009



ROUND 2K
Kirby Roxas
60 x 45 in., Acrylic on canvas . 2009

Jose Santos III's still life that masquerades as object facets another angle of this form of recurring dissembling in the same way that Joy Mallari's multiple screen of faces, including the Presidents of Asia's first nation, intimates another horizon of meaning through a riddle on skullduggery that we ever so slowly and painfully lip-read.



PACKAGE (detail)
Jose Santos III
48 x 36 in., Oil on canvas . 2009



DUGTUNGAN AT TUKSUHAN
Joy Mallari
42.25 x 66 in., Oil on canvas . 2009

Kirby Roxas's thesis on colonial education that has spawned scrambled codes of identity and Don Salubayba's "outgrowth" of people entwined like roots and hewing close to a gargantuan mummy round out this suite of what need not be entirely a tedious reenactment of history. Rather, it may in fact direct us



BASIC UNIT OF ONESELF IS ONESELF
Don Salubayba
90 x 40 in., Mixed media on canvas . 2009

to a coming to terms with ourselves in the haze of an economic debacle brought about by a system that for quite some time has been extolled as the lasting triumph of capitalism and the "end of history." It may, therefore, be ordained as a *pagbabalik-loob*, a reclamation of agency in the primal scene of another ground zero.

"Diminishing returns" is defined as "an economic or financial term that refers to less than proportional increases upon the addition of more resources beyond a certain point. It can also be known as the law of diminishing marginal returns, or simply the law of diminishing returns. Considered in the other direction, it can also be known as the law of increasing opportunity cost, or the law of increasing relative cost."

Given this principle that is also a cautionary tale, we ask ourselves: Is Philippine contemporary art overproducing? And is it overproducing derivatives? Asking an imperative question like this is a gallery's way of marking its second year of weathering the uncertain winds of art. ©



GININTUANG ITLOG (BASAG ANG PULA)
Mark Justiniani
13 inches in diameter, Oil sa kawali . 2009

Diminishing Returns



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- FERDIE MONTEMAYOR
- KIRBY ROXAS
- DON SALUBAYBA
- JOSÉ SANTOS III
- JUANITO TORRES
- CLAIRELYNN UY
- PAMELA YAN

CURATED BY
Patrick D. Flores



March 6 — March 20, 2009

"The dangers lurking in this situation are accentuated by the enormous expansion that the art system has undergone in recent years. The problem is no longer that art works will end up as commodities, but that they will start out as such." Thus declares the critic and historian Thomas McEvilley.

How this sobering notion plays out in the face of the collapse of the American economy and by extension of the neoliberal model of globalization should transfix artists in Asia who have experienced in recent time an unprecedented momentum in attention: critical validation through the biennale system and market interest through a hectic auction scene. In both these impulses, Asian art is cast as an emergent context, no longer a domain of timeless calligraphy, or modern masters reared in the School of Paris, but of viable contemporary art with its own history of the avant-garde and post-colonial reflexivity. In 2008, nine biennales opened in the same season in Asia and the Pacific. And a work of the Indonesian I Nyoman Masriadi could command a handsome price of a million dollars under the hammer in Hong Kong - to say nothing yet of the unbelievable surplus value of Chinese contemporary art spiraling out of control under the nose of a supposedly socialist politburo.

There will be many interpretations of the present recession. But one productive reading should be that there is hope precisely because there has been a collapse. Economists argue that a return to regulation after the fallout of wanton deregulation in the economy is vital. What would the form of this return be? And how would it translate into the transformation of the "contemporary" in art? Does regulation mean a rerun of classical liberal economics and democracy? Is it a reconsideration of "tradition" and "regionality?" What about the post-nation that rose against the scenography of neoliberal globality? In a post-neoliberal climate, what will happen to it? What kind of nationalism will it foster? And if it is no longer the nation or post-nation that is the operative structure, what kind of locality would shape up and supplant it?

The exhibition *Diminishing Returns* hopes to contribute to this discussion not by directly trying to offer visual correlations of the crisis or rupture, and the prospects beyond the ruin. Rather, it attempts to spin tropes or modalities of imagery and figuration that prompt us to make sense of the reality of a crisis or rupture. This disruption is important because it cues us to pause amid the breathtaking rhythm of the dispersal and accumulation of capital as well as the exhaustion of human labor. And while the horizon of this reflection is wide, the inflection could be intimate, not necessarily commensurate with the cataclysm that it seeks to describe. In fact, it could be critical of the basis of the spectacle that has been named "contemporary art" for good or for ill. In many ways then, this exhibition is a take as well on the notion of the exhibitionary: how deeds are displayed, how doers are exposed, how things change hands. It is a modest look into the economy of making art in other words at a time when art itself has become so entangled in the web of exchange. Not that this is entirely newfangled. It is just that the level of alienation in the present time has become so high that the economy is seemingly always-already a market one and that, following McEvilley, the instinct is for art to be traded in the currency at initiation. We note, for instance, how warehouse galleries have risen in an extension called Pasong Tamo; how a transnational dealer like Valentine Willie has set up shop; how the pieces of young artists have fetched pretty terrifying prices in the artificial secondary market; and how venues have germinated here and there, some carved out by wide-eyed novices and others by jaded but wider-eyed merchants. We do not make easy moral judgments on these developments. The gallery system has its role to perform in contemporary art and it is not without its integrity.

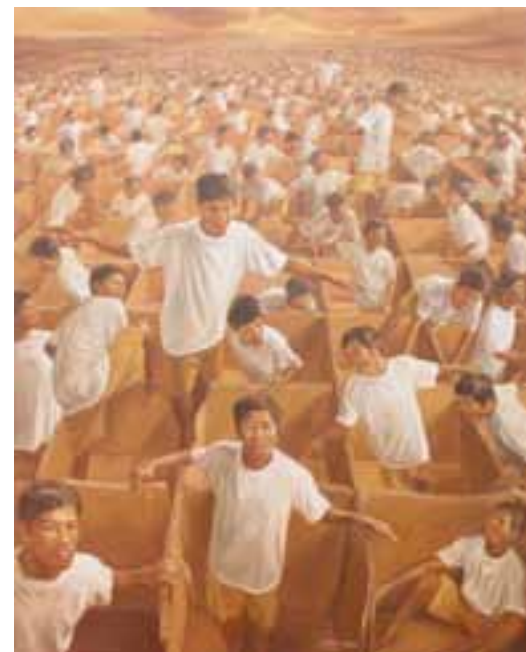
It is the ethical system to which it subscribes that must be revisited. Corollarily, with the economy being bailed out by the nation-state through government stimulus, the free market threatened and redeemed by the intervention of a nineteenth-century artifact, how should national institutions in the arts, along with the museums put up by the rent-seeking elite, weigh in? This is another story worthy of another essay.

In this exhibition, we glean some signs of reconsideration.



REALITY CHECK
Alfredo Esquillo Jr.
60 x 36 in. Oil on canvas . 2009

First is the condition of a leap, or *pakikipagsapalaran* that has led Filipinos to leave their country and to resettle overseas to work or to altogether migrate. This is a decision fraught with sadness and anticipation, and we realize the terror of finding out that the dream may no longer cohere and the homecoming becomes a tragic gathering. Alfredo Esquillo's billboard of a dream European subdivision propped up by dilapidated cardboard-like row houses



NAKUBIKOB
Juanito Torres
60 x 48 in. Oil on canvas . 2009

along Coastal Road, which connects Metro Manila to the province of Cavite on the southern shores of the historic Manila Bay, references this loss: it is a known fact that when overseas contract workers come back to the Philippines, they build houses as if they would retire in the Mediterranean. But Cavite is something else, its free-trade zones have produced zombies out of workers and is, as a writer would argue, practically a military state within a democracy; with the economic downturn worldwide, we speculate in fear and trembling how this floating world will morph. In the same vein, how Juanito Torres accesses the metaphor of the box, most probably the *balikbayan* box, as yielding nothing but vacuum is at once sad and startling. Clairelynn Uy's unfinished carousel in which one of the horses is spare and seemingly in disrepair converses with this theme as well.



ECHOING EBB TIDE
Clairelynn Uy
48 x 60 in. Oil on canvas . 2009



FOREX
Dennis Atienza
48 x 36 in. Oil on canvas . 2009

The other device hinges on chance or *pagbabakasakali*. It is best revealed in Mark Justiniani's machine that reflects bubbles turning into silver coins on a mirror in infinite regression, in hypnotic, narcotic simulacrum of nullity that is perfect for the delectation of a "jackpot junkie" and in Dennis Atienza's abacus of foreign exchange, forlorn and seemingly archaic in the universe of virtual capital.



JACKPOT JUNKIE
Mark Justiniani
8 x 36.25 x 8 in. Mixed media . 2009



LUCKY PICK
Ferdie Montemayor
24 x 72 in. Acrylic on canvas . 2009

Ferdie Montemayor's lottery, the ubiquitous lotto that has left the country enthralled, with its bettors caring for numbers as if they were their soul mates, is part and parcel of this game of luck that is a matter of life and death.



MEMORY LANE
Pamela Yan
30 x 60 in. Acrylic, serigraphy, and collage on canvas . 2009

Pamela Yan for her part invites to look at an inventory of things or knowledge, a clue to the understanding of a painting that may either be property or inspiration.



RANDOM ACCESS MEMORY
Pamela Yan
12 x 61 x 6.25 in. Acrylic, collage, and serigraphy on wooden card catalog . 2009

In these instances, we are asked to go inward, to subject mechanisms to closer scrutiny, and to apprehend how we have been cathected to instruments of fortune as if they were prostheses.

Finally, repetition is central, a kind of routine that does not relent to the point of exhaustion. Exemplary here is Antipas Delotavo's painting of a gilt frame without its prized painting and surrounded by languishing beings sapped of their spirit; inscribed on it is the title *Glory Days*, an obvious reference to a lamentable Lilliputian politician whose name may be translated into English as "prone to fatigue." Indeed, she has worn us down as the republic's longest-serving potentate next to Marcos.