

Looking Back to Begin

by Patrick D. Flores

In one of his early works *Ultimo Cinco* (Even the Last Five Cents, 1993), Mark Justiniani paints a scene of the town fair in which a bettor casts his lot with his final wager, evoking an image of the desperate final stake, at once wistful and thrilling, amid a brethren similarly praying for the sky. Or is he a Christ figure among his disciples, the god-gambler proclaiming the last and the barest at the moment of fate's banquet of a betrayal? It may seem from this vignette that a fine line divides abjection and miracle in a place of very little chances, akin to Albert Camus's feeling that he was born "halfway between poverty and the sun." The artist's world from the time he first exhibited in the late eighties has been about odds and prospects, dire straits and windfall, for people who must give their all just to get a piece of something. The gap between everything and surplus is the cause for art.

In this current exhibition, the artist reflects on childhood as an arena of games, ploys, and folklore, mingling hand-made contrivances with industrial semblances, a foil perhaps to anecdote and definitely a supplement to his fascination with the enchantments of perception, a heightened one, to be sure, that transcends our common sensing. When he was still little, he remembers originally being left-handed, but was shifted to the right; he also had trouble with seeing and reading and easily got lost. Such facet of biography might mean something in this instance of recollection: there is a slingshot cast in metal; an effigy of the half-horse, half-human forest creature (*tikbalang*); a jar of fireflies caught in the elusive night; a goblin/ancestral spirit/ghost of history of the anthill or termite mound; and an infinity mirror. Aptly titled *Malikmata* (*Peripheral Vision*), it is a phantasmagoria caused by a bewitched, bedeviled eye that sees legion.

There is a feeling of the macabre in this latest mutation of Justiniani's art in a gallery strewn with objects, fabrications, industrial thingies in the parlance of the day. They might be called sculptures in an earlier time of modernism and ultimately be regarded as installative when taken together. But discretely, they are just that: flashes of things in the realm of fantasy, folklore, a lapse into childhood, gleaming with indifference but also intimate because of the

memory inscribed in them: a projectile that threatens to catapult an ancestor rendered so naturalistically that it is grotesque; a match box yielding more of the same species of indigenous primeval, with the main figure (*Agtayabon*) clad in age-old armor and spiders skittering on the surface with their metallic appendages; optical devices that play tricks on the eye; and texts that speak of double visions and equally double meanings. At the threshold of this otherworldly sphere is a gargantuan vessel of insects lit from within.

This, indeed, is a liminal space of lower mythology, a vernacular pantheon of changelings and quick-change artists. It disturbs the conception of the human, alluding to post-human incarnations: humanoid, cyborg, even avatar. Justiniani flirts with these morphings in an ethnoscape that is aestheticized by media and in the same vein haunted by the primal scenes of either games in the province or gaming in the city.

One may justifiably ask: What has this all got to do with Justiniani's previous work? Is this a digression or a transition? Is this continuity or rupture? This offers a riddle commensurate with all sorts of pursuits, pranks, magic, masquerades, carnivals, trickster tales, hall of mirrors. We wander around a room of reflections, lenses, distortions, discrepancies in scale, terror and glee, violence and marvel, bouncing and caroming, but also settling in deep quiet. Language performs its emergence as well through words that evoke the almost-but-not-quite: *takipsilim* (dusk) and *lualhati* (grace) are auguries.

Justiniani extends his negative critique of image in his paintings, working around notions of false consciousness and illusion, a distrust of the eye and the folly of imagination. There is something troubling in this restless disbelief in what we see and abide by, in the instinct to confirm the real through evidence. As a response, he explores another constellation of sensing. We are at the limit of a certain consciousness, and the artist invites us to revisit old tales and see through synthetic culture the nature of our biopolitical future. He leads us by the hand. Scary.



Malikmata by Mark Orozco Justiniani

Opening Reception

February 19, 2010 • Friday • 6-9PM

OPENING RECEPTION: MALIKMATA by MARK OROZCO JUSTINIANI, SLab, FEB 19, FRI, 6-9PM

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Celebrated painter, Mark Orozco Justiniani, veers his latest work away from the medium he has long been associated with and instead takes it to the world of sculpture where corners and frames cannot bind. This world, entitled *Malikmata*, is one where night and day converge, and folklore and reality abandon their distinction. Justiniani's keen interest in Filipino society and tradition takes the sculptural route to present Filipino folklore in a form that is multidimensional, concrete and tangible. Not only do the eyes find the splendor of the earth as the sun sets and shadows creep in; this inbetween too awakens the other four senses, and at the same time stirs the imagination. Meant to heighten every sensation, *Malikmata*, Justiniani explains, involves a lot of ' "looking through" with peepholes and lenses with several angles and different vantage points'. With viewers' participation, the world Justiniani creates is sculptural commentary infused with physical interaction. *Malikmata* reveals the creatures of the night, from the fireflies and spiders that lurk in our backyards to those monsters that haunt our dreams. Taking us into the world where what is real and unreal coexist, Justiniani presents a tikbalang who no longer tricks people into getting lost in the forest it guards; a manananggal who discovers the worlds her two halves occupy are one and the same; and an Agtayabun, the man-bird that arbitrates between the realms of the divine and the bestial, who has sided with the latter and

allowed chaos to reign. Thought to be lost in modern consciousness, these creatures of folklore defiantly linger and taunt us to surrender to our darkest nightmares. With sculptural representations manifest of a society that often combines rationality and mysticism, religion and folklore, fact and faith, Justiniani's *Malikmata* is indeed a journey that goes back and forth between realms that are supposed to be distinct. More than confusing our senses, *Malikmata* questions how we construct reality and define illusion.

Malikmata is in collaboration with Tin-aw Art Management.

Malikmata will be shown alongside *STRIP 2010* with Tammy David, Jake Verzosa, Veejay Villafranca at Silverlens Gallery and *Saucerful of Secrets* by Mariano Ching with Haraya Ching at 20SQUARE, SLab. Mark Orozco Justiniani will have his Artist Talk on March 06, 2010, Saturday, 3-5 pm. For inquiries, contact Silverlens Gallery at 2/F YMC Bldg. II, 2320 Pasong Tamo Ext., Makati, 816-0044, 0917-5874011, or manage@silverlensphoto.com. Gallery hours are Monday to Friday 10am-7pm and Saturdays 1–6pm. www.silverlensphoto.com / slab.silverlensphoto.com.

Words: Bea Davila Image: Studies for *Malikmata* by Mark Orozco Justiniani