

ORAPRONOBIS

BY PATRICK D. FLORES

It is interesting to note that the word litany has two faces. On the one hand, it speaks of grievance, a tedious recitation of a multitude of grief. On the other, it is a supplication, an entreaty to a higher spiritual force. Either way, however, it is a prayer that is in essence a form of waiting. And so, whether the litany is a ritual of invocation or a critique of an order, what is important is that a colloquy transpires between mortals and those who possess immense power. This can only mean that prayer is not passive vigil; it is active expectation or even an entitled importuning.

The exhibition *Litanya* by the collective Kalye gathers estampitas of jeepney drivers on which prayers are printed, usually dangling close to the windshield, marked by their decorative fringes, and cherished for the protection they ensure in the course of the day's labors. They may be traced to colonial graphic works of religious images or so-called holy pictures, loose-leaf editions or slips, circulated by friars for conversion and venerated by the faithful at altars or worn as talismans. Surely, the form has evolved from Hispanic religious catechism (the novena, for instance) to artifact of folk piety (anting-anting) to the very vehicle of popular survival – all whirling in current time as a medium of the *oración*, or the incantation of myriad guises.

It is, moreover, uncanny that the print had been the template of Philippine painting, the source of imagery, figuration, and style of much of colonial art. These prints, which spread the worldview of the potentially liberating Passion of Christ or the vernacular *Pasyon*, mainly came from the Plantin Press in Antwerp, which was asked by the Spanish monarchs to furnish the new world with images of sacrifice and redemption beginning in the sixteenth century. Its luminary Christophe Plantin was granted by the papacy a monopoly of Biblical formularies for around two centuries, and yet in a twist of fate was later accused of heresy!

The artists in this project invest a great deal in the form of the *estampita* in relation to the context of its movement through the jeepney that lives through the *pasada*, the past or passage.

First, there is the poetic form in the manner of an aphorism, with the artist acting as both devotee and homilist. Second, there is the amalgam of the art and life ways of the jeepney navigator who snakes through the labyrinths, the guts, of the city with savvy and sometimes with impunity; every day seems to be a struggle set against the allure of a cosmopolis and the decay of a failed modernity. Third, of course is the technique of painting itself, largely known as an integer of the gallery system or an instrument of state ideology; it is in this milieu a moving depiction of sentiment about a range of concerns in society and a lush biographical environment. And finally, the reprographic mode that permits the artists to make multiple copies of these pieces and scatter them beyond the gallery and toward the mass who commute and travel the distance between work and home, errand and fantasy, exploit and banality.

The themes chosen by the artists evoke urgent realities and aspirations as filtered through the eyes of children, for instance, as in the disposition of Archie Ruga. There are also quite cutting reflections on politics and morality. In other words, the prayer is not uttered in submissiveness; it is enunciated as a matter of resolve and reciprocal obligation. Alfredo Esquillo advocates expression: to scream heaven's tale no matter the repression. Alvin Cristobal intimates moments of control and consciousness, prompting us to meditate on decisions and the contraptions of authority. Existential and melancholic is the take of Kirby Roxas, leading us through a puzzle of absence and action. Commodification is the issue of Robert Besana as he spins the inevitable vacuity of heroes manufactured by the elite and the media. Dennis Atienza snipes at the exceptional gap between poverty and aggrandizement, folly and hope.



ARCHIE RUGA
Series
Oil on wood
17 x 11.75 inches
2009

MUNTING DALANGIN 1



MUNTING DALANGIN 2



MUNTING DALANGIN 3



MUNTING DALANGIN 4



MUNTING DALANGIN 5



ALFREDO ESQUILLO JR.
Series
Mixed media on wood
17 X 11.75 inches
2009

HILING 1



HILING 2



HILING 3



HILING 4



HILING 5



ALVIN CRISTOBAL
Series
Oil on wood
17 x 11.75 inches
2009

BULA



KURTINANG ULAP



QUO VADIS



AGOS



UNANG HAKBANG



AMA AKIN
Kalye Collective
Acrylic epoxy and crayola etching on triplych wood panel
42.25 x 29.25 inches
2009



KIRBY ROXAS
Series
Oil glaze and acrylic on wood
17 x 11.25 inches
2009

GABYE 1



ROBERT BESANA
Series
Ballpen on wood
17 x 11.75 inches
2009

HINDI KA NAG-IISA 1



DENNIS ATIENZA
Series
Mixed media on wood
17 x 11.75 inches
2009

SUTIL



GABYE 2



GABYE 3



HINDI KA NAG-IISA 2



HINDI KA NAG-IISA 3



HAPU-HAPUNAN



MILYONG KUSING



GABYE 4



GABYE 5



HINDI KA NAG-IISA 4



HINDI KA NAG-IISA 5



SALARING OPISYAL



MANGGAGAMIT

And the collaborative work of Kalye is a stirring confrontation with unimaginable greed, the avarice of the right to rule. It is at the intersection of the latter that the inherent playfulness of the *estampita* is surfaced, breaking through the grim and solemn ruminations of individual works. Here, the ludic, the risqué, the ribald, the sexist humor of the cocksure jeepney driver, the king of the road as he is known, finds its tone in the polyphony of admonitions and wishes.

The challenge for these artists is to keenly mediate this mixture of iconographies, offer a hybrid idiom that refunctions the original form as well as the origin of the form, and transcend the virtues of parody, satire, and social realism. It may be significant to point out that their personal vision

significantly shapes their articulation, and this perfectly coheres with the highly personal expression of the keeper of the jeepney (which morphed from a World War II hardware) machine itself who remakes it as a veritable home, adorns a shrine on the dashboard, emblazones names of kin on the ceiling, puts up curtains, turns on the radio full blast for his favored tunes. Ornament is key to conveying discourse; it is fundamental to reclaiming a *pasada*.

The mingling of text and image of a rather discursive bent and the appropriation of a gritty and ebullient folk-urban culture take us to the oeuvre of two Philippine artists of diverse persuasions. Brenda Fajardo has made extensive reference to text as a way of commenting on Philippine history within an

alternative divination and memory through the native tarot card series. For his part, Manuel Ocampo quotes the amazingly makeshift and improvised Philippine culture through the palimpsest of colonial signs and the oft-repeated line on the jeepney "God is My Co-Pilot."

It is productive to think of the latter declaration as a robust article of faith inscribed on the *estampita* that goes around through the jeepney, both technologies bearing the scars of colonialism and the post-colonial sufferance. After all the woes in the world are recited and the sins recanted, there will be the affirmation of a blessed prevailing: that as we weave in and out of the fabric of our mean streets, we are not alone and we steer the wheel of life with a numinous being who shares in the burden of the passage by our always vulnerable, incommensurate side. ©

litanya

DENNIS ATIENZA
ROBERT BESANA
ALVIN CRISTOBAL
ALFREDO ESQUILLO JR.
KIRBY ROXAS
ARCHIE RUGA

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