

8 Questions Exhibition Essay 13 – 31 August 2016

MARKING QUESTIONS

by Leo Abaya

Eight young artists pose questions as opening salvo to the next chapter of their young lives in art making. They belong to the recent crop that have been dubbed as graduates of an academic degree, which to this day continue to send mixed, perplexed, misinformed - and yes - backward signals to those who only think of art in terms of embellishment, decoration and amelioration from the practical cares of living. Many still wonder why it should take many years of academic work in order to train artists given the notion that so-called talent only needs to be honed by repetitive doing and upping once initial hurdles have been surmounted? Why indeed, except if one only had sights for employability in industries and enterprises that use or have found value in the power of the visual to ply their trade?

The short and the long answer is liberal education. Andrew Delbanco, a professor of Humanities puts it rather aptly: "... so we might say that the most important thing one can acquire in college is a well-functioning bullshit meter."

The enduring relevance of liberal education is to equip or sharpen the artist with tools and methods, including the sensibility and hopefully the heart to look at the complexity, diversity and changes of the world. Far back or up close, it makes for better living to promote the understanding of the different facets of the human condition, and convey them not merely through data and statistics but more persuasively through the narratives and images of art.

The *Death of the Author* notion is not only the birth of the reader. It is really the birth of authors largely because the opinions and perspectives of people in general have become accessible in an age of information where the platforms for the dissemination of concepts or ideas are no longer conscripted within the imprimatur of governments and institutions. But unlike the chaff that is the parvenus and the charlatans of this world spawned by the accessibility of information to all and sundry, the liberally-educated use this democratic space as the nexus for questions rather than pronouncements.

It has only been a decade and a half into the new century and already many changes are happening right under our noses, transforming the human condition minute by minute. As culture-worker and culture-bearer, it is the responsibility of the educated young artist to wonder and ask the what's, how's and why's when the litmus papers of the world around him turn into pink or blue or vice-versa.

Here is a sampling of the questions that gave impetus to the works in the exhibition.

What is a place?

How did we become so smart that we have endangered even our own habitats? **Nicole Tee** poses this question by documenting the landscape and soundscape of an urban community that is now a shadow of its former self; a result of the encroachment of relentless

commercialization that have succeeded in silencing all efforts to resist it. Adapting ethnographic methods, Tee commits to video and photography the everyday of her own community in sympathetic, comedic, ironic and tragic tones as a last ditch effort to arrest it provisionally before it completely vanishes beyond recognition.

Aileen Viñas installs a hybrid place, an *in-betweenness* bridging the rural and the urban, arising from her own personal experience. Made with economy of means using discarded lumber, she builds and cultivates a circular dioramic world resembling human settlement: city skyline, Brazilian *fabella* and ruins. As moss and plants grow from the mineral-rich rut of the work, the initial sylvan, bucolic associations nudge the viewer to ask how human invention will stay relevant when nature re-takes the planet it has so abused and exploited.

The human species have invented ways to surmount the limits of ambulation, and thus far the objects that have been made have brought him even to outer space. **Carzen Esprela** anthropomorphizes objects to reify man's communion with it by using the enduring iconography of the boat as a medium for conveyance from one physical, geographical or emotional place to another. Combining found-object sensibility with sculptural set skills, Esprela uses the idea of portability to question rootedness for those, like him, who are caught in a nomadic flux and placeless transit by choice or circumstance.

In what ways do we know who we think we are?

Emphasizing that identities are constructed and therefore constructive, **Donna Go** uses the tropes visual culture has used and perpetuated in identifying gender and sexuality in a rather tongue-in-cheek manner. Using the poster aesthetic of popular culture in her painted portraits of men, she exploits the preponderance of bias in our perception of masculinity and femininity and pulls the gender identification rug under our feet, making even the informed viewer ask: "Is he or isn't he?"

Maisha de la Cruz recognizes the irony that while the skin is the largest organ in the body that protects itself from the elements, its color and tone lends the person most vulnerable to prejudice and discrimination, let alone the complications it entails considering human migration, intermarriage and ethnicity. Having climaxed in recent history with the civil rights movement and the apartheid, the war on racial prejudice is still being fought foundationally everyday on macro and micro-scale in the political, social and economic spheres, lending the technologies that allows the modification of skin tone merely a cosmetic turn of events. By painting skin tone swatches on gauze bandages instead of canvas, de la Cruz asks why the wounds of racial bias are not skin-deep.

Carmela Dagdag parodies our fetishized attachment to objects as if they determine who we are because they fulfill our needs, or at least those we imagine that can fortify our self-identification. She repurposes dolls - human surrogates and stand-ins - dismembers and reassembles them into sculptures that depict food to ask how in a highly commoditized culture, our hierarchy of needs is convoluted and how bizarre we can become.

When is time more than a duration matter?

Efficiency hasn't only generated the need for speed. It has also created a culture of impatience by which information technology has infected visual practices. It's all about fast cars, fast transformations, fast stories, fast art, instant fame and instant noodles. As if to poke viewers, **Venus Caparal** creates a video work that engages by denying us instant gratification, suspending resolution to the visual narratives presented, making us into proverbial Vladimirs and Estragons, waiting for Godot, asking and wondering whether he will ever show up.

Gale Encarnacion uses bubble gum as material and transforms it into sculptural forms that express transience. Faithful to the masticatory aspect of consuming gum, she chews and blows air as a sculpting method. She delays time by committing the outcome of the performative gesture to video, expanding duration momentarily in order to give us a longer glimpse into frail and fleeting forms, metaphorically echoing our bodily system, which is sustained by respiration - the entry and exit of air to keep us alive. In the way the works are composed on video and preserved in glycerin-filled jars, she references still life and organic specimen display, continuing the artistic tradition of *nature morte*, to ask and reflect upon our inescapable mortality.

With these questions, it can only be hoped that the generation to which these eight artists belong continues to persist in making marks by creating compelling works that dramatize symptoms, expose the wounds and the scars, identify malfunctions and rage against wrongdoing by asking - better still - generating questions that can function beyond rhetoric or academic discourse. Too often, the discomforts and challenges that come alongside the sincere engagement with art that is relevant to contemporary life and living are set aside once the perks of career success set in. Liberal education will have been regrettably under-used, if not utterly wasted.