

Trail of a Dream

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One finds in Francis Commeyne's pieces objects that are commonplace of urban life. They reference the sights, sounds, and rhythm of the city. These are junk shop signages, round stitched rags, pinwheel umbrellas, lined tarpaulin sheets, cut out plastic neon foliage, cigarette stubs and lighters inside wooden boxes, vulcanising and auto repair signs. Condensed and integrated within Commeyne's paintings and mixed media works, they appear disparate despite being signifiers for things common and profuse. These are objects plied in a common man's trade, in spare quantities and with meagre profit. The cigarettes often go with candies, and the rags are bought in sets. Those who buy are in many ways kindred pilgrims to peddlers on our traffic worn lanes - they ply our avenues with persistent and valiant hope.

The artist's many interests are framed by everyday life in the city, evidenced by his representations of local culture that highlight his enthusiasm for things random and mundane. His 2014 solo exhibition *Manila's Finest: Barbershop Edition* focused on barbershops as microcosms of localities from what he admittedly described 'a semi-outsider' position. Commeyne grew up travelling the world yet while wholeheartedly Filipino, his experience of diaspora consistently shapes his sense of belonging to place. He is preoccupied not only with documenting sites, he is also engrossed in the transient and improvisatory character of these places. While he speaks of a certain informality to characterise them, he is all the more sensitive to the transactions that take place in these locations, which may be ephemeral, spontaneous and unplanned.

Commeyne faithfully renders junk shop signages, fascinated in equal parts by their typography and latent symbolism. Junk shops line many Metro Manila streets. Interestingly, these are sites where malfunctioning or nonworking objects are taken apart, their remains sold separately from armatures that used to house them. In this manner, they enter once more the circuit of capital that discarded them. This seemingly informal economy of bartering by products is in fact part of the same, and is also sustained by the workings of a more encompassing trade in capital and labor. One can surmise however that the business of refuse and junk is often its hidden twin.

History is condensed through the objects that Commeyne inserts into his works. He renders them seamlessly and with remarkable polish, often it is difficult to trace them back to their origins. The junk shop signages are faithful copies of actual ones but underlying them is a form of longing - the artist calls it 'nostalgia' but it can also be a desire for a past that cannot be fully grasped. The junk and barber shops are but a few of numerous places where vestiges of the city can be glimpsed. These are remnants of small scale and more often, informal economies alongside multinational giants.

This trace of nostalgia can also be drawn from the artist's personal history. It is immutable past, and Commeyne renders this crystallised past in his placement of objects into receptacles and compartments; curiosities that do not belong in the present world. It is complemented by a gaze that 'others' and for his 2014 exhibition, he poignantly recalls his Filipina mother's first visit to Belgium which she described as akin to becoming a curious object of sight, as 'exhibit A'.

For this show, Commeyne resorts to a similar technique: the presentation of objects inside compartments, receptacles and niches. His *Tic Tac Takatak* series mimics the wooden boxes where street peddlers house their ware. Their lids make a clacking sound, the call of the cigarette and candy peddler. Yet what may appear actual cigarettes or lighters, he carves from wood and paint to appear real. Curiously though, he places actual religious figurines and green cutout plastic plants inside glass vitrines for his *Flora and Fauna* series. Their neon finish cast an otherworldly glow to an otherwise banal ensemble. Commeyne displaces and disperses objects as a way of defamiliarising them, prising them apart to be reconstituted into new and more interesting forms.

He sources round cloth rags, those often used by public transport drivers to clean their dashboards, had patches sewn on them and aligned them inside a framed glass box taking from Rauschenberg targets. Commeyne is taken with surfaces and patterns, the latent rhythm of things designed for specific uses but whose purposes are ultimately reinvented. He takes the head of the large Micromatic umbrella and fashions a similarly shaped painting to both look like the object while entering the art world lexicon as a colour wheel. He adapts the closed *sari-sari* store front (small neighbourhood stores) and meticulously paints them, abstracting them so that little is left but colour and line in his *Side A, B and C* series. He takes a portion of tarpaulin sheets often used as temporary awnings at food stalls and renders their stripes on canvas sheets that would hang from wooden dowels. This fragmented transposition of forms is informed by a parallel inversion of value, which very much echoes the intertwined economies that make the city. These economies spawn a medley of transactions and relations: conversations, coalitions, even conflicts.

We live the city as well as imagine it.

While Commeyne's lenses capture only a segment of urban life, he succeeds to show the 'fragmentary nature of urban experience' the way Nestor Garcia Canclini (2009) described it. He constructs an imaginary of the city through reversal and transposition, by way of his fascination with fragments through form, his interest in the momentary and the disjointed. What is even more curious is the manner of translation he undertakes - his works belie these latter attributes and conversely, there results unusual and unexpected emphasis on qualities that reference form. We gather though that form deployed in this manner becomes a conduit of value that migrates from one system to another.

The artist not only surfaces the tension between real and manufactured but more important, he maps the often steep slope an artist scales when he gathers and appropriates sources. His manner of appropriation mimics the reinvention necessitated by survival, a making do of various permutations. Perhaps, it is more often that art distances us from that very world and yet at its most brilliant, art seamlessly bridges our worlds to those of others.

'Business as usual' is in keeping with Canclini's definition of a mode of urban culture that fabricates information: it is a "logic tied to the practical, [the] forms of imagination and resignation" that inform both politics and cultures of cities. Commeyne succeeds to bring us to that charged border: the preordained logic of form and the necessary chaos of life and leaves us the challenge of navigating the channel that may connect one to the other.

Cited source

Canclini, Nestor Garcia. 2009. "What is a City?" in *The Urban Scene in Latin America* ed. Rebecca E. Biron. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 37-60.