

Filipino Ice Age through American lens

By Anne Jambora
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MANILA, Philippines – If the Ice Age were to come tomorrow, what objects would the world discover from our civilization? How would a generation of survivors perceive the Filipino culture.

Top lensman Tom Epperson will hold his first solo exhibit in the US depicting Filipino culture frozen in ice. Objects such as the rosary, sapsap (fish), balisong (knife), sampaguita flowers, children's marbles—even a Manny Pacquiao tee—are transformed into striking images in ice to illustrate a story of a Filipino family living in the 21st century.

Titled "12 Below," the exhibit, to run April to May, will be presented at the Tyler Rollins Fine Art in Chelsea, Manhattan, New York City. The Tyler Rollins Fine Art holds the distinction of showing invite-only artists in its gallery.

"I love it that the medium is so unpredictable. It's like serendipity. It's something that you can only control so much. But I like the energy of it all," Epperson said.

Epperson has always held a fascination for ice—and fire. Childhood memories of staring at objects in frozen lakes and a recent trip to freezing Mongolia inspired him to capture images in ice. And so far it has been the most challenging medium he has ever worked on.

Living in the Philippines for 23 years now, Epperson knows by heart the Filipino culture. Eleven subjects in 16 5'x4' images explore into the Filipino identity, including the Filipinos' affinity with the American culture as represented in stark images of a Barbie doll and an angry Mickey Mouse.

"The Philippines is influenced so much by the US. The fact that my wife has a Barbie doll is a testament to that," he said, laughing.

The objective of the exhibit, he said, is to show the different cultures in the country while consciously retaining the Filipino identity. While the images do not convey the frigid environ in which it was captured, they are neither warm nor hearty.

Photographs appear as though they come from a distant world. The images are intense, vivid and thought-provoking, akin to staring at fossils in search for an answer. In the Marble series, the ice manipulation produced some abstract, almost fluid-like images swirling in bubbles.

Working with an unstable medium such as ice, Epperson said he manages to take about a dozen shots in an eight-hour workday—if he's lucky, that is. Some days, he said, he'd wait three days to have an object frozen in a block of ice weighing up to 80 pounds only to find a frozen image that's completely "un-photographable."

Then he'd have to start over again.

"12 Below" refers to the temperature of the industrial freezer, -12 °C, which Epperson uses to freeze his objects. Large blocks of ice are transported to his studio where he sometimes lets the ice sit for hours before photographing it, or he manipulates the ice with heat and/or carving tools for a desired visual effect. Then he sets up his lighting equipment to highlight refracting properties of ice.

When he first started shooting objects in ice, he initially wanted the frosty look—the exact image one sees when looking through a frozen lake. Epperson buried himself on research, but instead only got information on how to make clear, bubble-free ice.

"Each time I freeze an object the ice doesn't look the same. It depends on so many elements, like the kind of container I use, whether it's metal or plastic; how I poured the water into the container, how it melts away ... Because you can over-freeze ice and then it becomes very brittle," he said.

Epperson's work came to the attention of Tyler Rollins when the American was in town last year and saw a photo flower frozen in ice taken by the photographer. Epperson is now under a two-year contract with the Tyler Rollins Fine Art gallery.

A contact in Europe is also interested to show his works there, he said, and he'd love to take it to Japan where he feels it will be appreciated even more.

"I love creative ideas. I want something that's going to make me think. Print is especially hard compared to doing TV cam, for example, because you only have one shot to get your message across," he said.

Epperson was working in the animation business in Australia when he decided to drop everything to pursue his passion for photography. He quit his job and lost his home. His girlfriend left him.

A snap-shooter, and hence knowing very little about photography, he became the oldest person working as a studio assistant at 30 years old. "I barely had money on me to live by and yet I was probably the happiest man on earth," he said.

Today, Epperson is the first photographer to be given the honor of showing his works at the Ayala Museum in 2005, a space generally reserved for exhibits by National Artists.