

SEEKING

By Adjani Arumpac

From the catalogue for the exhibition, *A Thousand Islands / Ronald Ventura*, Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, September 8 – October 22, 2011.

Ronald Ventura describes his works with an action: his outstretched hands slowly meet in a final gesture of intense prayer. This, he says, is a bulk of histories compressed in a single surface. Such is the weight that grounds Philippine contemporary art, fast sweeping the Asian art world in recent years.

Local/Global

A conscious shift in Western perspectives in the past two decades, from linear narratives to the varied peripheral stories, has made cultural diversity the new currency of global art. The transfer launched Asian contemporary art into the international arena. In the Southeast Asian region, Ventura is at the helm of the galloping pack. From his first solo show in Manila in 2000, to *Grayground*, a graphite, oil, and acrylic on canvas “tour de force” that set a new world record in the Southeast Asian market in 2010, to his recent slew of international exhibitions in Indonesia, Singapore, Italy, and New York, Ventura’s ubiquity bears witness to an unprecedented global appeal.

His signature hyperrealistic human bodies — buried under layers of graffiti and pop iconography — beguile and baffle. The horror vacui makes a formidable semiotic wall that invites myriad interpretations (e.g. as symptoms of urban decay, as lurid contemporary reality, as commodification of the body, etc.). The pull of Ventura’s works purportedly lies in their ability to represent a global disposition of contemporaneity while still distinctly rooted in the local.

The “local” is defined and informed by a history of three successive colonial rules (under Spain, America and Japan) that brought about conditions for new trajectories in Philippine art. Each is a reaction to the former — from the sordid oil opuses of Madrid art scholars revolting against Spanish/Catholic rule, to the post-war modernists’ distortions rebelling against their classical masters’ imagined nationhood through idealized rural landscapes, to the social realists’ resurfacing of the body, defiantly revealing it as bound by an authoritarian regime espousing repressive modernist global standards. The fall of the nation state finally gave way to the contemporary scene that is decidedly plural in its varied forms, ideals, and directions.

A cursory review of the “local” leads to a conundrum with regards to Ventura’s supposed strength. With a cultural orientation infused by foreign encounters to the point of saturation and sublimation, the identity cannot hold, nor the global/local dualism. The crux of Philippine contemporary art is this identity problem. In a neocolonial society where control is already internalized and the scheming powers hidden, the fight for identity emerges as a war waged against the everyday. The minutiae have become the main subject of rebellion, a phenomenon expressed by Ventura through painstaking hyperrealistic and pop-pockmarked oeuvres. In a more nuanced interpretation, the appeal of Ventura lies in the familiarity of his images set against a persevering alienation still in search of an identity. This ambiguity/irony accounts for the “global” sellable draw, somehow rendering the works as brutal mirrors that reflect the recognizable yet strange image/locale/gaze of whomever peers into them.

Body/Value

Conversely, the sheer bankability of Ventura’s body of works also makes up for a self-reflexive critique of its mode of production. Here lies his personal ventures in projects — an implicit study on the question of value. Ventura’s fetishization of the body, for example, is a motif that tells much about this preoccupation. From his first one-man exhibition, *Innerscapes* (2000) up to the present, he continuously painted the hallowed body, with marble-perfect skin, with every defined muscle coaxed out of the surface with gentle shadows. This is a mastery borrowed from the tradition of holy icons in the Renaissance era, a technique Ventura learned by painting for church clients at an early age. The divine representations — marred by everyday pop culture and the grotesque — are inquiries into the (religious) image-making process itself. The stress is on the question of the sacredness of the image that is mediated by a human/sinner, revealing Ventura’s view on a religion that persecuted and educated his kinsmen for more than

three centuries. By deconstructing the image and stripping it down to its barest form, he gauges the worth of such iconography, as well as the credibility of the system that implements it.

Over the years, he added layers of cartoons and graffiti, purposely distracting the viewer away from the body and effectively augmenting his discussion on value. In his solo exhibition, *Mapping the Corporeal* (2008) at the NUS Museum, he cut open the beautiful bodies in advertisement photographs to expose anatomical insides. *Metaphysics of Skin*, his 2009 solo show at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, highlighted his propensity for layering, “tattooing” a multitude of pop imagery on the bodies. By fusing the human figure with different and disparate images of commodification and alienation, Ventura teases desire out of publicity images; and assumed/found/dreamt of identity out of tattooed, nondescript bodies to show the arbitrariness of meaning-making and the cost/worth with which this process imbues images.

The artist’s ability to render his ideas in various media — ranging from drawing, to oil on canvas, to print, to sculpture — displays intense technique and craftsmanship that reveal the sensibility of an informed artisan bent on perfecting the medium to the point that the medium itself becomes the subject, or in Marshall McLuhan’s words, the message. In *The Human Study* (2005), Ventura recreated his spectacular bodies on graphite and paper, featuring naked men and women surrounded by signs and symbols pertaining to ruthless commodification brought by modernity. By blowing up the proportion of these drawings to a huge five by eight meter dimension, the artist called for a rethinking not only of the value of the body but of drawing itself as medium, as opposed to the more venerated medium of oil on canvas.

Never one to make a definitive statement, Ventura leaves the question of value open-ended. He himself stresses on “just gathering” and layering what he deems as the most powerful images that strike him — a process as random as signification. The results are cryptic figurative paintings and sculptures, their visual concentration alternately thought-provoking and thought-terminating. The obvious/visible image on the canvass, or the form of the sculpture, are only manifestations of the unseen existing conditions that determine value judgments and finally invest significance in the works. In place of an assertion, Ventura’s pieces call for a continuing negotiation.

Utopia/Dystopia

A Thousand Islands, his second solo exhibition at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, points to the intrinsic fluidity in Ronald Ventura’s stance and preference — a ready consent to the impact of the new, an aversion for a core. After more than a decade of mocking, chopping, reducing and finally burying the body under the signs and signifiers of our times, he now presents a collection where his vulnerable nude is conspicuously absent, except in one canvas. *A Thousand Islands* is a departure, with the artist showcasing a motif that has never been seen from him before — these floating islands.

It is a departure, literally. The images of floating islands recall René Magritte’s *Castle in the Pyrenees* painting — or, in popular culture, Hayao Miyazaki’s *Castle in the Sky* and the floating lands in James Cameron’s *Avatar* — came to Ventura during one of his flights abroad. While flying over the cities and the thousand islands of the Philippine archipelago, he sat by the window, taking delight at how the cities below suddenly transformed into a coherent plane, without people and devoid of chaos. Suddenly, the city was tamed. From this distance, he could finally contemplate. The result of such peace is a solid contained space visualized as islands of leisure and escape. He permeates these visions of utopia with a childlike quality, casting dollhouses and miniature palaces in fiberglass resin (*Kingdom Castle, Doll Homes, Escape*). This serenity is perfection, apparent in the precise, faultless lines that converge at a single point (*Pyramid, Imperfection 1, Imperfection 2*).

Similar to his previous exhibitions, Ventura chose to work in both painting and sculpture, each medium compensating for what the other lacks. His miniature sculptures translate the visual proliferation in his paintings into sensual tactility. The undersides of all these islands completely differ from the architectural precision of the structures on the upper parts — their amorphous dripping forms almost throbbing with a richness of texture. The juxtaposition between the two divisions brings out a jarring divergence. The comparison is not unlike Ventura’s epiphanies upon coming back home from abroad. He recounts how “you begin to see what’s wrong. You notice the garbage everywhere, the traffic jams, and the inadequate system. You just came from a First World country, and now all the faults in your own land emerge. Going back home, you suddenly feel alienated.” A closer look at the details reveals a nagging solitude. A clasped pair of hands, a man gazing up, a nude female with a skull for a head—all are either emerging from or being engulfed by the gloomy, nebulous masses (*Black Hope, Escape, Untitled, Monolith*). Either way, they are trapped, forced to live within and without (*Minefield, Calculated Spaces*).

A single dash of color in one of the sculptures, *Dreamer*, breaks the overall monotony of the murky masses. A red lazyboy stands out, perched on a pristine white cloud hovering over a floating island. Whether this inspired his works on canvases—that are also generally monochromatic with jolting color splashes—or the other way round, is an interesting thought. Ventura’s work process has always been organic and spontaneous. This attitude brought about his conspicuous layering process in the paintings. And now, it seems to have reached a zenith in this series of riotous accumulation of masses on surface.

Ventura layers with wild abandon. He forms grim worlds from the outline of a skull in *Explorer* and *Astroland*, playing on the concept of human mortality and fragility. In *Explorer*, a horse regally trots, his rider facing the other direction. Their contradictory rainbow-bright visions result in anarchy represented by the skull they are standing on filled with an ominous military tank, wrapped with a conglomeration of folklore and pop images. In *Astroland*, an astronaut is similarly lost in a paradise peopled with a maiden on a carabao, a serenading man, and other symbols of a dead, romantized nationhood. The farmers, the maidens, and romance have trekked to the city to look for Lady Luck, leaving the rural world bare and bristling with hunger and unrest. The skull motif is also hidden in the heap of *Blind Child*, its horror actively concealed by a corporate man directing the construction of whimsical castles and a theme park. The whorls of the roller coaster suggest screams of both terror and delight, a sentiment that stems from living in a state of such chaos and disparity.

Capitalizing on construction/creation and ruin, Ventura found his inspiration for the last three pieces he worked on. *Confluence* started as a mess of lines from which he steadily worked on, adding textures and colors, until a heap of wreckage finally emerged. In *Mausoleum*, a feathered bird skeleton looks inside the frame of a house, its lifelessness ironically complemented by the promise of a new home. A change in technique is apparent in the details in these paintings, with Ventura opting to texturize the masses not with icons but with just terrain, replicating the lush shapelessness of the lower part of his sculptural islands. The thorough representation of terra firma suggests, perhaps, a much-needed break from the image overload. Or perhaps, a deeper descent into contemplation. The refined earth fully emerges in *Conquest*, its bulk devoid of blaring signs. Reduced to being a nondescript island with sparse, resort-like structures, dragged by a menacing masked rider with a deathly damsel in distress—the whole scene cruelly proves that respite also means resignation.

Ventura forcefully ties up this multitude of narratives. He deems the islands as his “slices of experience,” randomly thought up and executed, their forms visibly varying according to his changing affections and circumstances. Nonetheless, a uniting element of weightlessness runs through these immense realities, a thought that evolved from the first painting he worked on. This is the singular image of the naked body, a piece evidently different from the rest. In *Invitation to a Feast* — a blend of tropical hues of greenery and warm sun — Ventura places fruits, a blaring band, and a pale human in repose, over idyllic farm scenery, straight out of a painting by Philippine master, Fernando Amorsolo. Bloody bones form the word MABUHAY, a standard welcome greeting in Filipino. Again, the vision of a lost romance, a summons to a space/time and identity long gone.

Weightless in search of self, Ventura’s *A Thousand Islands* does not defy gravity. In his context, simply nothing holds.

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INTERVIEW

The following interview with Ronald Ventura was conducted by Adjani Arumpac in Manila in August 2011.

What’s your earliest memory of encountering “art”?

RV I stalked a neighbor. He lived behind the other wall. The street ended where we lived and there was a very high wall dividing the adjoining streets, adjacent to our playground. It was during one of our plays that I happened to climb up the wall and got a peek of my neighbor, who was an artist. He painted galleons. Probably a Mabini painter. Sometimes, I picked up the trash he left after painting—empty cigarette packs crumpled to wipe off excess paint from the brushes. I remember he smoked Camels. This was in the 80s.

Around the same time, I enrolled in an art workshop in Malabon under the artist Fernando Sena. I was in grade school. The workshop was for free. I had a classmate who joined and I tagged along and started formal training there. Mr. Sena was a mentor for one and a half years, at least during summer art workshops. From then to middle school, I learned and practiced art techniques so everything was basically a rehash of the basics I've already learned when I finally went to college.

I had various art teachers in the art school but the one I consider as my mentor is Antonio Austria, one of the early Modernists in the Philippines. His works are mostly plays with basic forms and colors.

Your hyperrealist naked human bodies described as "nearly airtight,...streamlined to perfect exhaustion" have become your "trademark." How did this style come about?

RV I don't consider it a trademark. I guess most see it that way because I've always produced these images. I try to stay away from stereotypes. I'm a graduate of a fines arts college known for producing artists who are quite good in human anatomy. But nobody really taught me how to make my "trademark" human bodies there. My mentor was more into abstract art, for example. The human anatomy has fascinated me ever since I was a child.

"Profane" has almost always cropped up as the main artist statement in the curatorial notes of your earlier exhibitions.

RV The summer art workshops I attended when I was young were sponsored by a non-sectarian group. Later on, they hired me to paint images of symbols of their belief, like angels battling demons. They started selling my works and the funds go straight to a scholarship for sponsored children. In a sense, I was an artisan. Naturally, when I went to a university and entered a formal art school, I started seeing my old works from a different perspective. It was liberating. I started asking questions about religious artworks. I was looking for a value there, in those images that I was so often asked to paint.

Your first one-man show. What was it about?

RV It was called *Innerscapes*, an exhibition of figurative paintings and drawings and mainly a conceptual mixture of disturbance in the environment and yes, faith. My rendition of the bodies was not yet as "perfect" but the idea was already there. The human figures emerged fully in my third one-man show. The breakthrough was really just because I was finally able to buy better materials for the artworks that resulted to finer strokes, colors.

Speaking of breakthroughs, which exhibit/show, do you think, defined you as an artist?

RV The 2005 Ateneo Arts Awards is possibly what catapulted me to the so-called center of the scene. It is a local art award-giving body recognized by various other institutions. I was one of the awardees. *The Human Study*, the body of work I did for that event, is a collection of graphite drawings on 8 x 12 feet canvases.

Why did you choose drawing as the medium for a major show?

RV I've always been interested in drawing. In fact, the earliest "artist group" I joined worked with ink or graphite on paper. It was 1999. I found kindred for my fondness for drawing and we would later on join a group, the Printmakers Association of the Philippines. We experimented with printmaking. We went to provinces to hold printmaking workshops and exhibitions. I eventually broke off from the group but I kept on drawing. My drawings are now part of my paintings. They are not the main attraction but they've always been there.

So what we have on the canvas are artifacts of your history—the human body, the drawings, and the occasional prints. How do you mix these elements?

RV I continuously doodle. I have several doodle books. I file them away and then I browse through them. Then I choose images and make studies in Photoshop. (My wife, who is a graphic artist, taught me how to use it.) Then I execute. I enjoy the conceptualization part. It's the execution that's a pain, as the human body takes too much time to flesh out. Then I put up the pieces simultaneously inside my studio, alternately and randomly working on the surfaces. I never have a fixed idea. My digital studies are just jumpstarts. The whole execution process is organic.

Working simultaneously on paintings must have an effect on the final works produced. Do you think this process brought about that distinct shift in your style, wherein you started superimposing layers on your human figures, e.g. Japanese superflat aesthetics, ad photos?

RV Definitely. The process was gradual. Before, these icons were just part of the background. Overtime, they steadily plowed their way to the foreground, finally superimposing themselves on my human figures. Things affect me more these days, their impact too strong—like a daily shock. That is why I avoid watching the television and hardly open books. I try to ease the blows by resting my eyes time and again.

There is always this lone figure of the human buried by layers of colors and caricatures. And usually, it is a boy. (e.g. Astroboy, Framed, Duad at Play.)

RV Yes. He is my son. It's interesting how the kids are so attuned to technology. They just absorb everything. The cartoons are stuff I learned through him, watching him, being with him. I don't like them, you know, these icons. I don't necessarily like what I put on my canvases. But they need to be represented. You want to protect the child from the chaos of the everyday but at the same time you know you cannot. These things are very present and you can just guide him as best as you can.

Your paintings are located in fluxes, bare landscapes. Signifiers and symbols are the only determinants of their location. Your projects have been read and interpreted as having social realist undertones—urban decay, man and the changing landscape.

RV I don't dare define my works. Most of the time, I just set up everything to make things flow. I want it as natural as I think it should be, I should be. Choosing the images I incorporate in my works is automatic. I just retrieve what I think flows straight to me, what makes the biggest impact.

I am not making a commentary. I see it more as a social content. I never meant to incite action. At best, I see my works as signifiers of a context because I created them in a certain place, and that I, as an artist, am informed by a certain culture. I don't believe art can resolve anything, really. It is an expression. I am trying to convey a sense of helplessness of living within a system that is obviously not working for most of its people. It happens that I am an artist and this is my way of dealing with it, visualizing it. Much like what the media does. I am just a mediator.