

PATRICIA PEREZ EUSTAQUIO



Portrait of Patricia Perez Eustaquio. Courtesy the artist

PATRICIA PEREZ EUSTAQUIO, Untitled (Butcher's Blossoms V) (detail), 2013, oil on canvas, diptych, 234 x 207cm each. Courtesy the artist

From Mash to Metaphor

BY JENNIFER BAUM LAGDAMEO AND MARLYNE SAHAKIAN

Manila-based artist Patricia Perez Eustaquio bridges multiple worlds. At the intersection of fine art and craft, her versatile practice includes paintings, sculptures, drawings and installations that touch on themes such as power, identity, beauty and memory. A former student of the late Roberto Chabet (1937–2013), the father of conceptual art in the Philippines, Eustaquio's shows often include contrasting elements: a magnified detail of an Old Master still life captured in a geometric-shaped canvas may hang near an installation combining woven rattan and lace.

"The most important thing I learned from Chabet was that one plus one equals three," states the elegant, petite Eustaquio when she sits down for a conversation in Manila this January. "When you add two ideas, either you consider the poetry in the relationship between them, so that you can create a good metaphor, or you mash them together and hope it's successful."

Born in 1977 in Cebu City, Eustaquio and her family settled in Manila when she was four. As a child she was surrounded by craft books and was encouraged to draw. "It was a time of anxiously waiting for toilet paper rolls to get used up so we could use the cores as wheels for cardboard cars or puppets and such," she reminisces. Her father was a pilot, and while the family had modest means, they traveled abroad to Europe and the United States, where she was exposed to art museums from a young age.

Early on, she explored the links between fashion, craft and art—an intersection that has become central to her practice. Her first solo show, "Split Seam Stress" (2003), at the Ayala Museum in Metro Manila, featured *All Dressed Up* (2003), a dress crafted from more than 100 vintage shirts from a Salvation Army thrift shop. Through her work with fabric, the struggling young artist began to earn money by designing costumes for performance artists as well as clothes for Manila's socialites. She joined the Young Designers Guild and studied pattern making with leading Filipino designer Jesus Lloren, acquiring skills that would prove influential in her future work as an artist.

By 2007, however, Eustaquio had become disenchanted with the fashion world and was approached by two curators about reviving her art practice. Manila-based independent curator Joselina Cruz suggested she submit a proposal to the second Singapore Biennale (2008). Eustaquio's idea was based on experiments she had undertaken with fabric: she wanted to create resin-dipped

fabric sculptures, and while her proposal was not accepted, this work became central to her return to the art scene in 2008. That same year, Malaysian curator Adeline Ooi invited Eustaquio to participate in "Three Young Contemporaries" in April, an annual three-artist show at Valentine Willie Fine Art in Kuala Lumpur. There, she presented two chairs made of crocheted white lace that seemed to float in the air, a piece entitled *The Sprinkling and the Pall* (2008). Her technique involved shrouding an object with fabric, casting it in clear resin, then removing the original object to reveal a shell-like form. In October of that year, for her first solo show at Silverlens in Metro Manila, "Death to the Major Viva Minor," Eustaquio featured *Psychogenic Fugue* (2008), a haunting ghostlike sculpture, created using the same technique, in the shape of an upright piano. Inspired by the venue, which formerly housed a music school, she explored the notion of hierarchies in art, whereby music is considered a loftier form of high art, and craft is seen as the lowest form of visual art.

The following year, Eustaquio's work was recognized with two prestigious awards—the Ateneo Art Award, a prize bestowed by the eponymous Metro Manila-based gallery to emerging Filipino artists, and the Cultural Center of the Philippines's (CCP) 13 Artists Award—plus an offer from ID11, a residency initiative based in the Dutch city of Delft. During an earlier visit to the Netherlands in 2008, she had been inspired to experiment with still-life painting, a tradition she had been discouraged from exploring in her studies. "We were always told, 'Don't paint flowers, don't paint the banal still life,'" Eustaquio says with a smile, "So I was attracted to playing around with this tradition." The next year, during her residency, she continued to develop her European-influenced series of paintings. Ongoing since 2008, they are based on small details from Dutch still-lives, such as a flower or a feather, which she reproduces in an enlarged format, then presents on ornately-shaped canvases. Later, in 2013, she began using geometric-shaped frames for her paintings, which suggest fragments of memory, offering a glimpse of something that is familiar and abstract at the same time.

Craftsmanship is central to Eustaquio's work. The ready availability of materials and the endurance of traditional techniques in the Philippines have allowed Eustaquio to work with objects such as lace, rattan and wood. She has employed, for example,

artisans from Paete, the wood-carving capital of the Philippines, to create arms in the style of *santos*, or wooden sculptures depicting Catholic saints and holy figures. "I use craft where I feel that it's appropriate," she explains, adding, "It's also as a reference to our own Filipino art history." Craftsmanship was prominent in "The Future That Was," presented by the University of the Philippines' Vargas Museum, in July 2013, and at Tyler Rollins Fine Art in New York two months later—her first solo show in the US. Several faceless female mannequins, evoking the Philippines' former first lady Imelda Marcos in her signature butterfly-sleeve gown, were made from wired frames covered in woven rattan or *solihya*, an intricate crafting of palm leaf typically used for furniture. Under the delicate shapes, Eustaquio lays bare references to a political era in which art was at the mercy of a dictatorship that forced its own aesthetic onto artists.

In 2014, a tribute exhibition of work by 75 artists was organized for Chabet at the CCP. Eustaquio contributed a remake of an earlier piece, *To Helen* (2003), which had been shown at the 2003 exhibition "Picture This," organized by Chabet at the Art Center, SM Megamall, in Metro Manila. Eustaquio's first version features neon cursive text laid above an enlarged family photograph of a couple standing in the artist's grandmother's garden. The text was taken from a handwritten note by her grandmother found on the back of the original photograph, which read, "They stood right in front of my only blooming shrub & hid the flowers." For the 2014 tribute show, the same neon text was mounted onto a shiny black panel, in which viewers were able to see their own reflections, creating a type of "selfie" image. "I see light as a sort of subtitle, creating an environment that's suggestive of memory," the artist says.

Eustaquio often engages the viewer in this type of reflective, and reflexive, stance. "I embrace the interconnections in my work," she explains. "I try to put things together, while leaving certain elements incomplete, so that they can be open to external associations and references." Her work is like an elaborate dress with multiple layers: some seem familiar and comforting, while others are unsettling and provocative. Engaging the viewer on an emotional and experiential level, Eustaquio's shows are like performances, delivering a signature style that is bold yet delicate—much like the artist herself.