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PHILIPPINES

ON METAPHOR AND MASH: INTERVIEW WITH PATRICIA PEREZ EUSTAQUIO

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PATRICIA PEREZ EUSTAQUIO in her studio in Manila. Photo by Jennifer Lagdameo and Marlyne Sahakian for ArtAsiaPacific.

Manila-based Patricia Perez Eustaquio brings together the worlds of art and craftsmanship in her paintings, sculptures and installations. A student of the late Roberto Chabet, the father of conceptual art in the Philippines, her work touches on perceptions of power, identity and beauty. The artist, who has won several prestigious awards in the Philippines, had her first solo show in the United States in 2013 at New York's Tyler Rollins Fine Art. ArtAsiaPacific sat down with Eustaquio at Silverlens Gallery in Makati, Philippines, to reflect on her work and upcoming projects.

Which would you say was the most important show in your career to date?

My first show at Silverlens, "Death to the Major Viva Minor" (2008), marked my comeback to the art world. After graduating in fine arts from the University of the Philippines in 2001, I was a struggling painter at first, but then I turned to clothing design for a few years. I began experimenting with fabric sculptures and toyed with the idea of shrouding objects in fabric, in order to make ghost-like sculptures. The new space that Silverlens opened back then was formerly a music school, so I began thinking about the idea of music as an higher art form, as something that philosophers often praise above the visual arts. From there, I started to think about crafts—what is often considered to be the lowest form of visual art. The show ["Death to the Major Viva Minor"] was a statement about the link between crafts, visual art and music. It really helped clarify the ideas I wanted to put forward in my practice and the themes I wanted to explore.



Work-in-progress mirrored fabric in the artist's studio. Photo by Jennifer Lagdameo and Marlyne Sahakian for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

Can you tell us about your work that involves shaped canvases? How did that idea emerge?

The idea of shaped canvases came from wanting to show something seemingly decorative. At the same time, the idea of fragments emerged—how everything is just a fragment of something else. My paintings are based on small details from classical Dutch still-life paintings, which I blow up onto canvases; then I fragment those paintings by cutting them into shapes and stretching them onto frames. It's quite a laborious task. I wouldn't have been able to make those canvases if I hadn't learned how to sew and make patterns. I started with floral, baroque shapes but now the shaped canvases tend to be more geometric in form. The viewer has a glimpse of something that is familiar, and by cutting and fragmenting the idea—as well as the visual—is made more abstract. Cutting canvases is also about fragments of memory and associations.

You spent some time in an artist residency in Delft in the Netherlands. Did this influence your work with still life?

Yes, I chose Delft for of its still-life tradition. In art school we were told, "Don't paint flowers! Don't paint still life!" So it was a challenge for me to experiment with this approach. I took pictures of meat and realized they could look like flowers if executed in a certain way. The close-ups of meat that I painted for "Swine" [Eustaquio's 2004 exhibition at Green Papaya Art Projects in Manila], were both gruesome and abstract. This was probably a bit of a statement, as I was a vegetarian for 15 years. My artist friends say I am a closet social activist. I have very strong environmental and political feelings, and sometimes it comes out in my work.

Your recent show at Philippines' UP Vargas Museum, "The Future That Was" (2013), was a comment on power structures during the Marcos era (1965–86). Was this your most political show to date?

Many art patrons provide money and dictate their own aesthetics onto artists, as was the case with Imelda Marcos. She would suggest that artists use certain materials and make their work "look more Filipino." There's often a hidden agenda among certain art patrons and institutions in the Philippines to dictate what is a so-called "Filipino aesthetic." But Philippine history is so complex; the last time we were truly Filipino was . . . I don't know how many hundreds of years ago. Our archipelago has always been engaged in trade with our Southeast Asian neighbors, followed by the Spanish colonial period (1521–1898). These influences are all-encompassing. I mean, where, how and what is really "Filipino"?

You bring divergent ideas to your work, combining crafts with conceptual art approaches, for example, or mediums such as lace with neon. Are these tensions intended?

The most important thing I learned from Roberto Chabet was, "One plus one equals three." When you add two ideas you can work on the relationship and the spaces in between, and what you get is a really good metaphor, a sort of poetry. Or, you can mash two ideas together and hope it succeeds, without much more thought put into it. Some of my ideas have emerged by just mashing things together, such as my geometric canvases, which is also a commentary on how current design and art aesthetics are so obsessed with minimalism and modernism. At the same time, these pared-down ideologies are

still trying to be pretty—still trying to be beautiful. I wanted to take my very detailed flowers and meat and put them into rigid shapes, to sort of just mash them together, and see what would happen. I also wanted to question how we see things. Do we really base everything on how things look?



PATRICIA PEREZ EUSTAQUIO sharing ideas behind her geometric cardboard installation created for the Open Studios of the Art Omi Residency (2010) in upstate New York. Photo by Jennifer Lagdameo and Marlyne Sahakian for *ArtAsiaPacific*.



The artist's work-in-progress studies. Photo by Jennifer Lagdameo and Marlyne Sahakian for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

In your work, do you try to push people outside of their comfort zones and challenge their perceptions?

Certain people don't like my work, and perhaps this is because some of the elements are very powerful, like the paintings that were in "Swine." In that exhibition the paintings took over the walls, and it was hard to see from a distance the pig flesh—they just looked like nice, pink paintings. Do we only like what is familiar? My work is about getting people to not immediately accept what is in front of them. I want them to think beyond the surface, beyond their initial reaction to my work. I like to make big paintings that are more than two meters high. [This way] the interaction with the artworks becomes very physical for the viewer. I have also increasingly been using neon lights in my work, either in geometric shapes or in the form of written text. I see light as a sort of subtitle to my work; it creates a specific setting. It's always neon. It is very strong—blinding strong!

Tell us about your most recent show in Taipei, "Figure Babel" (2014). What does the title refer to?

"Figure Babel" was a continuation of the Vargas Museum show, where objects created a narrative for a critique of design aesthetics theory. For Taipei, I made drawings and used the same idea of mashing together fixed shapes and forms, and putting detailed still-lives inside those forms. From afar, [the display] just looked like a totem of circles and triangles, which are geometric forms that are the building blocks of art and design. They ended up looking like towers, but they are also sketches or proposals for objects that I would like to make in the future. They are like architectural plans.

Is this a new direction in your work and will you be developing this further? What is coming up next?

I actually find drawing really fun, because it has such a temporary quality to it. I only started to draw one year ago, and I had never drawn before that. My recent drawings have been proposals for future work, and I am exploring ways of making these drawings more sculptural. My next big show is at Silverlens Manila in August (2015), and I want to work on an installation based on my drawings, using a new type of fabric. It's like a rope mesh or a heavy fishing net. I would like to make more ghost-like sculptures with that.



Work space in the artist's studio. Photo by Jennifer Lagdameo and Marlyne Sahakian for *ArtAsiaPacific*.



Detail of **PATRICIA PEREZ EUSTAQUIO**'s mirrored fabric. Photo by Jennifer Lagdameo and Marlyne Sahakian for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

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