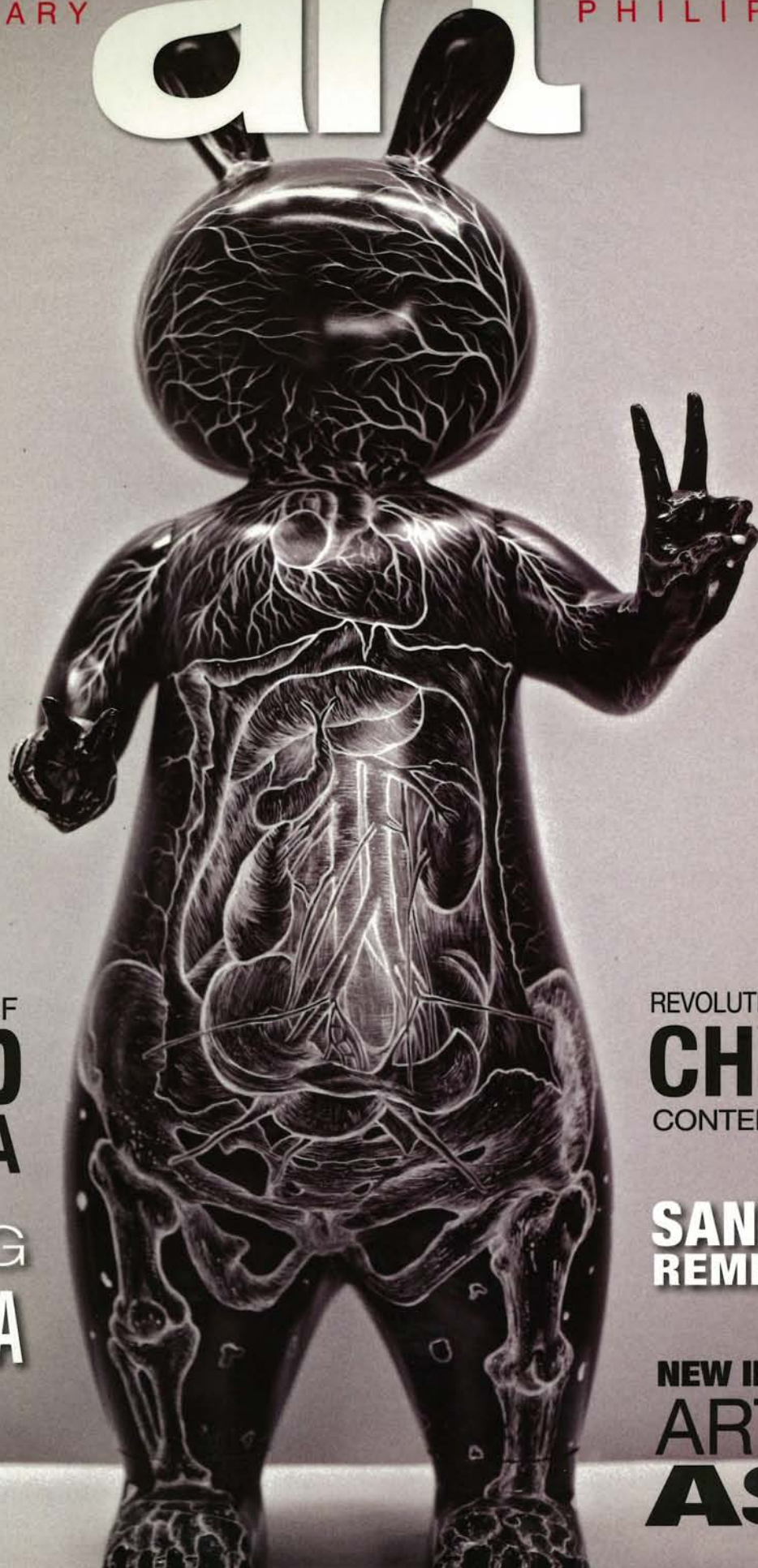


CONTEMPORARY

# art

PHILIPPINES



INTO THE WORLD OF  
**RONALD  
VENTURA**

GRUPONG  
**SALINGPUSA**

REVOLUTIONARY ROOTS OF  
**CHINA'S**  
CONTEMPORARY ART

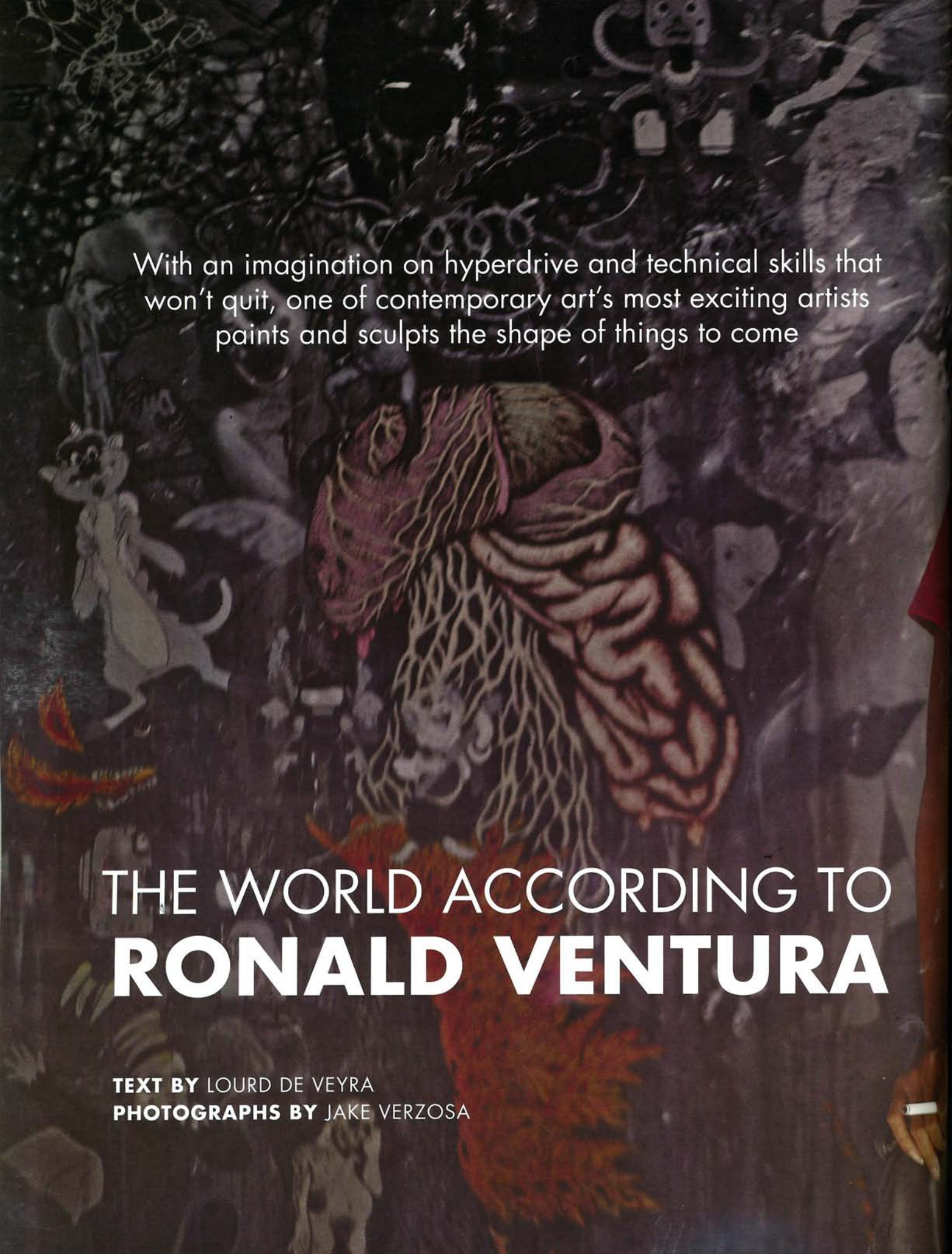
**SANTI BOSE  
REMEMBERED**

NEW IN NEW YORK:  
ARTS OF  
**ASIA**

PHP280 USD\$10  
SGD\$12 HKD\$70





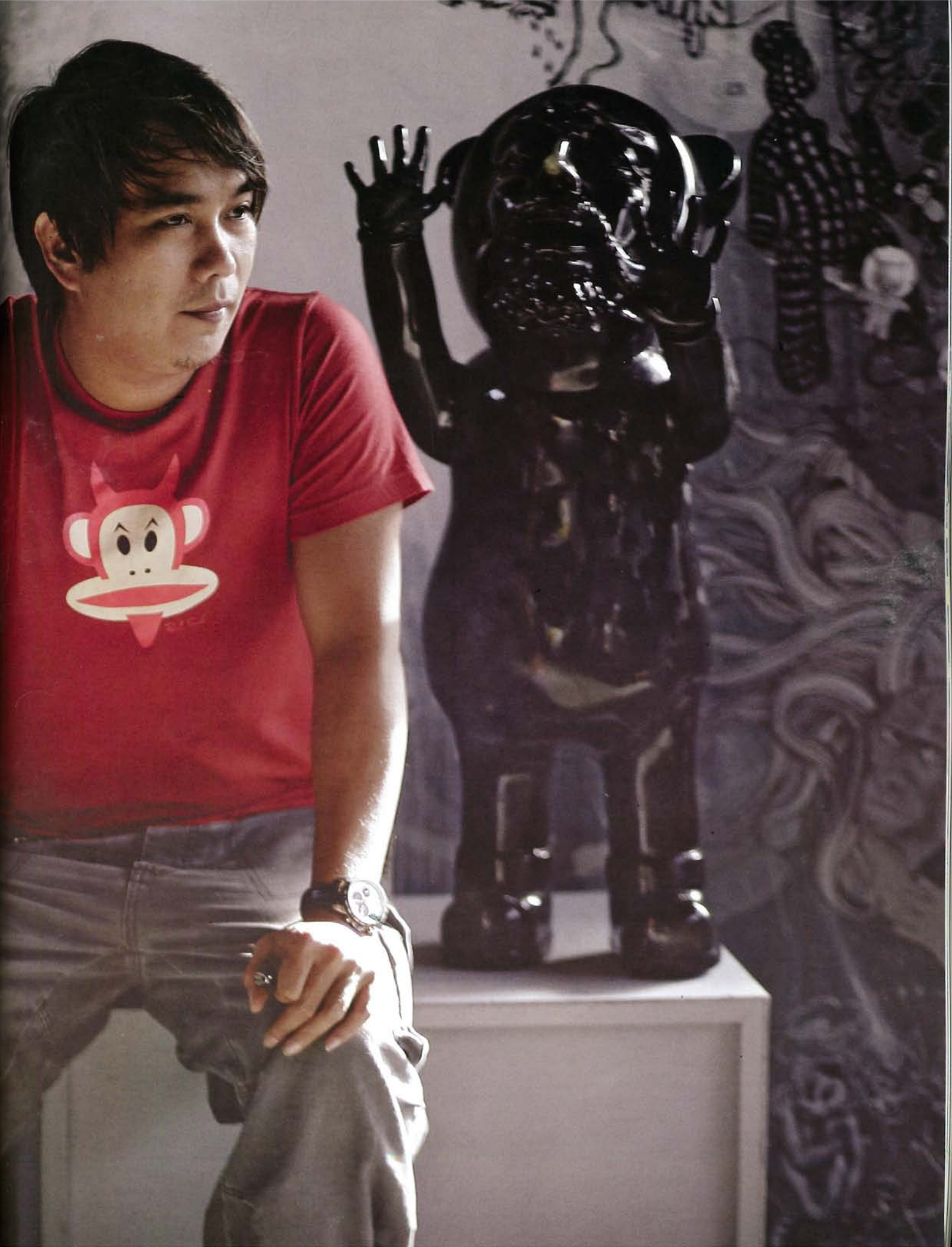


With an imagination on hyperdrive and technical skills that won't quit, one of contemporary art's most exciting artists paints and sculpts the shape of things to come

# THE WORLD ACCORDING TO **RONALD VENTURA**

**TEXT BY** LOURD DE VEYRA  
**PHOTOGRAPHS BY** JAKE VERZOSA







Ronald Ventura lives on a street called Earth.

That is not metaphorical balderdash but a literal statement of fact. This part of Congressional Subdivision in Tandang Sora takes appellative inspiration from celestial bodies. Earth Street in Tandang Sora is a stone's throw away from a Burger Machine stand. A big number 2 is crudely spray-painted on his apartment gate. One sees, upon entering, a caged pitbull that is surprisingly quiet for its otherwise vicious pedigree.

"Show-type lang yan," Ventura explains, when asked about the dog's demure demeanor. A blue Ford Lynx occupies the driveway that leads directly to what presently serves as the artist's work studio, at the center of which looms a canvas more than 10 feet and virtually blank except for an outline of what appears to be a robot of Japanese phylogeny. To the right side of the driveway is a wall lined by small plants, to the left a shelf with a battalion of resin sculptures varying in dimensions and shapes except for one common characteristic: the pudgy body topped with animé-rodent-like heads, adorned by edgy monochromatic scrawls (some are actually shaped like rats).

Ventura, 35, lives on a street called Earth but there is nothing mundane about his art. The aforementioned canvas, he would reveal to me later on, would be painted with a gigantic image of Astro Boy (or what looks like him) with the face of his son. On the robot's chest is a small hatch opening to reveal a beating heart.





ME: What is it that you find beautiful?

VENTURA: Tough question.

ME: Haha. Sorry—

VENTURA: Siguro, what's beautiful for me is something closer to the truth.

ME: "..."

VENTURA: Of course, my truth is different from yours.

ME: Okay...

VENTURA: And, of course, your concept of beauty changes all the time.

ME: "..."

It is interesting to trace the evolutionary trajectory of Ronald Ventura's style: the solemn, two-dimensional dreamscapes painted with frighteningly realistic detail of his '90s phase has morphed into playful, ironic graphic explosions informed by pop aesthetics, visual cacophony tempered only by an overwhelming sense of technique and structure.

Not too long ago his paintings were self-contained hallucinations radiating with classical sensibility; recently it seems as though the stench and funk of this world has begun to seep into Ventura's canvases. And more. But beyond the attention to detail, it is the execution and flair for drama that lends power to Ventura's works—especially his canvases. His paintings radiate an operatic sort of energy, and "awe" is a reaction that might not come across as hyperbolic.

But it is really the classical grounding that sets him apart from the rest of pack. Descriptions of Ventura's work often yield terms like "virtuosity," "perfectly rendered," "photographic realism" and, indeed, there has been overwhelming critical assent on Ventura as the supreme technician. But it is akin to praising a Buñuel film because of its cinematography. Of course, Ventura's share of detractors decry that it is all technique, all skill sans "profundity," mere visual acrobatics. But these whiners might simply be the same playa-haters hiding behind the veneer of the "conceptual" and

the "ironic," who would, in the end, turn out to be nothing but clever theoreticians and crappy draftsmen. Ventura's technique is a raised middle finger to the subculture of shock-pranksterism young artists find so stylish at the moment: scatological/sexual perversions in unchallengingly crude comicbook/cartoon renditions—all defensible by discourse, of course, or hauteur cynicism.

But the question: since when did skill become a bad thing?

"All images, whether photographs, videos, paintings, or sculptures, are the same. It's how you use them that makes the difference," he says during the interview, asked to react to all this flak about "technique."

But it's not as if Ventura's works are bereft of "discourse," whatever that means. His last major show, *Mapping the Corporeal*, from September to November at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Museum during the 2008 Biennale, saw Ventura at his most convincing—from graphite-on-canvas to assemblages to sculptures, including resin figures of animal heads attached to sexy, muscular human bodies. Here Ventura's paintings seem to take on a darker, humorous, looser, powerfully ambiguous tenor. The eerily sensuous and shadowy "Zookeeper" (122 x 152.4 cm, 2008)—featuring the image of a woman wearing a gas mask—adorns the exhibit's invite. The piece, according to his comment, "is a representation of the human body as a guardian of animals—wild and domesticated, kept inside a sanctuary. It magnifies the omnipresence of human animality capable of crossing the boundaries of the traditional concept of behavior and morality."

## TALKING SHOP

Many in the Philippine art world are rather shocked by the unprecedented prices his paintings have been currently fetching in

### SONGS FOR A NEW AGE

(OPPOSITE PAGE)

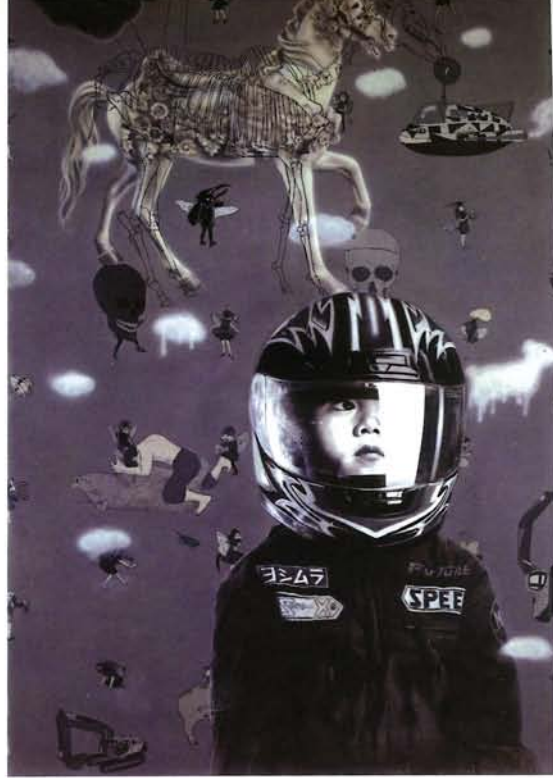
"After the Lullaby"

2008

13 x 15 x 27 inches

Fiberglass/resin,  
polyurethane paint





#### WILD, WILD WORLD

Striking and stunning images from the gallery of Ventura's much heralded works at top international auctions: (clockwise from top left) "Ikinakambal (Pairing Up)", 244 x 203.5 cm; "Transporter", 96 x 60 inches; "Pinamumugaran (Nesting Ground)", 152.5 x 366 cm.



the international market. Talk is that in international auction houses, Venturas are commanding five-digit dollar prices. An article by Lito Zulueta for the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* wrote, "At the Sotheby's auction last October in Hong Kong, Ronald Ventura's large work, 'Pinamumugaran', fetched bids from nine bidders and set a record for a work of Philippine contemporary art auction. Ventura repeated the feat in last November's Christie's auction, also in Hong Kong, for another work that displays his graphic and compositional dexterity." The article actually considered 2008 a landmark year, with young Pinoy artists like Ventura along with Nona Garcia, Annie Cabigting, and Rodel Tapaya, finding themselves "in the same seven-figure league (in Philippine peso equivalent) as the masters such as Felix Martinez, Anita

Magsaysay-Ho, Vicente Manansala, and Fernando Amorsolo."

But Ventura is not about to feel guilty about it anytime soon. He is aware—as is any careful observer—that his pieces are a result of meticulous planning executed with skill bordering on the superhuman.

Ventura shares a curious anecdote: while working, he was once visited by a famous National Artist who came along with an art collector. It turned out that a certain gallery had been spreading rumors that Ventura's recent paintings had the benefit of digital manipulation. Indeed, in this day and age of Photoshop sorcery, it is easy to float such allegations. To the visitors' amazement, they discovered that the young painter still painstakingly did everything by hand. Ventura even tells me of one famous critic slash art studies professor who really

thought that his paintings were "digital."

Can't blame him—or them. On a small catalogue or a computer monitor, a Ventura painting does look like the work of someone with incredible Photoshop abilities. After all, these days, who makes a collage on canvas using only a paintbrush—a real one, not the Adobe tool? More: what would be the point? That's like a DJ producing a song out of random samples he himself had made. Consider stunning tableaus like "Pinamumugaran", which are mostly large-scale phantasmasgorias in oil, with some glaring details: tiny, cartoony (i.e. Walt Disney dwarves) superimpositions. Wouldn't it have been easier to scissor out these from a storybook or a magazine? But it is in a painting like "Beastiality" (2008) that gets him in such dilemma: it looks like an actual



fashion-magazine ad, except for the phrase "Catwoman Collection" emblazoned as logo, and dangling from a woman's hand is a leopard skin bag with a growling head. Ventura chuckles that the point was lost on most viewers who thought it was a poster ad.

No scrimping happens on labor and materials. He is not afraid to drop the word "quality," and declares that he still employs the same classical methods of preparation, "the same ones used by Da Vinci centuries ago."

And time. Ventura takes on a terrifying work ethic of 10 to 14 hours a day. "My wife often complains," he chuckles, pointing to the ridiculously short distance between the huge canvas and the door of his house. "I'm here in the studio all day, and they're just right over there. But it's like I'm somewhere else. I only come in to eat and sleep." Ventura has a seven-year-old son, Rain Angelo, who is already in prep school.

But the wages of fatherhood had opened up to him a totally new universe. As any new father would experience, it is a world of toys, of Gameboys and Playstation Portables, cartoon serials, Japanese anime and graphics. It may, in fact, be possible, that this aspect of fatherhood has been hugely influential on his recent work. "I'm trying to communicate to that era," he says.

"Someone told me that the Japanese would like my sculptures very much," he says. That comment isn't hard to understand, given the cartoon-mouse-like heads and faces. Indeed, he says he likes to challenge audiences: is it a toy or a piece of sculpture?

"Mas marami kang magagawa pag hindi mo iniisip yung financial gains (You can do much more if you don't preoccupy yourself with financial gains)," says the man whose painting currently holds the most mindboggling price ever by a contemporary Filipino painter. "But it's how you balance the demands of the art market versus [who you are]."

## CHANGE

I arrive at Ventura's house on a Sunday morning and find him wearing a red Bathing Ape shirt and loose, pyjama-like pants. Smokes Marlboro Lights with his coffee.



**GROSS ANATOMY**  
"Zoomanities Study"  
2008  
20 x 24 x 28 inches  
Fiberglass/resin,  
polyurethane paint

The Tandang Sora house, which feels like a typical old Sampaloc abode, bears none of the trappings of fame and fortune. Well, not yet. He reveals, though, that he has a studio already under construction.

His hair now shorter, and he's lost a bit of weight compared to the last time we saw each other in UST where he was then teaching at the College of Fine Arts. But the serious demeanor remains and still sometimes talks with the free-associative obliqueness of the incurably right-brained.

After almost eight years, he quit his teaching job in 2001. Would his departure from the world of the academe have anything to do with his stylistic shift? Perhaps.

But one major factor he points to was his 2005 Australian sojourn, as part of his prize for winning the Ateneo Art Awards. For *Human Study*, Ventura was the recipient of the very first Ateneo Art Gallery Sydney Studio Residency Grant. Ramon E.S. Lerma, founder of the Ateneo Art Awards, in a 2006 article titled "Ventura Ventures to Oz" that appeared in one of the Metro publications wrote, "I immensely enjoyed being Ventura's tour guide, deriving great satisfaction from witnessing the artist confront a new culture and visit important art museums and commercial galleries where he saw original works by, among others, Titian, Rembrandt, Rubens and Bacon for



the first time. Judging from the way he scrutinized the techniques of these masters, one could almost imagine Ventura's future ruminations on paper or on canvas inspired by the way these artists played with color, texture, and line, manipulated the effects of light and shadow, and constructed/deconstructed the human anatomy."

The same article ends with Ventura coming face to face with a bubble machine by David Cortez Medalla at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne. "Seeing Ventura, who is only beginning to establish a name internationally, standing in front of this opus by inarguably the most successful and critically renowned Filipino visual artist overseas was, to my mind, truly symbolic—a moment of affirmation auguring unbridled promise."

Ventura has three major shows lined up this year, all of them abroad. The first one, in Indonesia, is inspired by a curious spectacle in Singapore; what he calls "body bags": huge travelling backpacks with the shape of animals, almost life-like in size, replete with dangling limbs and furry textures. But he takes the concept a step further: the body itself as container, of consumer-necessities and our various psychological baggage, traveling through life. For this he is preparing a set of assemblages inspired by those body bags. The second show is in Singapore, a collaboration with artist Francis Ng—a winner of the Philip Morris Art Awards—on a what had been planned as a series of headless mascots. The third and last will be in New York, at an enormous space in the Chelsea branch of the Tyler Rollins Gallery. The theme, he says, remains hazy at this point.

Inside a smaller studio in the garage, he shows me a work in progress: a panel on which two images are drawn: a swarm of insects on what from afar appears to be a beehive but upon closer look is actually a dead animal. To the right is a cut-out outline of a sexy woman. He mentions something about superimposing these on a velvet surface. What it has to do with the body-bag concept is something still not too clear to me.

I ask him his thoughts on "hyperrealism," another label often used in descriptions of his work. "Yes, meron akong mga ganon, pero meron ding mga wala... kung hindi naman kailangan. Pero kaya ko,



#### THE FIREMAN COMETH

"After the Lullaby (Fireman)"  
2008, 36 x 16.5 x 34  
inches, fiberglass/resin,  
polyurethane paint. (At  
right) An entire alternate  
universe of Ventura's  
doodles, sketches, and  
studies fill a vision board.





kung realism lang to its fullest (I do have that, and sometimes I don't. But I can also do realism in its fullest)." No arguments there, of course. "Hyperrealism," according to Jean Baudrillard, "requires a high level of technical prowess and virtuosity to simulate a false reality."

Although he doesn't quite spell it out, the old-school training is a virtue. "Kung gusto mong maging clear yung intentions mo, at least hindi naka-limit yung kayang gawin ng kamay mo sa gusto ng isip mo (If you want your intentions to be very clear, at least your vision won't be limited by your skill.)" Again, if he extols the virtues of classical grounding, it may be credited to his stint as instructor at the Department of Fine Arts of the University of Santos Tomas from 1993 to 2001.

As a student, he was already winning competitions left and right. He has won art contests staged by Shell, Metrobank, Art Association of the Philippines (AAP), among others. In '98, he placed first in the NCCA and PAP Lithograph Competition, in 1999, a juror's choice at the Winsor & Newton Painting Competition, and a finalist at the Taiwan International Biennial

Print & Drawing Competition. But it wasn't until 2000 that Ventura staged his very first solo exhibition, *Innerscapes*, at West Gallery at SM Megamall followed by *All Souls' Day* at the Drawing Room in the same year. Year after year, he was relentless. In 2003, he became one of the recipients of the Cultural Center of the Philippines' highly prestigious 13 Artists Award.

"I get bored easily," he says, in response to the question of how he maintains his amazing sense of industry. "That's why I try to do different things everytime. Marami akong naka-bankong ideas. Parang nilalagay mo lang sa mga folders na babalik-balikan mo pag kelangan (I have a lot of banked ideas in folders to be revisited when needed). And the more you work, the more the ideas come." Which is a rather athletic way of putting it—similar to a basketball pro philosophizing about the more games you play, the better hoopster you become. "Practice" is a term that might not exactly hold the most romantic of resonances, but it's probably the teacher in Ventura talking.

Ventura's visions are taking on increasingly grander proportions. Lying

on the floor of his studio are rolls upon humongous rolls of canvas the size of felled timber. There are no large pre-stretched canvases readily available in the country, he says, and that when the requirement is more than nine feet, you need to order it from abroad. One such canvas, so big it looked like he was building a ship, came all the way from India.

With these one can only imagine the stuff Ventura has in mind. The phrase "think big" seems to be something he is taking to its literal conclusion. "Pag mas malaki yung painting kasi, para kang pumapasok sa loob (When the painting is large, it's almost like you can step into it," he says, fully extending both arms and gesturing as if about to enter the canvas (which, at this point, still bears the Astroboy outline). "Pag malaki, mas marami kang mas intricate na magagawa (When it's bigger, you can do more intricate details)." Vast amounts of energy and discipline will be required to fill such large canvases, but we've already established the artist's almost otherworldly abilities. Incidentally, the artist Ronald Ventura lives on a street called Earth. **E**