



Ikinambal (Pairing up), acrylic on canvas, 96.1" x 80.1", 2008

Ventura's Vision

By Franklin M. Bobadilla

Ronald Ventura's works are art collectors' treasures.



Ronald Ventura

In October 2008, when the global economy plunged into freefall, the prices of the paintings of Filipino artist Ronald Ventura soared to stratospheric sums at dual sales at Sotheby's Hong Kong.

The auction house presented its Modern and Contemporary Asian Art Evening Sale (code HK 0292) on the 4th of October at the new wing of the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre. All 200 hundred seats of the auction room were taken and expectations were high.

Ronald Ventura's "*Pinamumugaran*" (Nesting Ground), listed as lot number one with an estimate of US\$13,000 to US\$23,000, did not disappoint. After some furious bidding, the hammer finally fell, and the painting sold for US\$230,000, excluding the premium.

Two days later, as if proving that Ronald's success was no flash in the pan, another painting of his, "*Ikinambal*" (Pairing-up) changed hands for almost US\$114,000 during Sotheby's Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Paintings (code HK 0275) auction.

According to art analysts, the strong performance of Ronald's paintings can be attributed to the unprecedented interest in Filipino contemporary art works by collectors who are in search of more affordable art. Chinese, Japanese and Indian contemporary works have almost reached their ceiling prices, so much so that many works of accomplished artists from these countries have remained unsold in recent auctions. Prices for art works of young Filipino artists, and for that matter, of Indonesian, Vietnamese and Korean artists are still within reach of most buyers.

Since 2007, Ronald's paintings have consistently performed well in the bi-annual auctions of Sotheby's and its rival auctioneer, Christie's, dedicated to modern and contemporary Southeast Asian works of art.

Ronald Ventura, together with his Filipino contemporaries like Geraldine Javier (1970-), Kiko Escora (1970-), Annie Cabigting (1971-), Yasmin Sison (1972-), Wire Tuazon (1973-) and Nona Garcia (1978-), have their works included in the collections of established and neophyte collectors.

Born in 1973 in Manila, Ronald grew



Pinamumugaran (*Nesting ground*), mixed media on canvas, 60" x 144.1", 2008

up in the fishing town of Malabon. His interest in the arts was kindled at a tender age by the famed art teacher Fernando Sena, who gave numerous workshops for young people in deprived areas of Manila. After graduating from high school, inspired by Sena's guidance and encouragement, Ronald enrolled at the College of Fine Arts and Design of the University of Santo Tomas, majoring in painting. Graduating in 1993, he worked as an art instructor for his alma mater till 2001.

While still a student, Ronald won first place in the Shell National Student Art Competition (1990) and the jurors' choice awards in the Metrobank Art Competition (1992) and Art Association of the Philippines Art Competition (1993). When he turned professional, his most prestigious laureates include the first place in the National Commission for Culture and Arts (1998), jurors' choice award in the Windsor & Newton Painting Competition (1999), as well as being a finalist in the Taiwan International Biennial Print and Drawing Competition (1999).

Ventura was chosen Artist of the Year by Art Manila in 2001 and was one of the thirteen artists honored by the Cultural Center of the Philippines in the 13 Artists Award in 2003.

In 2005, he received the Studio Residency Grant from the Ateneo Art Gallery enabling him to stay and work in Sydney, Australia.

A prolific artist, Ronald Ventura has

held numerous solo and group exhibits in the Philippines and abroad in a career that spans only fifteen years. Among his solo shows are his pioneering "Innerscapes" and "All Soul's Day" (2001), "Visual Defects and Morph" (2002), "Human Study and Morph" (2005), and most recently, "Mapping the Corporeal" (2008) at the Museum of the National University of Singapore.

He participated in several group exhibitions like the Philip Morris Asean Art Exhibit in Hanoi, Vietnam (1999), at the 8th Annual Fil-American Arts Composition, San Francisco, USA (2001) and in the 19th Asian International Art Exhibition in Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan (2004).

During his initial solo exhibitions in 2001, the Philippine art world took immediate notice of Ronald's vision of the human body, especially his predilection for depicting the male nude, a motif not frequently used in Philippine art. Beautifully drawn in classical proportions, his male figure glowed on canvas with its marble-like skin tones set against rich browns, luminous gold and other worldly sepia. These fine figures are often juxtaposed with scenes which afflict the contemporary human condition: environmental decay, warfare, commodification and religious fervor. This inconsistency in imagery could create not only a visual but also psychological impact on the viewer of Ronald's oeuvre.

In his most recent works, Ronald Ventura's application of warm, earthy hues have given way to stark black and white with

only a minimum use of color for highlight. The idealised figure is still present but no longer detached or indifferent; rather, it is now interacting with his surroundings.

Such is the case in point in "Pinamumugaran" (2008). Rendered in acrylic and oil on canvas, the work portrays two figures wearing gas masks. On top of their heads are an assortment of images arbitrarily accentuated with red and yellow against an expansively black and white backdrop.

The sweeping view of the work seems to suggest an aftermath of atmospheric fallout or simply the result of ecological collapse. The protective masks worn by the two central figures could indicate human effort to survive the nesting ground of toxic waste.

It would be interesting to see how Ronald Ventura's protagonists further develop in his forthcoming works: would they succumb to the destructive forces which seem to engulf them or would they reassert their presence and triumph against all odds?

Ronald Ventura's first solo exhibition in the U.S. is ongoing at Tyler Rollins Fine Art gallery in New York from September 17 – October 31, 2009.

Franklin M. Bobadilla is a bibliographer from The Hague who regularly visits the numerous multi-faceted museums of The Netherlands during the weekends.