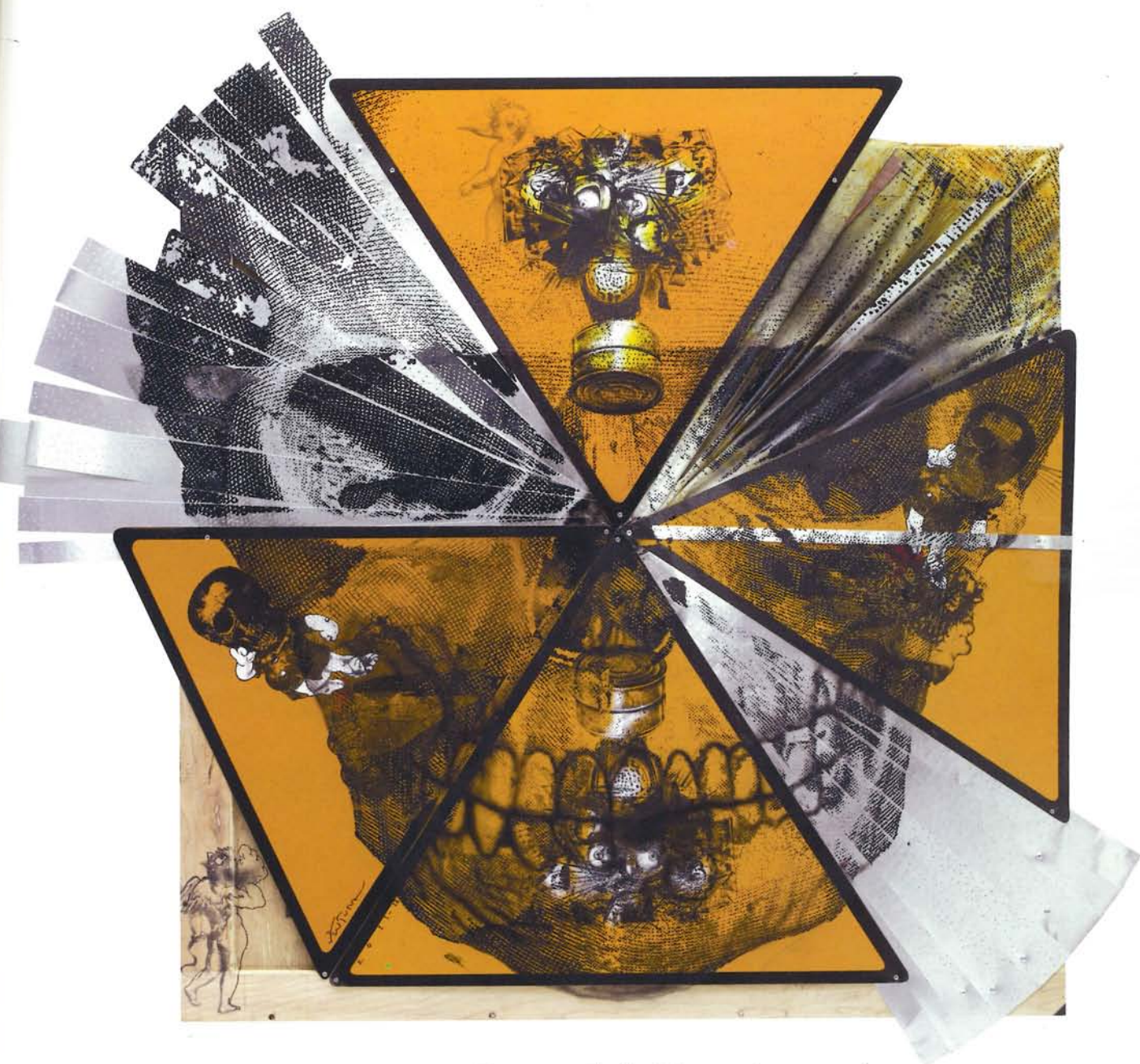


Ronald Ventura Recyclables



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Art and Nature's Revenge

We are constantly reminded of it. In the newspapers, on TV, on the Internet. *The world is collapsing around our ears* sings Michael Stipe in one of REM's songs from the album *Out of Time*. The signs are all there. Global warming. Terrible floods. Strange weather. Some species following the way of the dodo and becoming zoological footnotes. Diminishing resources. The only thing missing would be signs in yellow ochre-and-black telling us that the end of the world is nigh.

Unless. We. Do. Something. About. It.

The show at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI) can be interpreted as repatriating what belongs to Mother Nature. As we know, STPI is concerned with pushing "the technical and aesthetic frontiers of printmaking and papermaking," and I see this institution as something where materials can be reused and recycled into even better, more ecologically-sound materials for making art.

Working at STPI has made me reevaluate my own artistic strategies. The technology, the materials, the pieces of equipment at my disposal made me go into experimental mode. To try new things, to figure out new ways, to do art in a manner that has never crossed my mind, and to end up with something surprisingly fresh and undeniably new in this artistic wonderland at the heart of the Lion City.

On one level, I have consciously created artworks that would resonate with the theme of conservation and how urgent it is to address environmental concerns. On a meatier level, the exhibition deals with ideas and concepts pertaining to the psychological and the philosophical — and to human behavior in general. How we think, how we are, how we be, how we do it all over again.

Thus, the exhibition is billed as "Recyclables." My entire art practice deals also with "recycling": taking images from here and there (classical paintings, Disney and anime characters, pop culture); composing everything in this gray, gray ground (a witch-like brew of all things past and all things to come); and

holistically giving them an entirely new context and definition (you, the viewer, go tell me). Altogether. As one...

For "Recyclables," I have made hypothetical street signs that warn us of impending doom ("Point of Know Return"). See the dwarf with the skull for a head? It is warning you about something.

I have constructed burnt-out trees ("Shadow Forests"). Something related to the phoenix rising out of the ashes. There is hope for us yet.

I have sculpted objects out of discarded materials ("Toxicity") — metals, boxes, paper and assorted scraps. A warning: to make art is to make objects that will make more toxins. Quite alarming. Dig the irony.

I have drawn portraits of a woman ("Wilder-nest") and a man ("Sea for Yourself") superimposed with images that are natural and elemental (they are a part of us as much as we are a part of them). There is that endless confrontation between us and what is outside of us.

I have included my "Broccoli Cloud" sculptures as a way of lightening up the exhibition. They are the most pop of my pieces in "Recyclables," and yet they still have something to say about how the world will go kaput in the end.


And in "Into The Woods," I have turned to my collection of wooden odds and ends (flowers, birds, faces of saints, old doors), cast them (an arduous process), painted them and shaped the compendium into a tree — symbolic of how art can go full circle and return to the source of most art.

And the significance of this piece?

This is our Apocalypse and yet this is also our Eden.

Objects and materials can be recycled, ideas can be rehashed, and everything recurs.

Ronald Ventura



FIAT LUX

Ronald Ventura

By Adele Tan

I must go to Nature disarmed of perspective and stretch myself like a large transparent canvas upon her in the hope that, my submission being perfect, the imprint of a beautiful and useful truth would be taken.

John Updike, *The Centaur*

For an artist whose critical and commercial fame was made by his fidelity to delineating and contorting the wondrous or monstrous multiple forms of the human figure, this figure is in surprising retreat for Filipino artist Ronald Ventura's latest suite of works at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI). A graduate of the Philippines College of Architecture and Fine Arts, University of Santo Tomas in Manila, Ventura's foundation in exquisite draughtsmanship was already laid by the curriculum of the school, which emphasizes the precise study of the human anatomy. But where the critics, collectors and the public have drawn the easy conclusion of Ventura's practice as one of a signature hyperrealist style delivered on depictions of the human body, the artist has maintained his ambivalent distance from a prescribed style or subject matter — he appears to not want stereotypes or definitive features.

Here, the style that so cleaves to Ventura's reputation is momentarily put aside (although vestiges of his impeccable skill with drawing remain discernibly present), in favour of a presentation of something less tangible, like the forces of sentiment and culture, religious or spiritual imagination, and the antinomies of life itself. His surfaces are as busy as ever, replete with the graphically detailed symbols and images that we find throughout his body of work, but the looming presence of the human in his previous works has now been diminished. The tension raised here is instead that of the primordial opposition of Man and Nature, and also the circumspection of what is human nature and its fate, which he had already begun with his *Zoomanities* series; humans fused with animal parts were a sign of either a futurist cyborgian vision or an atavistic look into ancient mythology.

Apropos of his residency at STPI, Ventura alighted on the contradictory elements abound in the materials to be used for art. The papers, inks and chemicals incited an exploration of paradoxical situations; the paper pulp

prompts the suasion towards sustainable ecology and recycling, but the process of lithography remains laden with toxicity. His latest paper trees, pinned to variously sized canvases, were assembled via paper casts and rubbings from his collection of reclaimed traditional Filipino carved wood panels and furniture, which gave his trees a myriad of marvellous textures and shades. The faces and animal shapes were also cast from small wooden sculptures bought from street stalls, which the artist re-carved to his own specifications. But the trees, animals and faces in shades of burnt wood, were achieved from a dextrous application of charcoal and sawdust mixed with gesso. What Ventura puts before us is an ostensibly enchanted forest of trees and its denizens, but with the magic tipping between malevolence and beneficence – the cherubs from Christian lore are mixed with memento mori of the skulls. The desirable and the deadly seem to conspire all the time to enact an impossible moral position. It is no wonder then that Ventura's most recent figures are therefore bound up and overwhelmed by abundant flora and fauna in a kind of exalted fantasy but also potentially apocalyptic. If Man has played the antagonist in the narrative of ecological exploitation, he is, here, also part victim. Nature has been Man's greatest resource and inspiration, but in Ventura's vision this is a relationship that has been tested to its limits.

Ventura also considers the world from the other end of the (chromatic) spectrum, the contemporary vantage point, where the artist's iconography is equally catholic. The beautiful relief work of his trees give way to flat printed surfaces of the aluminium or Perspex plates in loud colours. Here pop culture is given full reign – you will find the recognisable icons of Mickey Mouse, Snow White's dwarf and the big bad wolf from Little Red Riding Hood – and all functioning as harbingers of doom and decay, but still maintaining their impeccable and disarming jauntiness. The jumble of icons, culled from the pop cultures of the West and East and Ventura's own mental catalogue of influences, settle on the shaped plates with the usual signifiers of destruction such as explosions and gas-masks. They present themselves as road traffic signs for the future, directing us to the Disneyland of death, but also one where nobody actually dies. The seriousness of death has been diluted by the proliferation of its representation where the impending tragedy can be swiftly made comic or, worse, anodyne. This, then, is the genius of Ventura's whimsical and outsized paper cast with flocking broccoli sculptures, the vegetable given a fuzzy surface



of purplish-green flocking, making it appear innocuous and child-friendly cute. But, of course, it is also alluding to the mushroom clouds when bombs detonate. It is as crazy as calling a nuclear or volcanic explosion beautiful, but one cannot deny that such is the strange appeal of a paradoxical stimuli.

Ventura is not content to merely draw and paint. He creates here the collision of the three-dimensional world into the two-dimensionality of canvas or aluminium plates, fashioning new artefacts that announce their own objecthood. His canvases of floating paper relief and brash lithographed plates are transformed into lamps, or as Ventura prefers, lanterns. They are lit from behind such that each becomes mystifyingly radiant in a darkened gallery. Radiant or irradiated art? Ventura lights a path to the reassessment of our vexing times, but like the rest of us, finds that the fog has not been dispelled from the forest of distractions and disquiet. We may be no longer ignorant of our condition but it does not follow that we have found salvation.

Adele Tan received her PhD in Art History from the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London and is currently Curator at the National Art Gallery Singapore. Her research focuses on contemporary art in China and Southeast Asia, with a special interest in performative practices and new media.



Ronald Ventura: **At Hand, By Hand**

By Clarissa Chikiamco

In *Recyclables*, Ronald Ventura's use of paper and paper-making prompts his reflection on nature and the environment. With the intense focus on materials during his residency at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute, he sought deeper connections with paper through the subject matter of his works, thinking of recycling and the current status of the natural world. Deciding to use these thoughts to fashion his imagery, he notes in his artist statement for the show, 'The signs are all there. Global warming. Terrible floods. Strange weather. Some species following the way of the dodo and into becoming zoological footnotes. Diminishing resources. The only thing missing would be signs in yellow ochre-and-black telling us that the end of the world is nigh.'

Thus, Ronald Ventura makes these signs.

Signs

His series of lightbox lithographs on aluminum, *Point of Know Return*, in this exhibition has its beginnings in his 2006 show in Manila, *Cross Encounters*¹. The colour yellow and the concern for signs featured prominently in his work then, a result of his Sydney artist residency as he encountered the common yellow-and-black Aussie signage. While his works for that show were more concerned with cultural crossroads, *Point of Know Return* signals alarm in the face of possible environmental disasters, through Ventura's signature of mixing images—such as a skull, cartoon, eye, animal, dense clouds and unidentifiable parts. The warning hints particularly at man-made destruction. The artist, through his man-made art, cautions of a space contaminated, the prospect of a mutating bioscape. It considers the rampant alerts of dangers the future will encounter in our changing environment, sounded protractedly by scientists to the public and those in positions of power. In numerous dismissal, denial and apathy, the artist points to directions of irreversible mutilation and change, feasible despite the present's ability to foresee and forewarn.

He brings this further through *Broccoli Cloud*, an installation of 'broccoli flowers' of different sizes and shapes. Made of paper, the material should hint of the subject's natural and healthy connotations. Yet, Ventura sees their form as somehow unseemly, evocative of the mushroom clouds associated with immense explosions and eruptions. In the context of the title and the exhibition, the work suggests the usual fears of nuclear destruction—purposeful as in the case of atomic bombs, accidental as in the case of energy plants. The several pieces and their relatively small proportion in the installation, however, seem to indicate something more covert. Perhaps more appropriate are the hidden and unknown menaces in genetically engineered crops ingested; or pesticides and pollutants which lurk in dishes and the air, their long-term effects unknown. Peril need not come in immediate and massive incidents, it can gather and unfold in clandestine increments over a period of time.

Toxicity 1 and *Toxicity 2* also insinuate an impending deleterious existence. He repurposes the initial faulty plates from *Point of Know Return* and other discarded material from STPI to compose large imageries of skulls. In the first, the various pieces come together like appendages to craft the skull's depiction, overlapping with his warning signs. The second offers a darker impression, a rotting, grinning corpse with the skull peeking through. Ventura's point, though, must not be death but uncertainty in how life may be modified, that natural life may morph into a world of zombies—modified human beings who subsist and live in conditions that coerce or demand this adaptation. It is not death itself he thinks of but death in life as it is currently known.

Initially bringing assorted carved reliefs from the Philippines that are used as decorative parts of furniture, Ventura casted them, making impressions on paper. He remarks that trees are fallen to create furniture and decoration, so he feels it is only apt to re-use these pieces and reincarnate them into a new art form, deeming the use of paper, an ecological material, as most appropriate. This he has done with *Into the Woods*, in a series of 3, in which he combined their spray-painted paper impressions to form large composites of trees. The cutout impressions are layered on top of each other and, though made of various ornamental designs, they coalesce into distinct images. Animal shapes and ethereal faces are woven into the pictures, recalling the otherworldly life forces often associated with trees



and forests. Lit up from behind and with their somber shades of browns, grays and black, the works attempt to hark back to the mysticism and strange power of nature. In image and in title, there is a narrative feel to the pieces, a reminder of the environment as character and storyteller.

Ventura extends this in *Shadow Forest*, a series of small paper tree sculptures, which have been mounted on canvas and lit from behind. He crafts each tree together with cast figures of faces, skulls, animals and even more trees, melding them together in different combinations into seamless appearances. As with *Into the Woods*, he attempts to invoke the aura of inner force or spirituality associated with nature, a kind of animism present in the natural world. Their multiple permutations suggest there is no overarching being, as in Mother Nature, but instead many divinities entrenched in elemental life forms, wherever they may be reached. Intimating the possibilities of innate energies, the *Shadow Forest* series offers a foreboding cue against today's cushioned and detached cityscape.

The lithographs *Sea for Yourself* and *Wilder-nest* are the works that bring a more apparent human element to the show. Male and female, their images were based on models in fashion magazines. Ventura blows them up then connects them to nature superficially – a correlation to contemporary times' divorce from nature. In *Sea for Yourself*, behind and through the man's form, an illustration of the churning ocean set dramatically against the sky can be seen. He sits though in repose, on a chair and clad in shorts, polo top and sandals. It seems the figure, probably constantly disjointed from the primacy of outdoors, would only set upon such a scene on a holiday, in a conscious decision to retreat to such an idyllic vista. The artist then makes a reversal in the man's silhouette, inverting the scene so the sea goes on top and the skies beneath. Perhaps it indicates a primeval search for a more soulful existence, one more bonded to open-air frontiers and more raw and physical than a dandified life.

Wilder-nest also indicates something similar, featuring a close-up of a female model's face. Ventura chose to draw and print the image of a pretty woman with tousled hair and closed eyes, in an expression of inner absorption. Her beautiful visage is, however, overlaid with an innate floral design, likened by the artist to

a tattoo effect. It reminds that nature is a common inspiration for the decorative and may be the steadiest stream by which *city-zens* interact with it, through their products and derivative motifs. Certainly, Ventura relates to this, coming as he does from Metro Manila's world of concrete. Yet, the work is conceivably a longing for something more in touch with native surroundings – a place to roost, a nest, a haven, a refuge.

Having worked with paper and prints for an extensive period in his practice, the exhibition *Recyclables* is initially an effort by Ventura to feel closer to paper materials, an opportunity to reflect on its preliminary environment, its processes, and its capability as art form. It shows a newfound desire and concern for intimacy with nature and, at the same time, considers his history of engaging with paper through the techniques of drawing and printmaking.

History

Ronald Ventura's interest in drawing and printmaking has been long-term, developed from his lifelong pursuit in examining art's materials and methods, a habit he's had since childhood, seizing at whatever available opportunity there was to learn about art making². While Ventura has been more known for painting, that other media is perceived of lower significance has caused him to precisely gravitate and push his engagement with those forms. Attempting to challenge the perception as well as himself, he has often highlighted how much more demanding they can be. This is evident in his thrust towards drawing as he defied the idea that the media is just preliminary structure, always to be used in small scale. The resistance is best felt in his graceful *Human Study* (2005), an imposing 8 x 12-foot virtuosity of his technique, draftsmanship and ability to compose and think of images.

Ventura's interest in drawing cannot be completely separated from his involvement with the print medium. He attributes his attraction to printmaking as being like a 'drawing and painting pressed.'³ He was a part of two small artist groups, the Philippine Drawing Society and Tres Acidos, named after the



nitric acid used in lithography. Composed actually of the same members, the groups sought to call attention to drawing and printmaking as art forms. In printmaking, Ventura developed a partiality to lithographs, particularly because they highlight the fall of the hand in drawing – capturing their impressions and making them more apparent: His skill and attraction to lithography led him to win first place in that category of the Printmakers' Association of the Philippines (PAP) in 1998, where he had initially taken workshops. Together with others, he also gave a workshop on lithography during the *9th International Print and Drawing Biennial* in Taipei and was part of Tres Acidos' debut exhibition, *Mad About Lithography*, in 2000.

Ventura has stated that he believes that a print is a basic technique of drawing, a critical motivating factor in his work. He notes, however, that he thinks of printmaking as even more expansive than drawing alone. While drawing on paper is limited by the colour used, printmaking allows the initial drawing to be printed in several colours. The gradation can also be tweaked and experimented. Says Ventura, 'I'm not interested in a print as producing many copies but as the result of the effect when the drawing is printed.'⁴

In his STPI residency, he was forced to further consider the idea of printmaking, particularly its materials. Given a knowledgeable team and the facilities for making paper, Ventura's ideas for the residency emerged from these thoughts. While it shows his interest in the medium, the subject matter is relatively different from what he has previously made; even though it is somewhat connected to his pursuit of 'Zoomanities'⁵ and his attention to values, it is new in his concentration on the natural environment.

By Hand

Considering Ventura's history, what *Recyclables* makes quite apparent in the larger picture of his work is his preference for things made by hand. While he certainly uses assistants for his production, Ventura feels most adept at techniques and material that the hand can use tangibly. Though ideas of the digital may seem within his oeuvre and he certainly borrows the digital method in layering disparate images, directly computer-completed works have been something he has mostly resisted. It seems perhaps a step too remote for him, at least at the present time. However slick or technically proficient his works appear, the hand remains of utmost importance, and the exhibition *Recyclables* highlights this. Ventura calls for a deeper and tangible consciousness of where materials come from and how they are used, in reviewing his own engagement and awareness of paper.

A curator from Manila, Philippines, Clarissa Chikiamco attained her Master of Art Curatorship at the University of Melbourne under the Australian Endeavour Awards. She has curated several contemporary art shows and recently curated "Modes of Impact: The Inaugural Collection of Video Art" for the Ateneo Art Gallery, the Philippines' modern art museum. She is currently based in Singapore.

¹ This show was held at the Ateneo Art Gallery and was a response to his residency at the Cross Art Projects in Sydney, Australia, as part of the inaugural residency program of the 2005 Ateneo Art Awards.

² These were based on personal interviews conducted in 2010 with the artist for his biography.

³ Personal interview with the artist, March 2012.

⁴ Personal interview with the artist, March 2012.

⁵ Ventura's 'Zoomanities' series was first shown in his solo exhibition of the same title in 2008. It featured animals merged with human figures, showing his strong interest in a posthuman environment.

⁶ The exception is in two videos that accompanied his Humanime show in Taiwan in 2011. The videos, however, were relatively simple, involving changing and intersecting colours, compared to the more dense imagery he is able to make in his drawings, paintings and sculptures.