

E.R. (ENDLESS RESURRECTION)



RONALD VENTURA

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FOREWORD

TYLER ROLLINS

E.R. (Endless Resurrection), an exhibition of new works by Ronald Ventura, takes its inspiration from the intense, often quite bloody rites that are still performed during Lent in certain parts of the Philippines, such as San Pedro Cutud in Pampanga province. There, penitents gather during Holy Week for public events, not officially sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church, in which Christ's passion and crucifixion are re-enacted, with penitents flagellating themselves using bamboo sticks tied to a rope, or spending hours nailed to wooden crosses. Ventura has long been fascinated with how tradition and faith shape identity in his native Philippines, and the ways in which the powerful influences of contemporary global pop culture continue the process of cultural syncretism that has been going on in the country since the beginning of Spanish colonialism in the 16th century. For the exhibition, he has created a series of oil paintings incorporating images of flagellants accompanied by a swirling host of figures inspired by European Old Master paintings (particularly Hieronymus Bosch and Caravaggio), alongside motifs and texts taken from vintage carnival posters, advertisements, and comic books. It is a meditation on Filipino history through visual and performative culture: the history of faith and its expressions in ritual, art, and in the human body itself, tracing the evolution of iconic motifs in popular visual culture, from the demons of the Middle Ages to the comic book characters of today. A life sized sculpture of a penitent carrying a cloud-like cross stands guard over the exhibition, which also features a video taken by the artist during the Lenten rites, as well as an extraordinary series of images of penitents standing in front of a large image of Caravaggio's *Flagellation of Christ* that the artist set up along the processional route. The mood is set by the rhythmic sound of penitents whipping themselves, echoing through the gallery.

Born in 1973 in Manila, the Philippines, where he continues to live and work, Ventura ranks as one of the most acclaimed artists of his generation in Southeast Asia. With their unique combinations of figurative motifs, his paintings and sculptures are now among the most recognizable images of contemporary art in Southeast Asia. His work features a complex layering of images and styles, ranging from hyperrealism to cartoons and graffiti. Ventura takes the layering process in his work as a metaphor for the multifaceted national identity of the Philippines. Over the centuries, the profound influences of various occupying powers – Spain, Japan, and the United States – along with the underlying indigenous culture, have produced a complex and at times uneasy sense of identity. Ventura explores this historical and psychic phenomenon through a dialogue of images evoking East and West, high and low, old and young – seen, for example, in allusions to Old Master paintings or Japanese and American cartoons. He draws our attention to the “second skin” of cultural signifiers that each person carries with him, however unwittingly. Ventura views skin as an expressive surface – written on with tattoos, concealed under layers of imagery, or exploding outwards to reveal an inner world of fantasy and conflict.

Ventura presented his first US solo exhibition, *Metaphysics of Skin*, at Tyler Rollins Fine Art in 2009, followed by *A Thousand Islands* in 2011. Other solo exhibitions of note include: *Bulul, Ronald Ventura and the Traditional Art of the Philippines*, Museo delle Culture, Lugano, Switzerland (2014); *Watching the Watchmen*, Vargas Museum, Manila, the Philippines (2012); *Recyclables*, Singapore Tyler Print Institute, Singapore (2012); and *Mapping the Corporeal*, National University of Singapore Museum (2008). He has also participated in such group exhibitions as *Surreal Versus Surrealism in Contemporary Art*, Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Valencia, Spain (2011); the Nanjing Biennial (2010); and the Prague Biennale (2009).

RONALD VENTURA'S ENDLESS RESURRECTION CROSSED ENCOUNTERS OF THE RECURRING KIND

IGAN D'BAYAN

And you stare at me in your Jesus Christ pose
— SOUNDGARDEN

The genesis of this exhibition, titled *Endless Resurrection*, goes beyond Ronald Ventura's studio in a subdivision named after a saint who lived a monastic life of prayer and penance. (Wait... that would be getting ahead of our story.)

It takes place up the hills of Cutud in San Fernando, Pampanga, in the direst of afternoon heat-spells of a Good Friday. (The same ritual is also happening in Bulacan, Cavite Angeles City, and in other parts of the country.) The artist stands transfixed as he watches the procession of whipped flesh and cross-carrying, a showcase of self-flagellation for the hooded or masked penitents. Some will even undergo crucifixion atop a makeshift Calvary surrounded by a platoon of centurions and hangers-on — it's a yearly pageant of atonement for one's sins. It also serves as their *panata*, or vow, as a way to give thanks for an answered prayer. Ventura takes out his film and video cameras and records the ongoing reenactment of the Passion of the Christ, stores the composition in a sketchbook in his head.

The artist's home country, the Philippines, may not be as progressive as the countries in the West, but it's a developing one, what with clusters of malls, condominiums and various infrastructures popping up everywhere. Billboards with the pearly-white close-up smiles of celebrities with perfect, Photoshopped skin greet motorists left and right of the major thoroughfare, Epifanio De Los Santos Avenue, or EDSA (the epiphany of the saints... oh, the irony). Exclusive chichi clubs promise a night of throbbing grooves and free-flowing body shots.

Filipinos — well, most of us, anyway — are living in the 21st century, and yet this ancient Holy Week tradition returns year after year. A practice that has its roots in Europe in the 4th century, and brought by the Spaniards along with the entire package of Christian beliefs and teachings when they conquered this tiny archipelago in the 16th century, and morphed over time into what it is today.

Whatever that is.

The *Via Crucis* (Way of the Cross) during the Lenten Season has become a pop-cultural spectacle, something to rein the tourists in (the way Boracay and the Rice Terraces do).

As advertised:

Reminders for first-timers or tourist: If you want to catch the Lenten rites in Brgy. San Pedro Cutud, come early, expect huge crowds and heat. Be extra vigilant for your safety, anticipate the heat by dressing accordingly (wear caps, shades, cotton shirt), bring a bottle of water for hydration purposes, and make sure you have a strong stomach since blood will be gushing everywhere. You can also contact City of San Fernando Tourism Office for more information (045) 961-5684 loc. 211.

Don't they say the same about Glastonbury?

The rite of *Penitensiya* has become a tourist attraction as well as a source of images for the galleries of *The Times* or the *Telegraph* and Facebook posts for the folks back home. Penitents walk in Incredible Hulk masks or Hotrod Harley Davidson bandanas (like castoffs from *Counting Cars*), scarring themselves with bamboo shingles tied at the end of a rope, or sharp sticks with leather handles. The centurions are in DIY helmets and armed with hammers bought from the local ACE hardware. Devotees, gawkers and blood on the streets trail them. Whatever their sins are, the penitents believe the whipping, the sacrifice and the shed blood atone for all of them. Having oneself nailed to a cross ups the ante, levels it all up, the rainbow shot into the golden hoop of the highest court in heaven. Or something like it. The Catholic Church does not sanction it, decries the goriness and the self-harm.

Ronald Ventura appropriates the imagery of the flagellation and crucifixion to create a suite of paintings, a life-size sculpture of a man carrying a “cloud cross,” a video (documenting the entire proceedings of the Lenten ritual), and flashing photo-stills (random images, straight photography) inside the gallery dark room for his most recent show at Tyler Rollins.

“The idea of resurrection, this endless return and recurring... I want that to be a metaphor for my art practice,” Ventura explains. “Why do I keep coming back to painting and making art? Paintings, in a way, are also resurrected.”

And the images of penitents flogging themselves or being crucified with the hope of renewal, of a resurrection of sorts, of symbolic rebirth have returned to the canvas (as well the viewfinder) of one Ronald Ventura. Paintings that are punctuated by monsters from European art masterpieces, images from vintage carnival posters, advertising slogans and comic-book texts.

This is not just an arbitrary strategy on the part of the artist. Every image, object or written phrase communicates how mad, strange, unique the mindset of the Filipino flagellant is. Is he truly a devotee or just a cog in the mad parade?

It is an attempt to present chunks of histories of art, faith, and pop culture. This gore-fest resurrected each year in the Philippines and reevaluated by the artist in his mad, methodical, and visually eloquent take on the bizarre backyard he calls home.

Ventura says, “This exhibition is about how faith, tradition and the Catholic Way have affected not just how Filipinos live, but more crucially how we think as well.”

But he does not entirely condemn the Pinoy tradition. He sees it as a way for Filipinos to give themselves hope in the endless seasons of suffering and withering poverty: the belief in overcoming, coming back, and the ultimate triumph over death.

One painting, *Visiting Artist's Demons*, shows a penitent being bedeviled by Hieronymus Bosch's monsters, these feisty boogers (rendered in even greater detail by Ventura) whipping away at the poor man. (The same Bosch imagery, the artist points out, was used in a campaign against graft and corruption in the Philippines.) Ventura's purpose was to en flesh whatever torment the subject is enduring — physical pain, the mental torture, the suffering spirit. There is another crucial point.

“Artists have this power of creating imagery,” he states. Old religious iconography — responsible for our way, even today, of visualizing angels and demons, good and evil, Christ and all the central characters — had been created by artists. “Artists have a role in presenting and *re-presenting* images. That is power.”

Another is graceful in its chaos: Caravaggio's *Flagellation of Christ* is intercepted by circus freaks (lithe acrobats with animal heads), pirouetting across the canvas and promising the “Greatest Show on Earth” or something like it. Ventura wanted the artwork (*Carne Carnivale*) to embody that advertising feel, to reflect how the Lenten ritual has become a tourist attraction. *Bring the popcorn, see the show, get ready for blood.* The composition of the piece is outstanding: figures are poised and balanced yet creating tension as carnival poster figures and a European master's take on a leading Biblical character cross paths in Ventura's headspace.

“What was supposed to be a solemn ritual has become a feast. A feast of flesh, so to speak. It's a party, a happy event, a platform for talented Pinoy. Christ showed his power in conquering death. Men, too, would want to do a showcase of sorts.”

Cross Turismo is splattered with the word “Arroouuch...” The penitent is supposed to utter the Filipino word for pain (*Aray*), but gets conscious of the tourists in the audience and thus did a quick and helpful translation (“Ouch”). Even the centurions get conscious as eyes and camera lenses are directed toward them. Little centurions with rooster heads have clambered up the helmets, waiting for the Easter celebration (with one waiting for the traditional Easter Sunday “jump”).

Armor shows everyday people with centurion uniforms drawn over, “graffitied” and super-imposed upon them. The red rope stands

for blood. The artist thinks that since the viewer is expecting blood ("since blood is a given"), he opted to go symbolic.

Cross Roads to Nowhere shows a penitent walking towards, well, wherever. "He has no idea where he is going. Either he is high on religion or high on alcohol and/or drugs." Blind faith in action, the figure is festooned with various images: handcuffs, bottles, guns, various texts, an animal with an eye of a lamb and a mouth of a dog. Lambs are meek, sacrificial. Stray dogs are vicious. "Some penitents who sacrifice themselves meekly during Lent can act viciously in real life. It's an act."

Turn Around A and *Turn Around B* depict the ritual as an ongoing process. Brace yourself for an eternal return as animals nest on the head of one while airplane falls on the head of another. They all amplify the idea of cycles.

Reflection Repetition reiterates the theme. Ventura used an oval-shaped canvas to make it look like a mirror. "A mirror reflects, 'repeats' an image. A painting also reflects, 'repeats' an image. An image that would be painted over and over again. It goes on and on."

These paintings show how penitents have become cartoon-like in their exaggeration and corruption of a never-ending ritual. Cartoon dogs and monkeys, thought bubbles, comic sound effects disrupt the parade of hyper-realistic penitents herded by centurions with their stage-play helmets and local hardware store hammers. The bloodiest of traditions juxtaposed with a bit of slapstick and lowbrow TV humor. It's almost like life invaded by dark comic forces.

Such is the world presented by Ronald Ventura.

The Real, the Imagined and Immediate bleeding into the Outer Limits of the Twilight Zone as documented by Loony Tunes and Funny Comics to show how Tradition is our own cross to bear.

To be rinsed and repeated.

Rinse. Repeat. So it goes.

IGAN D'BAYAN

Manila, August 2014

Igan D'Bayan is a writer and visual artist based in Manila.



VIEW OF THE EXHIBITION AT TYLER ROLLINS FINE ART



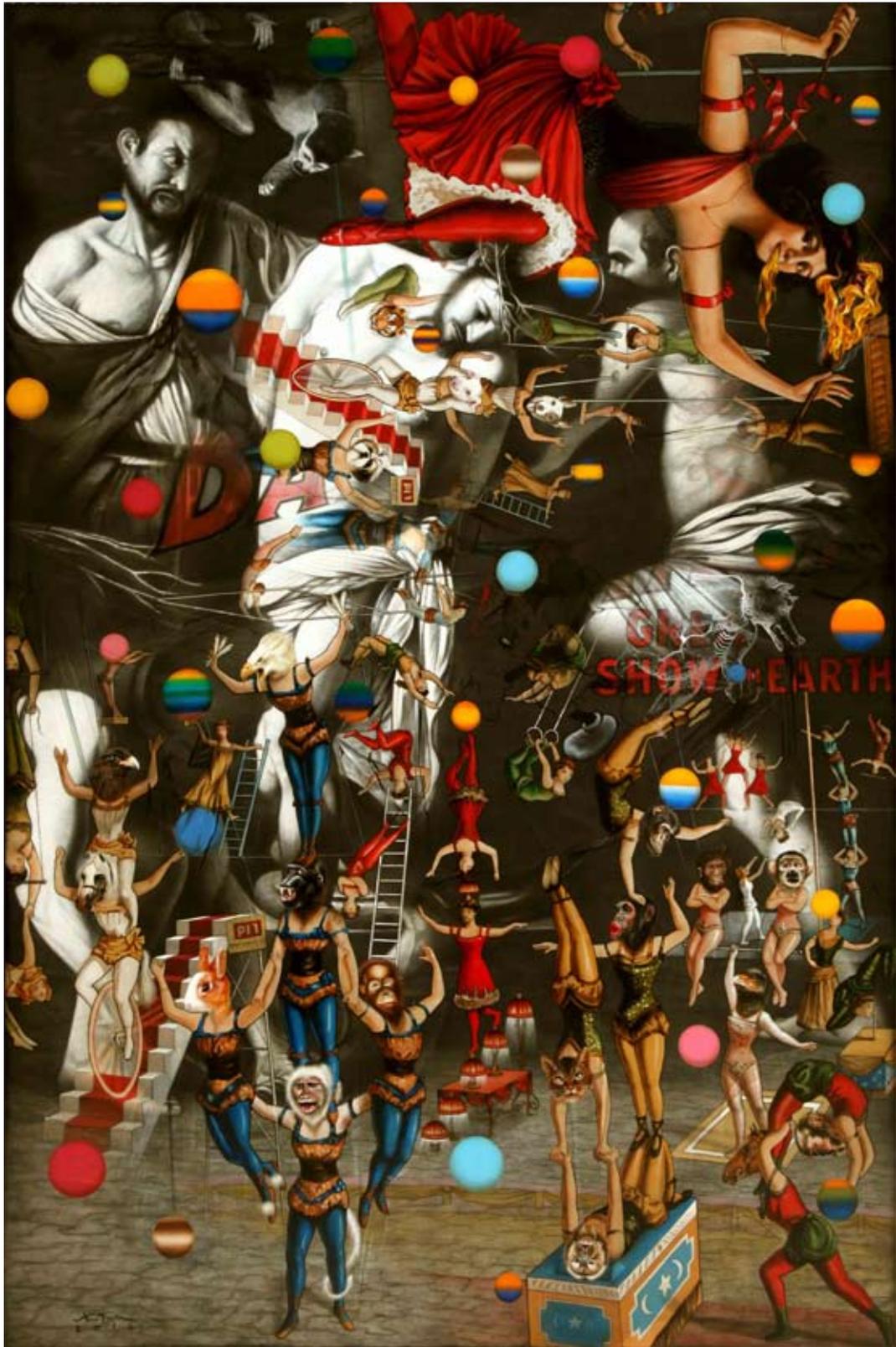
VIEW OF THE EXHIBITION AT TYLER ROLLINS FINE ART



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CARNE CARNIVALE

2014

oil on canvas

72 x 48 inches (183 x 122 cm)



CROSS TURISMO

2014

graphite and oil on canvas

48 x 72 inches (122 x 183 cm)

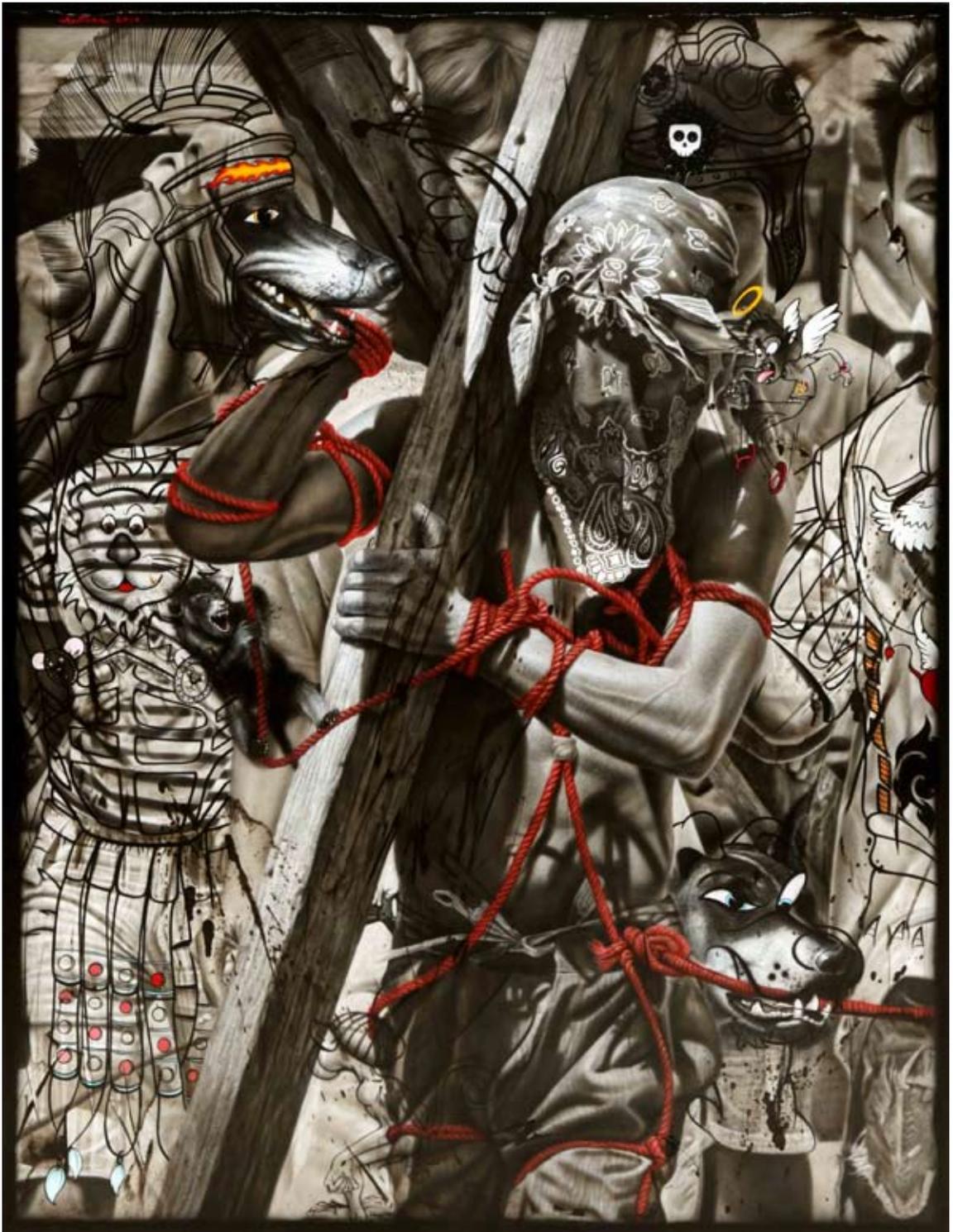


VISITING ARTIST'S DEMONS

2014

graphite and oil on canvas

72 x 48 inches (183 x 122 cm)



ARMOR

2014

graphite and oil on canvas

48 x 36 inches (122 x 91.5 cm)



CROSS ROADS TO NOWHERE

2014

graphite and oil on canvas

36 x 48 inches (91.5 x 122 cm)



TURN AROUND A

2014

graphite and oil on canvas

36 x 24 inches (91.5 x 61 cm)



TURN AROUND B

2014

graphite and oil on canvas

36 x 24 inches (91.5 x 61 cm)



REFLECTION REPETITION
2014
graphite and oil on canvas
26 x 16 inches (66 x 41.25 cm)



DARK CLOUD

2014

fiberglass and resin

88 x 145 x 22 inches (223.5 x 368.25 x 56 cm)



E.R. (ENDLESS RESURRECTION)

2014

video

4:48 minutes



E.R. (ENDLESS RESURRECTION)
2014
slide projection (8 images)



RONALD VENTURA

SELECTED BIOGRAPHY

Born 1973 in Manila, Philippines. Lives and works in Manila.

EDUCATION

1993 B.F.A. in Painting, University of Sto. Tomas, Manila.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *E.R. (Endless Resurrection)*, Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, NY.
Bulul. Ronald Ventura and the traditional art of the Philippines, Museo delle Culture, Lugano, Switzerland.
- 2013 *Voids and Cages*, Galerie Perrotin, Hong Kong.
- 2012 *Watching the Watchmen*, Vargas Museum, Quezon City, Philippines.
Recyclables, Singapore Tyler Print Institute, Singapore.
Fiesta Carnival, Primo Marella Gallery, Milan, Italy.
- 2011 *A Thousand Islands*, Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, NY.
Humanime (I), Fine Art Centre, Eslite Building, Taipei, Taiwan.
- 2010 *Converging Nature*, The Drawing Room, Makati City, Philippines.
Ronald Ventura: Fragmented Channels, Primo Marella Gallery, Milan, Italy.
- 2009 *Metaphysics of Skin*, Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, NY.
Major Highways, Expressways and Principal Arterials, Akili Museum of Art, Jakarta, Indonesia.
- 2008 *Mapping The Corporeal*, Museum of the National University of Singapore.
Zoomanities, The Art Center Megamall, Mandaluyong City, Philippines.
- 2007 *Illusions & Boundaries*, The Drawing Room, Makati City, Philippines.
Under The Rainbow, West Gallery Megamall, Mandaluyong City, Philippines.
Antipode: The Human Side, Artist Residency, Artesan, Singapore.
- 2006 *Cross Encounters*, Ateneo Art Gallery, Quezon City, Philippines.
Dialogue Box, West Gallery Megamall, Mandaluyong City, Philippines.
- 2005 *Human Study*, The Cross Art Projects, Sydney, Australia.
Morph, West Gallery Megamall, Mandaluyong City, Philippines.
Recent Works, Big & Small Art Co. Art Fair, Singapore.
Human Study, The Art Center Megamall, Mandaluyong City, Philippines.
- 2004 *Dead-End Images*, The Art Center Megamall, Mandaluyong City, Philippines.
Black Caricature, Big & Small Art Co., Megamall, Mandaluyong City, Philippines.
Contrived Desires, West Gallery Megamall, Mandaluyong City, Philippines.
- 2003 *X-Squared*, West Gallery and Big & Small Art Co., Philippines.
- 2002 *Visual Defects*, West Gallery Megamall, Mandaluyong City, Philippines.
Body, The Drawing Room, Makati City, Philippines.
- 2001 *The Other Side*, The Drawing Room, Makati City, Philippines.
Doors, The Art Center Megamall, Mandaluyong City, Philippines.
- 2000 *Innerscapes*, West Gallery Megamall, Mandaluyong City, Philippines.
All Souls Day, The Drawing Room, Makati City, Philippines.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *Surreal Versus Surrealism in Contemporary Art*, Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Valencia, Spain.
- 2010 Nanjing Biennale, Nanjing, China.
A Duad in Play: Francis Ng and Ronald Ventura, ICA Gallery, Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore.
- 2009 Prague Biennale, Prague, Czech Republic.

- 2005 *Cross Encounters: The 2005 Ateneo Art Awards Exhibition*, Power Plant Mall.
Rockwell Center, Makati City, Philippines.
- 2004 *Korea Asian Art Festival*, Inza Plaza, Seoul Korea.
19th Asian International Art Exhibition, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan.
- 2003 *13 Artists Awards Exhibition*, Main Gallery, Bulwagang Juan Luna, Cultural Center of the Philippines, Pasay City, Philippines.
- 2002 *Philip Morris Asean Art Awards*, Nusa Dua, Bali, Indonesia.
Soft: Tresacidos, Art Center, SM Cebu, Philippines.
- 2001 *The 8th Annual Filipino-American Arts Exposition*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, California.
Tesacidos: Small Works, The Enterprise Center, Makati City.
Balik Guhit, Cultural Center of the Philippines, Pasay City, Philippines.
- 2000 *Guhit I, II & III*, Ayala Museum Gallery III; UST, Museum Espana; Jorge B. Vargas Museum, University of Philippines.
Mad About Lithographs, Ayala Museum, Makati City, Philippines.
- 1999 *Philip Morris Asean Art Exhibit*, Hanoi, Vietnam.
9th International Biennial Print and Drawing Exhibit, Taipei, Taiwan.
- 1998 *1st Lithograph Competition Exhibition*, Drawing Room, Makati City, Philippines.

AWARDS

- 2008 9th OITA Asian Sculpture Exhibition Open Competition, Award of Excellence, Japan.
- 2007 Guest Residence Artists, Artesan Gallery + Studio, Singapore.
- 2005 Ateneo Art Awards, Ateneo Art Gallery, Studio Residency Grant, Sydney Australia.
- 2003 13 Artist Award, Cultural Center of the Philippines.
Philip Morris Philippine Art Awards, Jurors' Choice Award.
- 2001 Art Manila, Artist of the Year.
- 2000 Philip Morris Philippine Art Awards, Finalist.
Metrobank Art Competition, Honorable Mention.
Taiwan International Biennale Print and Drawing Competition, Finalist.
- 1999 Winsor & Newton Painting Competition, Jurors' Choice Award.
Taiwan international Biennale Print and Drawing Competition, Finalist.
- 1998 Diwa Ng Sining Drawing Category, Second Place.
Philip Morris Philippine Art Awards, Jurors' Choice Award.
National Commission For Culture & Arts and Pap Lithograph Competition, First Place.
- 1993 Art Association of the Philippines Art Competition, Jurors' Choice Award.
- 1992 Metrobank Art Competition, Jurors' Choice Award.
- 1990 Shell National Students Art Competition, First Place.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

1993-2001 Art Instructor at the Department of Fine Arts, University of Sto. Tomas, Manila, Philippines.

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E.R. (ENDLESS RESURRECTION)

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