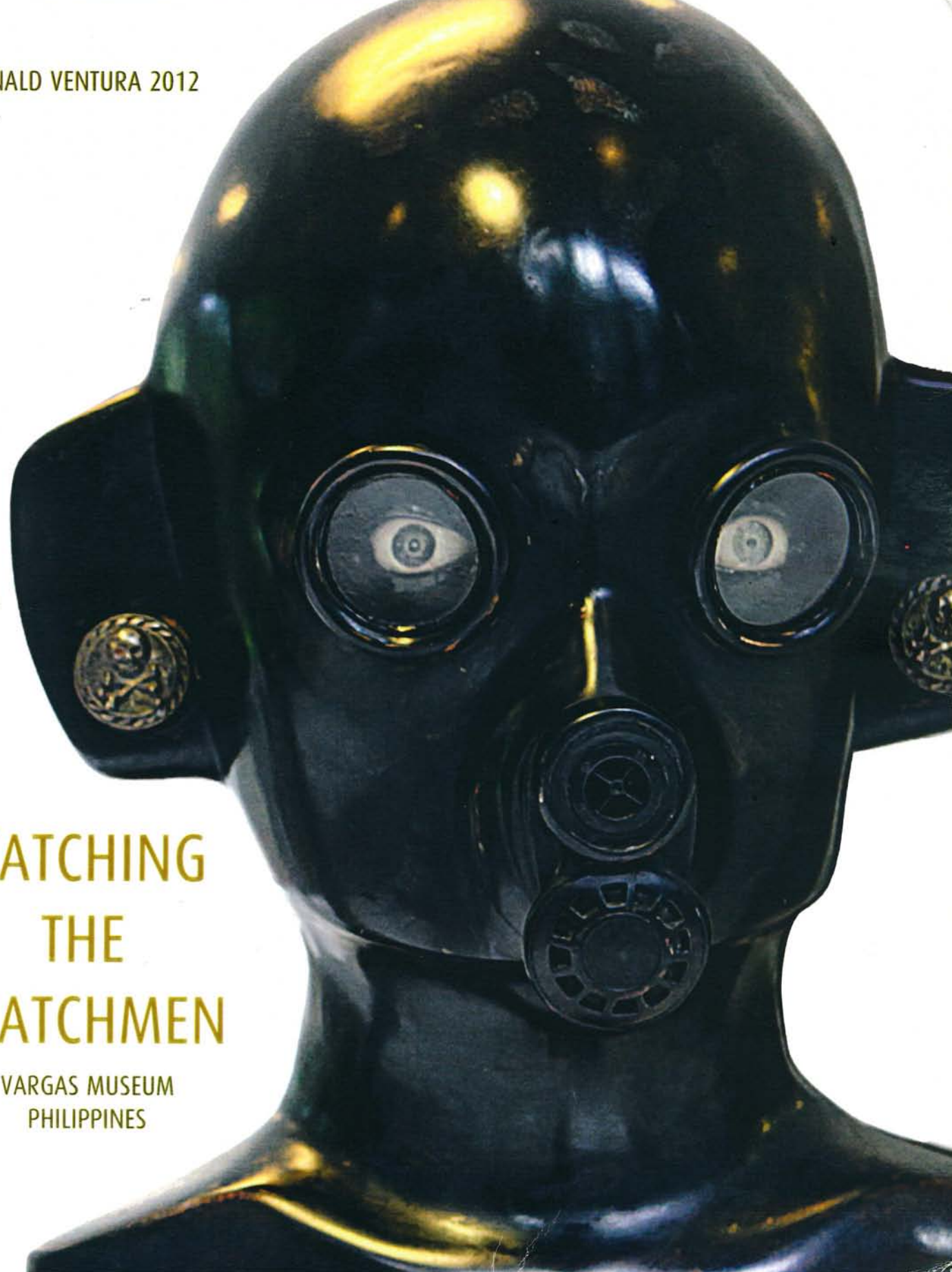


RONALD VENTURA 2012



WATCHING
THE
WATCHMEN

VARGAS MUSEUM
PHILIPPINES

Watching the Watchmen

"Everything comes from a cloud of inspiration. For me, images are all around us, ripe for the plucking. My job as an artist is to take whatever I need from this artistic ether, not to invent something entirely new (there's no such thing), but to reconstruct, remake and re-model old images, and in effect to make them say new things.

The past few years have found me putting together seemingly disparate imagery (classical drawings, cartoons, graffiti; 3D renderings, line drawings, flat, semi-flat; religious icons, Disney and anime characters, medical imagery, etc.), resulting in mash-ups and artworks that can be seen as a metaphor of the world we live in. A co-existence, a not-so arbitrary relationship of forms.

For the old guards who worship Tradition, this chaotic brew is a no-no. But for those who are friends of the New, my artworks have something to say. It is inevitably a question of appreciation.

The artistic journey has taken us here to the UP Vargas Museum. The exhibition is my own homage to our indigenous culture. Whenever I travel abroad, I marvel at how museums particularly in Europe have preserved artifacts of ancient civilizations — the materials used, the myths they embody, the power of their imagery. Ano ba ang puwede nating maiambag sa pagsulong ng sining sa Pilipinas?

That's why I chose to create sculptures of a truly Filipino icon: the Bul-ol or the Ifugao Rice God as subject. The Bul-ol is rife with symbolism (wealth, well-being, a bountiful harvest) and with comes ritualistic and ceremonial baggage (it is bathed with pig's blood, made to stand guard in the granaries).

One artist replicated Bul-ol sculptures, making a social commentary about the Bul-ol as something alienated from its ritualistic power and relegated into a decorative, domesticated prop. Nawala na 'yung sacredness ng bagay.

I, on the other hand, am simply exploring the Bul-ol as pure object/form. I deliberately refrained from going to the Northern part of the country to learn how the pieces are made. If Leonard Da Vinci had the Vitruvian Man as the ideal form of the human being, I have taken the Bul-ol as the counterpart of sorts.

And I've created different sculptures of the Bul-ol (in pairs or as standalones) with different variations: There are anatomical figures (with sinews of muscles and structural bones); tattooed (with Western-style Jesus slash skull slash tribal patterns); cubist (not Picasso-like, but more CGI-inspired — call it "digital cubism"); angel-versus-devil (St. Michael battling his enemy), etc.

You could call it "jazz up your Bul-ol," although my take is more respectful, purely driven by sculptural shapes and contours, and as a curious outsider peering into a more mysterious world.

This is also my way of taking something of ceremonious value in the Filipino culture and rendering it as pop, as collectible (like Mattel or McFarlane), as infused with the images of today (from Final Fantasy to Transformers), contemporarily mythic.

From indigenous iconography to Western aesthetics to anime to you-tell-me, everything is still a ladder to something. A ladder to the clouds up there."



fiberglass, resin, polyurethane paint
41x36x122 cm

The Imaginarium of Ronald Ventura

by Patrick D. Flores

The artist takes an object, the ritual statuary bulol (bulol or bullul) of the Cordillera, away from its ethnic zone and places it elsewhere. That might be the intuition shaping the observer's mind in the face of this assembly of works from Ronald Ventura. But the sight might prompt a rethinking, too, of the term ethnic, or for that matter, of authenticity, tradition, and originality in the context of the Philippine post-colony in global time. How can the ethnic bulol signify a kind of belonging to a local world and at the same time a denial of its transformations in history? And is this opportunity to access the bulol only reserved for natives so-called? This is the productive unease the exhibition poses.

The contemporary artist is drawn to the image of the bulol, its silhouette, structure, and substance. He relates it to the world of his first born, who spends much of his waking hours in front of the computer or some kindred gadget, immersed in gaming, cartoons, and robots. For Ventura, digital images form a vital nexus between past and future. They speak of a particular morphing of form.

Perhaps for the idealized indigene, the bulol beyond its customary contexts, is not a bulol; it is something else. For an activist working for indigenous rights, the bulol may be made an instrument of various interests. For the ethnographic curator, it deserves a plinth in the museum. The contingencies of the condition of being and becoming bulol -- vessel, icon, souvenir, collectible, heritage, heirloom -- play out quite productively, and contemporary art may be able to cue spirited conversations on the flux and the fixation. Why are we so attached to the object? Why do we take liberties with it? If it is reproduced, does it retain or lose or gain potency? Can an artist so far away from its reality and bearing no burden of its cosmology reanimate it without violating its animism? Or is its form finally free?

Amid the bulol are swirling clouds, artistic ether, in the words of Ventura where seeds of imagination are sown and inevitably disperse to till the atmosphere of his creative vocation, to make it fertile again on the watch of rice granary guardians. Images crawl out of cloth stained with everyday practice in his studio. And they inevitably, like a mass of suspended liquid or the scope of a network, swarm like the avatars of this changeling named bulol.

We wander around this exhibition that is the imaginarium of Ventura. We walk around his fiber glass black and white bulol figures in varying scales, from the gargantuan to the figurine and in between, thinking about the bulol, its form and its conversions, its affinity with the origin and its drastic deviation from it, its sleekness and sheen, its rondure and facets, its prosthetic qualities, and some affectations and accoutrements: gas mask and chain saw; avian beaks; anatomical dissections; skull. The bulol transfigures as angel, too; in one piece, it is no less than Saint Michael the Archangel, trampling on the devil, with a burnished sword on one hand. Here, bulol and Catholic iconography meet Final Fantasy.

In the process of this meandering, we spin the following questions that eventually become demands for both the artist and us who are all locked in this ritual of looking in the museum. These demands are decisively theoretical, that is, in keeping with the spirit of the word theory: to consider, to speculate, to gaze. And also in the vein of the human who is irresistibly drawn to things. As the theorist Barbara Johnson reminds us: "Wherever the subject looks, he sees only objects."¹

First is the theory of the bulol. According to the anthropologist Jesus Peralta, the bulol is a representation of a class of deities within the belief system of the Ifugao of the Cordilleras of Northern Luzon.² The bulol is named and animated, acted upon, subjected to, addressed, consecrated, infused: binullul or nabullul. It is, therefore, not an inert object or a thing in and of itself; rather it is a channel of energy, a moment, a

formative one, invested with work and facture, inflected with biography, mingling with other things and people in an atmosphere that may play out as culture or society or economy. As such, it is a volatile vehicle, part of the ritual of séance of propitiation and of consecration of a granary deity.³ Also, the bulol slips through its limits as artifact; it is mythology. The scholar Purisima Benitez-Johannot relates that the Ifugao people "attribute human qualities to bulol and describe them as huddled in a blanket, chewing and spitting betel, walking with a drunken gait, killing rats and thieves, and even jumping out of granaries to escape fire."⁴ This folklore can only further animate the bulol that is bereft of valence if it is not animated or activated in the instance of a gathering, a communion between human and spirit, the world and the universe.

Second is the theory of the image. Ventura's interest lies deep in the image of the bulol and not in the bulol itself, that is, in the fullness of its integrity as a thing as if this condition existed outside the lush ethnographic idiosyncrasies attending its potentiality as well as its "ethnic transformation." Like the image of Buddha or Christ, many times commodified and defiled, the bulol is a circulating, worldly image, rooted in though not fated to a locality that is the "Philippine," itself a figurine crafted from the imperial Philip. The bulol is not regarded as an index of the culture that had produced it even if the latter is evoked and invoked as a source though not deemed its overdetermination. At this point, it might be productive to reference Hans Belting who proposes the intricacy of the image-medium-body relay as a response to W.J. T Mitchell's explanation of iconology in terms of image-text-ideology. Belting defines medium as the "agent by which images are transmitted, while *body* means either the performing or the perceiving body on which images depend no less than on their respective media." On the other hand, "images are neither on the wall (or on the screen) nor in the head alone. They do not exist by themselves, but they *happen*; they *take place* whether they are moving images...or not. They happen via transmission and perception."⁵ The system of these categories of form is exceptionally calibrated in situations involving what he calls the "dual process of deappropriation and reappropriation" in which the "link with living rituals" would be "lost in a double abstraction: abstraction in terms of the images' translation into modernist style and abstraction in terms of their transfer to gallery art."⁶ This is what transpires in the project, this *L'Avventura*, with the bulol, with the caveat that, perhaps, the ritual may have changed in light of the "redistribution of the sensible" that is the bulol within art and the other way around.

Finally, is the theory of the contemporary. How does Ventura's bulol-effect translate the idioms of the global ethnoscape of art? Does it renew the primitive, the ethnic, the traditional? Is it akin to the superflat aesthetic of Takashi Murakami? Or is it actually folk, artisanal, and devotional? Surface is unapologetically industrial, but its interior is decorative, highly ornamental as discerned in the way the artist painstakingly paints the eyes, draws the tattoo, or designs jewelry, all of which renders the bulol historiated so to speak. Or could it be all of these? The manifesto of Super Flat states: "'Super flatness' is an original concept of Japanese who have been completely westernized." It is interesting to see the words "original" and "completely westernized"⁷ uttered in the same breath; this coming together effectively dissolves the anxiety of identity and colonization and confronts the claim to an entitlement to the breathtaking legacies of both, superseding the imperialist and civilizational dialectic altogether. The theorist Hiroki Azuma likens the corpus of Murakami to Robert Rauschenberg's "flatbeds" in which "an array of images arranged on a planographic press and reduced to two dimensions by its roller acquired a quality quite distinct from the planar surface of modernist painting."⁸ Azuma traces a line between the 1960s American subculture and Japanese culture in the 1970s and 1980s marked by the presence of "new consumers known as otaku."⁹ He argues that "resolutely planar," the works of Murakami "prevent the construction of visual depth" even in three-dimensional experiments: "Murakami not only rejects the spatial in the planar, he sees space itself as an assemblage of planes...Superflat, then, means not so much a physical flatness as a worldview lacking gaze...space and the eye no longer serve the purpose they once did."¹⁰ Pursuing the thought, he concludes: "The eye is but a spectral, *anime* sign."¹¹

This reflection on Ventura's recent foray is a modest one. Leafing through the literature attending his fifteen years of practice, we take stock of his wide range of efforts and attempts at intuiting the recurring inquiry into the body amid catastrophe and the sheer beauty that arises from his exemplary talent to glean the life of luminosity and translucence of carapace and color in paint, ink, and graphite. We are tempted to view the enterprise as pastiche, part Disney, part gothic, part jeepney in worldwideweb overdrive. But we are also led to ponder his interrogations of the (post) human, the nature of the animal within a grotesque menagerie of plastic figures, his own "dreams and icons." And we are intrigued by his days in flood-swept Malabon reeking of fish and salt and the fabled gain from the granary called the art market, the rationality of which confounds even the elect like Ventura. A story is waiting to be told out of this constellation.

All told, Ventura's bulol's may be in the end toys in the matrix of hypergaming, interacting with the copious drawings and paintings on the walls including a cork board of heady miscellany, a palimpsest or better still projection (they are lit from within) of his fascinations over the years. And in this regard, Barbara Johnson may again have a point when she reasons that the suffering of the human "comes from the *failure to become a thing*. The kind of stasis that only a thing can have becomes a flaw the human being strives to deny."¹² Such insight may have partly come from her meditation on the "transformer" toy: "An insect became a motorcycle; a robot became a lizard; a dog became a car: all with the flick of a wrist. What was mesmerizing about them was the use of exactly the same materials to produce a living thing or a machine; it was a matter of transformation. There was no fundamental incompatibility between life and machines; they were continuous if you knew the right moves...Under the spell of shape-changing, anything can become anything at any moment, and the world around us may contain the ghosts of the stories that we no longer know."¹³ This offers at once the thrill and terror of reification and the social life of the commodity, this chastening idea of, in her words, "the productiveness of self-alienation."¹⁴ And there is a germ of epiphany here: when we contemplate the word *kapwa*, who is self and other at the same time, we conceive of it in terms of the human, thus the term *kapwa tao*, except that "tao" is a thing, a creation, a *likha*, like the bulol and the human technology that animates it like the inveterate Ventura -- image maker, game changer.

Endnotes

¹ Johnson, Barbara. 2008. *Persons and Things*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 232.

² Peralta, Jesus. 2012. "Binullul or Nabullul, Consecrated Rice Deity Figures." *Paths of Origins: The Austronesian Heritage in the Collections of The National Museum of the Philippines, The Museum Nasional Indonesia and The Netherlands Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde*. Ed. Purissima Benitez-Johannot. Manila: ArtPostAsia, p. 143.

³ Peralta 2012, p. 143.

⁴ Benitez-Johannot, Purissima. 2000. "The Oldest Dated Bulul." *Arts and Cultures*. Number 1, p. 104.

⁵ Belting, Hans. 2005. "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology." *Critical Inquiry*. Volume 31, Number 2, p. 302.

⁶ Belting 2005, p. 318.

⁷ Murakami, Takashi. 2000. "The Super Flat Manifesto." *Super Flat*. Tokyo: Madra, p. 5.

⁸ Azuma, Hiroki. 2000. "Super Flat Speculation." *Super Flat*. Tokyo: Madra, p. 109.

⁹ Azuma 2000, p. 109.

¹⁰ Azuma 2000, p. 147.

¹¹ Azuma 2000, p. 151.

¹² Johnson 2008, p. 231.

¹³ Johnson 2008, p. 5.

¹⁴ Johnson 2008, p. 22.