

Demons, saints, penitents and pop: Filipino artist Ronald Ventura in New York – in pictures

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Filipino artist Ronald Ventura traces a bloody history of faith and identity in a unique series of oil paintings.

Internationally acclaimed artist Ronald Ventura returns to New York with a new series of works, taking inspiration from gory religious rites, pop culture and European Old Master paintings.



Ronald Ventura, 'Turn Around B', 2014, graphite and oil on canvas, 36 x 24 in. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Ronald Ventura (b. 1973, Manila, the Philippines) ranks as one of the most acclaimed contemporary artists from Southeast Asia. The 41-year-old auction star **broke records in a Sotheby's Hong Kong auction in 2011**, fetching the highest auction price recorded for a contemporary Southeast Asian painting at the time. Ventura's latest solo exhibition "**E.R. (Endless Resurrection)**" opened at **Tyler Rollins Fine Art** in New York on 4 September 2014. In a series of arresting, often unsettling paintings, the artist continues to explore history and national identity with a new focus on the uncanny role of faith and religion. The exhibition runs until 25 October 2014.

The dark side of faith

As the **exhibition press release** explains, "E.R. (Endless Resurrection)" *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.*

Ventura reveals the horrific nature of such rites in all their blood-soaked glory: penitents flagellate themselves using bamboo sticks tied to cords or spend hours nailed to wooden crosses.



Ronald Ventura, 'Reflection Repetition', 2014, graphite and oil on canvas, 26 x 16 in. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

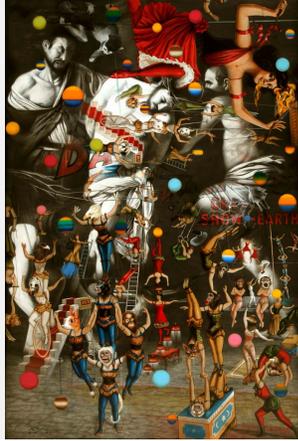
The artist's sophisticated hyperrealism is combined with a greyscale palette stained with vivid, sinister reds. Poised as re-enactments of Christ's passion and crucifixion, the depicted activities are not officially sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church.



Ronald Ventura, 'Visiting Artist's Demons', 2014, graphite and oil on canvas, 72 x 48 in. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Saints and demons

In Ventura's characteristic and well-honed layering style, demons and monsters swirl around the central images of disillusioned flagellants, seeming to aid the pious penitent's self-torturous acts. As the press release explains, Ventura took inspiration from European Old Master paintings, such as those of Hieronymus Bosch. The effect is at once elegant and haunting, melancholy and vicious.



Ronald Ventura, 'Carne Carnivale', 2014, oil on canvas, 72 x 48 in. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

In others, black and white figures resembling biblical saints mingle and merge with colourful, whimsical circus motifs. Such imagery is taken from vintage carnival posters and advertisements. The incongruity is jarring, eerie and disorienting: a nightmare in which a circus show breaks into a classical museum, wreaks havoc and makes statues come alive.



Ronald Ventura, 'Armor', 2014, graphite and oil on canvas, 48 x 36 in. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Comics and pop culture

Global pop culture also finds its way into Ventura's story of faith. Japanese and American cartoons and comic book characters creep onto the canvases, lurking in corners or behind pillars, folding into the layered collage of figures.



Ronald Ventura, 'Cross Turismo', 2014, graphite and oil on canvas, 48 x 72 inches. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Meanwhile, graffiti and cartoon text in speech or 'explosion' bubbles litter both foreground and background, creating another uncanny dreamlike concoction of motifs, metaphors and cultural references.



Ronald Ventura, 'Cross Roads to Nowhere', 2014, graphite and oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in. Image courtesy the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Art.

Skins of histories and cultures

With his complex layering of images and styles, Ventura weaves a dynamic history of the Philippines through intermingling stories in religion, popular culture and colonial influence. The press release states:

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.

Over centuries, the multifaceted Filipino identity was shaped by various occupying powers, such as Spain, Japan and the United States. Ventura explores and captures this uneasy sense of identity by amalgamating Eastern and Western influences, high and low culture, and old and young references (old masterpieces versus cartoons).

The explosion of cultural signifiers results in a compelling series of work, where the boisterous aggression of contemporary motifs is muted by the mournful faces and bodies of the martyrs. The press release explains:

[Ventura] draws our attention to the "second skin" of cultural signifiers that each person carries with him [...] 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.

Ultimately, the skin being flagellated in Ventura's paintings may refer to the layers of histories and cultures being torn apart to reveal the stories within.

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