



SOUTHEAST ASIAN CONTEMPORARY ART **NOW**

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RONALD VENTURA¹ Ventura studied painting at the renowned University of Santo Tomas in Manila. Sculpture was also an inherent part of the curriculum, so the artist got a well-rounded education. After leaving university he started off painting penitents, but soon veered to contemporary painting. He utilised a seemingly classical approach that leads the viewer into a new world on canvas, a world that is a reflection of the artist's experiences in everyday life. There is an architectural quality that is immediately apparent in the way Ventura organises space in his compositions.

Ventura's painting technique is multi-layered. After sketching, he often works with acrylics and finally finishes an image with oils. In between he uses dry and wet techniques to prepare his paints in order to obtain the desired effects, which is why parts of his paintings can be very sharp and clear while others remain hazy. The apparently easy virtuosity displayed by Ventura is in fact strongly underpinned by a very complex and painstaking technique.

The artist took a tutorial from his wife, who is an expert in Photoshop. This allowed him to add images altered by this contemporary preparation tool to the numerous sketches that he makes as an exercise or that he draws directly on the canvas.

Ventura's artistic universe is a world of fantasy and dreams, related to the chaotic situation in our contemporary world. The juxtaposition of very divergent elements, such as mixing serious and funny themes, is characteristic of his work. Asked if, like other Filipinos, he was influenced by surrealism, he simply responded that to him, last century's surrealism is today's realism because nearly everything becomes possible in today's world.

Unavoidably, his painting is informed and influenced by local customs and by present life in the Philippines. Although the viewer will find traces of this local content in his work, Ventura is a truly international artist whose themes recapitulate his view of the global aspect of our world.

Sculpture is an important part of his oeuvre but has to be seen as a three-dimensional extension of his paintings. The same can be said for his installations, where he combines paintings, sculptures and light boxes. This interdependence of media is very noticeable in his paintings where he manages to achieve amazing depth or the opposite: an image that seems to be jumping out at the viewer. The three-dimensional quality of his paintings adds to their vitality and animates the multiple characters and animals that appear on the canvas. Among his favourite subjects are:

- Religious images
- Images of transgression
- Classical or androgynous portraits
- Images of birth and death
- Hybrid animals
- Cartoon imagery
- Astronauts
- Circus and clown images
- Internet, print literature and commercial advertisement images

¹ The following text is based on an interview graciously granted by the artist at the Primo Marella Gallery in Milan on 27 June 2012.

Ventura does not have a fixed artistic strategy and does not believe in artistic periods, but is dedicated to develop what already exists in his oeuvre. The options he has to continue this development are multiple and he does not exclude using other media, such as video for example, in the near future.

Invitation to the Feast (Painting)

Mabuhay, a Tagalog word meaning "long life", is an expression used in welcoming guests and a way of showing hospitality. Interestingly, the artist has used bones to form the word. The painting is part of his *Thousand Islands* series, which is a celebration of cheap tourism in paradisiacal islands in the Philippines. Ventura realises that foreign tourists have a wonderful time in excellent conditions while much of the local population is living nearby in poverty.

The beautiful young girl's body is a kind of offering, like the colourful fruit displayed in front of her. A pig's head is represented on top of the girl's head, while her body is full of small scars indicating that she suffers from the effects of tourism. In the lower right foreground we see a local band composed of five musicians with death masks who welcome the guests. Ventura is informed by his local culture and does not intend to criticise a situation, but rather to visualise it, in order to create awareness and prompt reflection.

Greatest Show (Painting)

In a single painting, Ventura takes us through a memorable journey from prehistoric and medieval times towards several images of the twentieth century and of our contemporary world. *Greatest Show* is an apt title describing the cinematographic quality of wildly different images that the viewer needs to absorb all at once. The artist's interest in animals, and dinosaurs in particular, is explained by his childhood fascination with toys, and by the abundant literature available on the subject.

By showing the dinosaurs in the role of predators, Ventura wants to comment on the age-old continuity of life on Earth. Despite the extinction of dinosaurs, life cycles continue. Humans have taken over the role of predators as they now control the planet. In humorous fashion, the dinosaurs are connected with our present world as the largest one wears the red boots and red-striped socks of Ronald McDonald. A Roman soldier, wielding a sword and covered by the leathery skin and scales of a dinosaur, is a reference to one of the characters in the Passion Play, a reenactment of the death of Christ performed in the Philippines during Holy Week, the week before Easter. Durer's famous knight, although presented in an altered version, is pictured on the back of a small dinosaur that is spewing fire. Another reference to Durer is the lion. Durer, one of the first painters in history to view animals as a subject worthy of attention, painted several similar lions. Christ's head is pictured on the billowing costume of a Ku Klux Klansman. A snake entangled in the branches of a tree is a representation of original sin.

More contemporary images include an idyllic Disney-like castle pictured in the background and numerous trapeze artists falling from the sky. Ventura has scattered throughout the all-encompassing masterpiece several preventive signs that warn of impending danger, like radiation, lightning or threatening animals. The artist is warning us of the dangers that humans face. He clearly does not exclude the possible extinction of the human race, symbolised by the skeleton in the lower left hand corner.

Mirror 2 (Sculpture)

Like his paintings, Ventura's sculptures reveal several layers. In this piece, we discover a mythical creature with exposed muscles and anatomical detail, partially covered with an outer skin. Two front halves of two identical bodies are merged at the stomach, with the two heads facing in opposite directions. This creates a feeling of forced inertia, as any attempt to move would cause a push and pull in two different directions. Unicorn horns add to the mythical dimension of the animals, while Ventura reminds us that inertia is a losing game in today's world and that our system thrives on instability.

Thousand Islands (Installation)

We have learned from Ronald Ventura's interview that yesterday's surrealism is today's realism. Art critics have referred to the surreal as being a mirror of reality projected into the unconscious of the individual.

This installation consists of a huge painting called *Cumulus*, 8 light boxes below it and three sculptures placed on the floor in front of it. Ventura's theme of exotic tourism is featured in the painting, where we find a woman's body, a jazz band and several religious symbols. Immediately below, 8 light boxes give different images of situations that can occur on the tourist islands of the Philippines. Two white and one black resin sculptures occupy the foreground and feature subjects ranging from castles to hands and unidentified forms.

The link between the sculptures and the painting lies in the real estate development on the beachfront resorts. Craggy masses are surmounted by constructions that highlight this unbridled development.

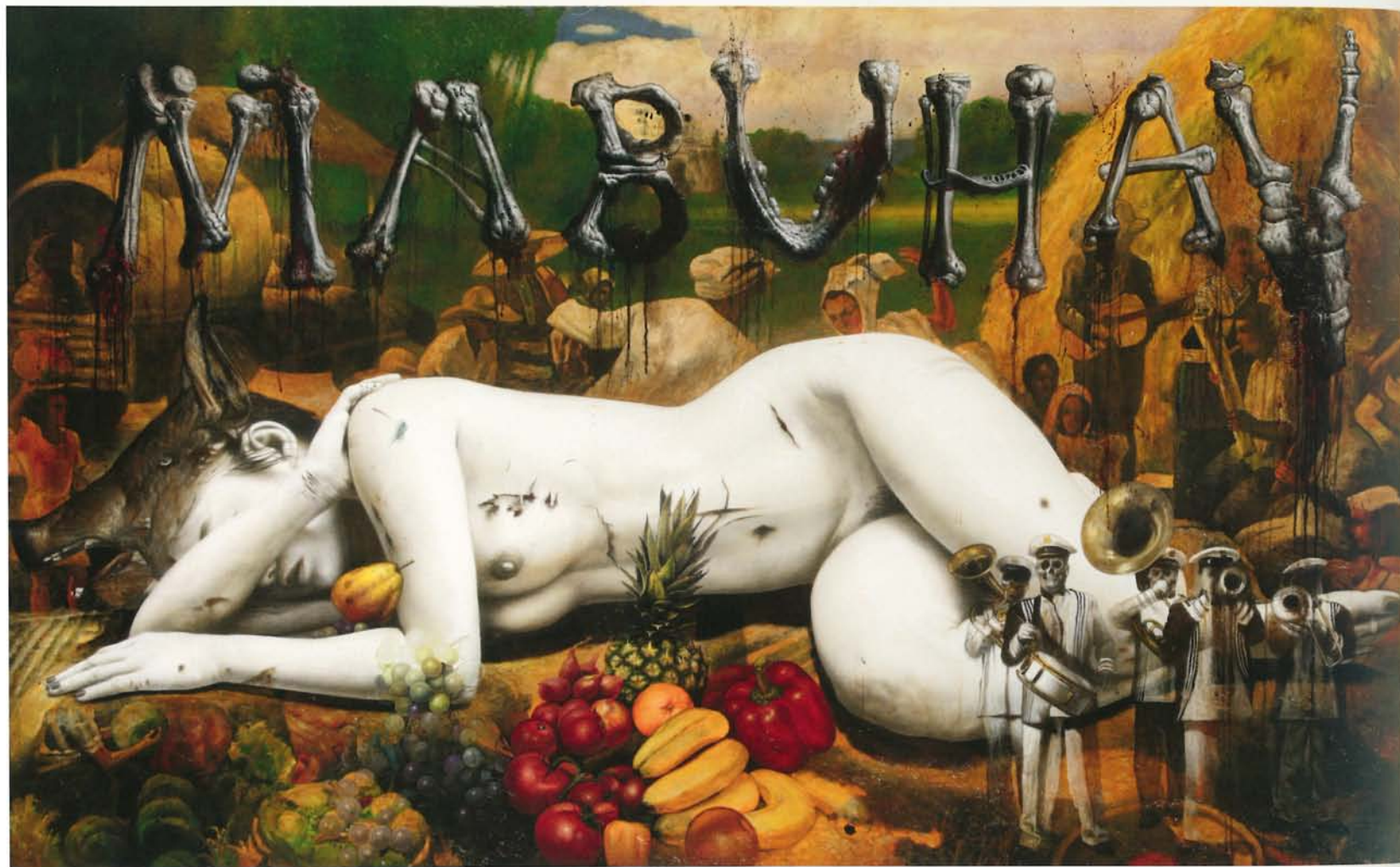
Cloud Error (Sculpture)

Ventura's inspiration for the *Fiesta Carnival* series comes from the legendary amusement park located in the huge Araneta Coliseum in Manila. The enjoyable experience of going to Fiesta Carnival remains in the collective memory of many Filipinos, despite the fact that it was superseded by mall-based entertainment, computer games and grander amusement parks.

Cloud Error is really one of the artist's most masterful creations as we discover a beautifully sculpted horse displaying several layers including muscles, flesh and various decorative elements. Ventura has striven to give us a very dynamic version of a carousel horse, accentuated by muscled legs, flame-like mane and flowing tail. The horse is lifted into the sky by colourful balloons, some shaped like half-finished Disney cartoon characters. A lot of attention is devoted to the decoration of the horse. The embellishment features beautiful flower garlands, a red saddle with a girth and, surprisingly, skulls instead of the usual cherubs. Although there is certainly a feeling of nostalgia experienced by the viewer on seeing an artwork like this, it also allows him to keep his childhood dreams alive.

GERALDINE JAVIER Javier was one of Chabet's star pupils. She learned conceptual development and critical thinking from him, but had to find content in the socio-realist movement of her student days. Her training as a nurse taught her to be disciplined and tough but it also gave her empathy for her fellow human beings. Javier's career developed very quickly. Contrary to Chabet's credo, she set out to sell her works to establish herself as a professional artist.

Over the years, her sources of inspiration have changed. Currently she is fascinated by images she discovers in movies, magazines or newspapers. She does not work a lot with photography. She makes a mental construct of the images she wants to depict, altering the look, the meaning or the context of the images she has found.





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Ronald Ventura

Painting: Oil on Canvas

Title: *Invitation to the Feast*

Date: 2011

Dim: 152.4 x 243.8 cm

Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

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Ronald Ventura

Painting: Oil on Canvas

Title: *Greatest Show*

Date: 2012

Dim: 155 x 215 cm

Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

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Ronald Ventura

Sculpture: Fibreglass/Resin
and Polyurethane Paint

Title: *Mirror 2*

Date: 2012

Dim: 236.2 x 50.8 x 146.5 cm

Photo: Courtesy of Primo
Marella Gallery, Milan







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Ronald Ventura

Installation: Mixed Media

Title: *Thousand Islands*

Date: 2011

Dim: Variable

Photo: Courtesy of Primo

Marella Gallery, Milan

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Ronald Ventura

Sculpture: Fibreglass/Resin

and Polyurethane Paint

Title: *Cloud Error*

Date: 2012

Dim: 76.8 x 76.8 x 288 cm

Photo: Courtesy of Primo

Marella Gallery, Milan

