

NATURE, RELIGION, MYTH, AND POLITICS IN PHILIPPINE ART TRENDS

•••

HILDA M. RODRÍGUEZ
ENRÍQUEZ

The Philippines are perhaps the country that has been least favoured by the emerging development for which Southeast Asia has so frequently been quoted in recent years, or, at least, the one which displays the least evidence of this development trend. Its similarities with the rest of the area lie in the complexity of its context, characterised by contrast, while its differences are found in the figures who have shaped its history.

The Philippines inherited different legacies from a succession of administrations: the Spanish colonisation, the American influence after 1898, the Japanese military occupation during the decade of the forties, as well as the endless domestic political conflicts, and a less-than-stable course of economic development that has been one of the overshadowing factors of this century. The country's cultural history is also a hybrid, and although this has lent it the dynamic richness of contextual diversity, it has also brought about the fracture of indigenous development and the imposition of foreign patterns.

It is fair to say that the art of the 16th and 17th centuries was concerned mainly with the depiction of myth and ritual. Art historians especially point to the ceramics, woodcarvings, textiles, and body painting, all of which exhibit their own particular styles. However, the progress of these developments was interrupted, first by the Spanish colonisation, which imposed new models and endeavoured to supplant the

indigenous culture entirely. However, as in America for example, the end result has been a culture characterised by its mix. In the case of the Philippines, the result has been a fusion of native elements, western features (mainly from Europe), and cultural and philosophical elements imported from other Asian countries.

When the technique of oil painting was introduced in the 18th century by way of the church, it encompassed mostly the medieval gothic style. With the secularisation of art in the 19th century, the influence of the more refined, classical academic European style began to appear. This coincided with the emergence of a native middle class, an intelligentsia that was keen to claim a position in society. Art historian Alice Guillermo explains that these conditions, and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1859, made it easier for artists to travel abroad to study. Thus students of the Philippine Local Academy of Drawing and Painting were able to attend the San Fernando Royal Academy in Madrid. At about this time, the prosperity of these emerging middle classes was becoming apparent in the many portraits they commissioned, and the miniaturist style began to be very popular among the learned classes.

The twentieth century would see the founding of the University of the Philippines, which, together with the School of Drawing and Painting headed by Amorsolo, was to dominate an artistic scene where the portrait and rural landscape was highly regarded [1]. But the new century also witnessed American intervention and its gradual dominance of the country's physiognomy. This became most apparent in the country's education system, urban architecture, and the lifestyle adopted by a certain sector of society.

Modernism emerged in the thirties, initiated by artist Vitorio Edades. The work of Juan Luna (one of those painters

who studied at the San Fernando Academy in Madrid and winner of the 1884 Plaza European gold medal for painting), and Juan Arellano also began to incorporate features of modernism. For the Amorsolo school, this represented a new phenomenon that began to appear in the work of artists who incorporated the modernist spirit through the use of a semantic code. Edades in particular began to raise issues and introduce themes and subjects that dealt with the problems of national identity and the indigenous Filipino population, and his work attracted quite a large following. This was the beginning of the group that would come to be known as the Triumvirate, consisting of Edades, Carlos "Batong" Francisco and Galo B. Campo. Of course, many other artists continued to be influenced from abroad, but this served to enrich the art scene with diverse themes and styles [2].

The next event to halt the evolution that had begun at the turn of the century was the Second World War and the ensuing Japanese occupation of 1941. Formal independence was achieved in 1946 and with it came the first faint glimmerings of a renewed artistic and cultural spirit. The Art Association of the Philippines (AAP) was born in 1948, followed in 1951 by the Philippine Art Gallery (PAG), and by the Contemporary Art Gallery in 1954. In its own way, each of these institutions served to stimulate creativity and cultural exchange. The APP in particular established annual contests that, although generic in nature, nonetheless provide a fairly good overview of the artistic trends of the period.

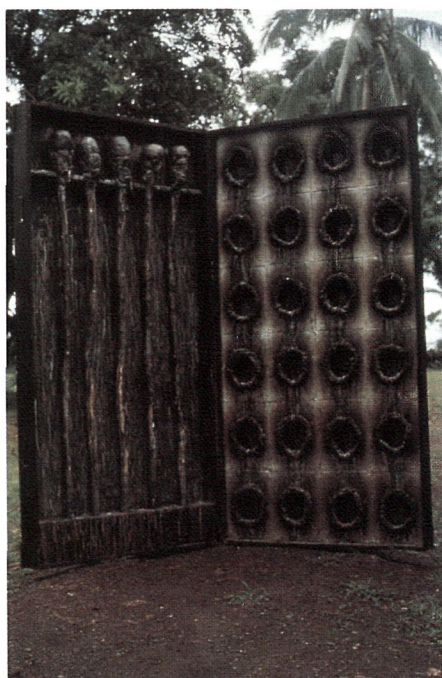
The decade of the fifties was a period of economic and social depression, a condition to which the more radical artists were not to remain indifferent. Expressions of social statements abounded, and eventually evolved into what Guillermo and other critics were to classify as "proletarian art". This trend

flourished side-by-side with abstract art, a trend that grew in importance over the course of the decade with the ever-increasing influence of the United States and Europe. Nonetheless, the most distinctive feature of the decade would be the emergence of a nationalist conscience, and the attempt to interpret foreign trends in a home-grown style. Many of the recurrent themes inevitably referred to the popular traditions and expressions of pre-colonial days [3]. It is important to note the enormous contribution of the many artists who were active at this time, enriching the Philippine cultural scene, and paving the way for the much more profuse artistic panorama that was to emerge during the decade of the sixties.

The decade of the seventies was characterised by a tense political situation. The so-called “iron grip” with which Marcos held on to power also kept a close watch on any artistic expression of social realism. Artists criticised the tense state of political and social affairs and began to paint very large murals and collective installations. A few critics and historians, such as Emmanuel Torres, point out that nationalist feelings found an outlet in these symbolic creations, for they rejected the use of imported materials and were a reaction to the dictates of formal, apolitical modernism [4]. Artists such as Edgar Talusan Fernández, Pablo Baens Santos, José Tence Ruíz, Antipas Delotavo, Imelda Cajipe-Endaya, Orlando Castillo and Soriano depicted this crisis of national identity in their work. Themes such as violence, militarism, human rights, political power, official corruption, a negative view of the Church as an institution etc. were used to convey powerful and very effective messages.

Imelda Cajipe-Endaya’s early work is distinguished by the use of local materials and its sculptural, two-dimensional qualities. She became an installation artist and an exponent of social and political causes, especially

women’s integration into society. Imelda’s work shows her interest in her immediate surroundings, her local frame of reference, not just the social and political affairs that dominate the domestic scenario, but also popular native elements – the symbols and objects that form an integral part of local culture, but that are generally considered unworthy of attention. By the latter years of this decade, she had become a spokeswoman



Alfredo Juan Aquilizan. *Kú*, 1993.
Mixed media.

for the feminist cause. In May 1995, I was able to see, if fleetingly, her installation in homage to Flor Contemplación, a Filipino servant girl who was hanged in Singapore. Imelda explained that this piece was dedicated to all Filipino women, but especially domestic servants who are sent abroad and mistreated by their employers [5]. “Filipina DH” (1995) is a collection of personal effects, religious pictures, photographs, typical servants’ uniforms, suitcases, and letters that speak of the problems encountered by these emigrants who are forced to work without properly

enjoying any rights. Most of these pieces have been painted black with white lettering and just a touch of colour has been added as a highlight on some of the utensils and objects. The colours used are essentially those of the Philippine flag, and are thus both compositional devices and connotative elements.

Edgar Talusan Fernández is distinguished by his perpetual experimentation and his vast production. His paintings are very large and develop as if following the passage of history, incorporating complementary scenes and anecdotes. All of his pieces are linked to issues such as identity, political problems, criticism of the military, acclaim for the popular resistance movement, or commentary on the demagogical use of national emblems and symbols in a country where the problem of political corruption is endemic. His work is symbolic and grandiloquent. For Talusan, social realism is more a way of thinking than a defined pictorial style, like abstraction. He has also collaborated with other artists in producing large collective street murals. These street spaces afford opportunities for democratic expression and are a direct and highly effective means of influencing people and of stimulating critical thought and raising public awareness [6].

In the seventies and eighties, this unabashed political stance verged on dissidence, and stemmed from the frustration of those who had hoped that Corazon Aquino would lead the country into a new era of democracy. Their art reflected local conditions, the predominance of foreign influences and the social isolation of the most underprivileged classes and strata. It employed a language that elsewhere would be classified as rhetorical, but which here was appropriate for its impact value and ease of comprehension. It too broke the rules by using national emblems for its own purpose, an equally grandiloquent and rhetorical discourse,



Santiago Bose, *Altar*, 1989. Installation, mixed media.

but the purpose used symbols that were able to transcend the metaphorical bounds of art.

In the nineties there emerged a group known as the Sanggawa. This group of artists carried on the tradition of street murals depicting social and political issues. Some of their most

famous works revolved around the Pope's visit to the Philippines, which served as a pretext to criticise clearly the Church's stance on ethics, sexual education, and birth control.

Along with these trends, there are a number of other symbol-based bodies of work, including one that stems from a

group made up of painters, musicians, writers, and film directors that is primarily concerned with expressing the country's traditions, especially those rooted in rural communities and though linked to nature or the elements that constitute it, in an attempt to convey the harmonic relationship between theme and subject. In my view, artists such as the late Edson Armenta and Roberto Villanueva, Santiago Bose, Junyee, Roberto Feleo, Alwin Reamillo, Agnes Arellano, and Alfredo J. Doran Aquilizan presented in a particularly articulate way their fascinating ideological and aesthetic views – which some critics have gone so far as to call cultural revolution – in a movement that reached its apogee in the decade of the eighties. These artists resuscitated the myths, customs, and local expressions, and immersed themselves in nature as part of a reorientation and exploration of the so-called “native” culture, and in a justifiable effort to return to the historical and cultural roots of the country's pre-colonial past.

The work of many of these artists has been generally short-lived, for it was done for a specific, circumstantial goal and, above all, because it is an “evocation”. Some of them lived together for long periods in the Cordillera, learning or sharing their cultural expressions, religion, myths, customs, and skills, and immersing themselves in an *ambience that was destined to vanish*. Their use of local products such as bamboo and wood, the incorporation into their work of animist images, and their use of mythology, has become their way of cleansing the “penetrated” land of foreign influences more than once.

Several of these artists settled in Baguio in the north-eastern section of the mountains and founded a community known as the Baguio Arts Guild (BAG), where life remains closely tied to spirituality, old-fashioned family values, production and conscience. Although

these artists set out to exaggerate the dimension of these values by participating directly in the lifestyle or organisation of these communities. I do not think I found any cases of absolute refusal to assimilate certain aesthetic codes from outside the local sphere, in that these artists share and try to remain part of the international art scene and circuit. As I see it, one of their major concerns is to insinuate “resistance” to the gratuitous, by reworking their artistic language using an entirely local viewpoint.

In a significant event, a manifesto was issued by the Native Art Group at the 1991 Havana Biennial, in which artists Junyee and Virgilio Aviado (then artistic director of the Philippine Cultural Centre) declared their intention to focus on “the necessity of putting an end to western criteria, and returning to the essence of Philippine culture” [7]. It must be admitted that, despite the somewhat overly romantic gesture of this manifesto (as seen in hindsight), these artists did in fact manage to stimulate the cultural ambience with a dose of dynamism which in turn contributed to a speculative atmosphere that altered the critics’ appreciation of this type of art.

Interest in rural societies, a strong tendency to use local materials and traditional objects – recycled by a different conceptual stance – a revaluation of native cosmology, the evocation of the myths or simply the lives of the social groups who have been a stereotyped symbol of marginal classes, all became fundamental features for these artists in creating artistic-natural communities involving the population, students and intellectuals.

In general, this symbolic work is largely a tribute to the experimental spirit, hence the incorporation of dance and musical expression, and the use of ordinary, natural materials such as stone, rattan, earthenware, seeds etc. The two main centres for this type of work are at

Baguio and Laguna. Baguio has a long tradition of crafts and much of the local population is involved in woodcarving and basket weaving. The town has a Convention Center where artists can exhibit their work. This centre also hosts the Baguio Art Festival, held with the participation of regional artists of all styles. The other traditional centre for the development and study of local techniques and materials is Laguna. Here artists and students come to work in direct contact with nature and the local population.

The work of Edson Armenta, one of the artists of the so-called Native Art Movement, was based on natural materials, and reflected the relation of man with his environment, not, however, in an idyllic or philanthropic way, but rather through an arbitrary interpretation of the richness of the relationship. Armenta described his work as “a metaphor for human destruction”. His works “Patibong” and “Trampas” constitute a scathing commentary on man’s aggressive nature and actions, as manifested by war, crime, environmental destruction, and even sexual relations [8].

He fashions his work out of materials such as bamboo, stones, guayaba branches, rice, animal pelts, snails, ashes, and other *objets trouvés* which he recycles. The finished products are complex installations and sculpted objects in which he has combined a universe of symbols of both divine power and the power of human forces, the censure of man’s predatory attitude towards the environment and animals, and the dark side of technological progress and its contradictory nature. Armenta uses these materials extracted from nature to call attention to the loss of the environment’s “nobility” and its transformation into a mere trash heap or battleground. His installations also make apparent the counterpoint between the essentially docile nature of the materials and the apparently aggressive nature of

his work, which is presented in the guise of predatory machines or highly complex deadly weapons. They also represent nature’s readiness to defend herself.

Santiago Bose was one of the first artists to use typical local materials as the primary basis of his work. Bose’s work was exhibited at the 1989 Third Havana Biennial. His work is mostly installations and uses such natural materials as bamboo, ashes, and paper although he also incorporates paint and everyday items. Most of his experience comes from La Cordillero, Baguio, where he lived and extracted the essence of local cultural traditions. But his work is by no means limited to merely reformulating local materials, customs and legends. Bose calls upon both his experiences of traditional mountain culture and urban life with all of modern society’s foreign influences and contradictions, and infuses his work with symbols representing consumer society and referring specifically to themes such as deforestation, the extinction of natural values, etc.

There is also continual allusion to the animist “philosophy” of the Baguio mountains and its hybridisation with Christianity, traditional rituals, and village lifestyle. Many of the experiences that he picked up while residing abroad have also been incorporated into his work.

Santiago’s installations use demystified religious images that he introduces into altered contexts in order to depict the complexity of contemporary society. His altars summarise the eclectic nature of the times and modern culture (Payson at Rebolusyon 1989). He combines the traditional symbols of La Cordillero with the images and symbols of the so-called industrialised world, a culture in which he was briefly immersed. Precisely because of his experience working and living in other cultures, he also incorporates themes concerning emigration and its effects and traumas.

During the course of 1994 - 1995, the work of Santiago Bose drew heavily

upon the amulets and talismans of the popular mythology known as Anting. According to the artist, these devices are a blend of ancestral legends with Tagalog and Latin words, and constitute the components of both local animist and Christian legend. These images are believed to afford actual physical protection in the face of adversity, but they have also been used by the natives to protect themselves from foreign cultural assault [9]. Thus, they have become an integral part of a psychological framework that goes beyond the merely magic or religious to become a part of the historical and social profile structure.

Artist Junyee's work is a personal interpretation of nature and natural materials. His constructions exalt the spiritual relation of man and nature. His installations are an extension of the mysterious, enigmatic aura that infuses natural settings. He spent long periods at Laguna, south of Manila, where he earned the title of shaman.

He uses traditional material in a contemporary manner. His sculptures-installations are like remarkably dynamic stage settings. He uses a wide variety of materials such as wood, fibre, leaves, shells, and coconuts – vernacular objects that, in my opinion, produce an architectonic interpretation of the natural environment. In this he is different from the other artists of the group, for his sculptures and installations are far more rational in concept.

He views the environment as a balancing act of its components, and his work shows his desire for structure and a reworking of the laws of nature. His vast knowledge of nature and all of her elements has endowed his work with visual balance as well as magic. Nature is his laboratory, and he is a species of chemist, mixing formulas, breaking apart and then recombining natural elements, reinterpreting the cosmology and ancestral history that surrounds him.

Junyee is like a weaver of nature, legend, and mythology. His work has become ever more sophisticated. Although the results are undeniably outstanding, there is nonetheless a risk that he could fall into the purely aesthetic – a risk that he would be well advised to keep in mind.

The late Roberto Villanueva came to be the paradigm of this trend – almost a movement – in the Philippine art scene. He arrived at Baguio in 1980 and broke with the past and began using natural materials in his work. His gradual integration in the community became reflected in his work, in the depiction of the traditions, symbols, and myths of the region's ethnic groups. This relationship was to become a sort of obsession, and, like Junyee, he has been called a shaman, as much for his personal behaviour and the special relationship between him and the community and nature, as for the raw energy exuded in his work. With his growing experience and familiarity with the culture and its history, Villanueva's installations became increasingly complex in form and concept, and even grew larger in scale, as if to reflect an increase in his magic and spiritual power. In his quest for the meaning of art in the lifestyle of the Cordillero community, he soon became an indispensable participant in the animist ceremonies.

The corpus of Villanueva's work contains the ancestral and anthropological concepts that pursue a holist goal, the integration of nature and spirit, mythology and life, mythology as part of everyday life, and the interaction of human existence with the sacred through action. Each of his installations or performances requires corporeal action from the artist as an expansion of energy that transcends the formal presentation of the work. "Atang Ti Kararua" (Offering to the Souls) is an installation and ceremonial performance in tribute to the souls of the victims of the July 1990 earthquake.

With artists such as Villanueva,

environmental concerns and conceptions are transcended by a vital quest for an avenue through which to express social and cultural elements. In communities such as these, this can be a complicated process due to the convergence of religion, myths, and politics and the coexistence of a world and a time whose essence is altogether more dynamic and controversial.

Alfredo J. D. Aquilizan is one of the youngest artists to be drawn to these concepts. He too has been an active participant of the Makiling experience at Los Baños-Laguna. He previously lived and worked for extended periods in the United States and England, and these experiences lend a far richer complexity to his cultural and artistic references. Because of this, his work often alludes to several parallel themes, presented in different contexts.

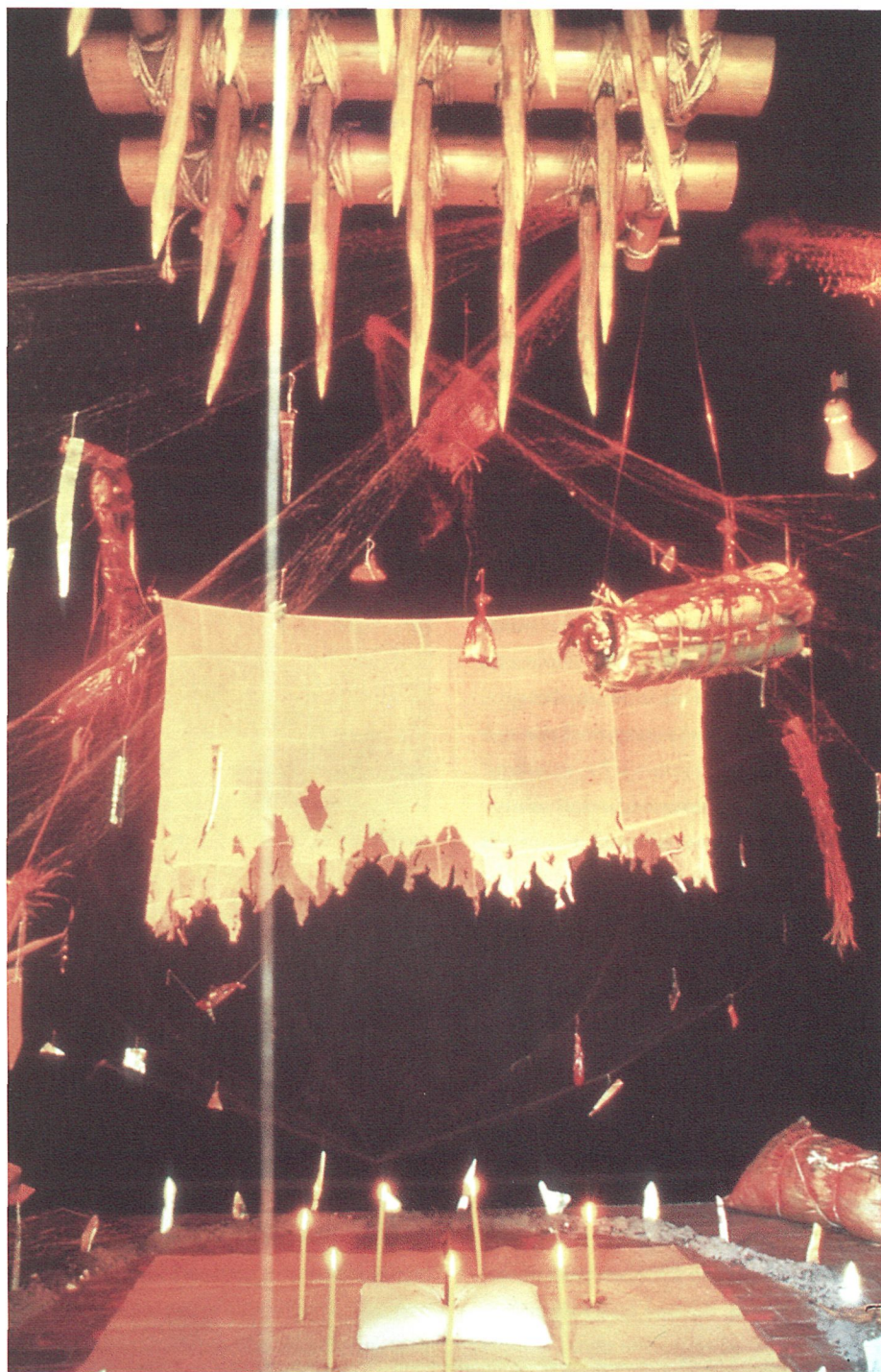
Aquilizan uses such natural materials as leaves, dried stalks, charcoal, paper, and *objets trouvés*. His themes encompass a wide range of issues such as pollution and the historical and political process, and the effects of colonisation, as well as more mundane subjects such as his own personal or family experiences. His work incorporates influences taken from a vast array of sources, both at domestic and foreign, and this diversity has earned him a wide following. He is particularly concerned with unravelling the essences of nature, the essential properties of natural materials and the combination of diverse elements.

During 1994 and 1995, Aquilizan installations used natural materials freely combined with paint and concrete. He fashioned entire artificial landscapes inside metal boxes and glass cabinets. Inside these, he would weave delicate patterns of braided branches, thorns, metal filaments, and leaves that were reminiscent of lace or latticework. More recently, Aquilizan has begun to show concern for social issues, the imposition of foreign lifestyles and cultural rape.

Roberto Feleo's unique method of interpreting his cultural surroundings makes him one of the most interesting artists of this group. He uses pre-colonial motifs and myths in an almost anthropological manner, but with a highly protective and conservationist stance regarding non-cultural processes. Feleo set out to explore the elemental components that formed Philippine culture: the Spanish occupation, Christian imagery, American political propaganda, mass media, industrialisation, Chinese iconography, Persian miniatures, the mythology of the primitive islanders, and pre-colonial traditions.

Even where Feleo's work is analytical or exculpatory, it remains devoid of rhetoric. He often uses humour and satire to express the Philippine experience. In order to assure the authenticity of his interpretation of *Philippine culture*, Feleo studied the work of craftsmen from all parts of the country, ritual objects and images, miniatures and historical and mythological characters deep-rooted in the popular conscience.

His work during the eighties was a synthesis of elements taken from Pop (in the sense of icons derived from popular culture), Kitsch, comics, and antique shops, all prevalent components of Philippine lifestyle and culture. Feleo's keen narrative style drew much of its inspiration from the country's history and popular traditions. His painted boards of thin plywood, cut and shaped, formed stage settings into which he would *position everyday objects and utensils*. The pieces were sealed, like showcases, and glass was sometimes used in place of plywood. The most remarkable feature of this work was its vast number of referents and histories or characters. He parodied and de-sanctified a vast array of religious, political, and historical stereotypes. Famous artists or masterpieces were used to defy the



Edson Armenta, *Patibong*, 1988. Mixed media.

limitations imposed on this part of the world, confined as it was to otherness. Coca-Cola, the "painted man" (a local character representing Filipinos who painted their faces to distinguish themselves racially from the Spaniards), or Botticelli's Venus represent the visual

"plurality" of the context, anecdote is a pretext for commenting on current affairs.

His most recent piece continues along this narrative vein, but focused more on one particular theme, Tau-Tao [10] – the visual representation of the

Bagolbo myth of the afterlife. This piece consists of six life-size figures set in and interacting with their particular surroundings. The characters are Lumabat, Wari, Mebuyan, Tuglay, Tuglibong, and another nameless spirit. The figures are made of a mixture of sawdust and cola, a technique known as pinalakpak. The work is a multiple depiction of the icon and its family, and portrays the Philippine concept of life and death, creation, and destruction.

Feleo maintains that *Tau-Tao* is an extremely complicated allegory. It is a species of chart of Bagolo cosmology, where light and dark, order and chaos, and all cycles of earthly life interact in an attempt to answer a final question: "what happens to us after death?"

According to Feleo, the mythology contains a number of concepts of the afterlife:

A person is re-incarnated as many times as necessary for him to free himself from all material desire (Lumabat had to chase a deer nine times around the world before he was allowed to enter heaven).

Filipinos possess many levels of spiritual manifestations and these spirits are set free after death. The main spirit goes either to heaven or hell, but the other spirits remain on earth and become guardians of nature (Wari was transformed into a nature spirit in the form of a bird).

Life and death are both part of the same continuum, the one being the product of the other (in the myth, Tuglay's corpse gives life to the corpse of a young man). Heaven and hell are essentially the same, but exist on separate planes (both are depicted as lands of plenty) [11].

According to Feleo, these concepts reveal pre-Christian Philippine beliefs in which good and evil - like Yin and Yang - are essential features of creation.

Sculptor Agnes Arellano uses the themes of creation and destruction in her work as part of her exploration of both

local and universal mythology. She calls the juxtaposition of symbols and concepts in her work "inscapes". Her forceful sculptures are based on her scholarly research into creation myths. Among the most interesting features of her work are the universe of associations and the questions that it raises, and the ethical and spiritual issues that are touched upon. The work is highly tropological. The subject matter can be read on two levels, but this entails decoding by the viewer, which in turn demands a certain level of familiarity with the artist's mythological, historical, philosophical and biographical references. The juxtapositions of creation, destruction, life, death, and rebirth, constitute cycles and polarities that exist in a dialectic relation. The work is fundamentally connotative and deconstructionist, insofar as it imposes opposing conceptual versions regarding such concepts as the nature of beauty, the nature of pre-established codes within the human conscience, and concepts of life, death good, and evil.

Precisely because of this profusion, combination and juxtaposition of so many symbols, Arellano's work can be somewhat complex. The parallel themes and inter-textual element, the unbridled use of diverse content and mythological significance, and the deconstruction of multiple pantheons give rise to the introduction of a personal mythological universe. Furthermore, her work is akin to a spiral cycle whose essence resides in the interaction of different components that in turn produce fresh versions, fresh interpretations - a sort of conceptual crossbreeding which reflects the complexity of the different vital conflicts that exist within any given context or time. This creates a thematic thread that allows the introduction of a number of subjects such as sexuality, power relations seen through the two sexes, personal experiences, and existentialist inquiries.

"Los Mitos de Creación y

Destrucción" (Part I) ("The Myths of Creation and Destruction") made up of "Carcass-Cornocorpia" and "Music for Making the Sun Rise" (shown at the 1994 Fifth Havana Biennial) and "Los Mitos de Creación y Destrucción" (Part 2), summarise the artist's views on birth and life in the midst of destruction, and the quest for mental equilibrium in the midst of paradox, which, she maintains, consists of cycles and polarities, like Yin and Yang.

But Agnes also uses motifs and elements drawn from her personal experiences, frustrations, and aspirations. Her use of fire, for example, comes from the loss of her parents and sister in a fire, an accident that inspired such works as "Penance of the Three Fires". She also uses her rich imagination to express opinions of maternity and sexuality, and to describe important events in her life.

"Three Buddha Mothers: Vesta, Dea, Lola" (1995 - 1997) is a triptych composed of three sculptures of female figures representing three different stages of life. They depict the cycle of birth, life, and death, and also represent the views of the artist regarding fecundity and fertility (Vesta), ambiguity and the need and capacity for emancipation (Dea), and inner wisdom and spiritual peace (Lola). The images are related to the literature of Robert Graves and to local myth. Such is the case of Dea, whose multiple breasts symbolise motherhood and nurturing as manifested by Mebuyan, the God of the Bagobo myth revived by Robert Feleo. The figures of Vesta and Dea are reminiscent of the Buddha. Agnes points out that it is not her intent to exalt these figures as goddesses, but rather to present them as symbols of the need to search for sacred meaning in everyday life [12]. The triptych thus becomes the symbolic vehicle to communicate ethical views and the quest for the richness of human spirituality. In her installation "Recintos Interiores" ("Interior Spaces") at the Sixth Havana Biennial, these sculptures

had a fourth companion, a species of guardian goddess. This was the artist herself, nude, prostrate on the floor, decorated with symbols describing her personality, life, and conception. A circle of lizards completed the group, a fertility symbol that is a repetitive theme in her work.

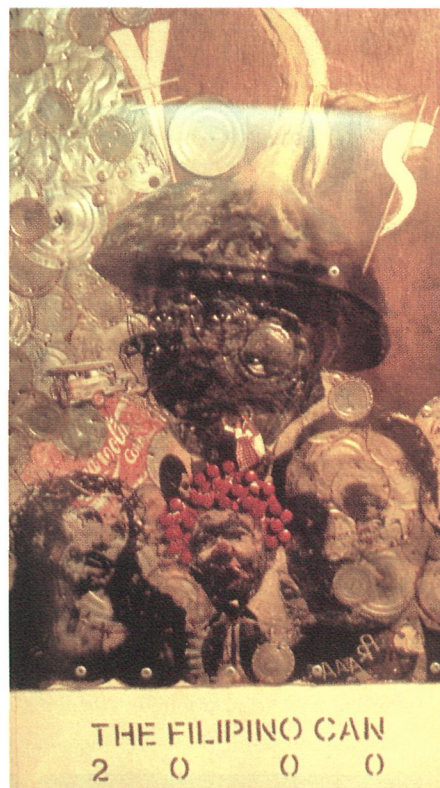
In the case of Agnes Arellano, the pre-production phase of research, inquiry and introspection are as important as, if not more so than, the actual production phase itself. This can be seen in the conceptual reformulating and construction. The finished product exhibits a technical polish that is only possible through the harmony of a mature conceptual subject and undeniable skill or talent. But her greatest attribute in my opinion is the dual nature of her presentations. They are at times disconcerting and stimulating, and leave little room for rhetoric, but supply the speculative side of art with a fresh viewpoint.

In a more sarcastic way, Reamillo and Juliet (who have lived and worked in Australia since 1996) sum up the eclectic context of the Philippines and the profusion of emblematic images that historically described the islands' social and historical development. Their installations, and more recent collages and photomontages, are deconstructions of the country's difficult state of affairs. Their criticisms of the political scene, the powers represented by the Church, the noxious American presence, and the eclectic cultural scene marked by stereotypes and propagandist paraphernalia, are an attempt to uncover the true reality that is being manipulated by a fictional global strategy and to show a *homogeneity invented into a truth*, which is bearer of the creation of invented necessities.

Reamillo and Juliet's aim is to explode the myths surrounding an idyllic and imaginary veneer through the use of a very personal system of signs and

metaphors that are the product of a talented manipulation of some of the most familiar Filipino emblems and stereotypes. The most interesting feature is the fact that although the references are local in context, they can be meaningfully translated to the situation affecting most of the countries of the so-called periphery.

Their 1997 installation "Jesus and



Alwin Reamillo, *The Filipino Can*. Detail.

the Jeeps – God Bless our Trip”, exhibited at the Sixth Havana Biennial, again portrays Philippine society and the paradigms of each of the powers of that society. The piece weaves together political and religious themes, popular expressions, and features of the *subculture in order to portray the chaotic and eclectic state of the country*. Thus, we see the Jeep, that ever-popular vehicle, so characteristic of popular culture, which, gaudily decorated, represents popular taste, but also serves as a platform for political propaganda, or

an effigy of the baby Jesus made of donuts (a typical cake introduced by the Americans). The piece is a summary of the banal, and uses other components that refer to militarism, the consumer society, advertising, slogans, etc. Once again, provocation through satire becomes searing criticism, while the deconstruction and reconstruction of events demands a rereading of the historical cultural values and established themes, and allows the exposure of whatever fissures there are.

Indeed, the poetry and the textual corpus of artists in the Philippines reflect a keenness to reinterpret the established view of history and to delve into grand themes, which they use to present alternative views with a firm will to integrate the vanished values, the deprived elements of society, the “archives” of a culture that was left on the sidelines. The great majority of artists remain loyal to their own concepts of existence, and hence to a dynamic aesthetic through which they display their capacity for analysis and commitment to the times, but one that breaks the bonds of Cronus. These artists are committed to a method of conscious exploration, to a style of art free of taboos and prejudices, a style that is capable of capturing the nature of things and reviving the liberating accounts of spirituality. It is a style whose imagery is in keeping with the demands of 21st century thought and sensitivity.

NOTAS

[NOTAS

- [*] Part of a longer essay of the same title.
- [1] Alice Guillermo: “The History of Modern Art in Philippines”, in *Asian Modernism Diverse Development in Indonesia, The Philippines and Thailand*, The Japan Foundation Forum, Tokyo, 1995, p. 224.
- [2] *Idem*. p. 225.
- [3] *Idem*. p. 226.
- [4] Emmanuel Torres: “Internationality. Towards a New Internationalism”, in *Art and Asia Pacific Quarterly Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, December 1993, p. 45.

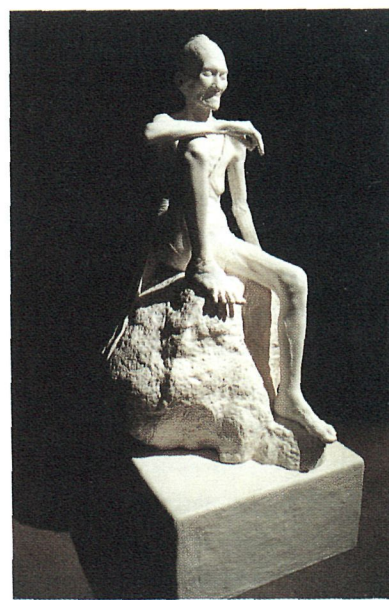
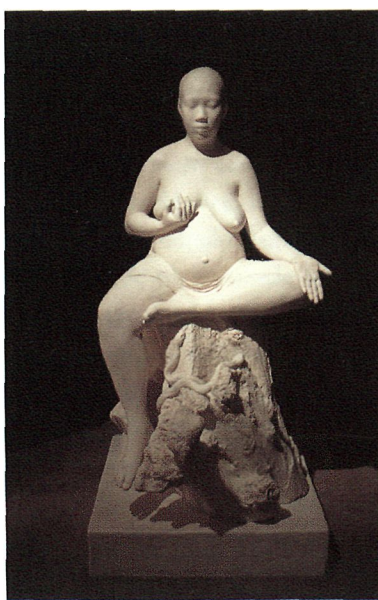
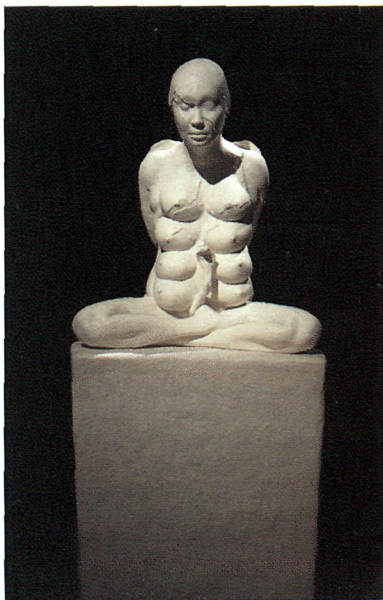
- [5] Imelda Cajipe-Endaya. An interview by the authoress. Manila. May 1995; see Apinan Poshyananda. "Roaring Tigers. Desperate Dragons in Transition". in *Traditions/Tensions. Contemporary Art in Asia* (catalogue). Asia Society Galleries, New York. 1996. p. 44.
- [6] Edgar T. Fernández. Artist's personal portfolio. Centro Wifredo Lam Archives. 1995.
- [7] Rachel Mayo. "Replanting Culture. The Indigenous Art Movement". in *Art and Asia Pacific Quarterly Journal*, vol. 1. Australia. 1993. p. 37.
- [8] Edson Armenta. Artist's personal portfolio. Centro Wifredo Lam Archives. 1989.
- [9] Santiago Bose: *Journals of Cultural Drifter*. Southern Cross University Art Museum. 1995.
- [10] Tau-Tao. A visual image which recaptures the Bagobo myth referring to the afterlife through a three-dimensional presentation consisting of six life-size pieces. The figures are: Lumabat, Wari, Mebuyan, Tuglay, Tuglibong and a nameless spirit. Lumabat is a hunter-warrior. His action is to establish another life for his fellow warriors in the "celestial" world. To enter that world Lumabat must cross the horizon, which is the frontier between the earth and sky. For the Bagobo, the horizon is a living entity and is depicted in sculpture as a snake, which, as such, must be conquered by Lumabat. It is constantly in motion and can kill a man with its strength. Only the brave and skilful can pass through him. It is also said that before crossing the horizon Lumabat must chase a deer around the world nine times.

When Lumabat finally reaches the "celestial" world, the Diwata chief rubs his abdomen with a betel fruit (an astringent Oriental plant) and opens his stomach with one blow. The Diwata then removes Lumabat's intestines so that he is able to renounce food. Thus freed from his earthly needs, Lumabat becomes a god. Wari is a peasant and Lumabat's brother. He lives a different life and decides to follow Lumabat to the "celestial" world. When the Diwata chief tries to open his stomach, Wari protests. Nevertheless, he manages to remain there. On his third day in the celestial world, Wari looks at the earth and sees his village and his fields full of fruit and grass and asks the Diwata chief to send him back. Diwata prepares food for Wari's journey, collects fodder from the meadow and ties leaves together to make Wari a suit long enough to reach the earth. He then ties Wari to the end of the suit but warns him that he must not eat any food until he reaches the earth or the suit will break free and he will fall. Wari feels hungry during the crossing and eats some of the food, which causes him to plunge to earth. However, his fall is cushioned by a tree. As he has not descend completely, Wari begins to weep, making a very unusual sound. The next morning, he awakens to find he has changed into a bird whose distinctive call is "Ururuy". Mebuyan is the sister of Lumabat, who wants her to be near him in the "celestial" world but she prefers the world below. One day Mebuyan says to Lumabat: "I am going down, to the howling of the earth, below Gimokdan". She takes a handful of rice and throws it into a mor-

tar, saying, "When I drop the grains, the people will die. People will fall like the grains and none will go to heaven". With these words she sits on the mortar, which begins to spin violently and falls to the floor. Finally both Mebuyan and the mortar disappear. Before this she was known only as "Lumabat's sister", but henceforth she has a name: Meguyon, head of a village called Banua. All souls stop in Banua on their way to Gimokudan in order to see the Pamalugo ritual which takes place in the river. There they wash their joints — points where the soul is connected to the body — and also the crowns of their heads. In Banua, Mebuyan also looks after the dead children, nursing them until they are weaned. Tuglay is Lumabat's father. When he dies, Lumabat places a scarf over his body. As soon as has done this, invisible knives begin to flay his skin until he turns into a small child. All these figures in the retablo are connected to Tuglibong, for she is mother earth who gives sustenance. The nameless spirit represents the spirits in Mebuyan's village who have been purified through Pamalugo. Bagobo myth, taken from Feleo, Roberto: "Tau-Tao, Ancestors. Three dimensional work", in notes on the exhibition, September 1994, Hiraya Gallery, Philippines.

[11] Roberto Peleo. Artist's notes, in "Tau-Tao, Ancestors. Three dimensional work". Hiraya Gallery, Philippines. 6-23 September.

[12] Agnes Arellano in the catalogue for *El Individuo y su memoria*, 6th Bienal de La Habana, May-June 1997.



Agnes Arellano. *Three Buddha Mothers*. (Dea, Vesta, Lola). 1996 Trilogy. Sculptures.