Oh, Lazarus … Whom God Has Helped, WALA KA BANG HIYA!

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Oh, Lazarus . . . Whom God Has Helped, WALA KA BANG HIYA!
(Oh, Lazarus . . . Whom God Has Helped, Have You No Shame!)

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DEDICATION

To my mother whose example of diligence, hard work, and support which I am forever grateful. My sister for her constant support and care have sheltered me in times of crisis. My brother whom I love dearly whose encouragement with the pursuit of my artistic path has been shoulder to carry me through times of hardship and doubt…May you rest in peace.

To Ming Fay whom I always think of as a father and mentor, who made me the artist I am today. To Alejandro Anreus whose words of wisdom and great intellect has lead me to the path of my art practice…To Manuel Ocampo who is a great inspiration, To John Yoyogi Fortes for your advice and support.

I especially would like to give thanks to Carlo Ricafort and Juan Carlos Quintana for being brothers to me…Thanks for letting me crash, the jokes, the pranks, and the idea that art at times should not be taken too seriously…Art can be a good laugh even at the expense of the Artist.
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Introduction

I recall having a conversation about my work with Alejandro Anreus an Art historian, scholar and curator. Whose keen mind and honest sincerity. I deeply respect and admire, and whom I had the privilege of being his student. His sharp insight about my work has given the mental space to reflect within myself of what it is about my work that I had overlooked.

Having not yet acquired a level of consciousness in connecting experience and personal development from where I have arrived in graduate school and the insight to comprehend of what he was trying to convey. He proposed serious questions and insights that I haven’t thoroughly made a connection with my work. What are the real politics in my work? How valid is the narrative for me? And the most intriguing one perhaps is whether I have a room towards spirituality in my work. Being blunt about my personal feelings towards organized religion.
He sensed an impression that however critical my work maybe with the structure of organized religion within the work, there is a discourse that is perhaps open to nature of spirituality from a decolonized perspective. Something that I might have overlooked.

Stepping out of the cocoon which was my studio. I took in the air openly and pondered at the clouds in the sky as the mind slowly slips away from the world of time and place.

Where contemplative moments and silence is a rarity amidst the noise of daily life; As though asking to search for meaning in solace within the small pockets of sky in between buildings.

I didn’t occur to me to think about this issue, I stepped back in retrospect of what I have been painting and made in the studio. His words made me conscious of a burning epiphany that are insightful through a brief correspondence:

Life is brief and when you consider that the art world and the academic world both are perpetually drowning in bullshit, honesty and sincerity(regardless of what Adorno wrote about the jargon of authenticity) are always the best policy…Always remember that spirituality can be truly subversive, and a political spirituality from a decolonized perspective even more (Anreus,Personal).

In this light of view, I started to ask these questions myself. What is my identity within the context of my Filipino-American experience? How can I express the personal as being sincere in my work, within the spiritual, the cultural, and political? This is where my work starts to manifest within the parameters of these perplexing questions. As simple, and complex as I see and feel the world through the experience of being an artist.
The Power of Narratives

The power of narratives is intriguing to me, the captivating allurement of how stories can carry a strong message whether in words or visual form is something that I explore through my art practice. In creating my own narratives by making imaginative images in art with questions about Filipino-American identity, colonialism, and the prevailing structures which still embodies a recurring consequence among those who struggle with the issue of identity with whom have yet to take the journey of decolonization and personal healing.

Within the use of narratives I incorporate elements of subversion to dismantle the conventions meaning within the imagery distorting it to arrive at the possibilities of image making and meaning within my practice often borrowing elements from religious iconography, post-colonial sources, history, literature, and street art. I incorporate humor in spite of the intensity and the gravity of my subject matter, there is a sense of play that resides within the paintings that I create. This form of subversion within the context of self-deprecating humor is something that is embedded in Filipino culture, this street sign for example which I took a photo of on a recent trip to Manila (see figure 1). Which I will use to illustrate how the Philippines retains a certain cultural aesthetic that is unique in its own. Since public urination is a common issue people take it upon themselves to paint on walls where that particular offence occurs.
This sign reads “Bawal Umihi Dito” where the word Dito which means “Here” is spelled D2. Which translates as “You can’t urinate here” and the accompanying antagonism in the form of a question “Aso Kaba?” which translates into as to English as, “Why are you a dog?” It is this type of aesthetic and play of words I find visually intriguing with its strong antagonism and word play that provokes the viewer which in this case the would be offender.

These visual images are intriguing being different from what I am accustomed to seeing in the United States. I dive into the creation of image making with an arsenal of various sources such as illustrated here; where using this type of free association within the interpretation language and meaning carried from two different cultures gives me a sense of freedom towards the creation of imagery and the use of text in my work.

I use a combination of surrealistic imagery coalescing with the use of text giving an amplification within the idea or pictorial composition which at times images cannot carry alone.

The text offers another component that gives a psychological insight of something visceral and confessional. Utilizing text also carries a certain play with the written word and the sound it creates as it is read by the viewer. The play of words and the personality of the script gives an emotive attitude, awkwardly written in a stylized manner and a personalized mark where words connotes an echo to accentuate the imagery corresponding at times with the concept of the painting. I think of my work as some type of illustrative journal that is self-reflective.

I am telling my story but opening a bridge who share a similar sense of lost and cultural displacement.
Simplicity is what I strive for, a directness to openly communicate my point of view. I strive for as much as a clarity conveying what it is I am trying to express within the fruition of these ideas openly accessible to an audience. In carrying a message in its accessibility something very much inspired by the Mexican muralist and even going back to Christianity in art. I am coming from my sense in trying to comprehend a duality of self from the governing Catholic values which I held in my youth, and this feeling of spirituality within me which I’ve come to openly accept through adulthood where a sense of oneness with the world around me without the weight and guilt incurred by religious dogma. This friction of retaining the strict values of the Catholic Church that I still retain growing up in the Philippines, however it may be at odds with my own conflicting sense of reason.

My Colonial Indoctrination

My indoctrination within the Catholic Church is influential in the shaping my work and values. Having been part of the middle class I had the privilege of being educated in one of the earliest Westernized institutions of higher learning in Asia. The experiences of attending Colegio de San Juan de Letran, a catholic institution founded in 1620 by Order of Preachers, known as the Dominican, order gave me an early history lesson about colonialism. Where at a naïve state of mind, I could not fully articulate as a child these unsettling feelings of ritual indoctrination,
through the re-enactment of the martyrdom of saints, the ritual morning prayer in Latin, and the creed that I must recite: “Deus, Patria, LETRAN” (God, Country, LETRAN).

Letran has a rich history where a majority of its alumni had become the revolutionaries in building the Philippine nation, they came to known as “Bayani” in Tagalog it means heroes of the revolution. They were educated by the church and tailored into accepting the values of a Western education. Eventually becoming revolutionaries against the prevailing Spanish power and Catholic authority. In gaining ground towards its independence, but only to be conquered yet again by American imperialism after the break of the Spanish American War. 

It is this rich history and the stories of these Filipino revolutionaries being taught in Letran that intrigued me. I cannot help but make a connection with myself upon having the same Catholic education and going through the same ritual indoctrination. Where this education has given them an awareness about the importance of freeing themselves from a colonized mentality and the realization of independence.

Franz Fanon which he eloquently states from The Wretched of the Earth; The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture. In the sphere of psycho-affective equilibrium it is responsible for an important change in the native. Perhaps we haven't sufficiently demonstrated that colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a
dialectical significance today (Fanon 37).

I address issues within the framework of my cultural and identity. Using it as means to formulate the subject matter of my past life and current experience which flow from my disjointed subjective point of views. The archeological digging in constructing piece by piece from the core of my memory and Filipino-American identity, embraces the reality of where; I am situated geographically and expressing what resides within me. An example of this is found in a piece titled “An Altar of Jubilant Rants” (see figure 2). Where the work is centered on the imagery and the evocation of what these images are of how it carries a sense of narrative that is personally mined within my psychological space. Disjointed as these experiences maybe from the core of collective memory. A specific image is labeled with an accompanying text that narrates specific events in my life. Giving a written definition from an autobiographical element of what these images mean within from an autobiographical content. Shaped into clarity from a format of a pictorial frame work and visual mapping. It is the evocation of a shrine that is has manifested as being sacred. A realization as something joyful and yet carrying an emotional pain that is both accepted and negated. I am attracted to religious iconography and its symbolism which is deeply engrained within me. As much as I am subverting these images it is a part of me. Walking around the columns and walls as a child amazed by the story of Christ and the crucifixion. The verses from the gospel narrated in sequence within the walls and stained glass windows of churches and cathedrals of my youth which was an early introduction to narratives and the power of symbolism.
Influences and Artistic Subversion

The visual look of my work borrows from cartoon drawing elements from comic imagery and visual pop culture. I’m influenced by artists who embodies these elements along with the cultural dislocation of within an identity crisis faced among former colonized nations particular that of the Philippines, who shares this sentiment among Latin American nations, being the former colonies of Spain. Artists such as Manuel Ocampo, Carlo Ricafort, and Juan Carlos Quintana. The works of these artist presents a discourse within the engagement of colonial history incorporating elements of satire and the use of subversion either in the realm of criticism in the scope of art in itself or the socio-political, but at the same time embracing cultural hybridization. Manuel Ocampo a versatile artist in my view is a master of subversion. Being able to utilize a multitude of approaches and methodologies in the execution of paintings whether it be figurative or abstraction, to freely associate whether it be in the language of painting in terms of its style and manner, or within the context of art history(see figure 3). Painting from a variety of sources, taking in scraps of visual culture that either is taken or borrowed. I see it as though something being caught within the current of a strong river surrounded by the images, objects, ideas, meanings and concepts of human endeavor in history, and taking in just bits and pieces to keep afloat within this overwhelming current, but reconstituted into something transformative within the lexicon of either multiculturalism, cultural hybridity, or within the language of painting.
While Carlo Ricafort takes in his experiences being in San Francisco from what he calls “hacked” sources ranging from culture, history, music, and philosophy. Where all of these elements are regurgitated into a complex dynamism of abstraction and figuration (see figure 4). The work is cryptic envelops an aura of mysticism and fascination quality which I adhere to as an artist. While Juan Carlos Quintana comes from that of Cuban-American vernacular his work tackles the issues of a lost sense of idealism within the socio political sphere (Quintana web). While playing a satirical commentary on the psychology of the artist; As though taking in those external and societal demands to the point of self-mockery into both tragic and comedic heights. His ability to create texture and surface in the medium of paint is captivating from the blotches and gobs of paint placed in a carefree haphazardness that is alluring to the eye (see figure 5).

I’m also inspired by the drawings of the artist George Grosz whose figures using a mere a generic approach to line could effectively communicate the harsh and cruel problematic issues of his time. Through his hand and use of line these figures become monstrous. The governing political body, the machinery of war, and his honest view of the greed of capitalism and among the bourgeoisie. I admire his directness and the rawness of his emotional core transferred in imagery. There is no clear point of dissection within mere logic and reason to render the atrocities of war and the problems of modernization within him to be manifested the way Grosz carried it through these images. It is something that cannot be simply analyzed but something he must have felt and experienced (Grosz web).

In terms of my own work has a certain anxiety rendered visually crude and roughness in the imagery where the mark making quality evokes a sense of agitation, something visually
explosive giving the viewer a feeling that it cannot simply be contained within the confines of a square format this expressiveness that navigates through the composition and the surface this energy reaches outward into the canvas (see figure 7).

**Thesis Project**

It is this realization of the boundaries of painting that revealed a problematic issue of these set of confines which lead me to approach the nature of installation. Which lead to my thesis project which gave me the opportunity to bring forth all the characteristics through the use of imagery, text, brush strokes, and 3 dimensional elements in to the space.

For the duration of a week I did a site specific installation consisting of five walls in sections. In choosing a narrative based on the idea of the biblical character of Lazarus of Bethany which was the miracle of Christ playing on the theme of Resurrection. The biblical Lazarus has had an impact on me having been named after this Biblical figure. Where a priest once told me as a child that I bear a strong name; which means “The one god has helped”, or interpreted as “God is my help.” I always find this to be a heavy burden in times of great crisis. So I made a conscious decision in placing my own interpretation in the context of an idea of experiences within the process of decolonization and revolt in depicting myself as the somewhat the embodiment of the Lazarus myth. As a way to gain awareness in purging all of my fears and doubts. There is a coffin placed on the floor fashioned out of cardboard. Which the entomb Lazarus is depicted on the first panel wrapped in bandages and covered bruises both weak and frail. He kneels down supported by a wooden crutch. Suffering from the misfortune of both heaven and earth which encapsulates the figure in a triangular composition (see figure 8).
Where a malevolent foot stomps the figure from the heavens and scorned by the earth by this demonic hand in the gesture of a middle finger. Text is written in Tagalog were words like “Palpak” translated as Failure or unredeemed failure in English, and “Wasak” means Broken. A resounding text on top of the where the foot is situated echoing the words “Walang Hiya” which means Shame, or Shamelessness. This is a Filipino word which is embedded within the context of guilt, or Catholic guilt which is a very psychological burden among the practitioners of the faith. A feeling of remorse, or an overwhelming self-doubt towards considered deviant or sinful actions (Nadal 60).

As Lazarus pushes forward he is blocked by three clerical figures with both arms and feet dismembered. Screaming in agony the words “Sinturon nang Kaligtasan” translated as “Safety belt” but within this context that it can be read as “Salvation.” Where visceral and guttural organs spews out from the figure covering the composition. A flying monster figure which is called “Aswang” in Filipino Folklore in the shape of a Jesus head guards the center panel with a fanged crucifix which acts as a barrier that cannot be crossed (see figure 9). Where the viewer is then lead to the center piece of a crucifix sculpture placed on top of a horned demonic head; where two domineering figures overshadowing two catholic school boys kneeling in prayer. One resembling that of a school master with a book for head titled “Lengua Franca” dressed in a cap and gown on the right. Jabbing a pencil through the tongue, and at the same time a conquistador or crusader on the left is thrusting a wooden sword in the head of the school boy (see figure 10,11). Each imposing figure represents the embodiment of indoctrination within the narrative.
There is a pause on the narrative where the second act is divided by the main entrance. Where Lazarus no longer covered in bandages retreats to the outskirts of an impoverished landscape inside a decrepit shack to live in isolation. In reconnecting with the land of his former birth which he found in ruins. The idea where one is a psychological manifestation of the Lazarus figure which is the painting on the wall. While the other is a physical embodiment of an external manifestation of the sculpture portraying both inner and external psychological states.

Echoing from the walls an emotive shout comes out from the crevices of the shack as a cathartic release of a revelation where an awareness of a sense revolt occurs.

This catharsis is also accentuated within the foreground by a blue clearing of sky within the top right corner revealed as a sign of hope. Written in jagged script and stylized manner are the words; “I went to your schools, I went to your Churches, I went to your Institutional learning facilities, So-How could you say I’m crazy!” Where an image of arm lunges out from the front of the shack across the top of the two doors in a sort of arch like gesture as though being propelled by a force or energy colored in dark pink and magenta which engulfs it (see figure 12).

As though this catharsis from the story amplifies this antagonism from all the dogmatic indoctrination, which he had tried to resolve in the former life but was encumbered to resolve. The tip of a finger touches the forehead of a catholic school boy similar in fashion to that of the ones on the center scene. As though it was given a blessing or a state of enlightenment which is suggested by a small circle and patch of color on his forehead recalling to mind the third eye. In representing a lucid realization of the self of someone in the transition to a new form of consciousness (see figure 13).
I choose the arm and hand to be depicted in a more illustrative manner rather than something descriptive, to make a clear decision that is explicit and poignant without losing of what it is I am trying to convey if represented in mere abstraction. The school boy stands on a malevolent and torrential cloud with a crucifix that propels it afloat. His hand is pointing downward as though demanding be put down and back on the ground (see figure 14).

On the last wall I’ve placed a *memento mori* as a reminder of one’s mortality, and a take on the idea that even the Lazarus of Bethany eventually had to face death a second time. I placed a text bubble on the skull which reads; “Death is like…Inevitable but shit still grows.”

A short statement which plays on the idea that even long after we are placed on the earth. The wretchedness of the world still remains. But I like the idea where in spite of all this wretchedness and death, that life still grows from the decaying body underneath the soil. And how this new consciousness remains as a justification of how this story of Lazarus is at peace within his mind even in death (see figure 15).

Since he is liberated mentally from the restrictions and beliefs of his former life, in finding he is at one with himself, winning over the demons of religious dogma, the burden of his colonial mindset. Where that plant growing on his finger represents that embodiment of revolt towards decolonization that has liberated his spirit which surpasses that of the corporeal, that starts to blossom from the ground up.
Decolonization through Spirituality in Art and Conclusion

In closing, I will return to what was said from the discussion with Alejandro Anreus. His last statement that echoed a resounding insight that connects in tying together of what is it that I am trying to say in my work…

“Always remember that spirituality can be truly subversive, and a political spirituality from a decolonized perspective even more…”

This quotation alludes me at first but after much introspection, I could not grasped at first of what he meant by these words, but now I think. I’ve come to understand of what it is he was trying to say. The pain of colonialism and the values that I find myself in conflict with whether it be within the dogma of the Catholic Church, the ravages of past colonial powers both Spain and the United States within the establishment of Filipino identity.

In finding where do I fit in within this duality of Filipino-American identity as though I am digging within the ashes and embers with the hopes in finding an object that gives a resemblance in something which is elusive and perhaps lost; It is through my own sense of decolonization and self-realization that I am beginning to understand in bridging this connection. Art was the means
that showed me this consciousness. In stripping away all that I was once taught from in the light of shedding this skin layered upon me to adapt into an American culture by means of a perverted logic both created and enforced upon me: Though I am at home, I feel like a stranger: It is a disorienting experience. This transition towards decolonization was not easy it could drive one to the breaking point of madness…To unlearn all that I was taught was wrong, denying the culture of birth with the weight of shame, and the delusion that one is dominant or more important than the other. Like most things towards self-realization; One must deconstruct to be rebuilt a new.

It is this sense of spirituality that gave me a sense of a balance. To tune out and to just listen within this inner voice. I always believed in the value of something of greater connection, a “spirituality” within something universal and an interconnectedness grounded upon the land we share with all its injustices and social problems. I often look at small pockets of sky sitting by a statue of Dr. Sun-Yat sen in Columbus Park in Chinatown. I would lay back on the written inscription which states: “All under heaven are equal.” I thought to myself how beautiful is this sentiment, and ponder if all these buildings and structures we make ourselves.

Which houses its own set of beliefs in which it embodies; In its own way every building is a church with its set of dogmatic beliefs that places its restrictions on people, and there are some far more harmful than others. I often imagine within the back of mind. What if all this just disappears. Then all that we have to look too is the sky, no imaginary lines of divisions, nor cement or mortar…Who builds this house? But to be grounded upon the land that we all share, and not strictly upholding in valuing solely on the metaphysical realm of infinite resignation or the dogmatic view which to me is just ego.

Doesn’t human beings make images and houses for a creator to make a more tangible connection in this light?
For my sense of spirituality is the transmutation of something channeled through the vehicle of art borne from this feeling of interconnectedness that humans share, that whatever it is that I make in the studio is something greater than myself, and that it carries a discourse of truth that is open into view. However as an artist within the consciousness of my present moment and circumstance. I can’t simply invest without acknowledging the political reality, and experiences of my time, which would reduce my studio as a maker of treasured relics.

In this case the reality of the past wrongs brought by colonialism which is still a perpetual struggle in itself to make amends. As an artist and an intellect I cannot help but to use the nature of subversion in dismantling the power and mysticism of the very objects and tools of colonial power, or just oppressive structures of power whether it be, Catholicism, My western education through Colegio de San de Letran, and Imperialism through the means of Capitalism etc. Art has granted me a salvation in giving a redeeming dignity of what I have sought after to attain. This state of reconciliation with the self and that of something perhaps adrift through the repercussions of past injustices. Only materialized in its physicality as something tangible through art. Since I cannot fully grasped this lost. It is an act on my part as a way of absolution to make my own through art, but in reflection as a reminder of that lost, and how I have attained a sense of dignity within myself in helping others achieve the process of decolonization.


Figure 1: Lazaro Juan, An altar of Jubilant Rants, 2014. Mixed media
Figure 3: Manuel Ocampo, Untitled (Burnt-Out Europe), 1992. Oil and decal on canvas.

Figure 4: Carlo Ricafort, Sweet and Sour Pork (After Guston and Picasso), 2012. Oil on Canvas paper, 36”x 31” inches

Figure 5: Juan Carlos Quintana, What Can You Bring to the Table?, 2012. Acrylic and Oil stick on Canvas 82” x 82” inches
Figure 6: George Grosz, "Freedom", 1936. small edition print

Figure 7: Lazaro Juan, FLIP (Halo-Halo), 2015. Painting Installation
Figure 7: Detail shot

Figure 8: Lazaro Juan, Oh…Lazarus, Whom God Has Helped, Have You No Shame! 2015. Mixed media, Site Specific Installation
Figure 11:

Figure 12:
Figure 13:
Figure 14: Detail
Figure 15: