

ADVENTURES IN SKINNY-DIPPING

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Ronald Ventura's latest suite of works for Tyler Rollins Fine Art, entitled *Metaphysics of Skin*, deals mostly with how present-day reality has become this baffling multi-layered beast, something that straddles human consciousness with its multiple coverings. The aesthetics, politics, metaphysics of layers. Skin as metaphor. Skin and its transcendental dimensions, far from its literal meaning as "the external covering or integument of an animal body." Heavy meanings. Even heavier images.

The artist explains that his goal is to juxtapose images: whether they be hyper-realistic, or something recruited from art history, such as intricate drawings by, say, Dürer or Da Vinci; or whether they be line drawings, or something regurgitated from some animated Disney or Loony Tunes or fairy-tale nightmare. Ventura says, "The images are all about identity — whether assimilated into a greater whole, or lost totally." Identity is a theme explored incessantly by contemporary artists in the Philippines, since Filipinos — or at least those Pinoys who are aware of history and the delicious fictions that pass for "history" — are burdened by a colonial past. (Centuries under the Spaniards, decades under the American and Japanese occupation. Who are we? and where are we going? and all that jazz.)

All throughout his career, Ronald Ventura has always approached the empty canvas with an inquiring mind. Born in 1973, he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts Major in Painting degree at the royal and pontifical University of Santo Tomas (UST) in Manila in 1993. His first solo exhibition, *All Souls Day* in 2001, attracted attention for his "magnificent nudes, ivory-skinned with rich tones from dark grays and sepias to luminous whites, in a setting of urban decay — unusual images that signaled a renewed engagement in gender issues in art as well as offering an allegorical critique of the conditions of men and women in our times."¹

From then on, he has participated in numerous solo as well as group exhibitions including the Asian International Art Exhibition (AIAE) at Fukuoka Art Museum in 2004 and the International Biennial Print and Drawing Exhibit in Taipei in 1999. He received a prestigious studio residency grant in Sydney, Australia from the Ateneo Art Gallery in 2005 and was one of the Cultural Center of the Philippines' 13 Artists Awardees in 2003. Through the years he has created an enthralling oeuvre. He has drawn the distinction between "illusions and boundaries," journeyed "under the rainbow" for hidden colors and meanings, as well as explored "dialogue boxes" and "dead-end images" in various exhibitions.

His landmark 2005 show, entitled *Human Study*, at the Art Center in Metro Manila featured paintings and sculptures that "refer to the contemporary hell in which humans live: soldiers in perpetual warfare, commodification and religious emotionalism. What

gives his work its power is its virtuoso style, derived from the classical tradition but revealing a dark underbelly.”² He “mapped out the corporeal” in his 2008 show at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Museum, laying the “groundwork for an investigation of the commodification of the human body, paranoia and religious consciousness in modern societies.”³

No matter the visual twists and turns of his opuses, every exhibit is an outgrowth of the preceding one. Like a bizarrely twisted yet productive plant. A Ventura flytrap that out-eats mediocre artists for dinner. Every image is a take-off point for the next. All are nocturnal preludes.

Ventura explains, “In these paintings for the Tyler Rollins show, everything overlaps — three-dimensional images with caricatures, color with black and white, fashion with philosophy, cartoons with art history, G.I. Joe with tattoo iconography, East with West, etc.”

The paintings still show this contemporary artist’s technical prowess in graphite drawing, shading and other drafting sorceries, just as in past shows in the Philippines and abroad. Colors (and playful ones at that), however, play a more defined role in the proceedings — maybe an outgrowth of his current fixations with all things pop.

Ventura is also exhibiting small sculptures that are part of the *Zoomanities* series at Tyler Rollins. This battalion of mutant-men assemblages wages war on preconceived notions of “what sculpture is and what sculpture shouldn’t be.” Like a cross between Rodin’s poetic bronzes and Todd McFarlane’s *Twisted Fairy Tales* action figures.

The *Zoomanities* sculptures (in fiberglass, fiberglass-resin, plastic, metal, silver, bronze; most of them hand-painted) include a gas-masked figure with wings, humans with animal heads or TV-set helmets, punk rockers, tattooed freaks, among other beasts of burden — a combination of sculptures, casts of toys, dolls, saint figurines, whatever the artist could get his hands on.

“I put them together automatically, not consciously,” says Ventura, who thought of mixing religious icons and cartoon characters in coming up with his own “creatures of discomfort.”

The artist noticed how animals are used in defining moral conduct. The title of the series was inspired in part by the Cirque du Soleil production in Las Vegas, which is a play on the words “zoo” and “humanity.” But if the Cirque show is about sensuality and animal magnetism (and about “natural beauty and acceptance of differences”), Ventura’s *Zoomanities* are more existential, more confrontational, and more of an inquiry on how men have stereotyped other men by using beastly metaphors.

He explains, “If you’re scared, you’re ‘chicken,’ or if you’re bad, you’re a ‘black sheep.’ If

a person behaves badly, somebody would tell that person, 'Hayop ka (You're an animal)!' Why is that? What I did in *Zoomanities* was to fiddle with those images handed down from generation to generation. Blue rhinoceros figurines are displayed by the Chinese for protection against robbery and accidents, so I purposely painted mine black to turn everything on its head."

The artist takes a jab at gender wars in one painting, revisiting the Filipino mythology of "Malakas" (the Strong) and "Maganda" (the Beautiful). In other works on canvas, he has depicted the magenta revolution of emo-rock fashion, reinterpreted the mother figure as a woman with a tattoo of a map of the Philippines, and deconstructed self-portraiture by portraying himself with a mushroom cloud "silently exploding" in his head, with the cavalcade of Bambi, Thumper, Chip (or is it Dale?) and other characters on a peaceful plain reminiscent of the cover of the Penguin edition of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* showing a philosopher ruminating over civilization and its various discontent.

Ronald Ventura is one discontented artist, always seeking the perfect form (or forms) for the inexpressible. And the art world is a much better (and beautifully stranger) place because of this.

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This essay appears in the catalogue for *Metaphysics of Skin*, a solo exhibition by Ronald Ventura at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York (September 17 – October 31, 2009).

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NOTES

- 1 Alice Guillermo, *Human Study*, curatorial statement, The Cross Art Projects, Sydney, Australia, 2005.
- 2 *ibid.*
- 3 Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, curatorial statement, *Mapping the Corporeal*, NUS Museum, Singapore, 2008.