

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

“Because it is there”

The Philippines at the 32nd Venice Biennale

Emmanuel Torres

Philippine Studies vol. 13, no. 2 (1965): 330–349

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

Notes & Comment

"Because it is there"... The Philippines at the 32nd Venice Biennale: A Close Look

Perhaps the best important single event in Philippine contemporary art so far has been the participation of two artists, Jose Joya and N. Veloso Abueva, in the XXXII International Exposition of Arts in Venice. The Venice Biennale is the oldest, the most celebrated, and in the years following World War II the most lavish of international art festivals. It is the biggest emporium of what is new and lively going on in the international art scene today and what is simply the best each country has to offer; where only the very best and the most "advanced" of aesthetic expressions stand a chance of being noticed, praised or condemned, by a tough jury and hundreds of critics invited from all over the world and where simply to have been there is a distinguished merit patch a participating artist could sew on his sleeve. It is certainly one of three or four exhibitions to which the world's leading art cognoscenti, critics, journalists, museum curators, dealers, and artists gravitate to look at the latest developments, consolidations, refinements, and breakthroughs, of different aesthetic movements in painting and sculpture as well as intimations of shapes to come.

That the Philippines made it to Venice at all is an achievement difficult to underplay, a thrust in the right—and inevitable—direction.

The Philippines *was there*, largely through the efforts of the 17-year-old, nonprofit Art Association of the Philippines (AAP), which the Department of Foreign Affairs had designated "the implementing body to handle all aspects of the Philippine participation" barely three months before the Biennale was scheduled to open. The total lack of financial support was the biggest problem the AAP had to put up with, in spite of its repeated requests to obtain funds from Malacañan and the gallant concerted efforts of several newspaper columnists who realized the predicament the AAP was getting into,

a matter involving national prestige abroad. As the invitation to this prestigious show is extended directly to the government of each participating country, the AAP had reason to expect *some* material assistance from the government. The apathy of the powers-that-be may seem perverse in the light of what we found out as soon as we arrived in Venice during that frenetic week preceding the art festival's opening: the Philippine participation was the only one which did not enjoy the support of government funds. We felt as if we had just been pushed overboard—Joya, Abueva, and myself—bag and baggage into the Grand Canal.

One might wonder why the AAP accepted to shoulder the responsibility of putting together the show in the first place, knowing that hoping for government financial support to materialize at the last minute, even while the delegates were well on their way by jet to Venice, might turn out to be a mirage. In less than five weeks, the AAP, which claims "to have worked hard" for the Venice invitation, felt that the Philippines had been waiting for an opportunity like this for years; rather than allow itself to be hamstrung by snarls of official red tape, it decided that this year's was too good a chance to pass up. What an event like the Venice Biennale might do to stimulate the creative powers of participating artists and to foster the image of contemporary Philippine art abroad was well worth the risks involved, and the AAP met them head-on. It did all it could to raise funds from private individuals and business establishments to defray the cost of transporting and insuring the entries as well as to obtain donations from three airline companies and the state university to send a delegation of two artists and a commissioner. (By no means is the Biennale over with the AAP: at this writing it is still in the throes of raising funds, this time to pay the cost of transporting the entries *back*.)

There we were, the official delegates at this redoubtable festival of the arts, making do with what little each of us had personally scrounged from his own private sources, bearing up with fourth-class hotels and the hazards of eating *trattoria* fare and finding ourselves in situations that threatened to become at any moment like those in a Mack Sennett comedy. We had an AAP member, Mrs. Elizabeth Chan, a Filipino-Chinese studying the art of mosaic in Venice, who speaks Italian and who of her own free will applied herself to the task of helping put together the Philippine participation, negotiating with Biennale officials, and dutifully relaying information, pertinent and otherwise, to Abueva, Joya, and me. At times she would be frantic about the lack of funds, which was no help to our frazzled nerves, as we were all waiting for *the* hoped-for cablegram from the AAP secretary informing us that the request for funds had at last been granted by Malacañan. It was like wishing for a phantom gondola to materialize of an evening under the Bridge of Sighs. There were

mornings when only the beautiful, ancient pear-shaped lute in an antique shop's window in front of our hotel would cheer me up before the prospect of another Continental breakfast of unchewable bread and *cafe-latte* such as we could afford. At times there would be Abueva's reminder that at least we were being made unhappy in Venice, in Byron's and Shylock's city, to buck our spirits up.

We were indeed in a city like no other in the world, where it was easy to alleviate worries of the kind we had, where the love for art is second only to the love for life. In Venice *farniente* (idleness) is a cultivated art in itself and the city invites one to stroll along its narrow, labyrinthine streets, through many peaceful *campos* or squares, up any of its 400 high-arching brick bridges to watch the gondolas moving underneath like black swans upon one of its 150 canals, past representations of the Madonna cradling a plump *bambino* and saints in painting and relief on the walls, curious shop signs, lanterns, window displays of florid Venetian glassware—all of which, seen at night, made the city look like a theatrical set for a Romantic Italian opera, an Impressionist illusion floating upon dark watery mirrors. Venice encouraged us to be philosophical about our problems, to sit them out at an outdoor cafe in a *campo* drinking red Valpolicella wine, watching the sun brighten on the yellow-ochre and pink of the building plaster and the peonies decking the balconies; observing gossipy fruit vendors gathered around a well and admiring the lissom, glowing sensuality of broad-hipped, full-breasted Italian women; waiting of an early afternoon a gunbark signifying the feeding-time of birds and sending all the pigeons within earshot to swarm out of the squares, balconies, eaves, water troughs, and red-tile roofs to wheel in a deafening beating of wings across the blue toward San Marco. After all, we were in the one city on earth where nobody cares to hurry and everybody walks or travels slowly by boat, where all the sundials are inscribed with the words *Horas non numero nisi serenas* (I count only happy hours), where the Rialto Bridge still arches over the Grand Canal toward which the summer crowds would flock with their thumbworn Michelin guidebooks, Kodaks, flightbags, and other standard paraphernalia of transience. The sights and sounds of this absurdly romantic story-book city sinking steadily millimeter by slow millimeter into the water, had us in its thrall—until over a large *campo* of Shylock's Rialto we could see, large and clear, a wine-dark crenelated banner announcing the XXXII Venice Biennale, reminding us what we were supposed to be there for.

Ad majorem artis gloriam. We were in a city famous not only for its architectural Renaissance wonders, but also for its two sophisticated, pace-setting festivals—one glorifying the fine arts, the other the art of the cinema.

Although we had nagging problems, what mattered was that our entries to the fine arts festival had made it, that we were there one

week before the opening. We were there during those frenzied seven days, attending ceaseless rounds of enormous cocktail parties, receiving invitations to see one-man exhibitions in and around the area of San Marco, showings of film documentaries on art, a concert at the Fenice, a sumptuous luncheon given by the President of the Biennale. On our own we were seeing an *avant-garde*, "let 'er rip" dance concert of the Merce Cunningham troupe from the U. S.—with music or non-music by John Cage and lights, sets, and costumes by Robert Rauschenberg, whose "pop" works were on display at the Biennale—at which a number of critics, allegedly French, booed and hissed throughout the entire performance. After the show we sat at a *pizzeria*-bar right outside the Fenice where sections of the audience discussed the *outré* performance of the evening and, mostly, Rauschenberg's ashes-and-sackcloth costumes and sets of polka red-blue dots, creaking machinery, and clanking tin cans, while the autographed photographs of distinguished artists looked down on us—especially one of Salvador Dali with his long wiry mustache curled toward his popping eyeballs.

If we were not cocktail-going or attending cultural programs, we would be chasing after beer-guzzling sweaty Italians to get on with the installation of pictures and sculptures; listening to the spirited cafe talk about the "politics" allegedly behind the management of the Biennale and rumors of Rauschenberg being a sure winner which were bugging the French who seemed to be all over Venice; strolling about the Giardini, the elegant site of the festival, amid the sounds of crashing metal sculpture, hammer-pounding, and a perfunctory broken-down Claudia Cardinale voice paging officials and journalists through an intercom. The place continually swarmed with jurors, artists, photographers, critics, and journalists cradling armfuls of catalogues, and local characters who did not look as if they had anything directly to do with the preparations of the festival.

It was also a week rampant with the antics of exhibitionists, providing the freak shows to the big carnival. There was a young man from Bologna, whose works had been rejected, quietly walking in the Central Pavilion with an umbrella up on which samples of his work were painted all over. At two cocktail parties at the U. S. Embassy and the British Consulate there was another young man simply from "Nowhere," who wore the same unconventional outfit—a suit of clothes made from World War II parachute silk with green camouflage blotches. We kept seeing the same girl with long black silk stockings that disappeared under a billowy green skirt show up at cocktail parties who seemed ready and willing to be kissed and seduced by any artist on sight. Could this have been the same girl who picked up sudden notoreity at a cocktail party by refusing to budge from in front of a painting, explaining she was part of the picture? On the Grand Canal a "Floating Biennale" materialized, a yacht dolled up like a poor man's Walt Disney pirate ship loaded with gaudy, shocking bric-a-

brac and peepshow boxes and telescopes; we were later to read that two of its exhibits were confiscated by the police for alleged pornography.

At the Giardini members of a roving TV camera outfit were busy doing an on-the-spot record of the Biennale activities. While Joya and I were having *vino bianco* in an outdoor cafe outside the exposition gates, a man smiled up to us in a casual sportsjacket to ask in faltering English if we were participating in the show. Next thing we knew I was appearing before the TV camera answering this man's three questions: (1) What is the purpose of the Biennale? (2) Who do you think are likely to win major prizes? (3) What is your comment on the new trends? (Whatever became of that film remains a mystery to me as nobody I know has ever seen it. Perhaps they belong to the crew that does the *Mondo Cane* series? Last year's festival had enough strange objects to fill thousands of feet of film: the world's greatest art festival was also, in many ways, a bizarre bazaar.)

How did the Philippines fare at the Biennale? Creditably, we think. To our satisfaction, the entries were installed the way we wanted them, and although the room we had was one of the smallest (roughly, 17 by 28 feet), it was one of the best-lighted. The room was ready for viewing three days before the opening.

The Philippines occupied one of the small, skylighted rooms in the huge Central Pavilion which also accommodated Argentina, Bulgaria, Peru, Syria, and South Africa (countries like the Philippines without their own pavilions). The greater portion—69 rooms—of this Central Pavilion contained the Italian entries, special retrospectives of three Italian painters, and a large special show called "Art of Today in the Museum" arranged in cooperation with 18 topflight museums of the world which featured many of the great names in modern art (a number of whom are past Biennale winners): Francis Bacon, Max Beckmann, Alberto Burri, Eduardo Chillida, Jean Dubuffet, Max Ernst, Alberto Giacometti, Barbara Hepworth, Oscar Kokoschka, Fernand Leger, Joan Miro, Henry Moore, Antoine Pevsner, Pablo Picasso, Germaine Richier, Pierre Soulages, Rufino Tamayo, Antonio Tapies, Jean Tinguely.

Five hardwood (*molave*) pieces by Abueva (of which three are reliefs) and nine oils by Joya comprised the first Philippine participation. Abueva's elegant "Allegorical Harpoon," waxed to golden sheen, stood at the center of the narrow Philippine *sala*; one end of "Harpoon" pointed at Joya's yellow abstraction, "Granadean Arabesque," and the other end at another large canvas, the colorful and exuberant "Hills of Nikko," which in Joya's opinion was the one single entry of his most widely admired by opening-day crowds.

At about ten o'clock in the morning of June 20, the 32nd Venice Biennale opened with a brief but colorful ceremony amid spectacle such as is reserved, we thought, only for papal princes or ambassadors, not artists. Red velvet canopies billowed in the early summer breeze; a long red carpet had been unrolled the night before to mark the path to the *al fresco* tribune where the officials of the festival would preside like later-day Maecenas; and for decorative effect guards in storybook costume and high shako were on hand to add a grace-note of tradition to the 69-year-old Biennale. By the Grand Canal the flags of 34 nations streamed in the wind, and it was heartening to know that the Philippine flag was up there for all the delegates and ambassadors from other countries to see, fluttering for the first time at the Biennale. President Antonio Segni was supposed to preside over the awards ceremony and give the principal address, but official reports had it that he was ill, and his Minister of Education had to carry on for him. We had expected long, withering speeches from the two other speakers, the Mayor of Venice and the President of the Biennale, but theirs, like the Minister's, were short. After the speeches came the announcement of the prize-winners, chosen by a seven-man international jury: Robert Rauschenberg of the U.S., painter (2 million liras: Zoltan Kemeny of Switzerland, sculptor (2 million l.); Andrea Cascella of Italy, sculptor (2 million l.); Arnaldo Pomodoro of Italy, sculptor (2 million l.); Joseph Fassbender of Germany, graphic artist (500,000 l.); and Angelo Savelli of Italy, sculptor (500,000 l.).

The formal announcement of Rauschenberg's winning the grand prize in painting came as an anti-climax, as his victory had been predicted loudly weeks before the opening. Seated right in front of us at the tribune for commissioners and artists, the 38-year-old victor beamed in an elegant light suit for the benefit of photographers, looking neater than his controversial "combine" paintings which make use of such unexalted materials as rusty slop pail, crumpled newspaper, grubby stuffed fowl, and dripping tar. As cool and casual as he was a few nights before at the Fenice when he appeared onstage to acknowledge the ovation—and jeers—from the audience, "the old master of pop art" rose to receive his prize. He was beaming, and so was Leo Castelli, the leading New York dealer of "pop art," who had a seat beside the victor at the ceremony and was said to have campaigned hard for "the canonization of pop art" in Venice. This time nobody booed: everybody was clapping politely in the dazzling Venetian sunlight. Rauschenberg looked as if he couldn't care less what people, including critics, thought of his works, least of all Rome's pro-Communist *Paese Sera*, which called "pop art" all sorts of names, and the Vatican's *L'Osservatore Romano*, which decried the triumph of Rauschenberg and his followers as "the total and general defeat of culture."

Aside from Rauschenberg and Kemeny, and in the furor over "pop art," nobody seemed to be noticing much of other artists who had won honors.

The presentation of awards over, a meandering official tour of the exposition followed. The pavilions all looked epic-and-span, reflecting the architectural features of their respective countries: there were, for instance, Canada with its outdoor teepee-inspired glass-and-timber construction, Japan with its Zen-austere lines and spaces fronted by a characteristically quiet rock-and-moss garden, Russia with its formidably heavy masses, moldings, and turrets, looking like a junior-sized Kremlin. More than 3300 entries by some 500 artists were on view, spread out across several acres, which would take at least two full days to see all. I thought the way we went about it, seeing a few pavilions at a time over a stretch of five or six days, was the sensible thing to do if we were to avoid the taste of too much and mental diarrhea.

It was good to learn that we were one of two Asian countries at the last Biennale and that the word "Philippines"—*Filippine*—was being heard for the first time in the Venetian press and in the many cocktails given by the participating countries through their respective embassies. Many delegates had only the vaguest idea where the Philippines could possibly be; such confession of ignorance coming from, say, Frenchmen, was tolerable, but coming from Venetians, who take pride in their cosmopolitanism and their well-known contacts with the East, was a source of irritation. But then the intrepid Marco Polo had never reached the Philippines in his celebrated travels in the Orient; there we were, a tiny embattled band of cultural emissaries making our first contact with the Venetians some 600 years later, being mistaken for some other country's. A number of dignitaries asked us how President Sukarno was doing as head of state. At the British cocktail party, a British delegate, after the usual introductory formalities, started small talk by chirping a compliment in our direction, "Ah, that was a splended *pah*-tie you had the other day," which nearly had us choking before our drinks as the "*pah*-tie" he was referring to was obviously the press preview at the Japanese Pavilion—which indeed was the most splendid we had ever attended, as *hors d'oeuvre* and rice delicacies served in beautiful arrangements as only the Japanese knew how seemed to be in inexhaustible supply and the champagne flowed and flowed while one Japanese lady in regal kimono kept smiling and bowing graciously at guests. But a chance meeting with the commissioner from Israel at the Piazza San Marco, who said he had read what I had written for the official catalogue and wondered about some of the remarks I made about contemporary art, made us realize that the Biennale was not simply what it meant to the blasé press—the most mammoth Vanity Fair of the art-promotion syndrome, a giddy carousel of cocktail parties where people seemed determined to talk past each other, as in a play by Eugene Ionesco—there were also people *listening* with a serious ear.

As delegates we were *listening* at these cocktail parties, and learning, as much as we were eating and drinking our way through them. We were made to understand that these parties were set up for purposes of international goodwill as well as publicity by representatives of countries with pavilions and prestige to keep up. At these parties we learned how countries readied themselves each Biennale year, usually months—a year—ahead of time. In several cases, there would be a representative (private individual or cultural attache) on the payroll of his government, who spoke Italian and resided either in Rome or Venice, doing *liaison* work between the Biennale officials and those of his own government, looking after the entries upon arrival, and paving the way for those elaborate cocktail parties that have become traditional at the Biennale and the object of gate-crashing art *aficionados*, beatniks, and demimonde who make Venice their summer stomping ground.

At these parties we often heard how the Biennale had grown so huge there is hardly a plot of ground at the exposition site left for a new participating country on which to erect a pavilion. At the Canada press preview, a commissioner's assistant suggested, "Perhaps the Grand Canal", which led to an animated, albeit whiskey-eyed, discussion on the pros and cons of building a Philippine Pavilion *on stilts* over the water—a Maranao super-structure, surrounded by a flotilla of Moro *vintas* perhaps? Someone not "in" on the banter thought that although its exoticism could be an irresistible come-on for tourists, anything short of concrete would be reduced to shambles by the Venetian storms, such as the one a few days before the opening that knocked a hole through the roof of the British Pavilion.

Before taking off for Venice, we had hoped to give a modest press preview to mark what a friend from the British Pavilion referred to as our "debut in the big circus". The idea was to invite a small gathering of journalists, foreign delegates, and Biennale officials to whom we could simply say "Have come, are here," and lift a highball in the name of international friendship. But the plan was doomed from the very start for lack of funds—together with the idea of printing several thousand copies of a lavish catalogue for free distribution to stir up the widest possible interest and publicity during the week of the opening, as many countries were doing as a matter of normal procedure. During that all-important week, we had with us less than 900 copies of a catalogue (it was far from lavish) which we had managed to get printed at the last hour through a donor. Others had thousands—roomfuls—of catalogues and other hand-out materials to give away like so many calling cards to 547 critics and journalists from all over the world invited by Biennale officials to cover the event, not to mention critics who were in Venice at the time to attend the annual conference of the Association Internationale des Critiques D'Art (AICA) at the Palazzo Ducale, numerous Biennale delegates,

their friends, and friends of friends. We were fortunate, however, that we were able to bring with us black-and-white photographs of each of our 14 entries and to deposit these at the Biennale's coldly efficient publicity bureau which took care of farming out printed and photographic materials about the different participations to the besieging press.

After the ceremonies of the opening day, almost everybody who had anything to do with the festival was either preparing to leave Venice or were already on their way home that afternoon. That evening the Biennale officials held an invitational concert (which featured a major Stravinsky work) to honor the delegates and their ambassadors at the plush, red-velvet-carpeted Teatro La Fenice, and the whole concert hall was four-fifths empty! All we could see the following morning at the Giardini were strawhatted tourists, beach characters from the Lido, and pigeon feathers.

The official catalogue, we noticed, was selling fast. The fattest, most lavish the Biennale has ever put out (332 pages of text, over 200 full-page photographs of the entries, priced at about \$6), the catalogue includes reproductions of Joya's tight, surly "Episode in Stockholm" and Abueva's "Flight", looking like a smaller "Harpoon" in its horizontal emphasis, as well as the Italian translation of the preface I wrote for our own catalogue of the Philippine Participation. The highly influential *Art International*, in its discriminating perspective of the 1964 Biennale, reproduced one work by Joya and one by Abueva in a spread that also included a reproduction of a piece by Zoltan Kemeny of Switzerland, the grand-prizewinner in sculpture. Newspapers and art magazines which mentioned the Philippines "*per la prima volta a Venezia*," as G. A. Dell 'Acqua does in his introduction to the fat catalogue which is now part of the reference shelves of many leading art museum curators, dealers, and critics who have their fingers on the pulse of what is consequential in the current international art market. The main purpose of our going to Venice was not to angle for prizes but to be noticed officially; and this we accomplished. A small splash, but a good start. (What matters is that if a bigger splash is to follow the initial plunge, the time to prepare for it is NOW.)

Though we were not able to plant a Big Publicity Machine in our first Biennale year, which under the circumstances had to be played by ear, so to speak, the experience we gained in Venice was more than we could hope for: meeting artists, and Biennale officials, establishing contacts, obtaining first-hand knowledge of the workings of the complex international-art festival syndrome, seeing the latest "post-everything trends of current aesthetics" (as the *Newsweek* critic put it), finding out how ours compared with the visual and plastic achievements of other countries where art is regarded as an

existential act of daily importance by artists, the people who buy their works, the dealers who promote them, and the friends who presume to understand their egos.

Among the insights we gained in Venice, the most significant are two: (1) that only internationally recognized artists who have had the largest number of successful one-man shows in the art centers of the world (New York, London, Berlin, Madrid, Paris), the greatest critical acclaim, and the widest influence on other artists have the best chances of landing prizes (the Biennale is a virtual galumphing battle of titans, as one glance at the roster of postwar winners will attest: Bracque, Moore, Morandi, Manzu, Chagall—winners all in 1948, the same year!—and in subsequent Biennales Matisse, Dufy, Calder, Nolde, Arp, Miro, Villon, Munakata, Chadwick, Tobey, Hartung, Giacometti), and (2) that the Biennale is more than a competition among artists for prizes: it is, in effect, an *agora* for a lively dialogue among artists and promoters of art from Tokyo to Buenos Aires. We were impressed by the works of this year's prizewinners as much as we were by entries of artists who won nothing in the way of prizes but much to increase their already impressive reputations: France's Jean Ipousteguy, Holland's Karel Appel, Great Britain's Bernard Meadows, Germany's Norbert Krieke, Belgium's Pol Bury.

Except for the French critics, the losers and villains of the last Biennale, many delegates and critics whom we met and rubbed elbows with thought that the two grand prizes went to good choices, if not the very best of the contenders (very difficult to establish categorically in the first place). We felt that, on the whole, a spirit of sportsmanship, of fellow-feeling, especially in a field where the Muses also tread, pervaded the awards ceremony. Elevation to the official pantheon is, after all, the work of men who are tentative and fallible, although such an event happening to an artist like Joya would mean unprecedented honor to the Philippines and bring instant world renown and wealth to the artist. Still, chauvinistic sentiments in art festivals are indefensible, and nobody seemed to be defending the French. ("The French are angry," Alan Solomon, the U.S. Commissioner was explaining to us at an overcrowded British preview, "because they hate to admit what has been a fact for many years now—that New York has replaced Paris as the art capital of the world.") The participating artist who goes to Venice quickly realizes the scorched-earth value of facing a tough international body of critics. He learns what it takes these days to be a serious artist with one eye turned inward to his Muse and the other cocked to the niches of the official pantheon. If he comes from a country in which modern art is still a relatively young thing, Venice provides "the moment of truth."

Seen in the context of the Biennale, the works of Joya and Abueva confirm the lyricism and essential conservativeness of Philippine art—

qualities which in themselves are nothing by which to condemn or praise works of art. What some Manila art-gallery habitués find *avant garde* in Joya and Abueva is not so, in Venice. Not all good entries at the Biennale, however, represented the very latest-just-arrived; but it is true that what got into the glare-of headlines were those which had the most topical, the most "far-out," look about them, particularly (1) the New York phenomenon called "pop art" which has spread to Europe (the most typical examples of which, to my mind, were Joe Tilson's giant wooden keyhole; John Chamberlain's crumpled automobile fenders; Jim Dine's all-white bathroom wall with *real* things to go with it, Ivory soap, towel, medicine chest with mirror, toilet paper, etc.; Claes Oldenburg's pillowy ghost toaster and soft typewriter made of vinyl plastic; Mimmo Rotella's gaudy collages of torn billboard movie posters featuring such symbols as Marilyn Monroe and Greta Garbo; and Jasper John's assemblage that brings together such unrelated objects as beer can, paint brush, kitchen knife, and press-button light switch) and (2) the new gothic horrors of Italian surrealism (the hairy, sick-color blobs of nightmares, grim science-fiction landscapes, green metal forms that look like mechanical monsters from outer space, erotic crucifixions, and stark vaginal and phallic obsessions). These paintings and sculptures had the frightened and frightening, the absurdly confused, and bored imagery of the contemporary metropolis or megalopolis and of suburbia swamped by the doubtful comforts of mechanized speed, brassy commercialism, wonder cures, mass-media entertainment, simplistic journalism, public relations, and glossy pornography. The storms of critical controversy at the 32nd Venice Biennale (the most controversial, according to observers who have been following its history) raged mostly about the Italian horrors at the Central Pavilion and the current aesthetic epidemic of "pop art." Some critics thought that this time the Biennale had gone too far in tolerating *avant-gardism-at-all-cost* and the rampant blast-your-eyes exhibitionism that had every traditional norm thrown overboard. Several ecclesiastical dignitaries, like the Patriarch of Venice, excoriated the representations of savage nihilism and despair at the Biennale and declared that some of the works were "indecent" and "morally corrupt" (the works that drew the loudest objection were the morbid surrealist icons of the Italian Sergio Vacchi, some nudes by the world-renown Belgian Paul Delvaux, and the voyeuristic preoccupations of the Canadian "pop" satirist, Harold Town). In more critical *artistic* quarters, the Italian "horrors" drew more controversy than "pop," American-style.

All that was overtly shocking and confusing about the Biennale seemed to be epitomized in a room containing the creations of Enrico Baj of Italy, in which the same dehumanized comic-strip figure with saucer eyes and a gaping hole with rows of splayed teeth, sporting rows of medals on its chest (a symbol of man's destructive self-pride, presumably) would appear in ludicrous contexts like wallpaper flowers

or a group of realistic, luscious nude women. His sculptures were just as grotesque, like the one which seemed to have been the most widely photographed, a free-standing bright-green, Erector-set robot built out thin metal strips dotted with holes—something straight out of some mad scientist's dream landscape. Baj's images of decadence formed a chamber of sick-green horrors which the public, the press, and the clergy would point to as proof that the Biennale was going to the dogs—in spite of the prevalence of saner voices in other rooms. In American "pop", it was not difficult to find the liberating qualities of calculated naivete and absurdity. The works of Dine and Rauschenberg were at least humorous. But the layman confronted with a Baj creation is easily repelled by the quality of menace—and it takes a pretty strong stomach to find it attractive in any way.

Like many other entries at the Biennale that chose to follow the quieter paths of abstract art, Joya's and Abueva's seemed to possess a clean, classic and acceptable look about them; they stood in a non-controversial corner of the Central Pavilion, remote from the critical storm centers, the titillating novelties of "pop" (which has become "in" through Rauschenberg's triumph) and the nervy, jumpy excitements of the even bolder works of the "kinetic" artists whose whirling, vibrating, noise-making machines looking like complicated toys are still "out," but which I believe are already on the way to being "in" perhaps by 1966.

When we held a one-day preview of the Philippine entries at the Architectural Center ground lobby last April, there were not a few who complained that the entries should have been more distinctively Filipino. We were told that the entries we chose, particularly Joya's, would only succeed in resembling works from other countries done in the International Abstract Style and that entries "more representative" of the Philippines should have been chosen. To this objection, our reply—in the light of what we saw in Venice—is as follows: (1) that modern art criticism could not care less if a painting were done in an abstract, figurative, or nationalist manner—the important thing is that it has quality; (2) that abstract art, by becoming an international language, did not lose the capacity to offer a still-wide range of refinements, extensions, and adaptations within which a painter like Joya could work out his own *personal* style to set him apart from, say, Afro or Tworok; (3) that, far from being an indiscriminating modernist copycat, Joya has added something vital out of his own personality and environment into the framework of the so-called International Abstract Style—in fact, his paintings did not look like anybody else's in Venice, not quite (we looked at Afro's "Neroverde" of 1959, and then at Joya's "Surging Red" of 1960, and did notice a close semblance, especially in composition, but certain Joya mannerisms, "tics of the brush" that would later expand into his tracking loaded-brush calligraphy, as in "Hills of Nikko" and "Episode in Stockholm", both of 1964, differen-

tiate him from the Italian master); and (4) that the entries which tried hard to assert national identity, especially those in the social-realist manner, looked awfully misplaced at the Biennale, like the entries of Russia and Bulgaria, some of Syria, Greece and the United Arab Republic. National identity or imagemaking carries no weight in an international art exposition.

What matters with international jurors is the appearance of authority in a work of art, new or not-so-new, cubist or surrealist, geometric or expressionist, neo-Dada or neo-figurative, "pop" or "op". What they look for is something new—and every artist with talent and originality is always finding surprising ways of expressing and interpreting reality in varying degrees of newness or creating new variations within a not-so-new frame of reference like cubism, for example—but decidedly *not* something new for the sake of merely grabbing attention through shock or gaudy sensationalism. What matters is that a work should have vitality as well as holding power, inventiveness as well as conviction, freedom as well as a built-in inner logic. It is true that to find a *rationale* for an authentic new work is sometimes difficult, as many spectators, including art critics, would declare at the Biennale, regarding only the immediate bewilderment of shocking subject matter and an apparent rejection of all traditional rules. After the initial first-contact feeling of chaos rubs off, it is quite possible to see why Rauschenberg's "pop" imagery has more satiric relevance than Rottella's, how the fresh ideas of an authentic innovator like Johns become easy clichés and heavy-handed gimmicks in the hands of his countless imitators.

I think Joya is right in keeping to the course he has chosen, eschewing the shock values of novelty, to discover new ideas in an abstract style not yet thoroughly explored to its farthest reaches. His is an art motivated by deep personal conviction, not by a desire to be arresting at all cost (something-borrowed, something new fangled for the sake of being topical) as if style in painting were something to be put on and off, like a hat, happening not by inner necessity but by sheer whim or perversion. His entries at the Biennale, I thought, showed not only competence by international standards, but also surpassed many works in the abstract-expressionist/impressionist idiom in which he paints.

Abueva's were among the rare sculptures carved from wood. His striking "Allegorical Harpoon" has scale and force, one of the few pieces he has ever done in-the-round, in separate sections, that possess variety of shape and tension. It has what very few art works in the Philippines have, a museum look, and we thought it was a pity he did not have other works at the Biennale that could measure up to it in quality; indeed it looked very good in our corner of the festival. It made the most of the beauty of *molave*, which drew ripples of praise

from opening-day crowds who thumped and stroked the rifle-shaped main section. His "Flight," however, does not have the same power; although it has interesting modulations, the scale seems too small for the intentions it is supposed to carry. The other Abuevas, shallow reliefs, represent an impasse into which the kind of functionalist aesthetic Abueva is committed to can easily lead: "Bird," "Ark," and "City"—typical of contemporary Philippine sculpture—have elegance; but the elegance of their clean, simple lines, polished but static details, and labored appearance is a slick one. Their small scale bothered Fernando Zobel, one-time AAP president, who had been to the 1962 Biennale and whose paintings formed part of the Spanish representation then; he doubted their effectiveness, feeling that they would look like ashtrays in an art festival where usually gigantesque works tower in each pavilion. But it was not the scale of these pieces, of "Ark" and "City" in particular, which bothered me—there were pieces just as small at the Biennale and there are any number of internationally famed sculptors who work on a small scale, like Reg Butler of Great Britain—but the absence of interesting shapes in them: they looked more like unobtrusive adjuncts to architecture, household decor, or furniture than self-contained objects that grip the imagination because of the expressive complexity or the sustained evocative subtleties of their forms. It is true that the pieces in question have neatness of execution, but this is not always a merit, especially if the ideas therein are seminal, to say the least. The only reason I know for the failure of Abueva to be represented by better works is short notice: right after he heard that he was a likely choice to represent the Philippines in late February or early March (the Biennale deadline for submission of entries was May 10), he decided to chisel out a group of new works by which he wanted himself represented. He did seven, all in *molave*; with the exception of one, they showed the effects of working under time pressure; the AAP had to screen three of these out as below the standards Abueva himself had set in past performances and in "Harpoon" of the new group. It was too late to gather his old works: the best ones were scattered in many private collections. The only thing I could do under the circumstances was add one competent work, the "Bird" of 1958 in the collection of Joya, to beef up, so to speak, Abueva's representation artistically at the Biennale.

Joya had no such problem with representation. When informed about his being selected the sole Philippine representative for painting, all he had to do was simply tell the members of the selection committee to go and take their pick from his large three-year (1961-64) retrospective show at the Phil-Am Life lobby (February 27-March 5) which was still going on. The work of this selection committee, composed of members of the Cultural Section of the Department of Foreign Affairs, the AAP, and a fledgling organization of critics (the Philippine section of the Association Internationale des Critiques D'Art),

some of whom are members of all *three* organizations at once, was a pretty complicated business from the start, a formidable Gordian knot that would tax the patience even of a calmer, more sagacious Alexander; to explain how finally, after much heated debate, it managed to arrive at the final decision to send two artists to Venice would require Olympian detachment and perhaps omniscience. There were 14 paintings in oil originally chosen to represent the artist, which had to be reduced to nine, because of the smallness of the room allotted to the Philippines. All nine oil paintings are consistently high in quality; more than half of them are among the best Joya has ever painted to date and technically impressive by international standards, to my mind; they also showed Venetian art cognoscenti the variety of content and the expressive range of Joya's visual language, from the cool, grassy lushness of "Hills of Nikko" to the steady glare of "Granade in Arabesque," from the quiet lyrical outburst of "Venetian Daybreak" (which reminded me of a Turner sunset being paraphrased by an abstract expressionist) to the palette-knife fury of his red "Carcass." Joya fared much better than Abueva did in Venice.

The specific arrangement of the entries, I thought, was more than we could hope for. The warmth of the sculptures complemented many of the paintings. Although we had expected a slightly wider floor area, we managed to avoid a cramped feeling. As far as wall space went, we had the second-to-the-smallest room (the smallest was Syria's). We had no complaint whatsoever as far as the lighting was concerned. True, friends of ours who had seen the Biennale would invariably complain how difficult it was to get to our corner of the Biennale: one had to pass through the labyrinths of the Central Pavilion and to be a Boy Scout once to make quick sense of the map of the Biennale to reach Sala No. LXI, the Philippine room (the map in the catalogue does suggest a short cut, round the corner of Sala LXIII, but then one would need a magnifying lens to find it). It was so easy to get lost on the way to the Philippine room as the Central Pavilion provided uneasy distractions to the unsuspecting visitor, what with the new surrealist shockers of the Italians leering and looming down from the walls at every labyrinthine corner, like minotaurs.

There is little doubt in my mind that going to Venice did a lot of good to our two participating artists, in the way of pointing out their individual strengths and weaknesses. It is in sculpture, however, where a Filipino artist like Abueva would find international art festivals stimulating and challenging. It is easy to think of four or five names in painting who could represent the Philippines by turns at future Biennales, but besides Abueva, I can think only of J. Elizalde Navarro for sculpture. Sculpture remains a neglected field in the arts in this country and the prevailing school of wood sculpture,

Abueva's, and his particular brand, the Cranbrook School of "the well-crafted" look, already shows signs of weariness and monotony. On the whole the expressive possibilities of metal are relatively unknown to Philippine sculptors, with the possible exception of Navarro and Ildefonso Marcelo, a former student of Abueva's who seems to be the only one at the moment preoccupied with junk metal.

The sculptures figured prominently at the Biennale if only because of their sheer scale and tonnage; but more arresting than mere size and weight are the fantastic appearances that were achieved with iron, bronze, and other metals, by twisting, puncturing, welding, scorching, and countless other ways of creating unusual sculptural details. We saw metal works that looked like huge gaping aortas, gigantic pomegranates, wind-tossed trees, tortured seaweeds, sunrays frozen into wiry zigzags, all sorts of unusual vegetable forms, mural-sized slabs ripped open by cannonballs, walls covered by rows of blisters as if caused by some overpowering solar heat, rock ledges with pumiced surfaces, and crooked totempoles. We also noted: (1) a wide variety of materials—every conceivable material is being used nowadays by sculptors, from traditional iron and bronze to all kinds of new synthetic ones; (2) the many ingenious devices to achieve color and complex or unusual textural effects, especially on metal; (3) a preoccupation with expressionism rather than decorativeness, organic rather than geometric form, "roughness" such as can be found in discarded objects, like junk automobile fenders or cartwheels, rather than the polish of the traditional well-made thing; and (4) a growing interest in the atmospheric and evocative effects that scale, mass, and interior space can create (some of the sculptures we saw could easily fill up an average-sized apartment room, sometimes inviting spectators to walk in and out of their gaping spaces, and could properly be called "environments").

The addition of actual movement and sound to sculpture by means of electricity really amounts to a new art form—kinetic art, the expressive possibilities of which appear boundless. Argentina had cubicles of electricity-powered mirror-discs giddily gyrating in the dark, iron fillings moving about within electro-magnetic fields, spindle machines whirling and clacking noisily a stone's throw away from the Philippine room. Oddly enough, the most original of the kineticists were not represented at all, such as Takis, Marcello Salvadori, and a Filipino now living in England—David Cortez Medalla, who is also a painter, poet, and dancer of real gifts. During the opening week of the Biennale, a small exhibition of kinetic works organized by an English art dealer named Paul Keeler was held in the gardens of La Villa Malcontenta: Salvadori's sensitive illumination" apparatus cast light that "faded and brightened with infinite gentleness" against peeling stucco; Takis' "ballet magnetique" bounced and swung against a dark background of trees; and Medalla's bubble machine made "the insubstantial, hardly earth-bound sculpture [bubbles] to grow out over the

sides of its container and envelop the ancient stone table on which it stood." These works, which must be seen in actual "performance" to be believed, were described by a *London Times* correspondent who had witnessed the goings-on at La Malcontenta as having "more vitality than the big show at Venice."

Another art form which does not seem to fall within the limits of traditional sculpture or painting and has engaged the creative talents of many artists, including the "pop" practitioners, in Europe and America is the assemblage. Extending methods introduced by cubist artists, an assemblage is made by fastening together out of torn pieces of paper, fragments of wood, metal, cloth, or other such materials as seashells, stones, strings, toys, clocks, pillows, automobile fenders, boilers, cans, stuffed animals, and birds.

By choice and circumstance, the Filipino artist is a part of the international art scene. And yet it is ironic that he should be remote from the live centers of art. This remoteness and the absence of any museum in the Philippines where the Filipino artist can see and study examples of the best being done all over the world make it imperative that he hazard out into more bracing cultural weathers. There is need to measure his power with those relentlessly committed to forging vital images in the art centers of the world. From Luna to Joya, Philippine art has been an evolvment—though not a smooth, exactly logical one—from Monet, Gauguin, Picasso; from a Western idiom that has now become universalized and absorbed by such Oriental countries with much older indigenous traditions than ours, like India, Indonesia, and Japan.

For a long time now the Filipino artist has put up with Manila's haphazard cultural life and environment of small risks, the ominipresent menace of inbreeding, the lack of sustained professionalism in the creation and promotion of art works, the lack of sustained dialogue among artists, between artists and critics, between artists and their audience. Too long has he been coddled by a society satisfied with the good-enough. As one American painter put it to me once, "It's easy enough to be a big fish in a small pond."

Establishing the Philippine image in art abroad requires constant participation in international art festivals, the Venice Biennale and a few others like the Sao Paolo, the Carnegie Institute, the Kassel Documenta. Although Cinderella stories can happen in real life, they seldom do in the world of art; critical success in a big art competition is not accomplished overnight.

When asked who are likely to make a favorable impression or *succes d'estime* in art festivals, perhaps at the next Venice Biennale, I immediately think of the names of three Filipino artists in Europe, die-



HILLS OF NIKKO

(1964)

By Jose T. Joya, Jr.

Oil on canvas: 68" x 70"

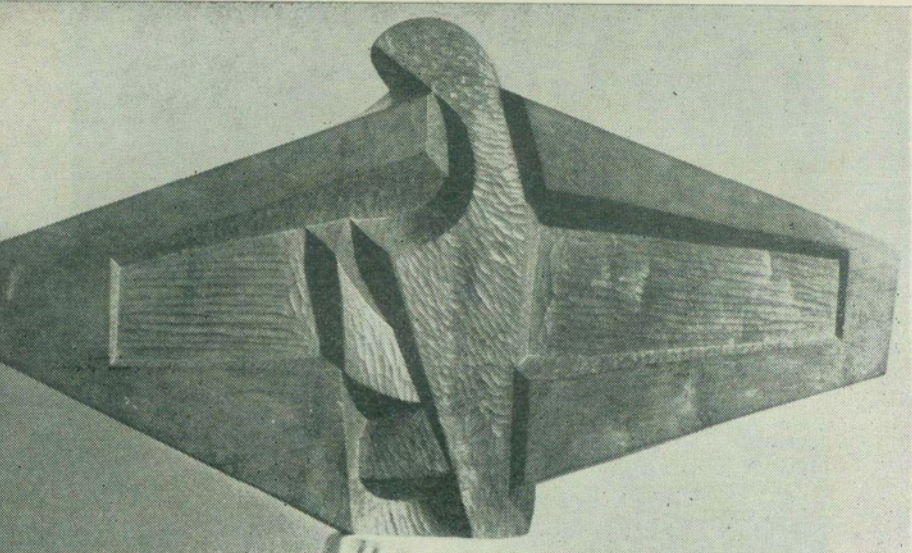


EPISODE IN STOCKHOLM

(1964)

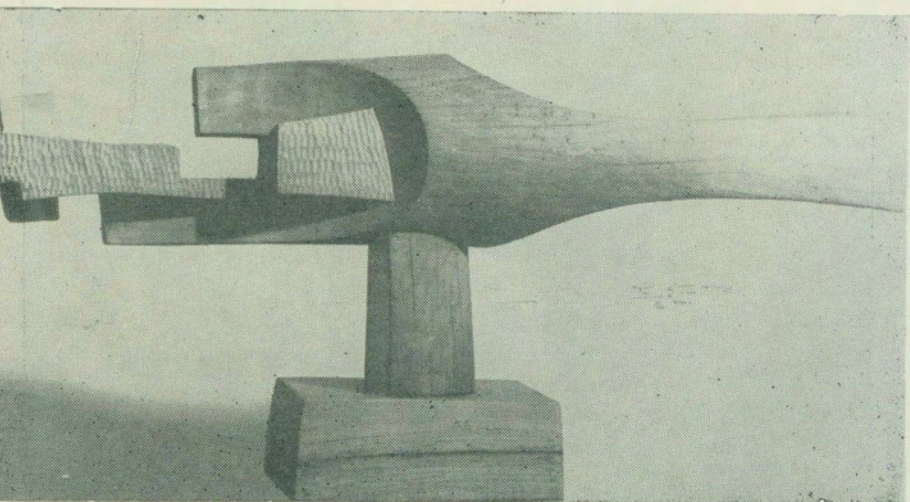
By Jose T. Joya, Jr.

From the collection of Atty. & Mrs. Primo Santos



BIRD
(1960)

Relief sculpture by N. Veloso Abueva
26 1/2" x 45" Molave (wood)
Collection of Mr. Jose T. Joya, Jr.



FLIGHT
(1964)

Sculpture by N. Veloso Abueva

hard professionals who have been building their critical reputations steadily for the past several years and are continually in the heat of creation and whose works have already impressed a number of significant art critics abroad: Juvenal Sanso, Nena Saguil, and David Medalla. Sanso, graphic artist, has had successful one-man shows in Europe and the U.S. and works included in important museums and private collections abroad; Saguil, painter, has attracted the attention of the late Ernest Fraenkel, who started work on a book about her which is being finished by the French art critic and historian, Waldemar George; Medalla, painter and sculptor, is one of the leading lights of the kinetic art movement and was recently the subject of a long review in the art columns of the *London Times*. Their dedication painfully shows up the indifference of the government to sustain creative expression in this country of loners and exiles.

Yet I also think that the experience and discipline of international art festivals are what our home-based Hernando Ocampos, Arturo Rogerio Luzes, and Vicente Manansalas need, painters who have gone as far as they could hope to reach. Having gathered all tokens of local critical acclaim and having solidly entrenched themselves as household names and members of the local art Establishment, they are, in an environment that suffers from a lack of sustained patronage, already on the verge of an artistic hardening of the arteries. Only recently one of them raised the question: "Why is it that artists in this country stop painting seriously by the time they reach forty?" The note of defeatism is typical of our established artists.

Perhaps it is the younger painters under forty on whom we must pin our hopes, the Roberto Chabets and the Lee Aguinaldos, to whom the kind of challenge whereof we speak matters precisely because their ambitions are larger, their emotional drives more intense, their curiosity for fresh ideas more avid. Perhaps they are not yet hardened by the wry "What's the use?" attitude older artists have taken of late; perhaps it is the young who have the energy to fight for state support of the arts.

When asked what compulsion drove him to scale the mountain, Annapurna, Maurice Herzog answered, *because it is there*. The AAP could think of no better reason why it worked hard the way it did to send Philippine entries to Venice last year than the ultimate one—*because it is there*.

EMMANUEL TORRES