Gerardo Tan: Fragmented Riddles

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Gerardo Tan

Art degree from the University of the Philippines.

Whenever he looks back and tries to recall his childhood years, he relates that the image of a blackboard comes to his mind. "It was the content for learning the alphabet," he expresses. However, taking into account the evolution that art has gone through in accordance to the demands of the fast-paced modern world, his analogy changed as well. "Now, the blackboard is the computer screen. The teacher's pointer is now Bill Gates' Little arrow," shares the artist.

It was in the early '80s that he began exploring and working on collages. In between the large paintings he was doing as a graduate student at the State University of New York at Buffalo, he would collect random images which pique his interest from his everyday encounters with materials produced by the media along with some shipping objects found from his immediate environment. These include newspapers, books, grocery magazines, exhibit brochures, product catalogs, and posters, among others. He describes this activity as a form of personal training and recreation because of the subject's manageable size.

After gathering all the printed resources and disparate materials, he cuts out the different pictures into smaller fragments and puts them together, creating a miscellany of unrelated, non-thermodynamic images. The printed figures comprise a new composition having more or less the same amount of significance as how these are presented in their original context. These collages served as pseudo-studies which eventually become the groundwork for his future creations—he produced blow-up printed versions of these miniature works that can already stand by themselves.

The emergence of technology also brought about changes in Tan's aesthetic approach. Digital system caught his attention so he began incorporating it in his process of art making. He digitally prints his chosen images onto the canvas and prints them on to construct a whole new piece of art. He finds the contrast between the printed and the painted a truly exhilarating sight. "For example a holding ad is juxtaposed with an image from Velazquez's painting or a poster from an El Shabakai gathering in Luneta Park. I work a lot with fragments. This is what photography did to our vision—-to see the world as fragments," stresses Tan.

When asked how he comes up with his unique works, Tan describes his moment of visualization: "I work directly with images that already exist. I don't invent them. They are ready-made as Marcel Duchamp put them. I have this stack of printed materials that I sift through, select the images at random, cut them up and glue them together. I combine culture - the urbanized - and the hand - the commonplace - into one. After I have done the collage, I project it on a canvas and paint it. These are times when I paint exactly what I see in the collage. But at some point, I let the painting take over and put aside the collage," he explains.

Tan views himself as the atypical landscape painter due to the fact that his paintings are not derived directly from nature's visual image but instead, are representations of how the media perceives it.

"I think that our perception of nature is filtered through media more and more especially if one lives in Manila. Just go around and look at the buildings, billboards, bookstores, and the internet. Everything is all out there but once or twice removed from reality as we know it of 60 years ago."

As a man of art, he works aptly depict his perception of the world. "What I'm trying to do is to other people with my art to build up a mirror in front of them and letting them see the world through the reflection," he concludes.

Witness Gerardo Tan's juxtaposition of prints and paint in his exhibit aptly titled "Ellipses" at the Magnet Gallery in Kalupanan Avenue, Loyola Heights, Quezon City from August 25 to September 11.