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A Filipino Artist's Divine Deluges of Paint

by [Bansie Vasvani](#) on February 8, 2016



Installation view of 'Jigger Cruz: Smudging Dirty Little Touch' at Albertz Benda Gallery (all images courtesy the artist and Albertz Benda Gallery)

Jigger Cruz is one of several young Filipino artists experimenting with new methods of painting, and his attempt to break with traditional representation has yielded a new form of automatism. Characterized by colorful, geometric, and zigzagging lines that fill the canvas, Cruz's random application of thick squiggles of oil paint, from pastry cones over impasto swabs, assaults the viewer with energy and vigor.



Jigger Cruz, "Abstraction Intersection" (2015), oil on canvas and wood, 14 1/8 x 10 1/4 x 2 in (click to enlarge)

His US solo debut at [Albertz Benda Gallery](#), *Smudging Dirty Little Touch*, deviates from his earlier method of painting over discernible images of landscapes. Cruz's drive to be innovative permeates his art — it is also apparent in his practice of creating electronic music from different modules that deconstruct classical harmonies. The smallest painting in this show, "Abstraction Intersection" (2015), measures 9 by 12 inches and best captures the painterliness of his technique. Five to six layers of curled and twisted blue, white, orange, and yellow paint accumulate like heavy icing on a cake. Highly tactile, the clustered swirls pulsate and undulate in their piled-up form. Similarly, akin to a child's purposeless meandering on paper, "Breath and Fall" (2015), is a free-flowing outpouring of haphazard lines and doodles over chunky dollops of paint. The crisscrossing streams of vivid pigment on the canvas resemble the tangles of colorful wires that Cruz uses to connect his modular synthesizers.



Jigger Cruz, "Masquerade" (2015), oil on canvas and wood, 24 1/2 x 20 3/4 x 1 3/4 in (click to enlarge)

Unlike [Hernando R. Ocampo](#), the maestro of Filipino non-objective art — whose images consist of conjoined abstract shapes — and [Manuel Ocampo](#), the current bad boy of Filipino contemporary art — known for his profanity and taking inspiration from various sub-cultures like cartoons and punk — Cruz focuses on the raw, crude surface of his canvas. His preoccupation with materiality led to the incorporation of wooden frames, bought at garage sales and thrift shops, into his paintings. For example, in "Masquerade" (2015), paint squirted and smudged on the frame and the canvas gives perspective and depth to the uneven surface of the painting. No longer planar, the bulging edges, dips, and crevices enhance the tangible aspect of the work, and thrust its materiality to the forefront.

Cruz's paintings are also deeply connected with the influence of Catholicism in the Philippines. References to angels, halos, heaven, and hell abound in his work and, in "Masquerade," a silhouette resembling the Virgin Mary occupies the center of the composition. Less iconoclastic in this regard than the Filipino artist [Norberto Roldan](#), whose works openly question the role of the church, the diptych "Poor Sunset Boulevard" (2015), and the triptych "Silent Waltz from the Ancient Atoms of Hell" (2015), have subtle religious overtones.



Jigger Cruz, "Silent Waltz from the Ancient Atoms of Hell" (2015), oil on canvas and wood, triptych: 60 x 109 x 3 1/2 in (click to enlarge)

In a conversation with Hyperallergic at the gallery, Cruz referred to his upbringing as a devout Catholic, and the delicate allusions to his religion in his paintings. In the diptych, a pink, semi-circular shape that resembles one of [Philip Guston's](#) loosely defined figurations is topped with a halo. A silver oval shaped like a crown at the top of the triptych connotes heaven, while the darker black impasto slabs at the bottom of the painting are meant to denote hell. Although Cruz's religious iconography is not always evident, the contrasting black and silver tones of the diptych (meant to convey different spiritual states of mind) and the subdued application of paint are not as appealing as his more colorful and chaotically arresting works.

Cruz's strength emanates from his signature vibrant palette and sculptural slathering of paint. Unlike the religious paintings, which lack the fervor of his automatism, the best works in *Smudging Dirty Little Touch* are made up of oodles of paint that seem to flow organically across canvases and frames. They are the most convincing when the surface and aesthetics are uncompromised by religious connotations.



Jigger Cruz, "Poor Sunset Boulevard" (2015), oil on canvas and wood, diptych: 47 1/2 x 76 1/2 x 3 in (click to enlarge)

Jigger Cruz: Smudging Dirty Little Touch continues at **Albertz Benda Gallery** (515 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through February 13.

Albertz Benda GalleryJigger Cruz