

ALFREDO ESQUILLO

Transfigurations

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The Personal in Realism

Like any art history coming to terms with its current trajectories, the notion of "social realism" in painting has been contested in the implications on the forms that it could take and as a school of thought that could only be achieved successfully on concurrent contexts of discord and societal change. By essence, artists referring to milieu or specific contexts in representative ways would peg social realism as a misnomer in its redundancy. While a vocabulary of imagery has circulated to form habits of essentialising with the intent of feeding the market or any form of surface categorization, this belief of art mirroring society in order to change it persists as a practice to artists affiliated with a time when "social realism" wasn't burdened to be called as such in order to be canonized.

It is in this circumstance that we inquire into the practice of Alfredo Esquillo who has been associated with the "lineage" of artists in the Philippines known for a rhetoric around the landscape that besiege the politically conscious Filipino. The horror vacui of iconography is not uncommon in the scenes of social realist painting. Such allegories are often regarded to expose cultural ironies in the practice of faith and the politics of the milieu. Over Esquillo's career, the density of imagery ebbs out – he has always the tendency for calibration – as if the thinning of the population of figures is proportional to a balance deeper than the formalisms that arrange symbols of cultural history. Identified as the point of convergence of his practice, *loob* has gained in measure in the articulation of the forms his paintings have channeled in recent years. Singular figures have made way for the crowds that often navigate as a platoon or in a religious procession amidst scenes of disenchantment and duplicity. As with the adage, "the personal is the political," these characters repeat in a sequence of a work that brims with activity. What is curious about them is that they are subjects being predicated upon: this active-passive interchange poses a tautological inquiry into their essence as actors and as objects being acted on. *Prey Catching Prey* for instance enacts a male figure catching his own hands only to trap himself.

Loob lies at the core of Esquillo's thinking, manifested in a ripple that does not only project outwards. Rather, his current practice has ebbed towards the seat of that ripple. A literal translation of "loob" refers to "inside". But as a virtue ethic attached to a Philippine philosophy, the translation becomes problematic in the dichotomy that it implies. The duality of the political act is often dismissed between individual and society as a faceless, exterior whole in which one could avoid participating in. In the case of Esquillo, whose career has been a steady, thoughtful one, his practice persists as relevant beyond the period that glorifies social realism

as a form only because his works move according to how he tackles the position of the self in time. “Universal” as it may seem, the issue on the evolution of self is not fashioned in abstracted aphorisms of the self as an isolated/disembodied entity. The concept of *loob* has been given extended criticality as something more than a static one. *Loob* is brought up in the discussions of driving revolutions and seen as virtue-ethic rather than a value to be nurtured into perfection. A current paper by Jeremiah Reyes releases the *loob* from an “inside” and argues for a re-translation of *loob* as “relational will”.

In this sense, Esquillo’s practice as a painter of Filipino philosophy prevails as he brings to the fore that these works are more than the old world representation of politics. Rather, painting is the artist’s political act. His subjects often take on his portrait but also implying that this non-autobiographical strategy still poses the idea that the self-begets the encounter. “Transfiguration,” as a title, also calls for the awareness of *loob* – as if the evolution of its knowing is in itself a process for its enrichment. Esquillo has always shown that the Filipino self carries all its political and religious histories and permutations in recurring symbols of clouds and fire – iconographies attached with the divine or an absolute that exists beyond the spatiotemporalities of here and there, then and now. Adding to the loaded beliefs on the symbols of cloud and fire, the artist’s triptych sequence is a moving metaphor that is unbound by the one-dimensionality of painting.

The sequence of *Man On Fire* could perhaps encapsulate that Esquillo’s practice is of knowing *loob*. As with the flame that purifies all, it also the source. As relation will, *loob* is power that operates within action. Esquillo proves that the “social” in social realism encapsulates the self and society at large coinciding not in binary. Rather, they are part and parcel to each other. The different discussions around a practice articulating *loob* renames the misnomer into a certain spiritual realism that witnesses change in a society at odds alongside a transfiguration of the self.

Sidd Perez, 2015