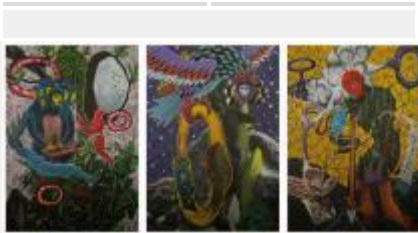


Art Mag by Deutsche Bank

The Spirit in the Forests
Rodel Tapaya's Magical Art

Giants, spirits, gods: The Philippine artist Rodel Tapaya builds bridges between age-old creation myths and the 21st century. Now he has created a triptych for Deutsche Bank in Manila. Oliver Koerner von Gustorf talked with him.



Rodel Tapaya, *The First Beings: The Supreme Planner, The Ten Headed Creature and The Mediator*, 2014, triptych. Deutsche Bank Collection. Courtesy of the artist, ARNDT Berlin and Ateneo Art Gallery, Manila.



Rodel Tapaya, *The Supreme Planner*, 2014. Deutsche Bank Collection. Courtesy of the artist, ARNDT Berlin and Ateneo Art Gallery, Manila.

If we are to believe the myths of the Philippine region of [Visayas](#), [manananggals](#) are truly terrifying creatures. During the day, they appear as ordinary people, mostly as women. But at night they separate their torso from their lower body, spread bat-like wings, and search for victims. The lower part continues to live on its own. But if it is not rejoined with the upper body again by sundown, the creature dies. If one finds a separated lower body, one can prevent this reunification by sprinkling salt on the torsoless body.

In his installation *Modern Manananggals*, the Philippine artist [Rodel Tapaya](#) makes use of this age-old myth, transferring it to the modern age. He has a whole group these demons fly with hard-shell suitcases – the brightly colored variety symbolizing mass tourism of which there are thousands at every airport. But a closer investigation reveals that this is not as strange as it seems. Anyone who googles pictures of this mythical creature will be in for a surprise. All variants of this “Filipino folk monster” can be found in Asia and the U.S.: in fantasy, anime, or Simpsons style; childish, mystical, erotic. The original folk myth has undergone astonishing transformations. It’s gone on a journey, reproduced and changed in contact with global mass culture. The image of the two-part woman penetrates deeply into the apprehensive psyche of today’s globalized society. It embodies sexual and violent fantasies, alienation, the fear of losing contact with oneself, one’s feelings, one’s identity.

Tapaya’s *Modern Manananggals* tell precisely of this fear. In his exhibition [Bato-Balani](#), which he realized for Manila’s [Ateneo Art Gallery in 2014](#), male and female versions dash through the museum hall in ordered pairs as though going to check in. Tapaya plays with a special circumstance here: around eight million Filipinos, almost nine percent of the total population, constantly work abroad, particularly Philippine women, who are employed in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and Arab countries, above all as maids or nannies. *Modern Manananggals*, explains Tapaya, are something like a warning, calling on



+
 Rodel Tapaya, *The Ten Headed Creature*, 2014. Deutsche Bank Collection. Courtesy of the artist, ARNDT Berlin and Ateneo Art Gallery, Manila.



+
 Rodel Tapaya, *The Mediator*, 2014. Deutsche Bank Collection. Courtesy of the artist, ARNDT Berlin and Ateneo Art Gallery, Manila.

so-called Filipino Overseas Workers to return to their home country and reunite with their family and home to avoid suffering.

But even those who do not recognize this allusion feel the alienation the wooden sculptures radiate.

Tapaya's *Modern Manananggals* noticeably recall the figureheads of the Spanish rulers that colonized and Christianized the Philippines in the 16th century. But it seems as though a conquest is taking place in reverse. There is a reason why one of Tapaya's early solo exhibitions in the [Drawing Room in Singapore](#) was entitled *FOLKgotten*. In the work of the artist, who was born in 1980 in Montalban near Manila, it is the old myths, which are marginalized in today's society, the forgotten demons, the old spirits and divinities, that reconquer modern, secularized society. And with them the artist, who just has realized a large commissioned work for [Deutsche Bank](#), has had success around the world.

Although his paintings and installations are based on Philippine folk myths and legends, says Tapaya, there are big overlaps with other cultures and countries. The details, stories, and names may be different, but the motifs, themes, and archetypes are similar: "It's very hard to say that what I am doing is about national identity because Philippine culture is a mixture of indigenous, Spanish, Japanese, and American influences. I just find myself looking into these folk narratives and picturing in my mind the rich connections past stories can have to the present, which can even let us see a map of the future."

The paintings that Tapaya creates from these links have a virtually hallucinogenic effect. Often monumental, they draw the viewer into a labyrinthine web of images that recall both the phantasmagorias of [Hieronymus Bosch](#) and Latin American [magic realism](#). "I guess being raised in a country that was under Spanish colonization for 300 years and being a Catholic myself, having a strong sense of visual traditions, orientation, and imagery, could have a big influence on my work," says Tapaya. It is surely no accident that his works are reminiscent of the allegorical murals of the Mexican painter and Communist [Diego Rivera](#), who used them to disseminate the ideals of the revolution and of educating the people. As with Rivera, one of the main motifs in Tapaya's work is the Creation, and he too used painting to formulate political, social, and spiritual ideas, to immortalize historical personalities, and to examine national history.

Tapaya constructs the stage for an idiosyncratic



Rodel Tapaya, *Bato-Balani*, Installation view, Ateneo Art Gallery, Quezon City, Philippines. Courtesy of Ateneo Art Gallery, Quezon City, Philippines.



Rodel Tapaya in his Studio. Courtesy of MM Yu and the Artist.



Rodel Tapaya, *Like a bird that leaves its nest is a man who leaves his home*, 2013. Courtesy of Private Collection Switzerland, ARNDT Berlin and the Artist.

cosmology out of organically sprawling forms, as well as geometric, abstract, and architectural elements. The recurrent figures include mythical creatures such as [goblins](#), ghouls, manananggals, giant horse people ([tikbalang](#)), the giant [Bernado Carpio](#), who is trapped in between two great rocks in the mountains, as well as historical personalities, such as the revolutionary leader [Andres Bonifacio](#) and the national hero [José Rizal](#). The world of history and myths meets the world of cities, of war, of work. In Tapaya's painting, people confront their gods and demons with the by-products of civilization: office furniture, Ping-Pong tables, cannons.

At the same time, the mythical beings provide a kind of moral commentary on the human world. This applies to one of his most recent works, which was commissioned by [Deutsche Bank](#) and this June opens in the lobby of the [Deutsche Knowledge Services](#) (DKS) in [Bonifacio Global City](#) in Manila. Rodel Tapaya's triptych *The First Beings: The Supreme Planner, The Ten-Headed Creature and The Mediator* was commissioned within the framework of the "[Appreciating Art in Deutsche Bank](#)" program. The aim of the program is to make art accessible to customers and employees on a daily basis through acquisitions, exhibitions, and guided tours. "The challenge for me," says Tapaya, "once I knew about the commissioned work by the bank, was to look for stories on wealth such as legends about gold, folktales about treasures, etc. But I find it too direct, literal, and predictable. Since at first I decided to do a triptych piece, I remembered that I've long wanted to do the creation myth unique in Bukidnon, a southern part of the Philippines where there are three main characters. In each panel I focused on one god and mythical character and repeated them in the other parts of the work. I decided to pursue that myth, that story, and from doing the work I then found that the myth must not just be about creation of the universe but can be about making anything that involves creativity, whether wealth, career, etc., where planning and vision making, a great team, resource, advisors, and mentors are all important for one's success."

Tapaya's three paintings show the beings whose interplay gives rise to the world: the one-headed being is the highest planner, the one who has the vision of the world, while the ten-headed being has the means to implement and materialize this vision. The winged god is the mediator, who helps with the Creation and settles disputes between the other two divinities. This balance is essential for the Creation. Values such as community, spirituality, and respect for nature run through Tapaya's work like a red



Rodel Tapaya, *The Attraction*, 2013. Courtesy of Private Collection, ARNDT Berlin and the Artist.



Rodel Tapaya, *The Hole in the Sky*, 2013. Courtesy of Private Collection, ARNDT Berlin and the Artist.



Rodel Tapaya, *The Magic Frog*, 2014. Courtesy of Private Collection Philippines, ARNDT Berlin and the Artist.

thread. At the same time, concealed in many of his paintings is more or less encoded criticism of violence and materialism.

It is probably no coincidence that in Tapaya's work it is not the big cities where cultural identity is negotiated and mediated. His works are usually set in the jungle, which are often seen as being exotic or barbaric, far from the hubs of political and economic power. In his paintings, the jungle seems transformed — like a magical border area between nature and civilization, tradition and progress. It is not a world power that rules here, but an age-old spiritual one. This kind of thinking has parallels with the work of one of the most important artists from the Asia-Pacific region, the Thai director [Apichatpong Weerasethakul](#), who in films such as *Tropical Malady* creates a completely new visual language out of popular myths. Weerasethakul not only received the Jury Prize in [Cannes](#), but also was represented as an artist at the [documenta](#) and has been honored with large exhibitions such as the show in Munich's [Haus der Kunst](#) (2009).

Like Weerasethakul before him, Tapaya is well on the way to conquering the global art world and to creating work that is completely modern by returning to local tradition. Back in 2001, he won the Grand Prize of the Nokia Art Awards, which enabled him to study at [Parsons School of Design](#) in New York and the [University of Helsinki](#), before completing his degree at the [College of Fine Arts](#) at the University of the Philippines. Tapaya has worked with Asian and European galleries for years and is one of the most successful painters in the Asia-Pacific. In 2011, he received the renowned [Signature Art Prize](#), awarded by the Asia-Pacific Breweries Foundation and the Singapore Art Museum. This fall, he will be represented at the [10th Gwangju Biennale](#), which is probably the most important institutional art event in Asia.

Worldviews characterized by animism, the belief in the transmigration of souls between people, plants, animals, and spirits — these motifs would have been frowned upon as being “exotic” just a few years ago, and would have been avoided particularly by artists from the new art landscapes. Today, on the contrary, Tapaya uses them to question such exoticism. They offer new possibilities of describing the conflict between progress and tradition, rapid urbanization, rural exodus, and postcolonial sensitivities. Not least, they attest to a deep spirituality, are Tapaya's engine. “I believe that there is life after death,” he says, “and there are more worlds than what we are experiencing now. There are different forces; some are

good, some are not; just like in a society there are good and evil as well. But I believe there is goodness in everyone, in everything.”



+
Rodel Tapaya, Whisper Cutter, 2014. Courtesy of Private Collection Switzerland, ARNDT Berlin and the Artist.



+
Rodel Tapaya, The Armor, 2014. Courtesy of ARNDT Berlin and the Artist.



+
Rodel Tapaya, The Disguise, 2014. Courtesy of Private

Collection Philippines, ARNDT
Berlin and the Artist.



Rodel Tapaya, Bato-Balani,
Installation view, Ateneo Art
Gallery, Quezon City, Philippines.
Courtesy of Ateneo Art Gallery,
Quezon City, Philippines.