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### Rodel Tapaya Mines Filipino Folklore for "Ladder to Somewhere"

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Rodel Tapaya "Like a bird that leaves its nest is a man who leaves his home" (2013) showcases Tapaya's brand of Filipino magical realism.



"Heart Shaped Blossom"

SINGAPORE — Filipino painter **Rodel Tapaya** is known for his monumental paintings blending magical creatures from native folklore and contemporary references to war and disaster. His canvases draw the viewer into a surreal vista of fantastical images: a man emerging from a fish, a dog with twigs for legs, a rotten fruit with a human eye.

The Tapaya, who received the prestigious Asia-Pacific Breweries Foundation Signature Art Prize in 2011, draws from a rich tradition of Filipino mythology in his latest show, "The Ladder to Somewhere", which opens at [ARNDT Singapore](#) on April 5. Artinfo catches up with the artist to find out more about his obsession with giants under mountains, why he loved newspapers as a kid and his creative process.

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**Tell us about the inspirations behind your latest show, "The Ladder to Somewhere".**

"Ladder to Somewhere" is about the intersection between different realms or worlds, such as reality and dreams, as well as the world of mortals and the world of immortals. I focussed on stories with themes of transformations from one realm to another.

**Could you discuss a painting and relate it to a folk tale for people who are not so familiar with Filipino folk mythology?**

"The Guardians" is a work partly inspired by a story from the Maranao tribe in the Southern part of the Philippines. In the tale, there is an eight-headed monster that guards the Tree of Life located in the lowest part of the seven-layered heaven. The name of every single person is written on each leaf. When a dry and brown leaf falls, it means the death of an old person, but when a green leaf falls, it means that a young person has died an untimely death.

**How did your interest in folk narratives start?**

It started from when I was a child. I grew up in a rural province in Montalban in Rizal, a province just outside Manila. Rizal is surrounded by mountains. There was one myth I believed as a child about a heroic giant called Bernardo Carpio who tried to stop two mountains from fighting with one another, but he got buried under them. People say that when there's an earthquake, it's Bernardo Carpio wanting to make his escape. Since I grew up with these myths, legends and stories, I found myself including folklore-related stories in my work organically.

**It is said in the curatorial essay that you took eight years to study Filipino folklore. What did you do to research it?**

I read a lot of books that scholars have compiled about Philippine folk tales, myths and legend I asked people what stories they still know of.

**What is your favourite Filipino myth?**

I like the creation myth that the first native Filipinos were formed inside a bamboo. The first man and woman (named Malakas and Maganda, respectively, meaning "strong" and "beautiful") came from the same bamboo tree. A giant bird named Manaul liberated them by splitting the bamboo into two using its beak.

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**For people who don't know Filipino folk legends well, what do you think your paintings hold for them?**

People can look at the work and make their own stories. Or they could feel that there is a story. It need not be narrated literally, but it can be felt visually. People from different places have shared themes and stories like creation myths or flood stories — what varies are the details.

**When did you know that you wanted to be an artist?**

When I was about 10 years old, I started to enjoy drawing. But only when I was 14 years old I knew that I wanted to do this as a career. I found myself winning art competitions and I was also very drawn to images of works by great artists. I liked looking at paintings.

**Tell us about your childhood and your family.**

I didn't come from a family of artists, nor did I come from a well-to-do family. I am the sixth of seven children. My parents prepared smoked fish for a living. As a child, I was tasked to go to the recycling shop to buy old newspapers, which was used to wrap the fish into smaller portions to be sold. I remember being excited by this errand, because I got to scan the pages and look at the art section in the Lifestyle section. I would even cut and compile articles for my reference.

**What is your creative process like?**

Reading stories such as folktales and myths makes my imagination explode with images. Since there is really no specific archetype or image assigned to each tale I have the liberty to imagine and give them forms myself. I find this very exciting.

In terms of the actual execution, sometimes I start with rough sketches, read more stories and add in more studies. Then I start painting and it morphs into something else. I make several paintings at the same time and I move ideas around. When things becomes clearer, I focus and finish the work. A piece could take one month to 6 months to complete.

**Are you married and do you have children?**

Yes, I am married to an equally talented artist **Marina Cruz**. We have two energetic young boys, Yohance Van, aged four, and Keon Yaro, aged two.

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If you weren't a painter, what do you think you would be?

That's a difficult question. I have always seen myself doing art. If I had to choose something else, it would be an endeavor that entails creativity and imagination.

*"The Ladder to Somewhere" is on at [ARDNT Singapore](#), Gillman Barracks, from April 5 to June 30.*