



The Transformation of the Commonplace

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TEXT BY CID REYES

Old empty chairs are not empty in reality—memories always sit there!
— Mehmet Murat ildan

In the March 1962 issue of *Art International*, art critic Max Kozloff wrote a scathing attack on “Pop Culture, Metaphysical Disgust and the New Vulgarians.” The essay skewered the works of Pop artists James Rosenquist, Roy Lichtenstein, Jim Dine, and Claes Oldenburg—strangely enough, Andy Warhol was not mentioned at all. Sneered Kozloff: “The truth is, art galleries are being invaded by the pin-headed and contemptible style of gumchewers, bobby soxers, and worse, delinquents.” (Whether this was written before, or after, being chosen as recipient of the coveted Frank Jewett Mather Award for Criticism, we still have to research on.) Still, this condemning essay was later reprinted in Kozloff’s collected writings, *Renderings*. This time, however, with an italicized rejoinder, a veritable expression of apology. Thus: “I had still not clarified the distinctive factor that subject and style were linked so cohesively...were of a piece. This, after all, constituted their formal originality, something hard to see in the glare of their social attack...Here the spirit of inquiry clashed rather violently with emotional response.”

PHOTOS BY JOVEL LORENZO. ARTWORK IMAGES COURTESY OF MOMENTOUS ARTS.

What time, distance, perspective, and cool detachment can do. (Critics ironically never seem to learn.) Nearly half a century later, with Andy Warhol already sanctified as the Pope of Pop, the unique sensibility celebrated by the Pop artists can still be felt as an aesthetic temblor. Today, artists respond and relate to any object or subject with feelings of tenderness and affection, warmth and longing, never condescension, even if it were a dead shark in a glassed pool of formaldehyde.

To be sure, Filipino artist Rene Robles has always been aware of the lessons of history. His recent works are gripped by the impulse to wring every possible meaning and metaphor from commonplace objects: the lowly, the unworthy, the quarry of the quotidian. Robles’ repertoire consists of the chair, the light bulb, the electric fan. In previous works, these objects were apparitions within suggested domestic interiors, enclosed by doors and windows and corridors, finding themselves among tables and toilet bowls. The artist seemed to have been consumed by the desire to embroil himself in their thing-ness and make them emerge from his consciousness as an object other than what it



(ABOVE) "Composition in Blue", 3 x 3 feet, acrylic on canvas. (OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP) "Chair Composition IV in Orange", 2 x 2 feet, acrylic on canvas; "Electric Fan Composition in White 1", 3 x 3 feet, acrylic on canvas.

really is. The philosopher Arthur Danto had a phrase for it: the transformation of the commonplace. Picasso, in comparing himself with his friend and rival Matisse, remarked, "It isn't any old object that is chosen to receive the honor of becoming an object in a painting by Matisse. They're all things that are unusual in themselves. The objects that go into my paintings are not that at all. They are common objects from anywhere: a pitcher, a mug of beer, a package of tobacco, a bowl, a kitchen

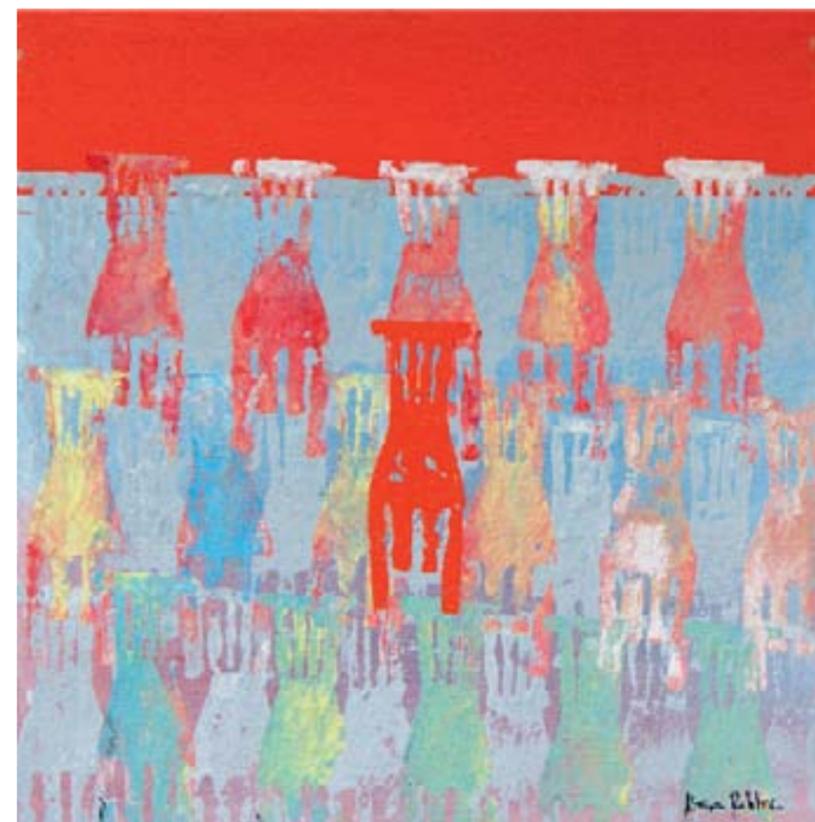
chair with a cane seat, a plain common table—the object at its most ordinary." Thus, in his recent works, Robles revels in the familiarity of these domestic objects that he is now compelled to present them, as it were, in a dizzying diorama.

The operative principle and process involves repetition, a practice for which he is indebted to Warhol, who screenprinted his multitudes of Campbell Soup Cans, Liz Taylors and Marilyn Monroes, dollar bills and Coca-Colas and electric chairs.

Indeed, it is inevitable that Warhol's electric chairs will come to mind when looking at Robles's own panorama of sequential chairs, though it is once obvious that there is a great shift in mood and meaning. For a start, these native, straight-backed and armless chairs were each hand-painted and not mechanically screenprinted.

Though the objects of Robles are items of mass production, each one, viewed in isolation, is an icon of solitude, as each object finds itself in the living room or bedroom. They are indeed "part of the furniture." The endless repetition of each image is like a piercing, but hollow, scream for attention, an echo destined to remain unheard in the din of domestic life. But with such lavish, untiring work, time and effort does Robles expend in the delineation of each chair, as if each brushwork were an imperative caress. Still insisting on the honor and dignity of the hand applying brush onto canvas, Robles, in that very gesture, finds his own meaning as an artist transcending mere artisanship. Though the chair is a product of commodification, it emerges with its own individuality, invested with an almost human feeling, denoting someone craving relationship with the sitter. It was the American Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau who said, "I had three chairs in my house, one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society."

The second object of Robles' affection, the lightbulb, glows with its association with the Proto-Pop work of Jasper Johns, his sculp-metal of a lightbulb, together with its ungainly-looking socket and torn wire attachment. Again, by hand, Robles renders the shape of the light bulb in numbing hectic repetition, as if drilling into the viewer's retina the luminosity of the object's meaning and metaphor, which, of course, equates itself as light being turned on to vanish the darkness ("Religion is a light bulb, created by man to help him to see in the dark" – Paul Arden) and more blatantly, the light bulb's premonition of impending death ("I am on, until I am dead, like a light bulb." – Henry Rollins). As with the resonances of Warhol in Robles' chairs, so too does Johns make his presence felt, or "memory imprinted," in Robles' lightbulbs. Nothing here to diminish the artist, as Johns himself had been vocally admiring of the remarkable influence





of Marcel Duchamp on him. It is a case of one artist being a correlative stimulus to another, resolving the issue of originality and derivation, inspiration and influence.

The third person in the pantheon of Pop Artists that insinuates his presence is Claes Oldenburg, well known for his giant “soft” sculptures, such as that of an electric fan. Robles’ version of the same subject, also activated in repetition, is so paint-laden as to constitute an action painting of sorts, the pigment seemingly whirled about in emulation of the machine in motion. The image, filling up every space of the pictorial surface, sucks the air out and expels it into real space. As if gathering in momentum, the whirring blades splatter the colored pigments about, in circular movement within a highly structured design.

It was a well-considered move for Robles to abjure the silkscreen method of Warhol and favoring instead the hand-drawn method. The artist was rewarded with results that avoided the static effect of boring repetition. While he knew the image beforehand, he could not predict its exact appearance. In this he shares the experience of Francis Bacon who has said, “I foresee the image in my mind and yet I hardly ever carry it out as I foresee it. It transforms itself by the actual paint. I don’t, in fact, know very often what the paint will do, and it does many things which are much better than I could make it do.”

In the highly competitive Philippine art scene, artists of remarkable talent abound, and from each generation emerges a younger breed of exceptional abilities. Rising above the rubble, as it were, is Rene Robles, esteemed as a senior and major Filipino artist, who has proven, through several decades of active and prolific art-making – producing works ranging from portraiture, still lifes, nudes, landscapes, religious images, murals, figuration and abstraction – that talent forged in the smithy of passion, commitment and dedication will endure and never be commonplace. 🇵🇭

(FROM TOP) “Transmutation”, 2 x 2 feet, acrylic on canvas; “Composition Bulb IV”, 4 x 4 feet, acrylic on canvas. (OPPOSITE PAGE) “Life of Hope”, 7 x 10 feet, oil on canvas.



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