

# Capturing the Nude

By Lisa Ito

**T**he nude, as a subject of artistic representation, has historically been depicted through a myriad of aesthetic sensibilities and techniques—from the precise proportions of the Humanist Renaissance perspective, to the grand and voluptuous contortions of the Baroque, to the shattering of visions and depictions brought about by Modernism and its ways of seeing.

In Philippine contemporary art, the nude as an artistic genre has likewise evolved through an interesting state of flux: throughout the historical matrix, the nude has appeared, reappeared, and generally prevailed as one of the fundamental images of an artist's repertoire. The nude has continually posed a representational challenge for Philippine painters: how to capture the tangibility of physical form through various modes of representation, whether strictly naturalistic to bordering on abstraction. The formal challenge for Modernist depictions of such a traditional artistic theme has also posed the question of how to capture, in a few strokes and through the language of abstraction, the physical tangibility of the body?

Such concerns are represented in this collection of nudes by Rene Robles. The female figure is represented as a transient presence, an impression constantly in flux. Rendered on pastel and paper, a medium that allows for more flexible gestural manipulation, the images are painted and drawn rapidly and spontaneously, as if the artist takes it upon himself to capture the last fleeting images of a dream.

Robles' nudes straddle the boundaries between the figurative and the abstract, maintaining dynamism between the two modes of representation. Some works hint at the naturalism of the female form retained throughout the veil of abstraction, or create the impression of flesh or volume through a play of light and color; other works simplify the realism of the body and condense it into a rush of strokes. The details of the nude's bust in the *Relaxing* series, for instance, hints at the techniques employed by naturalistic realism, but eventually gives way to the free-flowing strokes of abstraction, where space and shade connive. The series entitled *Poses*, meanwhile, identifies the human form through sinuous lines, planes of color, and shadow.

Robles, in this exhibition, captures fleeting images of the nude, ensnaring the bare essence of form through the language of abstraction. Through doing so, the artist successfully captures the rawness and nuances of emotions: mystery, longing, and vulnerability. In the works *Ecstasy* and *Love*, for instance, overtly refer to and depict the barest of human emotions, unadorned and unabashed.

Part of the strength of Robles' works comes from a deft handling of hue. Their hues and values of Robles' nudes vary: shades can range from the most intense and saturated of colors, to the barely perceptible nuances of shadows. Works such as *Solo* demonstrate the power of monochromatic rendering in shaping the human form in its solitary splendor, while others, such as *Sisters 3*, draw their power from the intensity of colors that connote passion in the midst of multiple images of the human form.

Robles' technique of rendering nudes in multiples connote a sense of movement and flux to the works. Instead of representing the nude as completely immobile and frozen in a pose, silent and motionless, most of Robles' works incorporate elements that depict the image of the nude body as a recollection or impression of lived experience. Some are replete with the simulations of flesh connoted by the texture of soft pastel, others are rapidly modeled in a few deft strokes as a gestural capturing of the body's image.

Robles' representational concerns, however, center more on the formal, rather than the political aspect of depicting the female body nude. *Sisters*, despite the collective use of the familial term, seems to harbour no overt feminist allusions. The use of the title's text to define the relationships governing the multiple subjects gives no other clue to link the faceless female forms to each other, except perhaps as having a shared anatomy.

Again, such a form of representing the female body harks to the historical concept of nude one that is not to be equated to the use of 'naked'. The depiction of the female as 'nude' (and not 'naked') connotes an entire system of political implications. In the *Relaxing* series, to demonstrate, the depictions of the female body at rest, posed and displayed for the male artist's eye, may be viewed also as an artifice for the poer of the male gaze. Clearly, a semiotic and feminist reading of Robles' works will reveal more ruptures and contradictions within the images than a formalist one will. Yet the political implications of Robles' modes of representations do not obscure the fact that the works were conceived with enough technical and formal competence to connote an entire realm of beauty whose assumptions, if left uninterrogated, can stand on its own.

As a whole, Robles draws strength from capturing instances that are barely grasped by nude photography's precise eye for detail: the subtle shifts and nuances of movement, the ways in which form may be echoed in shadow and line. Thus, the artist handles the medium and its techniques with untrammled ease: broad, defining strokes define the contours of form, while swaths and smudges of pigment allude to the textured surfaces of the body as terrain. The titles of the works are equally simple, even stark, in their almost literal references to their subjects.

The simplicity of Robles' nudes, thus, speaks for themselves. Robles' compositions possess a strength and vitality that can often escape the strokes of far more naturalistic modeling and detailed anatomical depictions of the female form. This lies in the fact that

Robles is more bent on capturing the essential and the ethereal aspects of the nude, rather than on documenting what is seen on the surface by the naked eye. The image of the nude, as conceived by Robles' hands, becomes less of a capturing of physical reality and more of an experiential homage to the beauty of form.

## Ritual

By Bea Robles

Sweat trickles down her forehead, slowly making its way down her neck. Long strands of black hair stick to her bare back, as tiny glistening beads appear on her nose. Suddenly her heated flesh is met with a rush of soothing freshness. The wetness embraces her aching flesh like a soft satin dress. At first the wetness takes her in lovingly. She feels a gentle hum of calm in the air. But then it swallows her up whole, enveloping her just as a passionate lover would take hold of his love. In this embrace it's as if she can no longer feel where she begins and the other ends. The wetness slips into every crevice of her flesh, lightly shocking whatever warmth in her body with cool sensation.

She lies there. Not moving for a moment. And the wetness around her is still and quiet, as she breathes in the sudsy smell of Lavender, Ylang-ylang, and Patchouli. Her hands are drawn towards the soothing smell. Taking the smell in her fingertips she lathers it smoothly across her once heated flesh, into marshmallow clouds of comfort. It's as if she can feel the heat of day lift from her, and replace itself with relief. Ever so gently, she moves the relief, first through her arms, right, and then left; then through each leg, in gentle waves. The clouds of comfort whirl around her as she motions across her nakedness in circles.

A pitter-patter breaks the calm. The tiny footsteps grow louder and a squeaky voice hollers "Ate, Hindi ka pa ba tapos maligo!?"

## Thirsty

By Bea Robles

Tender pink flesh meets my tongue with a soothing coolness. Gently pulling off the textured layers of white which embrace the flesh, my cheek feels a sudden gush of wetness. A tangy sweetness makes its way to my nose as the wetness slides down my fingertips. I take my tongue and slick it over my index and middle fingers. As soft as the

tender color is to the eye, the flesh feels like a new born baby's. I stop for a moment and stare down.

Bringing my warm lips to the pink wetness, squirts of sensation burst in my mouth. Again and again, I bring the wet sweetness to my lips. Each crescent-shaped slice of pink dissolves almost instantaneously and my taste buds are left with nothing but a nuance of suha.

## Life Brought to Life

By Bea Robles

A faint red line across her hips bears the mark of the tight jeans she was wearing. She's motionless. The gaze of four men slide down the bare skin until her knees, where button-sized scars interrupt the fairly smooth surface. Only a twinkle of gold from a strand around her neck and a golden hoop around her left wrist adorn her youthful, taut flesh. She stands, left hand on her waist and right hand resting on the white monobloc chair beside her. With head turned to her right, her wavy golden highlights gently blow into her face and partially cover her closed eyes.

Later, her chest and stomach begin to heave slightly and traces of her lower ribs and the concave of her stomach show through the flesh as her breathing gets heavier. Her right arm stiffens against the back of the chair and a drop of perspiration slowly makes its way down her neck, finally resting just above the nipple of her left breast. Her supple pink-tinged breasts stand out against the rest of her tanned body. Her eyes are shut... as the faint sound of soft pastel grazing the surface of textured paper surrounds her.

"Kung nangangawit ka na, magpahinga ka muna," says an artist in a cargo vest whose pockets overflow with candy-colored pastels. She lets go of the pose and seems to gratefully enjoy her regained motility, quickly retreating to one corner of the room while murmuring "Ang init!" and sipping from a tall glass of mango juice.

"O, ano mga pare? Tayu pa rin ba tayo o upo naman?" asks the artist in the cargo vest. Slowly, answers come from different spots in the room as the artists, without lifting an eye from their compositions, mutter "Upo naman".

He motions to the model and shows her how to sit for the next pose. It's a beauty: right leg extended, left leg bent with her foot tweaked upward, right arm strewn across her left leg, left arm gripping the edge of the stool. All of this is done with only the left cheek of her buttocks resting atop a small rectangular stool. Sounds of easels clutter the air as the artists move around to choose their viewpoints for the second pose.

Facing her from one corner, an artist in a red polo swiftly makes an outline of her body using pastels in a dark navy blue. He continues to fill in the figure with a cottony pink. As he does this, the artist beside him begins to make a light sketch of her shape with a subtle orange. He works gradually, adjusting the outline of her shape before adding color to her skin.

Another artist doesn't even work with an easel. He carries the board of mounted textured paper and makes several forms of her body from different angles as he shambles across the room, sketching her from the side, the front, the back; he even lies on the floor looking up at her. He quickly fills in the black outlines, placed side by side, with crimson red, lemon yellow, prussian blue, and a blinding white. The artist in a cargo vest twists her position to his liking on the textured paper, as he places bits of neon colors over the sketch of her body. A mixture of purple, hot orange and neon green make up her skin.

The artists carry on. And more and more of their individual interpretations of the nude are revealed. Indeed art can project life in so many ways. The artist in red now surrounds the navy blue outline of her body with hot pink highlights, stroking purples down her right arm and reds over her thighs. The work beside his carries an orange tinge. The initial subtle orange sketch of the model's body is filled with a blend of light carrot tones, making the curves of her body gentle to the eye. He reaches for an apricot hue and shades in her lips to make them stand out with a youthful glow. His work appears the most traditional of the group. The artist on the floor gets up and retouches his red, blue, yellow and white forms of the model, making them appear like silhouettes of different women posing together.

The artist in a cargo vest adds a bright cherry red to his sketch, accentuating her nipples and lips among the mix of neon colors. He turns the model's thin gold bracelet into an exotic flower on her wrist with neon green and hot orange petals. He dabs orange highlights where the light hits the sides of her thighs and highlights her breasts with peppermint green. As the other artists in the group place the final touches on their compositions, he puts finishing swirls of deep reds and evergreens around her body.

There is only one model, but in the works are many women. In the hands of artists she is brought even more to life.