

Edwin Wilwayco: Artist

Interview by

James T. Valliere

Edwin, your paintings have won wide recognition and acclaim in South Asia especially in your native Philippines. You have also had many solo shows in Manila and Singapore. How did you first become interested in art?

I was born in 1952, the eldest of seven children, in the small town of Guimba which is four hours drive from Manila. As early as the first grade in elementary school I loved drawing and doodling. My father showed me how fast he could draw cartoons. I think I got this penchant from him.

I always put drawings on the borders of my test papers. By the time I was in the third grade I became the ‘official illustrator’ for the class. My teacher always asked me for help making illustrations on the backboard. I remember drawing plants, amoeba and scientific illustrations

My father often bought me art materials like pastels and watercolors. I used these to color the covers of Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale comics.

What about your formal studies in art?

I studied and took part in many art competitions at the University of the Philippines College of Fine Art, from 1968-1972. I was also very fortunate to be under the tutelage of professors who had studied art in America – from Cranbrook Academy of Fine Art, Pratt Institute as well as Harvard and Yale.



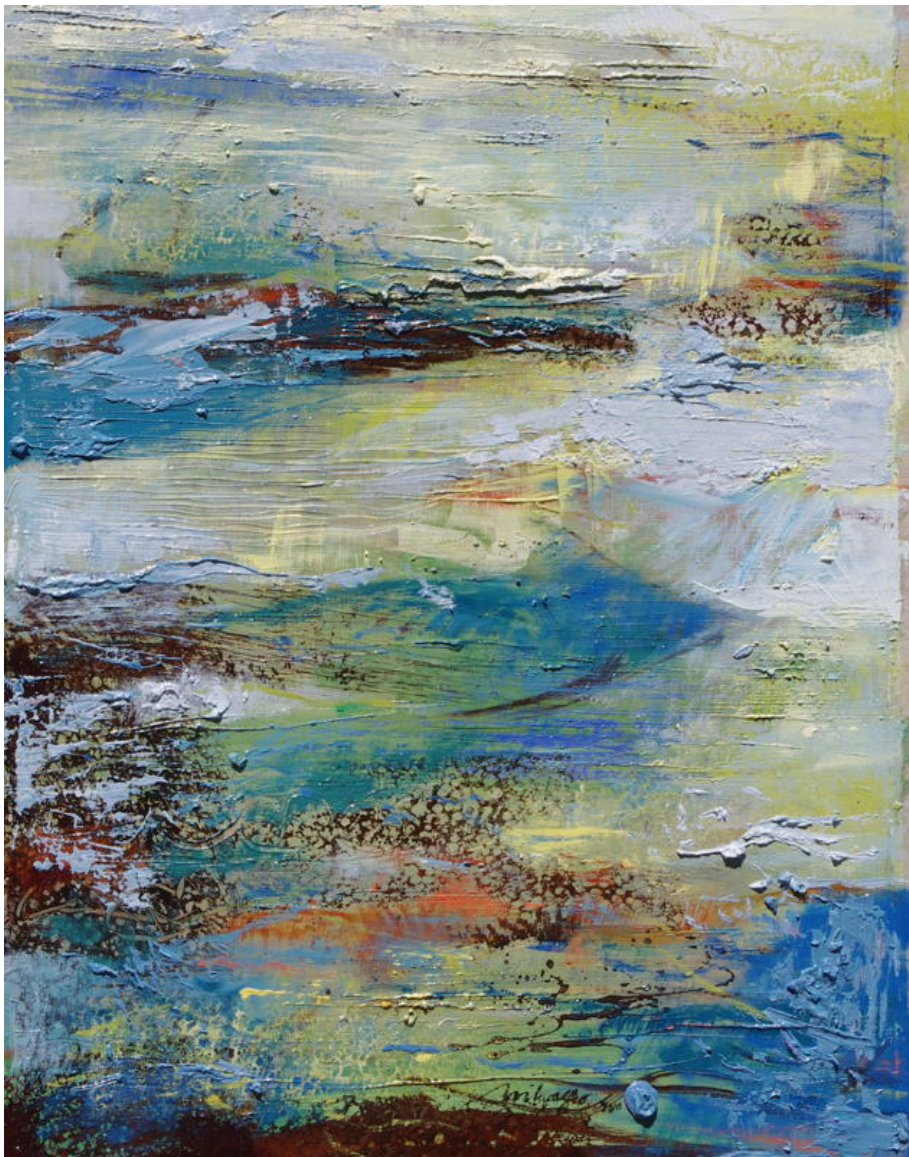
Edwin Wilwayco's studio in Providence RI: Wilwayco & Valliere.

2.

I majored in advertising art with painting as a minor. My training was to be proficient in drawing the classical way, or realistically, from still life, nudes, landscapes and portraits.

My father had emphasized the need for me to pursue a practical avenue in the arts that would help me find jobs. That's why I majored in advertising design. This led to my employment as an art director and ultimately to an executive art director position at an advertising agency.

This work involved developing visual graphic solutions, supervising television and photo shoots as well as designing print, logo and other corporate identity materials.



Homage to Bach, c.2010, Oil on Paper, 24" x 18"

What kind of art did you study in England?

My art school studies in the UK were very important for me. England was very much ahead in art, when compared with the Philippines. This gave me access to vast resources from museums and galleries as well as connecting with art students from other countries, the artists who were teaching and the visiting lecturers.

**“... England was very much ahead in art...
I saw original works by J.M. Turner and
Graham Sutherland...”**

I loved the Tate Modern Museum where I saw original works by J.M. Turner and enjoyed the color palettes of Graham Sutherland as well as the French artists Chagall, Kandinsky, Matisse and Miro

3.

- *Artists I Admire* -

When and how did you start to do abstract art. What works inspired you?

My British Council Grant at the West Surrey College of Art and Design in England played a big role in helping me to see art in new ways. I was in awe with how Mondrian was inspired to do his linear paintings and how he took realistic images to what became his signature rectilinear motifs.

**“... the major artists for me... were Jackson Pollock,
Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline...”**

The major artists for me began to be from the New York School. They were Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline and Marc Rothko. I also acquired a deep interest in the works of Dibenkorn, Miro and Zao Wuo Ki.

Your reference to Piet Mondrian’s work is most curious. His paintings are so geometrical and his colors so monochrome as compared with your work. What did you see in his art that inspired you?

My work now and Piet Mondrian's paintings don't have any semblance or similarity. I admired his determination and openness in pushing his mind's boundaries. He created paintings from experimentation with realistic forms to extreme abstract images, if we may call them that.

It was Mondrian's use of the colors of blue, red and yellow with black outlines that do not clash that caught my attention. I find his colors to be classic, timeless and fresh even to this day.



Jeepney Fantasia; Yellow Queen, c.1979, Oil on canvas, 48" x 60"
Collection of Pete and Lissa Jimenez

4.

Your art education was primarily influenced by teachers educated in the US and your time in the UK. You also mentioned famous 20th century American and European painters. Yet I detect an ‘Eastern’ quietness and sensitivity in your art. Where do you think that comes from?

As an artist it's not easy to find one's little niche – if I may call it that. I found elements of the works of many European and American 20th century masters to be compatible with my own evolving art style.



In Nature's Realm 2 , c.2012, Oil on canvas 60" x 48".

**“... my own spirit can be meditative
most of the time.”**

My sensitivity and sensibility to style allowed me to become closer to them maybe because of my natural temperament. I borrowed some abstract painting methods of the West and fused them with my own spirit which can be meditative most of the time.

You mentioned J.M. Turner’s paintings as being of interest to you. Can you say more about this?

What inspired me seeing J.M. Turner’s paintings at the Tate Modern was the overall feel and drama of his works. He can manipulate his colors and have them obey his hand and mind. I never paid attention to whether it was his attention to hide the paint or not. I just liked his brushstrokes as they provide a feeling of effortlessness. It’s as though he is just playing and that is what I want to emulate

5.

- *Why Color is Important* -

You mentioned how you were attracted to the way various artists used color. Have the vivid colors of planets and fauna in your native Philippines played a part in your color selections?

My fascination with color has been very strong ever since I was a child. My mother made clothes and I was given the privilege of choosing the textiles for her. I always chose prints with strong graphic designs.



Birds of Paradise, c.1992, 3-panel wood screen, 60" x 30" per panel, oil on wood.
Collection of Butch and Bingbing Santos

Yes, the vivid colors and fauna back home have played a big part in my color selections. I do think that this is what led me to be fascinated with the application of color in nature. I see nature demonstrating its beautiful colors in just one, two or three color combination

In your series *Birds of Paradise*, I detect many floral design elements. Is this how your appreciation of color and design in nature impacts your art?

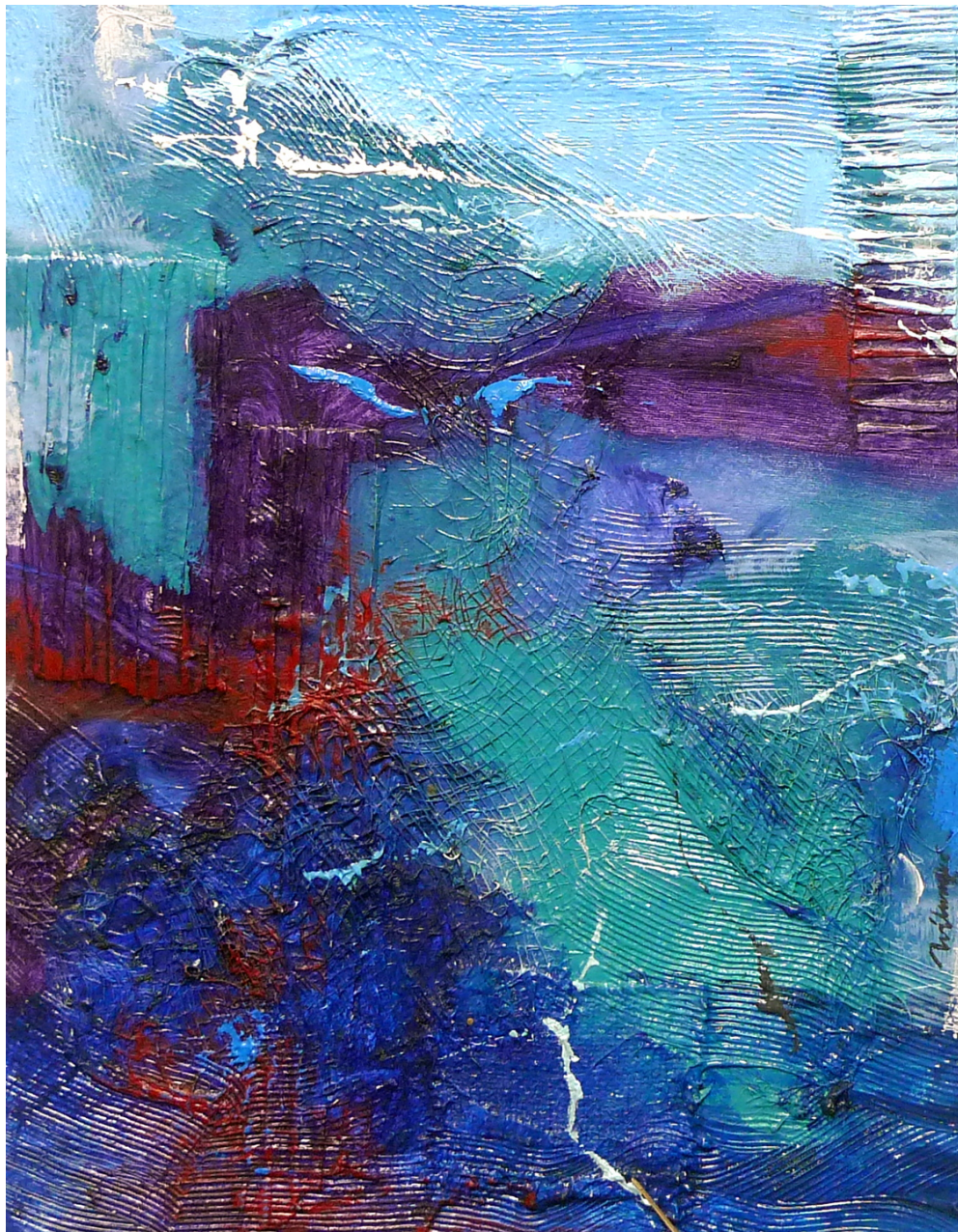
The intense natural colors and design I used in the *Birds of Paradise* screens caught my attention and led to the creation of many of my later paintings.

Floral designs for me lead to the curvilinear forms that I always find in landscapes. I see floral designs or patterns as part of the whole earth's landscape.

6.

What color theories have you studied. During the 20th century the Theosophists developed elaborate concepts of the meaning of various colors. Also in the 1960s and 1970s Joseph Albers at Yale University had a major impact on color concepts.

The color theory that I always find logical and useful are the color wheel, color harmony and the context of how color is used. I have always used color in my paintings that are analogous, complimentary and are based on nature.



River Circles: Return To The Heart, c.2010, Oil on paper, 24" x 18"
Collection of Robert Bjorn Santos

“...Joseph Albers paintings... had a great impact on me.”

I recall my professor in college, having been schooled at Yale, would often show us slides of Joseph Albers works with emphasis on the impact of color. Admittedly, the use of color in Albers paintings was dramatic and simple and these had a great impact on me.

The use of color in nature, for me, has the greatest importance in relation to color theories. Every time I look at the colors of different flowers I marvel and am in awe with the transitions of color - the sudden, seamless shift from one hue to another.

Color in all of its infinite variations is the very air I breathe. As melodramatic as that sounds, that is how I feel!

7.

- *How I Paint* -

Your overall compositions are superb. I very much admire the way you use colors to make the forms in your art. How did you develop these techniques?

Art school in England prepared me to paint anything. I've always been fascinated with landscapes, seascapes along with sunrises and sunsets.

**“I don't even start with a color preference.
I find the colors as I go”.**

But when I paint I have no preconception of what I want to do. I let the painting develop according to my inner feelings, my moods. This is especially so when I work early in the morning.

I don't even start with a color preference. I find the colors as I go. The colors in my paintings are juxtaposed for various changing effects. My colors are supposed to challenge or to echo each other.

How do you go about making a painting? Do you use preliminary drawings or sketches? What role do other visual images play in forming ideas for your art?

When I am painting I am not aware of what I am doing. I just go with the flow. It's an easy give and take process until the painting is finished.



Second Nature: Riverside Drive II, c.2011, Oil on canvas, 60" x 48"
Collection: Mr. & Mrs. Oscar J. Hilado

8.

I have no fears of making changes, destroying the image, adding, or erasing. I try to let the painting come through on its own. I developed this process without knowing it. I believe that gesture in art must appear out of necessity – not habit!

I have always found that listening to classical music sets a helpful tone and helps me to create a painting.

Which classical music composers do you prefer o listen to when you paint? Which of their works do you play most frequently?

I admire and have always enjoyed listening to the music of Mozart, Vivaldi, Handel, Bach and Schubert. I am especially moved by Mozart's **Symphony # 40**, Bach's **Obo Concerto**, Vivaldi's **Four Seasons** and Schubert's **Ave Maria**. I play these extensively and repeatedly while I paint.



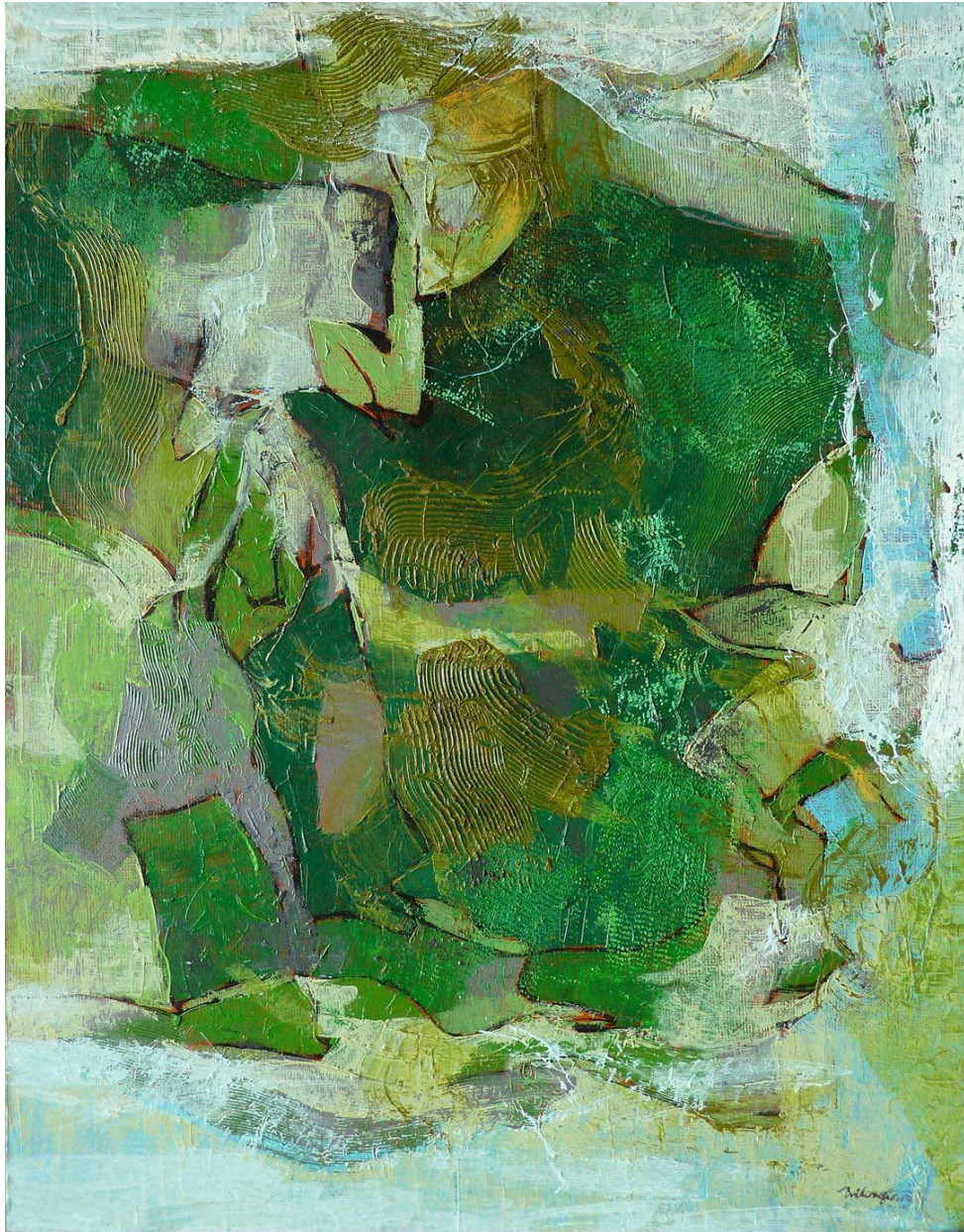
Edwin Wilwayco
Second Nature: Mariposa
152.4x 122 cm. / 60 x 48 in.
oil on canvas
2011

Collection of Carlo and Monique Lopez

Second Nature: Mariposa, c.2011, Oil on canvas, 60" x 48" .
Collection of Carlo and Monique Lopez

Do you paint flat on the floor or on a table top? Do you tack the canvas or paper to the wall and then work on it?

The limitation of space in my Providence RI studio inhibits my using easels. I do sometime paint on the floor or table op. I do my retouching by tacking the painting to the wall.



Edwin Wilwayco
Second Nature: The Green Leaves Of Summer I
101.6 x 76.2 cm. / 40 x 30 in.
oil on canvas
2010

Collection of Rufina Joaquin

Second Nature: The Green Leaves of Summer, c.2011, Oil on canvas, 40" x 30"
Collection of Mrs. Rufina Joaquin

I notice that you used both acrylic and oil paints. Why do you use both and how do you combine them?

I like to use acrylics when I start a painting. It's an experimental exploration for me. It serves to set an outline and can define the composition. Acrylic dries fast and then I can apply oil paint where I want it and allow more time for the oil to dry.

Do you paint with a brush or any other type of instrument?

I use a brush most of the time, combined with using pallets, scrapers, sponges and whatever instruments that can help produce interesting visual results.

How do you know when a painting is finished?

I know when a painting is finished when I think and feel that I cannot add something to it. I think it is more the 'feeling' that it's finished that helps me decide to stop.

You've told me that whenever you begin to paint you ask God for guidance. Do you say a prayer? Have you ever learned contemplation or meditation techniques? Are any spiritual practices part of your daily life?

I was raised by parents who were religious. For me it's natural to say a prayer before I start to paint. I ask God to be in control and to guide my hands. It's a very short prayer. When the painting is done I say thank you.

**“Prayer is what sustains me and
enables me to create.”**

For me the importance of prayer is that I do not have to wait for an inspiration or for a muse to speak to me. If I waited for his to happen I would probably never begin or finish a painting. If I miss saying a prayer before I paint, I feel sluggish and my mind tends to wander in many directions. Prayer for me is central to painting. It's what sustains me and enables me to create.



Edwin Wilwayco & Jim Valliere in Providence RI.

**Edwin, thank you, for the thoughtful and insightful comments about
your life and art.**

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James T. Valliere's interviews with Jackson Pollock's contemporaries, including Willem de Kooning and critic Clement Greenberg have appeared in many publications and are in the *Archives of American Art* at the Smithsonian Museum. Valliere's latest work is the Amazon e-book: *Pollock: How Lee Krasner Built His Legacy*.