

ASIAN ART NEWS

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Welcome to *Asian Art News*.

14 NEWSBRIEF

News and views from the art world.

48 BANGLADESH

Bridging Boundaries

The range of photographic festivals and exhibitions around Asia has grown significantly during the past decade. One of the most important is *Chobi Mela*, held every two years in Dhaka, Bangladesh. This year's festival turned around photojournalism, a form that many will dispute as art, but cannot deny the impact such work has had within a world already inundated by myriad forms of imagery. *Chobi Mela* stands out as a forum for photographers from around the world whose passion for their form is strikingly immediate and powerful.

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An Inseparable Bond

The vision that the Israeli artist Michael Kovner projects of his country is one that expresses the poetry of the patriot. Kovner is a philosopher of his land and a witness to the vagaries of its charms. As Harold Rosenberg wrote in his *Art on the Edge*, "Art lives by contradicting its immediate past. The aim of every authentic artist is not to conform to the history of art but to release himself from it, in order to replace it with his own history." This applies directly to the world of Michael Kovner for through his art he speaks of his own history, too.

60 NEW ZEALAND

Paradise Questioned

The realities of the lives of the peoples who inhabit the "paradise" islands of the Pacific are far from idyllic. The New Zealand artist Michael Reed's recent large-scale work *Cultural Vulture* questions some of the myths and the magic behind the gloriously colored world of the tourist propaganda about the Pacific islands. Here environmental catastrophe is about a trade wind away as global warming threatens the very existence of many small islands and clichéd world of tourism would make Gauguin rush back to France.

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Nurturing Narratives

The blend of fantasy, fiction, and fact that informs the art of the Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul speaks boldly across cultural boundaries. While much of his art raises questions in both a serious and humorous way about history and global society's present situation, it also raises some important questions on the future state of art.

70 INDIA

The Poetic Painter

Since 1947, Indian artists have consistently challenged all notions of what it means to be an Indian artist. Syed Haider Raza, 85, who lives in France, has for more than 60 years sought to inform his art with both the memory of his traditions and the dynamism of the West to make a vision of the world that is uniquely his own.

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The Art Of Making Visible

Through the seemingly trivial, marginal, and unpretentious objects of the everyday, the art of Filipino artist Rene Robles causes us to reflect on the subtleties of time, space, and memory as central elements in the complexity of the human narrative and individual identity. His art and his meanings are multi-layered—formal, personal, and social—which are steps to personal and cultural empowerment.



Rene Robles, *Lights On*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 4 x 4 ft. Photograph: Courtesy of the Artist.

80 CHINA

The Celebratory Art

The art of Beijing-based painter Bob Yan is a full and colorfully buoyant expression of the joy of life and living. His heavily impastoed and bright canvases also underscore the joys of friendship and his love for animals. In all, Yan's work is an expressively intimate celebration of life.

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Indonesian auction house Larasati continues to perform well with a broad range of fine art from Southeast Asia. The auction house has maintained solid results even in difficult times.

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Reviews from China, Hong Kong, India, Israel, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Thailand.

100 BOOKS

1. **Jeffrey Harris** by Justin Paton, Victoria University Press and Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand
2. **Abdul Aziz: The Artist and His Art** by Mary Northmore-Aziz, Mariz Foundation, Ubud, Bali, Indonesia

Cover: Bob Yan, Here I Come !, 2006, oil on canvas, 130 x 97 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Yan Gallery, Hong Kong.

The Art Of Making Visible

Through the seemingly trivial, marginal, and unpretentious objects of the everyday, the art of Filipino artist Rene Robles causes us to reflect on the subtleties of time, space, and memory as central elements in the complexity of our human narrative and individual identity. His art and his meanings are multilayered—formal, personal, and social—which are steps to personal and cultural empowerment.

By Alice G. Gillermo

For Rene Robles the discovery of his art has been a long and exciting journey through a vast landscape, with numerous delights and seductions along the way. His first

introductions to art were the paintings of the 19th century Filipino artists Juan Luna and Felix Resurreccion Hidalgo, who were accorded critical recognition in the 1884 *Madrid Exposition*. Early in his career, Robles perceived their conditions and aspirations as similar to his own, as a Filipino artist seeking a larger cosmopolitan public through the medium of a universalist discourse. From their academic influence, Robles proceeded to modernist grounds, the School of Paris and the later New York School. He became initiated into impressionism, cubism, and abstract art as he drew from these styles, at the same time that he never allowed himself to be captive to particular modernist paradigms.

Like Luna and Hidalgo, he pursued

the life of a Filipino expatriate artist for several years, mainly in the United States where he studied at the National Academy of Design School of Fine Arts in New York and at the Art Students League. He was

ally, this process led to the crystallization of his art in the style he called Assertionism, which captures the essence of his art. Having achieved this, he has come back to the Philippines from his sojourn abroad

and he hopes to interact with his fellow Filipino artists, while once more affirming his original and native ground from which he seeks to maintain communication with artists in various parts of the world.

From his ordeals by fire, Robles, who was born in Lucena City, the Philippines, in 1950, has emerged as a painter with a fresh and original vision within the expanded range of modernism with its revisions and reinventions and within the unshakeable *beaux-arts* discipline of

oil painting. He has indeed developed his own recognizable style, but by giving it a name, Assertionism, he also foregrounds the vision that impels this style.

Now, while springing from within the bosom of modernism, Rene Robles's



Rene Robles, Surrounding, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 8 x 12 ft.

also a recipient of study grants in Germany, Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain. From these diverse sources he learned that the journey to find one's art involves the constant focusing and refining of one's vision. Eventu-

art eludes facile classification. It escapes the outworn binaries of abstract and figurative—it is not his intention to be pigeonholed in either of them. Indeed, the reformulations of modernism, verging on the postmodernist even, valorize hybridity and fusion which produce the spark of insight so greatly valued by Oriental Zen artists and Western surrealists.

Assertionism, as Robles theorizes it, is not a simple unilinear concept but rather lends itself to multiple approaches. It involves three basic elements: the artist, his setting and environment, and the material objects that furnish his setting. On the part of the artist, he infuses or asserts/inserts his personality and identity into the objects of his setting in an intensely subjective process, one which involves an intuitive self-knowledge as well as the development of an artistic *écriture* applied to his subject. On the part of the objects, they recuperate their identities and assert themselves as hitherto concealed, neglected, and marginalized entities that are brought to the light through the genial gaze and sympathetic scrutiny of the artist. The environment or setting likewise, though often apparently uninhabited, bears the enduring presence of the artist himself in marks and traces of line, scribbling, familiar codes, and liquid or transparent washes, as well as in his identifiable point of view and vantage point from which he is both seen and unseen.

For the setting, the artist, without doubt, eschews the limitations of the single-point or linear perspective. Instead, his treatment of space is remarkable for its breadth and depth. Often, it takes the form of a city and a domestic interior telescoped within the urban setting. Space may be deep, with transparent layers that recede into seemingly infinite depths or are at points cut off by a two-dimensional device. Space also spreads out in various directions, with outer spaces slipping into inner spaces through passages and corridors that hint of lights in the middle or far distance. The composition, which is often structured along the lines of a cube or box, also orders space in the paintings. Often, white line drawings of a door or window



Rene Robles, Two Chairs, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 3 x 5 ft.

at the center of the painting parallel to the picture plane set the basic orientation, although these are only directional or relational in nature, being never solid or volumetric in form. They also imply the setting which is often domestic, that of a household, uncluttered and austere, more masculine rather than feminine in aspect. Wooden ceiling beams and stairs also introduce rhythms, bringing in the element of time that interacts with space that is subtly modified by temporal units of measure. Sometimes, there are subtle vertical dividing lines within the painting, which create sections that complement and interact with each other. Meanwhile, the overall transparency of the hues lends an airy quality to the paintings in which, never heavy and ponderous, the images seem to float like mindscapes. Here, what is solid becomes transparent and penetrable and layers of space interpenetrate with each other, creating ambiguous and intriguing realms like Chinese box puzzles.

Much of the distinctive quality of Robles' work comes from the characteristic subjects of his work. He seeks out new

views of things in their setting or objects that lie in the periphery of one's attention, although they constitute part of the daily amenities that are overlooked or taken for granted. Among these are tobacco pipes, needle and thread, bicycle parts, and often tables and chairs. But the tables and chairs are not presented in their familiar aspects; they are instead often reversed, their legs protruding in the air from the inner surface. In this way, a table is not the flat surface with supports where one sets the dinner plates or the books and paper that mark one's occupation. Robles' image of a table implies a three-dimensional structure apart with a flat rectangular or square surface and four wooden leg-like supports at its four corners; this material structure can be rotated in space and can be reversed without regard for its social function. Thus, the artist deconstructs the familiar structures of table and chair, showing them as they are in themselves, of wood or whatever material designed according to its basic requirements. And yet, while doing so, one acquires a more acute sense of the relationship of form and function in the objects



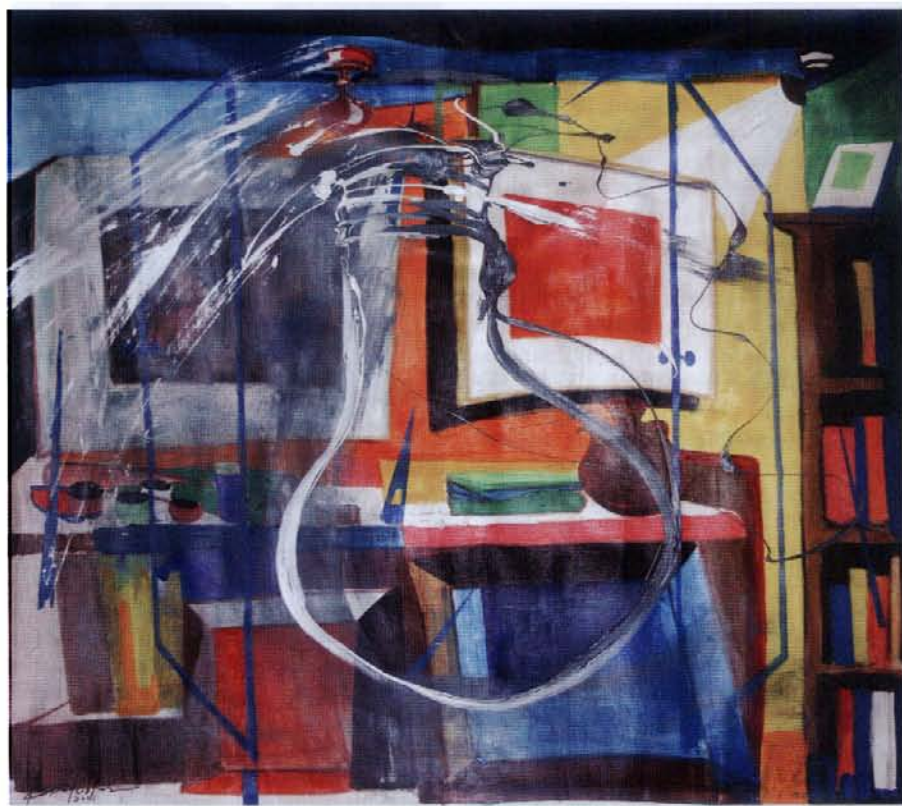
Rene Robles, Inside, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 3 x 5 ft.

that are taken-for-granted elements of our world. But, at the same time, we become more aware of the culture that gives rise to these particular structural designs which are not, after all, universal but culture-bound or, as in the case of ourselves as Filipinos, brought about by Western cultural hegemony, as different from our indigenous culture of the low *dulang* and the bamboo floor and *papag*,

the Japanese *tatami* and their small writing desks, or the Arabian cushions spread out on the floor. Thus, while the elementary presentation of the images of table and chair leads to an intellectual disengagement from the often messy particulars of domestic contingency, it also brings us back to a reengagement with these structure-objects, first as material form following function in a broad, universal sense, and then as cultural objects situated within a historical and social context.

The artist's choice of trivial and marginal objects is also cause for reflection. True to his personality, he creates an art of low-key, quiet but subtly sumptuous in its own way. He does not go for grandiose architectural details, perhaps classical columns, or high bourgeois fixtures, such as chandeliers or silver samovars. But he prefers unpretentious, perhaps inconsequential lived-in rooms where hidden marks and stains hint at human narratives that have past into oblivion. For instance, a naked light bulb shines forgotten from a wooden beam in a basement like a smile that has forgotten its original impulse. A bicycle stands below the stairs, its spoke wheels playing against the horizontal rungs of the wooden steps leading up a closed door. Here, formal design converges with human inflections: What is the nature of human presence here? Is it present in the moment, or has it left its mark as a promise to return, if not stir the memory for one who has broken familiar associations for the large and anonymous urban jungle? Indeed, in a number of paintings, these objects, tables, and chairs, have a spectral quality. At times, they are ghostly presences constituted by cursory white lines as though detected by ultraviolet light. And in their setting, these chairs of a particular design take up and claim their old customary places, representing their owners in their former living habits.

His paintings are largely somber with swathes of dark shadow interrupted by passages of red and blue. His colors possess an unusual sonority that comes from his typical color combinations: blue and yellow ochre, red and blue. His colors are largely autonomous in abstract masses that do not necessarily fill the contours of objects but rely on their own independent expressive significations within the context of the work. The colors, too, reds and blues, for instance, are applied in



Rene Robles, *Library*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 4 x 5 ft.

open wash-like passages with a chromatic intensity. Furthermore, white or black kinetic lines traversing the objects and abstract color passages impart a kinetic energy and movement to the paintings which, by this device, deviate from the condition of static still life's but become dynamic and alive. Like the best examples of the Oriental calligraphic art, these works then become zones of energy and witnesses to the potential spiritual impulses of a particular artist.

Most of his paintings have a somber

mood, which, however, is brightened by the intensity and luminosity of his colors. In *Reflections* (1995) the bright tones of the indoors in varying tones of alizarin red and Prussian blue interact with the outdoor reflections of gray and light yellow, with their once-removed design of arcades and arched windows forming a totality of ambience, while here and there are swathes of white in concentrated vibrating lines, like living impulses that continue to release energy even after its human source has left.

One also becomes aware of the use of objects in these works as different from their use in the analytical and synthetic cubism of the School of Paris, as in the works of Picasso, Braque, and Gris, primarily. In cubism, the objects, whether they are tobacco pipes, cords, pieces of newspaper, or violins, are fragmented as they interact, arbitrarily or not, in a large, encompassing reality. Their fragmentation or dissection is a purely formalist device to make the viewer aware of their various material aspects of line, tone, and texture. They likewise possess an equal weight in the cubist works as characterized by an even and neutralized value system. And, in another sense, these objects, too,



Rene Robles, *Bright*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 4 x 6 ft.

are cultural motifs and notations of what constitute the French bourgeois world of the period between the wars. But in the present case of the paintings of Robles, there is a selective focusing on an object, like the common light bulb or the ordinary bicycle, which is valorized and rescued from the general anonymity of urban detritus by relating it to human life and what the object has, in its own simple and basic way, both as formal design and function, contributed to it. The object is situated in an environment, at the same time that it relates to its setting, which both affects and is affected by it. One can say that Robles's art also exemplifies the fusion of the figurative and abstract modes, as it transcends this dichotomy to achieve a satisfying synthesis.

There is likewise an inescapable parallelism between the artist's valorization of the small and neglected elements of our lives and sympathy for the humble, lowly and marginalized inhabitants of the city—those who go about like cringing shadows in the inequitable system of power relations in which we live. In his art, at least, if not through more active political efforts, the artist seeks to reverse this traditional order of things. In a way, it becomes an art of reversals, and as such, inherently oppositional and off the well-beaten track, as indeed the most significant art must be. Of course, Robles's art of "nay-saying" is most subtle and *sotto voce*, but his Assertionist message comes clearly through after going through his body of work: we assert our identities through art in the same way that we discover and bring out new identities that have hitherto languished in the shadows. As Robles says, "The subject of art can be anything. Of more relevance is the impact it creates and the endless meanings that ensue for the viewer."

Robles asserts that his works have meaning and, in fact, his meanings are multilayered, formal, personal, and social, with these layers using and interacting in his work. The chair, for instance, is on

several levels, the image of a material object, a formal design, a piece of functional furniture, a memory clue, a signifier of the human presence, a universally shared object. Through his art, the artist changes the way that we look at objects. After him, the chair in art will never be the same again.



Rene Robles, *Take Care*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 8 x 4 ft.

Given his profound artistic engagement, Rene Robles also reveals a pedagogical side, as he seeks to be a teacher to students and to those who read on him. Through charts in books and various educational devices, he disseminates his particular chromatic code and method of color combinations. He makes younger artists

rediscover their subjects by assuming new angles and points of view where they shed their flatness and two-dimensionality and become brilliant and prismatic. For him, light is the primary element; transparent and luminous, it signals Creation, without which all is dark and without color. In his work, it is embodied in the light bulb which illuminates the scene, while at the same time it lays bear the structure and articulates details in their exquisite minutiae. As the artist often works with the primary colors, red, yellow, and blue, the national flag may insinuate itself into his work, bringing in evocations and warnings as in the painting *Take Care* which suggests the fragile balance of the present political condition in the country.

The needle-and-thread that often occurs in his work suggests the activity of stitching together, and in a larger sense, the healing of body and soul, and the process of spanning distances and marking signposts for the traveler. More important, for Robles, the process of making art involves a search for meaning or the profound experience of semantic wholeness which may start with a small motif, visual clue, or pattern which the artist may bring to full realization at the end of his voyage. Then, his objects as semiotic signs fall into place and cohere in a rich field of significations involving values held dear, as well as elusive fragments of memory, music and sounds, scents and aromas like Proust's *madeleines*, dreams, and reveries that surface from the depths, accompanied by a flood of feeling or the relief and delight of welcoming recognition.

All in all, the art of Rene Robles opens out to a larger personal and social view which seeks to do away with the hegemonies of power to seek a humane order of things through art. He says,

"Art which has power asserts, transforms, and transcends," thus affirming the transformative potential of art and its capacity to reverse the hegemonies. Δ

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