

SACRED THREAD

Raffy T. Napay

Art Stage Singapore

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Presented by
artesan

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Raffy T. Napay



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F o r e w o r d

Ateneo Art Awards held their 10th anniversary exhibition last August 2013, and I was asked to attend the event, after hosting many of their past awardees since 2008. A lady sidled up beside me, and alongside her was a burly young man with bright eyes, whom she pointed out and said “Ma’m, this is Raffy Napay.” I looked at him, his work, then him and asked, “How do you do this?”

I was referring to his work *The Family* which won him the Ateneo Art Awards 2013. At first glance, it looks like a painting. Then you have a hard look at it, and you see lines – hundreds and thousands of lines, as if they were fine brush strokes of oil and paint. Instead, they were threads of cotton, and wool, in colours and shadows you never imagined wool and cotton thread could do.

Later that year, Raffy completed a residency at our studio. The inventiveness of his approach, purity of vision, intense work ethics and stark honesty in his personality, were indeed invigorating. Any gallerist will tell you the exhausting experience one goes through in the trade; it goes up and down and it is often an exasperating venture. But it is moments like these, when you witness works in the making, and you let out a little whimper of joy inside you, you will then recall the true reason you are doing all that we do: for love of art, and the virtuosity of human creativity. Raffy Napay’s work is sophisticated, and has an ability to touch the viewer in a visceral manner. The experience also reminded me why I founded Artesan in 2005; to work with and nurture artists of exceptional talent, offering honest representation in an industry, which can become disputatious, when you least expect it.

The artist has managed to evolve further since 2013, and I have sought to keep his latest series under wraps to allow the art fair’s audience the full immersion into Napay’s fascinating world. It is an incredible privilege to mark our 10th year Anniversary with the international debut of Raffy T. Napay, at Art Stage Singapore 2015.

Roberta Dans

Founding Director
Artesan Gallery + Studio

SACRED THREAD RAFFY NAPAY

By Rebecca Grin

“Art is a microscope which the artist fixes on the secrets of his soul, and shows to people these secrets which are common to all.”

– Leo Tolstoy

Filipino artist Raffy Napay creates chromatic mixed-media pieces, deftly employing and harnessing colour and texture to create vivid works of art.

An awardee of the Ateneo Art Award in 2013, Napay was granted two international residencies: one at the Hope University, in the U.K., Liverpool; and the second at Artesan Gallery + Studio, in Singapore. As most art residencies serve as a repose from a familiar environment, it allows the artist an opportunity to interact with a different culture, as well as exposure to new art forms, materials, inspiration and ideas. In most cases, it also inspires the personal growth of each individual. At age 27, Raffy took his first trip abroad, a rite of passage if you will, amidst unfamiliar faces and foreign cultural norms. Seeing another world independently, the separation from the homestead only reaffirmed his familial loyalty.



In November 2013, noted Filipino writer Victor Ocampo interviewed Napay during his residency stint at Artesan, Singapore. He quotes in his documentation: “Napay’s work is far from the impersonal, geometric forms favored by school. Instead, Napay prefers to use cloth and thread to produce objects that straddle the traditional boundaries between textile, sculpture and painting, as well as between folk art and high art. He collects, synthesizes and transforms each canvas with his unique contemporary aesthetic – which in essence means he imbues each work with a measure of his own soul.”

The collection of artworks in *Sacred Thread* is, therefore, a declaration of the artist waking up to a newly discovered world, the wider physical sphere, the expanse of life and the new contemporary art world – all with a fresh, newly derived perspective.

One such new perspective is *Sacred Thread*, a presentation of new works by Raffy Napay that depicts a triumvirate of wall works, with sculptures and installations within arms reach, specially curated for Art Stage Singapore 2015. Taking centre stage in the exhibition is *Core*, an installation of a pair of ivory white heart sculptures. The concept of the soul whilst remaining incorporeal has been debated through the ages. Napay begins with the suggestion of the the purity of connection, and proposes that a singular pith is not in itself complete, but the interaction of a pair uniting and connecting, will ultimately see itself elevate, expand and grow closer to the universal life force – in fact, that sacred thread that binds us all.

In *Sky*, the artist recalls, “I sat on the plane to England and I remember just looking out the aircraft window watching an endless panorama of blue skies and clouds,

Core
Raffy T. Napay
Fabric, wool, cotton thread
42 cm x 122 cm (18 in x 48 in)
2014



which engulfs you with the thoughts of heaven...” Hanging high, the first of the trio of wall works, *Sky*, unfolds a medley of blue, grey and white, with no beginning nor end in sight. The shades comfort and cocoon, whilst suggesting getting lost in its infinite loop – prompting a familiar depiction of paradise. As American poet Robert Frost declares: “Where, where in Heaven am I? O opening clouds, by opening on me wide. Let’s let my heavenly lostness overwhelm me.” The paradox lies in a common difficulty to believe the end of one’s existence after death, and so, beyond death one must aspire to reach paradise, or heaven as a comforting thought.

The second work, *Sacred*, the title itself implies great importance to the artist. Intertwined silhouettes sit on a thick branch in a dense, overgrown jungle, branches, vines inundating them, with ‘eyes’ peering at them through the darkness. The white forms are leaning on each other, as they are hemmed in by the surrounding flora that are somewhat dark, yet somehow bright. Directly beneath them is a patch of healthy green, which unlike the rest of the landscape, seems to have a robust undergrowth. Amongst the foreboding growths of bare twigs of branches are spots of colour, brilliant like the plumes of birds of paradise, and twirling golden fruit.

Sky
Raffy T. Napay
Fabric, cotton thread
182.88 cm x 304.8 cm (6 ft x 10 ft)
2014



Sacred
Raffy T. Napay
Fabric, wool, cotton thread
213 cm x 400 cm (7 ft x 13 ft)
2014

The figures are entwined spirits, perhaps, co-joined in a solemn embrace, perched on a massive branch that serves as their sanctuary. The artwork is a complex undertaking, yet the allegory is simple and unabated correlating a parallel existence with mother nature who can play its wrath, or nurture our survival; no different from man's personal journey and cycle of subsistence.

Napay's intention to replicate one's "presence" as he takes the world around allows the viewer to actively participate in his inner gaze. The artist has been known to frequently place a human silhouette within the landscape of his canvas of wool and thread, omnipresent as a silent outline of an observer central to a concept. *Being* is one such example as we see a tree-figure, with feet firmly planted on the ground with infinitely growing branches, reaching out in all directions set amidst a dense, chaotic tropical terrain that threatens to overrun its own landscape. The thick branches grow up and outward over the foliage, extending its lifeline from the choking, grasping undergrowth. The outer layer of the figure is translucent, suggestive of the porous nature of being, yet omnipresent with sound intentions to extend and over-extend its energy, as its centre beats unmitigated.

Being
Raffy T. Napay
Fabric, wool, cotton thread
243 cm x 366 cm (8 ft x 12 ft)
2014



Strands of colour and fluorescence hang down, appearing like tiny garlands of confetti to celebrate the greatness of existence, the feat of the triangle of works, as the *Being* stands triumphant and strong.

Nestled within the trilogy of wall works, is a work both figurative and metaphorical. The installation *Lying and Waiting* coalesces Napay's emotional state, as we come full circle. A dark canopy hangs over a tufted, fallen tree. The piece allows for numerous analogies. Whilst adversity is commonly held in a negative light, it can also serve as an instigator for growth, and strengthening of resolve. Writer Ocampo declares, "So while the fabric is dour and grey, and the same storm carries darkness and destruction, it also brings the water that nourishes the tree below". Again, the artist references cycles that can turn on itself – or, move forward to a better place; an admonition to wake us up to what are now obvious earthly signs.

In a manner of speaking, Napay has created a series of works allowing the audience immediate communion with his ethos and the philosophy of his aspirations, by transcending multiple art forms. He is an artist of uncommon honesty who wears his heart on his canvas, and does not camouflage his feelings or thoughts in witticisms. Napay bares all, expounds completely unrestrained, without self-judgment in a decidedly assured and composed manner, offering solidarity of spirit uncumbered by identity or creed. The works in *Sacred Thread* explore Napay's thoughts of familial bonds and the virtues of humanity, very simply believing that what we put out in the world matters, to the next person and to the next, and on. Napay's epiphany comes through the mechanism of his artistic creation, and the enigma he is tackling is no less than the meaning of our fundamental existence within our habitat – and our absolute relationship with our fellow human beings.



About the Artist:

Raffy T. Napay was born in 1986 in Manila, Philippines. He graduated from Eulogio Amang Rodriguez of Science and Technology (EARIST) in 2009 with a Fine Arts degree. Whilst in school, he started gaining recognition for his skill. He was one of ten finalists in the Philippine Art Awards in the national capital region in 2007, 2009 and 2011. In 2008, he won the Metrobank Art & Design Excellence Award. In 2008, 2012 and 2014, he was awarded the Juror’s Choice Award of Excellence at the Philip Morris Philippine Art Awards on the national level, considered by many as a staggering achievement.

Napay originally used oil paints, until he developed an adverse allergy to the medium. Whilst recovering, he explored the potential of other materials, and explored working with the available threads and textiles at home. Growing up with a seamstress mother, Napay was exposed to a wide variety of threads, cotton and fabrics and these materials gave him a strong ground into a different world of creativity. The artist realized the creative process, was quite similar – from early conceptualization to finishing touches on an artwork. His threaded works demanded just as much time and attention to detail as paintings. Now equipped with a needle for a brush, thread and fabric as his paint, the artist approaches his canvas as he would a painting. His composition stays true whilst playing with shadow and light, in effect transcending any intuitive boundary between painting and creating a tapestry.

In 2013, Napay was awarded the prestigious Ateneo Art Award, emerging as winner in the Contemporary Artists category, besting artists from all over the Philippines. Napay’s early works are whole yet intrinsically personal, drawing inspiration from his family, surroundings and experiences. The award granted Napay two artist-in-residence programmes at both Liverpool Hope University in the United Kingdom, and at Artesan Gallery + Studio in Singapore. He has held three solo exhibitions since.

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