



URBANVOA

SOUTHEAST ASIAN PLATFORM

Zul Albani, EJ Cabangon, Romina Diaz, Goh Beng Kwan,
Justin Lee, Raffy Napay, Iggy Rodriguez, Jose Tence Ruiz,
Gromyko Semper, Denise Jillian Tan and Ryf Zaini

Curated by:
Roberta Dans

17 - 25 October 2015
Fortezza da Basso, Florence, Italy

Presented by:



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Urbanoa

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F o r e w o r d

It is with great pride and joy that I have been given the opportunity to stage the very first Southeast Asia platform at the tenth edition of the Florence Biennale.

For ten years, I have steadfastly sought to work with exciting Asian artists who work with such creative fervour to deliver world class exhibitions, setting off a truly impressed audience to talk about their shows for years to come. I have witnessed the arts scene in the region flourish, as economies develop and strengthen. Southeast Asian Contemporary Art has become a balm for our aggravated souls, a portal for social commentaries, as it leads us to face the stark realities that socio-economic progress has delivered to our very doorsteps.

The theme for the Biennale is particularly fitting, *Art and the City* – as the collective of artists we invited to join the project all hail from frantic Asian metropolises in varied states of development, with governments grappling with the needs and desires of millions – artists from different nations, political persuasions, and personal backgrounds. In an increasingly fragmented world, the works offer a reminder of our shared dreams and hope to wake us from to the perils of progress, for the sake of humanity.

The ride to ensure the success of the project has been somewhat quixotic, but with our sleeves rolled up, all proud to be part of the project and represent the region, everyone has worked with sheer determination. We express immense thanks to our generous sponsors, all participating artists, the National Arts Council, Singapore, the Singapore International Foundation, the Lee Foundation and the Philippine Embassy in Singapore, and of course my unfaltering teammates Smita Karunan and Romina Diaz, and all who have extended their generous hand. They have all made the project all the more sweeter, *più dolce*, and a strong boost to our unrelenting drive to ensure the success of this pioneer project.

Roberta Dans

Director and Curator
Artesan Gallery + Studio



*The Tenaciously Inevitable
Rise of the Abang Guard*

Jose Tence Ruiz
Acrylic on canvas
90 cm x 55.2 cm
2015

P r e f a z i o n e

E ‘con grande orgoglio e la gioia che ho accettato l’opportunità di mettere in scena questa prima piattaforma di arte dal sud-est asiatico alla decima Biennale di Firenze.

Per dieci anni, ho voluto lavorare fermamente con artisti asiatici entusiastici che lavorano con tanto fervore creativo per offrire delle mostre di livello mondiale, scatenando un pubblico veramente colpito a parlare dei loro spettacoli negli anni a venire. Ho assistito fiorire la scena artistica della regione con lo sviluppo economico e rafforzare. Sud-Est asiatico l’ arte contemporanea è diventato un balsamo per le nostre anime aggravate, un portale per commentari sociali, in quanto ci porta ad affrontare, nella cruda realtà che il progresso socio-economico ha consegnato alle nostre stesse porte.

Il tema della Biennale è particolarmente adatto, *Arte e la città* – come il collettivo di artisti che abbiamo invitato a partecipare al progetto provengono da metropoli asiatiche frenetici in vari stati di sviluppo, con i governi alle prese con le esigenze ed i desideri di milioni – artisti di diverse nazioni, orientamenti politici, e sfondi personali. In un mondo sempre più frammentato, le opere offrono un ricordo dei nostri sogni condivisi e sperano di farci pensare ai pericoli del progresso, per il bene dell’umanità.

Il percorso per garantire il successo del progetto è stato un po ‘donchisciottesco, ma con le maniche rimboccate, tutti orgogliosi di essere parte del progetto e rappresentare la regione, ognuno ha lavorato con grande determinazione. Esprimiamo immensa gratitudine ai nostri sponsor generosi, tutti gli artisti partecipanti, il Consiglio Nazionale delle Arti, Singapore, la Fondazione Internazionale di Singapore, la Fondazione Lee e l’Ambasciata filippina a Singapore, e, naturalmente, i miei compagni di squadra incrollabile Smita Karunan e Romina Diaz, e tutti coloro che hanno esteso la loro mano generosa. Tutti hanno reso il progetto ancora più dolce, molto dolce, e una forte spinta per la nostra unità incessante per garantire il successo di questo progetto pionieristico.

Roberta Dans

Direttore e Curatore
Galleria Artesan + Studio

URBANO

SOUTHEAST ASIAN PLATFORM
@ FLORENCE BIENNALE

Artists: Zul Albani (Malaysia)
E.J. Cabangon (Philippines)
Romina Diaz (Phils/Italy)
Goh Beng Kwan (Singapore)
Justin Lee (Singapore)
Raffy T. Napay (Philippines)
Iggy Rodriguez (Philippines)
Jose Tence Ruiz (Philippines)
Gromyko Semper (Philippines)
Denise Jillian Tan (Singapore)
Ryf Zaini (Singapore)

Exhibition Dates: 17th – 25th October, 2015

Presented by: X Florence Biennale
Venue: Fortezza da Basso
Viale Filippo Strozzi 1
Firenze 50129
ITALY

Curated by: Roberta Dans

Organized by: Artesan Gallery + Studio

Urbanoa: Visual Narratives from Asia

Rebecca Grin

This year's Biennale theme *Art and the Polis (Art & The City)* reflects the burgeoning urban art movement within a rapidly changing world economy. In particular, the economic boom in the Southeast Asian region has seen an amazingly rapid urbanisation of its cities, witnessing drastic changes to the socio-economic landscape of the region. People have migrated en masse to their capitals in search of better living, whilst aspiring to build their fortune. Technology has encroached into the personal sphere – and the rapid urbanisation of cities with the ensuing consequences of cultural clashes, overpopulation and rising levels of economic disparity becomes an obvious reality in the region.

Contemporary Art in the region has become a means of reclaiming memories, and documenting key political, social and economic events whilst addressing the new realities of its fast changing societies. As the cityscape evolves, art connects the past with the present and offers a portal to the future for the audience to ponder on.

Featured in Urbanoa are works by eleven artists from Southeast Asia who express certain realities of many societies in the region.

The exhibition opens with artist and activist, Iggy Rodriguez's *Thy Kingdom Come II*, pondering on a more historical and broad concept of "invasion" representing a dystopian war carrier with a spiked city on its deck. The dark cityscape sprawl of dilapidated edifices is no different from how we imagine the fictional cities as in *Dark Knight's Gotham City* or Alex Proyas's *Dark City*, the decaying metropolises in DC comics. Rodriguez alludes to the forthcoming infiltration of so-called progress and urbanization – and the sceptre of the forthcoming decay of many capitals around the region. As history repeats itself, the fall of civilization is the downfall of humanity itself, through continued greed and the destruction of morality, amongst others.

E.J. Cabangon's *Profile*, continues to elaborate on the setting, specifically tackling the role of technology in the 21st century. A human being's head appears, but of obvious cyborg origin. The face is perfectly outlined and contoured with a grid, evoking memories of 1980's cult movie *Tron*, a film about human beings entering the world of a computer mainframe. The Facebook logo is beamed across the cheekbones, chin and neck. The artist suggests how the human mind is being

re-structured like a robot, with “restored functions, or enhanced abilities due to the integration of technology” taking over what was earlier known as the human brain. It is virtual, indeed, but it begs the question, when will cybernetic human beings become our own reality as technology encourages us to evolve into a different 21st century specie?

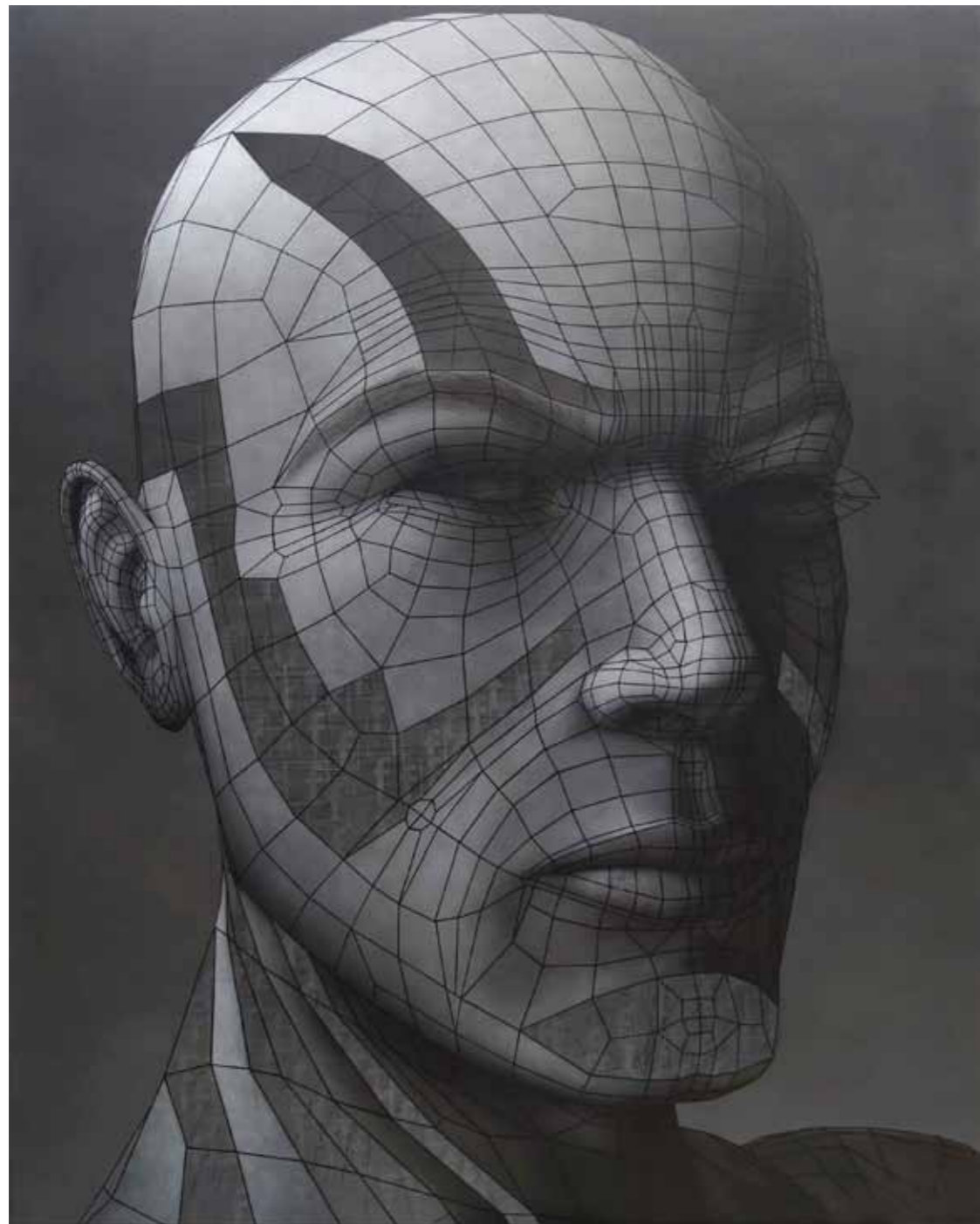
Not dissimilar to this visual prose is *Green Hornet* by Justin Lee. His works deal with security, conformity and the interplay of cultures. A binocular-ed General and his army of men stand on guard and are at attention. Their uniforms are reminiscent of armies of tradition, yet they wear the trappings of modern society, a set of night-vision binoculars for the General and embossed headphones for the soldiers. The artist reminds us how the “old guards” of societies who stand in defense of cultural norms and tradition will soon let their defenses down, as we all succumb to technological advancement. The youth being the most impressionable, are also the most vulnerable.

The youngest artist in the group, Denise Jillian Tan's *Is this Rebellious Enough?* repudiates the argument and speaks out for the desire of younger citizens in developing democracies. She asserts the need for greater space – physical, mental and emotional. Unwilling to accept the confines of “space” allocated to the young, Denise sees the artist as a facilitator of communicating with the urban youth – sharing their known reality and dreams of tomorrow. Tan reminds the viewer to look back at the freedom of their younger mind-frame, unfettered by collective thinking, but instead to do as one pleases – the innate joy in behaving in one's own radical fashion.

Delicate Violence (Self Portrait) II by Romina Diaz plays with the dichotomy of feminine issues which still dominates public discourse in progressive cities all over the world. A face shrouded in lace, with a hand over her mouth evokes disparate emotions. The light filters through the fragile lace magnifying the frailty of protection for women's rights, raises the issue

Thy Kingdom Come II
Iggy Rodriguez
Oil on canvas
122 cm x 106.5 cm
2014





particularly of sexual violence and the abuse of women and girls which is widespread and is considered to be ‘one of the most traumatic, pervasive, and most common human rights violations’. Similarly, she is seen “suffocated by tradition and the need to self-censor”. Sexual violence remains highly stigmatized in all settings, thus levels of disclosure of an assault vary between cultures. In general, it is a widely under reported phenomenon, thus available data tend to underestimate the true scale of the problem.

Jose Tence Ruiz’s *The Tenaciously Inevitable Rise of the Abang Guard* speaks of the ubiquitous sight of security guards in the Philippines – really a para-military within an urban setting who guard the elite from the rest of society, raises the conceptual possibility that the elites have become wealthy from both the efforts and filched resources from the very people their security forces guard them against. “The Abang” (brother) Guard are themselves from the very marginalized class they protect against – whilst being paid a pittance to perform their role. It begs the question – before will each wave of advancement of our race benefit only the top 1 percent and inevitably give rise to the proliferation of

the diminished, from which our Abang Guard eternally springs?” quotes the artist. The disparity and incongruous co-dependence between the haves and have-nots are a constant concern by Social Realist Filipino artist Jose Tence Ruiz, one of 3 Filipino artists also represented in the Venice Biennale 2015.

In a similar stream, Zul Albani’s *Nothing to Hide*, portrays a “strong-man lion” surrounded by iconic characters who have nothing to say, or some who refuse to listen or prefer to stay ‘hushed’. The artist suggests an unflinching depiction of the corruption in the population as endemic. The crowned steroid fueled ‘king of the animal kingdom’ depicts a ruling-class who are emboldened to commit acts of graft and corruption knowing their privileged position buffets them, symbolized by the clouds, from being accountable. In effect, the public remains powerless against the crimes of megalomania and greed.

On the other side of the spectrum, the personal quest for betterment and progress encourages the mass migrations of people to cities and foreign lands. Gromyko Semper’s *The Voyage to Artopia*, speaks of

Profile
E.J. Cabangon
Acrylic on canvas
154 cm x 122 cm
2013



The Green Hornet
Justin Lee
Fibreglass resin
Size variable
2014

the artists' journey. The female muse collects scattered stellar dust in an attempt to continue the magical and creative inspiration artists rely on; contrasted with the contemporary male figure, holding a golden skull, analysing and rethinking gimmicks and ways to accumulate more fortune, reminding the Midas curse is within all of us. Semper sends out a stark reminder to familiarise artists with the past, in order to understand our present; how artists themselves must unify and rethink their collective course.

d.umbrellas, an installation created by Singaporean artist Ryf Zaini feature wire-mesh shaped umbrellas, finally centers the group collective. The metal umbrellas represent his country, a civilization that is strong and reliant on technology. "The citizens, the people who carelessly embed their lifestyle with technological attachments, are like machines that are also vulnerable to viruses. We are plagued by several problems, such as war, poverty, climate change and overpopulation. The umbrella signifies a metaphor for protection, as we are no longer cloaked in armour or suits. We are instead left quite vulnerable and exposed, and the singular wired mesh umbrella provides an illusion of security, a protection for the frantic, constantly evolving societies. "

Yet Zaini affords us an optimistic twist. "A singular umbrella is translucent yet soft; bunched together, it becomes harder and stronger, signifying absolute strength when in solidarity for a cause," the artist declares.

And as Art should, removing us from the dire straits of urbanization, two artistic pacifists gently remind us the need to take a step back, and reflect – and occasionally take ourselves out of our world of hustle and bustle – as addressed in the works of Raffy T. Napay and Goh Beng Kwan.

Napay's *Dawn*, is a homage to the magical hour which takes place every single day, yet is missed and not appreciated by most urban dwellers in our day-to-day routine of existence. With thread and wool, Napay 'paints' the golden and peaceful hour. The act of sewing itself is time-consuming, yet it aides in meditative contemplation, an element commonly seen in many of Napay's works. Despite the holocaust of urbanization, there is beauty and cause for calm and respite, which Napay urges us to recall.

78 year-old Goh Beng Kwan, likewise, lovingly recalls seeing the frenetic spectacle of nocturnal insects in *Fireflies*. The brilliant splashes of colour on his canvas portrays the wonderful movement of these lightning bugs, "for their conspicuous use of bioluminescence during twilight to attract mates or prey. The light is produced from chemicals from the lower abdomen and

may be yellow, green, or pale red with no red or ultraviolet frequencies." Goh captures the magical flight of the night beetle as it dances in its own sweeping light. Just like stars, their light is better appreciated when there is no artificial light to dim its supernatural glow. Goh's work is a reflection reminding us all to occasionally cease, to enjoy the simplicity and splendour of our beautiful planet.

The thrust and pull of urbanization – overburdened cities struggling to supply essential urban infrastructure whilst lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty is an issue which will continually need to be addressed in the future. How do we mobilize private sector and civil society to generate economic growth whilst reducing poverty and destroying our sense of humanity? What role do artists play in this dialogue? Contemporary Southeast Asian artists create social commentaries to add to the dialogue relating to the issues they witness around them. Is this the blooming of greater engagement of artists in the space of critical social discourse in the Southeast Asian region? URBANOA invites artists and viewers to view the cogs of economic progress through the gateway of Art, towards the aim of a clearer understanding of yesterday towards a better tomorrow.



Is this Rebellious Enough?

Denise Jillian Tan
Oil on canvas
120 cm x 150 cm
2015



Delicate Violence (Self Portrait) II
Romina Diaz
Photography print on archival paper
180 cm x 120 cm
2014



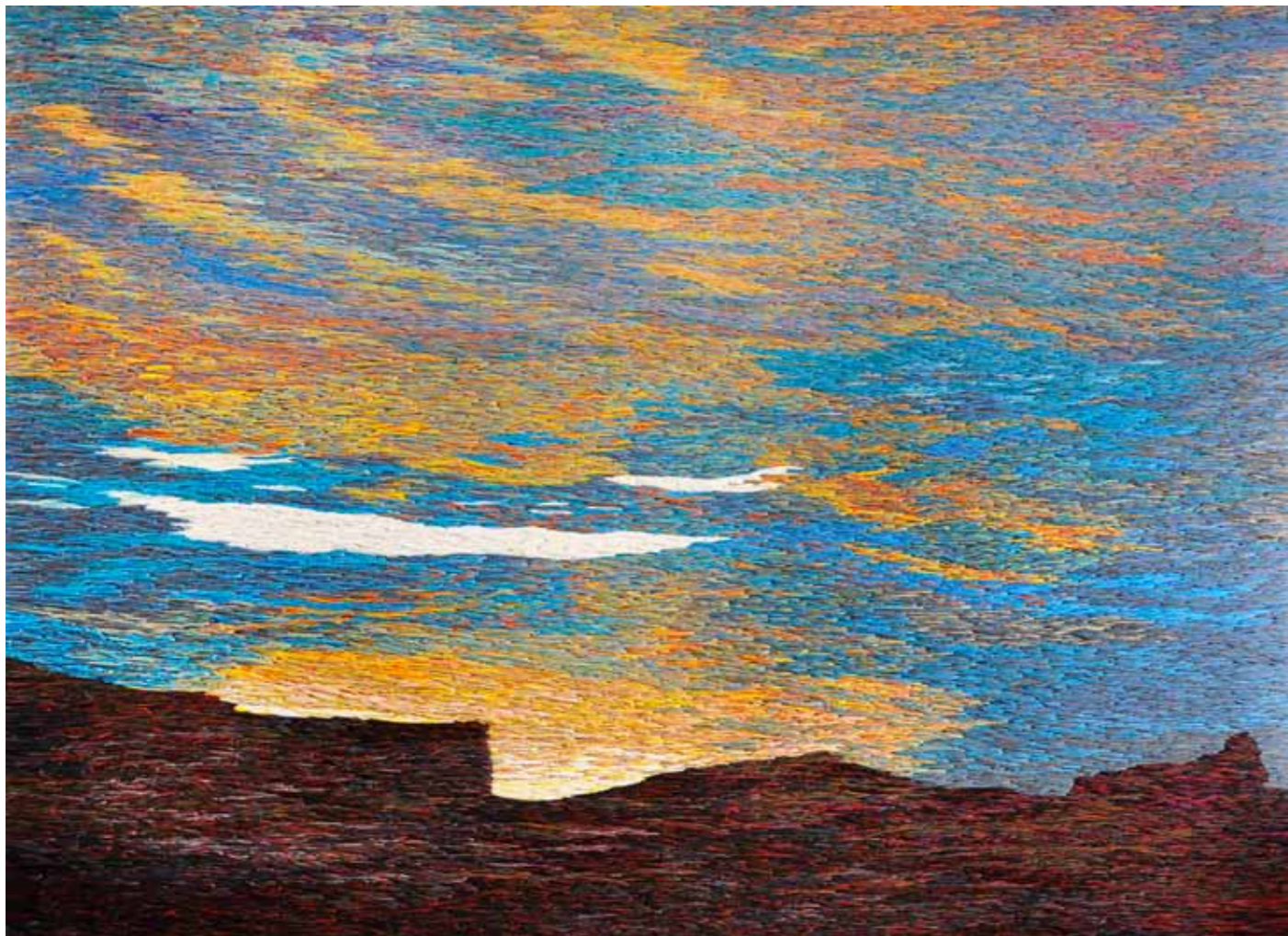
Nothing To Hide
Zul Albani
Acrylic on canvas
85 cm x 85 cm
2015



Voyage to Artopia
Gromyko Semper
Acrylic and ink on canvas
91.4 cm x 121.9 cm
2015



d.umbrellas
Ryf Zaini
Found objects, wire mesh,
cable wires
Size variable
2015



Dawn
 Raffy Napay
 Wool, cotton thread and fabric
 182.88 cm x 243.84 cm
 2015



Fireflies
 Goh Beng Kwan
 Acrylic on canvas
 100 cm x 80 cm
 2015

A b o u t t h e a r t i s t s

Iggy Rodriguez

Iggy Rodriguez – a political activist and artist. He was first introduced to the protest art scene in the early 90’s whilst at the University of Santo Tomas University through his involvement with the politically engaged Artist collective UGAT Lahi. The group attempted to trigger discussions on Filipino politics through workshops, performance protests and installations.

Currently less active, Rodriguez still uses his art as a platform for conversation and reflection on social issues. Although aware of the limitations of art in affecting change, Rodriguez nevertheless sees his practice and the legacies of Social Realism – a major influence on the artist – as an important strategy to connect and engage audiences, both in and outside the gallery, with socio political issues.

Iggy Rodriguez’s works impel rumination on the consequences of conflict and subjugation, provoking discourse on how dignity and the human spirit are consumed in the shadow of neocolonial and neoliberal policies

EJ Cabangon

EJ Cabangon, graduated from Philippines Women’s University in Manila with a Bachelor of Fine Arts, majoring in Painting. Whilst still in school, Cabangon was a finalist in the 25th Shell National Student Art Competition in 1992.

A maestro of the ‘dark and perfect art’ – his first overseas exhibition *Mirror Mirror* was in Singapore in 2007. Renowned for his signature hyper-realistic oil paintings rendered in very fine detail, paying particular attention to minutiae, his works are never strict interpretations of scenes or subjects. Cabangon utilizes subtle pictorial elements to create the illusion of a reality, nudging the viewer to understand the underlying truth.

In May 2014, Cabangon took part in a group exhibition titled *Facets of Philippine Art Today* in Taiwan, curated by Ronald Ventura. He has had over ten solo shows with the likes of West Gallery, Blanc Art Space, Tin-Aw Art Gallery and Big & Small Art Co.

Justin Lee

Born in 1963, Justin graduated from the University of Huddersfield with a Bachelor of Arts in Painting in 2006 and a Diploma in Fine Art from LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts in 1999.

An active artist from 1996, when he competed in art competitions and in 2000 he was selected to complete a 6-month intensive training at the Tyler Print Workshop in New York under the supervision of Ken Tyler. In 2006 he was awarded the Mont Blanc Young Artist Patronage Project in Hamburg, Germany. He has exhibited extensively in Singapore and with institutions such as the Singapore Art Museum. Internationally, he has shown in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia and Thailand.

His work aims to bring a fresh understanding of current Singapore society, blending the cultures of East and West. His believes art raises the awareness of people’s place in society and the role they can play.

Denise Jillian Tan

Emerging Singaporean artist, Denise graduated with a degree in Fine Arts from LASALLE College of the Arts.

In 2011 and a student, Denise was nominated for the Sovereign Asian Art Prize – and won the category of Top 20 Singapore Artists in 2012. She exhibited alongside the Top 30 Category in Asia at Marina Bay Sands Singapore. She exhibited at The Arts House and had her first solo show at Marriott Hotel. Group shows include the ICA Gallery at LASALLE College of the Arts, The Substation, The Arts House, NUS Society Guild House and Alliance Francaise de Singapour.

In May 2013, Denise held her first show with Artesan Studio + Gallery, *Therefore I Am: The Making of A Portrait* showcasing her works from the start of artistic journey to the present, hinting at the young artist’s innate talent. Her second solo exhibition, *A Spoonful of Sugar* was held in December 2014.

Romina Diaz

Romina A. Diaz, was born in Manila, Philippines in 1981. At an early age she was exposed to the arts and

developed an eye while working in her mothers international art gallery. She studied interior design in La Salle University and transferred abroad to study in Florence Italy as a Filipino scholar at the Accademia delle Belle Arti.

After an introduction to all forms of expression and the media, she discovered that photography is her medium and started using photographs as a method of expressing herself in almost all her works. She also experiments with new technology and learning new visual languages through video, photography, and interactive multimedia installations. She graduated in 2008 from the school of decorations and pursued a master degree in new languages of visual art. Romina presently lives and works in Florence, Italy where she is finishing her masters degree.

Jose Tence Ruiz

Jose Tence Ruiz took two courses at the University of Santo Tomas College of Fine Arts and Architecture, enrolling in BFA Advertising in 1973 and graduating with Honors with a BFA in Painting in 1979. He has been involved in multi-media visual activities such as Set Design, Publication Design, Book Illustration, Media presentations, Teaching, Editorial Illustration, Painting, Art for Advocacy, Sculpture, Installation and Performance Art.

In 2009, he had two major works in *Thrice Upon A Time:*

A Century of Story in Philippine Art, which ran at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) from November 2009 to January 2010.

He currently works as a multi-media artist and an independent writer/consultant/curator for such Institutions as the Cultural Center of the Philippines, The National Commission for Culture and the Arts, The Pasig City Arts Museum, Neo - Angono Collective and The Ateneo Art Gallery. He represented the Philippines at the 2015 Venice Biennale.

Zul Albani

A self-taught artist, Zul was born in Malaysia in 1965. Zul's work focuses on socio-political and cultural issues. After graduation, he moved to Kuala Lumpur, and worked as a cartoonist and graphic designer in a publication house. His interest in art, led him to pursue art over the weekends.

An artist activist, Zul's artwork takes a critical view of the social, political and cultural. Art is a means to express feelings and opinions on issues as diverse as war, justice and life.

His intent when viewers see his works is for them to be stirred by the movement of ideas in his unconscious mind even as they think they are looking at colours, strokes and textures. More than just viewing, he wants people to feel his works within themselves. Since 2012 he has worked with bitumen and acrylic on canvas.

Gromyko Semper

Born in 1985, Semper is a self-taught artist whose works have travelled far beyond his native Philippines, exhibiting in Germany, the United States, Portugal, France, Russia, Austria, Australia, Japan, Singapore and the United Kingdom.

Semper's drawings are executed in the manner of Japanese wood-block prints, whilst embodying a personal, invented mythology like William Blake and J.R.R. Tolkien; the symbolists, surrealists and decadents; and up to and including British artist Patrick Woodroffe's Mythopoeikon (1976) and The Pentateuch of the Cosmogony (1979) and the forerunner of Vienna School of Fantastic Realism, the visionary - Ernst Fuchs. Semper's work has some affinity with Albretch Durer's woodblock style, it stands apart, drawing on Filipino supernatural folk traditions, Christianity, Jungian psychology, the mysteries of the Kabala and Gnostics whilst employing elements of quantum mechanics, alchemy, world mythology, the occult, classical art symbolism, art nouveau and erotic drawings.

Ryf Zaini

Having first graduated in engineering, Ryf then completed a diploma in interactive media from LASALLE College of the Arts and graduated with First Class Honors in Media Arts. As a student, Ryf participated in several festivals such as the Singapore Art Show, and the Singapore Arts Festival – utilising his understanding of electronic engineering and translating it into artistic content.

Post graduation, Ryf participated in several exhibitions in which he created hybrids of technologically-informed art. Ryf's installations merge ideas relating to technology and the arts, and his work has been exhibited at Sculpture Square, Singapore and ARTRIANGLE, Malaysia.

Ryf's interest in society's reliance on technology and its social constrcuts saw him constructing large-scale sculptures of mythical creatures through public inter-activity. His sculptures showed at the Singapore Art Museum as part of the Singapore Biennale's fringe event and at the Sea Art Festival 2011, organised by the Busan Biennale Committee, South Korea.

Raffy T. Napay

Raffy T. Napay born in 1986 in the Philippines, is a 2009 Fine Arts degree graduate of Eulogio Amang Rodriguez of Science and Technology (EARIST). In school, he started gaining recognition for his talent He was a finalist in the Philippine Art Awards in the national capital region for 3 years. 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 a staggering achievement.

In 2013, Napay was awarded the prestigious Ateneo Art Award, winning 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. He has held five solo exhibitions, including his international launch at Art Stage Singapore in 2015, garnering acclaim.

Goh Beng Kwan

Pioneer Singapore artist Goh was born in 1937 and his distinctive approach to abstraction and collage saw him awarded the Cultural Medallion for Visual Arts in 1989 for his contributions to the Singapore art scene.

The direction of Goh's stylistic development was molded from exposure to art and Chinese calligraphy coupled with his exposure to the mainstream international art of the 1960s including time spent studying at the Art Students League in New York and Provincetown Workshop, Massachusetts in the 1960's.

Goh is most preoccupied with achieving pictorial harmony and balance. Working intuitively with unorthodox materials found in everyday life like rice paper, fabric, and bamboo yet which are personally intimate and meaningful. That these materials and objects are also signifiers of “localness” and reminders of fading lifestyles suggest that Goh's self-professed “oriental approach” is tinged by the nostalgia of one dealing with the progress of urban hyper-development.

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