

Re-marking the Unremarkable

by Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez (2018)

Leslie de Chavez has been riding a steady crest of artworld recognition for the better part of near two decades, and having known him when he was still a deskbound graphic designer nudges me to ask how he's able to keep the edge of *desgusto* his works continue to give off.

Interestingly or perhaps tellingly, this time around, De Chavez's signature macabre tones come counterpointed by a near clinicality in *Higa sa Hangin* (roughly translated as 'suspended in air', just one of several precarious stances Marcos dissident poet-journalist Pete Lacaba was forced into as he was subjected to harrowing instances of torture). This titular reference to Lacaba's post-martial law testimony, of being made to lie across a gap between steel cots as he was pummeled by captors came re-staged in De Chavez's hands using anthropomorphic wooden stand-ins raised high up on Finale's warehouse ramparts, ominously and forebodingly above the coffin-like structure. Unlike the artist's well wrought but always dire paintings that register more heavy handedly, there is a slickness to this and other pieces on show that brings the stench of defeat to the edge without quite tipping over. There are the grain rucksacks doubling up as peasant bodybags, the rough-hewn bamboo scope commandeering a vantage elevated but interminably bleak. As in showings in the near past, De Chavez delivers an expected cynicism peppered by allusions to a broad spectrum ranging from pop culture, political and social history, literature, philosophy, art history, online pegs, and other current media events. This time it seems, there is distanced wistfulness to the whole production.

Take the day-in-the-life video montage from small-town Bangkulasi, Navotas which comes rendered in the banality of the unseen and ignored (pedicab drivers lolling away a sleepy wait for fare, scavengers sorting through discarded mineral water bottles and a mash up of plastic caps, that lingering peek at an alley where laundry is getting some sun, catching a whiff of a fiesta banderita cast-off as it flails against an impossible web of electric cables, scanning through a patch of river scenes of detritus and men making do, spotting piled on ads and electoral fluff faded and pasted upon one layer after anothe...all this in a place where it seems nothing ever happens). And yet it is precisely on such a non-descript spot that morbid travesty set upon a juvenile club-footed EJK body statistic gets flagged upon, the bloodied space shrugged off as miserably water-logged and essentially, hopeless.

Heavily influenced by the late curator and regional advocate Bobi Valenzuela, De Chavez effects this 'small town vantage' mindfully. It is positionality near and dear to the artist's larger sphere of work and domicile. Having opted for setting up his young family near parents and childhood memories, the artist keeps a keen eye toward how his own mobility might trigger earnest conversations across the formulaically seen as simplistic and cosmopolitan.

Red-tagged Quezon province, De Chavez' once sleepy but since rapidly industrializing, because resource-rich rural idyll, is in many ways a precarious retreat, and is easy stand-in for the fate of much of Filipino towns on the development superhighway. Sheer distance from the toxic pace of the art

centers affords artists there some genuine elbow space and time to stew. But neither is this well-known hub of radical left dissidence resolutely removed from the terrors of the gnawing megacities and multinational claws chapping at what the province still holds by way of people, scapes, and land-sea riches. In this light, it may indeed just be fitting to find De Chavez counting on such town-iconic pegs like the unapologetically savory longganisa and the spiritually-festive pinalakpak to scratch at what would otherwise be off-the-pleasant palette. This same ironic impulse pushes the artist to call in object stand-ins for odious and foreboding human predicaments...higa sa hangin, buro (pickled), lagabag (a thunderous bang)...clear assertions of how there is no desire to sanitize life dearly lived at the ruddy grassroots.

There is a trail scent for instance, of folly but resilience too, of hubris—that effected entitlement-immortality ego-bred residue in *Aninag* and *Bought and Sold*—as if doing something, anything even if merely gestural, would make a difference; as if standing in for a cloaked portrait testifies to one’s being there and having lived. The stubborn though weathering materiality of *Ego Altered* and *Immortal* bode otherwise, even if cyclical abuse appears to be inescapable patrimonial fate. There is elegant invoking of state fascism made slick in *Estados Aparatos*, the same visual quandary lent by the artist’s earlier wall-based gold-inflected works figuratively and literally blemished by tinted figures in almost always compromised and bleak instantiation. The painful shifting between what could and will always be becomes almost too masochistic to witness at times in these tellings.

As sensed in *Bought and Sold*, and even in *Aninag*, De Chavez, particularly in these installations articulates an inclination to have other bodies participate in a posited psycho-spatial transformation, however, subtly and only temporally enabled. And yet, while soaking in the potential embodiment laid out before such work, both curious and intrepid will need to cross an interminably willful point—to graze, glaze over, possibly too to shrug off completely.

Some critics have grappled with how the seduction of slipping into empty political rant seems to hover over De Chavez’s formulations in recent years, but the heightened panic behind *Higa sa Hangin* (at least partly borne on the rising national body count) is easy enough to discern. Perhaps unintentionally, artists who think through and refuse to act haphazardly upon an insistence on sociality will likely turn out work that remains tenuous as best, but the effort will set off a healthy taunt to fellow artists interested in not merely sitting through the problematics. The classic artistic conundrum of breaking with a pack, but still seeking to express some kindred-ness seems to have underpinned the stagings of De Chavez’s work predating this particular moment. In the end, perhaps we could think of these iterative exercises as a public working out of individuation amidst a crushing scape of toxic populism and gnawing despair.