

ESOTERIC ART OF JIV MANILA – Art for a Meaningful Life: Review of “Opening” and “Opening, Part Deux” Art Exhibit

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JIV Manila art collective released its new collection of esoteric-inspired paintings about metaphorical doorways, pathways, portals and bridges in two exhibits this May 2010. The first show entitled “Opening” was launched in Galerie Astra Makati (May 7 to May 20), featuring the works of Ivan Basit, Juno Parungao, Lito Casaje, Alain Austria, Liezl Buenaventura, and Norlito Meimban. The exhibited paintings in Galerie Astra were transferred to the Phil-Am Theater (May 22 to May 29), a cultural hub for performers and visual arts located in United Nations Avenue Manila. The second show is entitled “Opening, Part Deux” where artists Rex Rosco, Lynyrd de Marquez de Narciso and Joel Caballero joined the group. In 2010, the Philippines enters a new scene in the political arena. With this theme comes a collection of pieces symbolic of new beginnings as portals, transitions and changes are promised by openings.

Esoteric inspired paintings are new in the Philippine art scene. The year 2008 saw the formation of JIV — an independent collective that brings

together an eclectic mix of visual artists from different backgrounds and disciplines. Esoterism in artistic texts such as in paintings pertain to the ways of becoming aware of the Fine World including the numerous fields of the paranormal. In essence, esoterism deals with phenomena that modern sciences, especially physics, cannot explain (Blyumenau, 2009). In the Philippines, popular esoteric arts pertain to the occult such as the concept of *kulam*, *tawas*, *anting anting*, and other supernatural beings such as *tikbalang*, etc. Many local books are written by Tony Perez and Jaime Licauco about the aforementioned concepts. Filipinos perceive astrology to be limited to daily horoscopes, love life, and lucky numbers for betting in the lottery.

The founders of JIV Manila, Ivan Arrojado Basit and Juno Parungao, thought of pioneering esoteric inspired art in the Philippines by showing paintings anchored on universal principles, new age philosophy and spirituality; hence the slogan of the group – ‘art for a meaningful life’. Esoteric paintings offer a new way of appreciating esoteric concepts by showing the importance of astrology in one’s life, for example, in a painting which could be hung in one’s bedroom. The art work thus becomes a symbol of the art recipient’s aspirations, values and other attributes just like when people select tarot cards to represent their present state. This new method of presenting art invites the art recipient to engage in an act of introspection when viewing and choosing a painting to buy.

Now, in the Age of Aquarius, people are starting to redefine how they categorize and conceptualize ideas. Society has become more open to change. Similarly, this mirrors the defining theme of the new age movement – universal tolerance. Purists are giving way to the surge of new ideologies emerging from different sectors in society (Groothuis, 1988). The introduction of JIV Manila in the art scene is, therefore, an inevitability given this exciting state of affairs.

The group brought together a collection of art pieces examining the concept of “openings” from different esoteric perspectives. According to Lito Casaje, the month of May is a special month for artists because it is ruled by Venus the Goddess of Beauty. This belief is based on horary practice which teaches that Venus, aside from being the ruling planet of Libra and Taurus, inspires creativity. The latter pair is associated with love, art and fashion. Artists of all sorts feature Venus as prominent in their natal chart, which is

computed based on the person's birth time, place and date (Parker, 2003). Art is a calling to fulfill the Venusian Principle. To understand one's Venus in the natal chart is to understand one's artistic nature as Venus represents a sense of style, beauty, and balance (Hillman, 2007). Artistic endeavors are thus favored in the months May and October. That is why despite the elections last May 11, the launching of "Opening" in Galerie Astra last May 7 was well received, and was even featured in an episode of ANC Cityscapes, hosted by Lexi Schulze. To give a more thorough discussion about the style of JIV Manila art collective, this review chose the works of Norlito Meimban and Alain Austria because they typify the group's aim to advance esoteric principles in art.

Norlito Meimban's collection focused on spiritual doorways. His piece *Red Limbo II* challenged its viewers to imagine what lay beyond the swirls of red, blue, black and white paint. Meimban used swirls and circles in his paintings to make its viewers feel as if they are being drawn in to expand their consciousness. Circles, swirls, and helixes are rooted in esoteric arts. Part of Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions is the creation of mandalas. 'Mandala' is a Sanskrit word for "magic circle". Part of meditation is engaging in mandala making, which allows a person to find his center. The circle becomes the reflection of the inner self which also represents the metaphysical cosmos; hence being one with the universe (Malchiodi, 2002; Holmes, 1997). Swirls and helixes define the movement of the universe—the helix itself is the template for life as it illustrates the movement of life in the galaxy from the DNA molecules to the spinning of the planets (McArthur, 1998). The helix of Meimban can also symbolize the dynamics of human communication and social change just like in the recent study of Deza (2007) where the helix was used to represent a phenomenological-based social change paradigm that takes after Ken Wilber's Kosmic map—showing how creativity is generated by interaction of forces in the quadrants of being. In Meimban's abstractions, his swirls look like the top view of a helix with a smoky mixture of ochre, black, and white against a vermilion background. The mass of the swirl depicts a particular movement that draws the viewer into the center, a metaphorical "going within" to discover one's creativity, ending in a resolution of personal crises.

Alain Austria in turn specializes in Asian mythology. For these two exhibits, he came up with illustrations exploring his idea of what exactly happens when individuals engage in certain rituals. Based on esoteric practices,

people engage in rituals because they are undergoing transitions. The ritual itself is the door to another state of being; it is a way of making contact with the spirit world when invoking forces that can help in prayers or spell casting (Parker, 1992). This is exemplified very much in his *Bathalang Bata* where the mixed media art work features installed brass *anting-anting* with people worshipping these idols under a big tree. The artwork clearly expresses the idea that praying and spell casting are the same in principle. In 'Science of Mind and Man', a lecture series by Charlie Barreto, prayers and spell casting are employed when giving praise to a higher being and when in need, for guidance or other matters. This painting makes people rethink their understanding of spell casting, especially when it is depicted to be no different from praying. In Philippine society, there are those who look down on spell casting saying it is sacrilegious based on catechetical doctrine. It is therein stated that spell casting is wrong because God alone has the power to influence or control lives (Bennet, 1962). In spite of this, there are still those who believe and even depend on *anting-antings* for various purposes such as protection or love. In Siegel's Theory of the Opposites in Art, poetry, dance, architecture, paintings and other art forms all express the oneness of the permanent opposites in reality. Artists, according to Siegel, will always find ways to unite rest and motion, heaviness and lightness, freedom and control, sameness and difference because opposites are eternal (Reiss, 2007). Furthermore, uniting the opposites is very evident in symbols following the principle of duality. Symbols such as the Ying Yang, Star of David, the infinity symbol and the Major Arcana tarot card of the Lovers clearly show the union of the archetypal opposites – male and female, light and darkness, heaven and earth, to mean oneness, as above so below; hence the term "universe" (Parker, 1992; Barreto, 2000; Pollack, 2008). Alain Austria has achieved this by presenting a religious ritual with undertones of paganism.

Given the myriad of symbolisms in esoteric art, paintings are not restricted to an essentialist view of defining meaning which limits interpretation into one accepted way of understanding art. There are a myriad of interpretations for any painting; hence, interpretation of artworks are not limited to the artist's point of view (Barret, 2002). Similar to tarot readings, the paintings exhibited were arranged based on a tarot spread posing significant meanings. The interpretations, however, are not imposed on the art enthusiasts. The group actually invites people to give their own

interpretation of the artworks during viewing sessions. JIV Manila values the meanings people attach to paintings in exhibits because it is a way of getting inspiration for a new collection.

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