

DISSONANT ENCHANTMENTS: The Resonant Object and Kawayan de Guia's "Bomba": A Review

■ **TESSA MARIA GUAZON**

Tessa Maria Guazon is assistant professor of Art Studies at the University of the Philippines Diliman. Her research interests include urban issues and their artistic mediations, as well as curation and contemporary public art practice. Recent essays include an article on the Vargas Museum's permanent exhibition in the *Asian Art News* magazine, while another on an art project that interrogates urban planning was published in the *Agham Tao* journal last October.

Past

Artist Kawayan de Guia reworks nostalgia into mindful retrospect through pieces for *Bomba*, installed at the Vargas Museum from June to November 2010. While nostalgia is characterized as remembrance tinged with romanticized longing, Kawayan deliberately crafts the past into forms that resonate forcibly into the present. Located at the Museum's third floor spaces, the installation pieces invoke an atmosphere paradoxically enchanting and dreary. Highly sensitive to the innate attributes of site and space, Kawayan successfully conjures an uncanny setting. We find ourselves adrift in the mire of light, sound and images contained in space. We hover uneasily between flickering collage of image and sound, and the dissonant paces that mark their unravelling. *Bomba* references the destruction wars bring in their wake, the porn-flick genre of the early eighties, a blunder, an exposé; as all these rest on the heady intoxications of power, unbridled greed and lust. The exhibition's elements are the mirror bomb fleet, a video piece, a re-worked jukebox in acrylic housing, and the segment of sounds that form the backdrop. Together, they lend a cacophonous character to the exhibition while girding the artist's sharp scrutiny of social issues and his avid reworking of artifacts which art historian Patrick Flores calls "an acute intuition of objects"¹ transforming them into ideologically infused vehicles to navigate the travails of the human condition.

In *Bomba*, Kawayan resurrects Disco days of old—decadent and threatened by ominous destruction. We feel abandoned as we view the hypnotic mirage from the mirror bombs while resisting the urgency of scenes unfolding in rapid relay before our eyes. The claustrophobic capsule of the disco is made complete by a reworked jukebox housed in transparent acrylic, subtly extending the reference to ‘nudity’. Exposing the jukebox’s innards also reveals its ‘magic’ and in formal aesthetic terms, echoes the industrial character of the bombs. Through these, the artist transports us to a past marred by social unrest and protests over a dictatorship long entrenched.

Suspended at varying heights from the Museum skylight, rotating mirror bombs cast iridescent globules on the walls. The rainbow specks of light signal the viewer’s entry to an environment quite unexpected. While some bombs rotate at various speeds, others are stationary. The bombs signify the mechanics of industry, coated as they are in the glimmer of steel and the reflective surface of glass. They are central elements of the installation piece as they make a slow, grating sound against the montage of sound clips incorporating music, television show sound bites and movie dialogue. They surround a central sphere that menacingly looks like a C-bomb but houses speakers instead. The glimmer of the suspended armada is mimicked by the flickering montage of film clips, sourced from diverse sources – those by Kawayan’s father Eric de Guia, hard-core porn, footages of protests, rituals of gore and gratifying voyeurism. They share an unsettling strain, not only because some footage is graphic but the speed at which they have been strung together casts doubt on vision. Like an afterthought, we wonder whether pictures disappear or surface in sequential or random intervals. This tense loop draws us into a vortex where brutality, sacrifice, carnality and sober ritual commingle. The video piece jarringly weaves gaiety, loss, disaster, pain, naiveté and contrived joy in a hypnotic, bewildering mix.

Kawayan, however, forages deeper into history, a search fueled by an archaeological project done by a friend for an NGO. In several sites across Baguio where De Guia is based, bones and implements of Japanese soldiers were found. These will soon be repatriated to Japan. The encounters with



Figure 1 – Mirror bomb fleet suspended from the Vargas Museum ceiling

the spoils and losses of war fed his ideas for the mirror-bomb installation. He began conceptualizing *Bomba* last year, initially setting them up in a tunnel dugout from the Second World War. In a filmed performance, a woman with body daubed in white paint danced around the bombs, phallic manifestations of power and greed. Early on, the artist's reflections were drawn from national histories fraught with violence and the self, deeply imbricated in the trenches of shared memory struggles to confront inescapable and infinitely larger, destructive forces. The dance alludes to a Japanese ritual meant to exorcise the horrors of the atomic bombs dropped in Nagasaki and Hiroshima. The bombs were odes to destructive power, and this dance in a tunnel of war resembles our headlong descent into a life of waste – a state of being the artist bemoans. He asks whether "we [know] the [price] we have to pay for our actions"², and imagines the fast-whirling dance of death and life a "party", a threatening madness.

Object

This unconventional transformation of artifact to subvert meanings is nowhere necessary than in the present where social life becomes, in Pfohl's description, something "entering liquidity, lose [-ing] form"³ where fascination is ruled by the self's ever heightened dissociation from the world, thriving as it is in the heady atmosphere of a digitalized world. He describes this state as unfolding with indiscernible rapidity, where the intricacies and nuances of life are veiled by forgetfulness. In this aberration, Pfohl describes a threatening transcription – "people and commodities trade places, [and] people become more like things and things become more animate". At this juncture, the practice of Kawayan and other artists who share his vision of 'animating' objects is endowed renewed clarity and purpose. Through disco balls refashioned like missiles and bombs, hybrid post-colonial jukebox-jeepney, or the fusion of images and objects from colonial history, popular culture and indigenous themes, Kawayan consistently delivers thought-provoking, almost disturbing reflections on this current state of 'enchantment', as Pfohl calls it.

Kawayan decodes this enchantment not just in *Bomba* but in projects like *Bored on the 4th of July* where photographs from thirty kilometers of solitary walk through suburban Houston were an attempt to make sense of an underlying desolation that plagues plenty; leading the artist to wonder about existence in a society that manufactures desires and dreams as if on whim. In a 2009 show at the Drawing Room in Makati, *Katas ng Pilipinas: God Knows Hudas Not Play*, Kawayan revives artifacts brought to Philippine shores from America – the jukebox and the jeepney. Through composite pieces, Kawayan reinterpreted local ingenuity while scrutinizing the labored paths of history and well-trodden themes from pop culture that crowd daily life pervaded by consumerism. This *mélange* of motifs makes Kawayan's pieces restive, lending them edge and a shiftiness engaging but unsettling. Engaging because soon enough we realize that these are sincere and avid ruminations about life through art, and that this art, at once visual, tactile and auditory, transports us to the place and time which the artist's imagination bides.

De Guia's art practice is steeped in this inquiry and vividly illustrates a vision of art as perpetual interrogation. These ideas reside in the tangible forms he conceives from an imagination of life cognizant of larger forces

that allow us to thrive be these from cosmos or nature, sustaining existence whether in material or spiritual realms. As war takes on more threatening configurations, the need to reveal its mutations becomes ever more urgent. Kawayan imagines the life driven by corporate manufactured desires whirling in dizzying speed and finally falling apart. He ends his impassioned reflection with a realization: in times of strife, “we [surrender] our faith to higher powers”.⁴

Site

The decision to install the ‘mirror bombs’ at Vargas came to Kawayan after several visits to the Museum in 2009. Indeed, an installation of this scale has never been attempted at the Vargas, and together with ongoing shows at the lobby – *Bound* and *Yari, Bomba* throws in relief the building’s modernist structure. Its long covered up skylight was revived through the suspended mirror bombs as well as Bogie Ruiz’s piece, *Radikal*, a crucified orange figure with a unicorn horn surfing imagined seas. The pieces of Bob Feleo



Figure 2 – Mirror bomb fleet with video piece in the foreground

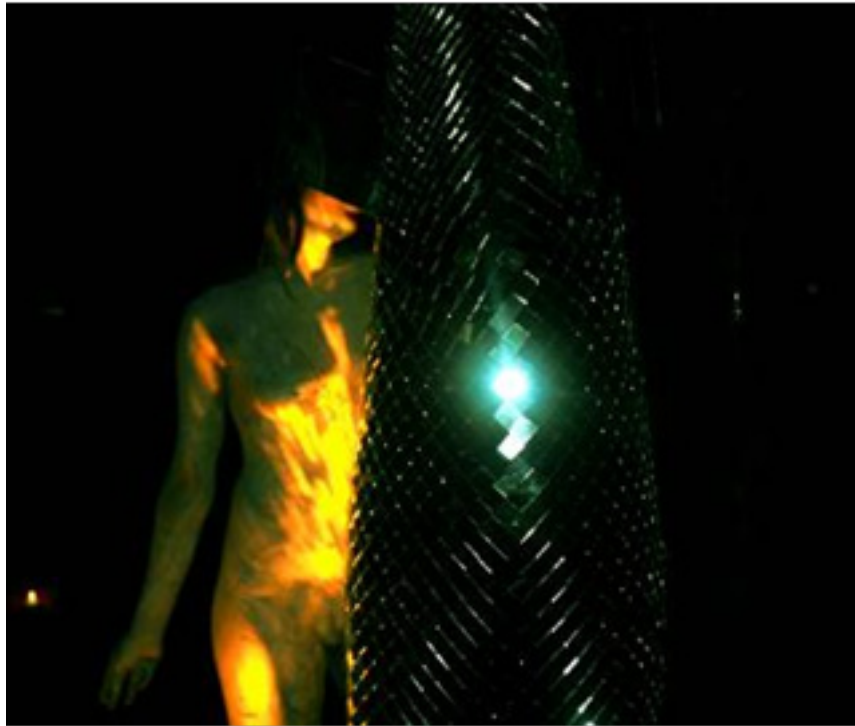


Figure 3 – Filmed performance of a woman dancing around a mirror bomb installed in a Second World War tunnel dugout

and Gaston Damag are earth bound, Ruiz's lets us imagine the onslaught of waves, and de Guia's hover menacingly from above, a specter from uncertain skies. This polarity of expectations De Guia realizes by juxtaposing "destruction with the strikingly beautiful"⁵ or the blindingly mesmerizing, a fatal delusion. The installation for *Bomba* recalls the larger machinery of war, the methodical, mechanized merger of lethal motives and arms.

While this assembly recalls this foreboding specter, it also casts light on aspects of communal craft employed by Kawayan, Jun Ritumalta (his foreman), and Roger Berdon (the jukebox technician). As with other projects, like *Biyaheng Langit*, the piece for the Bagasbas Public Art Festival in 2009, Kawayan relies on this intersection of shared imagination and manufacture. This collaborative element is likewise manifested in the Vargas Museum's new curatorial direction of increasingly integrating

contemporary works into the collection bequeathed to the University by Jorge Vargas. As such, the strand that loops past to present is felt and realized through art.



Figure 4 – Biyaheng Langit Kawayan de Guia’s installation piece for the Second Bagasbas Public Arts Festival, Camarines

By mounting shows that utilize the ever-expansive language of Philippine contemporary art, the Museum succeeds in bringing art that poses necessary, albeit difficult questions to its audiences. Thus, the museum is invigorated as a site of engaging encounters where works partake of a lively exchange of ideas and strategies wrought by works, curatorial vision and education programs. This thrust challenges and sustains the practice of artists whose modes of art making are similar to that of Kawayan de Guia - a sinuous enlivening of the past. In their hands, the past sheds its skin and births vigilant forms.

Photos courtesy of the U.P. Vargas Museum and Kawayan de Guia

ENDNOTES

¹Flores, Patrick D. "*Devices of Recollection*". Catalogue for Bomba. Makati: The Drawing Room Contemporary Art. 2010.

²De Guia, Kawayan. Artist notes on the exhibition. June 2010.

³Pfohl, Stephen. "Digital Magic, Cybernetic Sorcery: On the Politics of Fascination of Fear". 2010.

⁴De Guia, June 2010.

⁵ibid.

REFERENCES

Cimatu, Frank. "When Jukebox Met Jeepney" *Sunday Inquirer Magazine*, 14 March 2010: 11-12.

De Guia, Kawayan. Notes on the exhibition pieces. June 2010.

Flores, Patrick D. "*Devices of Recollection*". Exhibition catalogue. Makati: The Drawing Room Contemporary Art. 2010.

Perez, Padmapani. "*Katas ng Republika ng Pilipinas*". Exhibition catalogue. Makati: The Drawing Room Contemporary Art. 2009.

_____. "*[Un]Made by Walking*". Bored on the 4th of July Catalogue. Quezon City: The Ateneo Art Gallery. 2009.

Pfohl, Stephen. "*Digital Magic, Cybernetic Sorcery: On the Politics of Fascination and Fear*". *Code Drift: Essays in Critical Digital Studies*. 2010. www.ctheory.net/article.aspx?id=654. Accessed 09 June 2010.