

Ferdie's Cityscapes

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The dusk sky, when the light turns bright orange, is painter Ferdinand Montemayor's favorite subject. It seems that the sun's struggle against its setting is parallel to his own conflicts with his art-making—not its waning, but its shift to another level just as the sun moves to another day. As Montemayor's need to make the shift becomes more intense, his paintings, like the vanishing sun, glows a brilliant ember.

Having gone over a glitch and moving on from painting circular, aerial view cityscapes, the 1994 Thirteen Artists Award recipient has shown in his latest exhibit that he has found his place. The small show of four paintings of varying sizes at the West Gallery Glorietta reveals some of the elements that made him an outstanding artist. He made his mark painting urban life scenes, using multiple-point perspective. Cutting up sections of a well-populated area, Montemayor creates human figures, jostling in cramped spaces, their faces indiscernible.

Montemayor also favors using orange and yellow to brighten his picture plane. In the past, I found some of his works laden with these acidic colors. They were probably popular with judges of art competitions which he frequently joined. He won the grand prize for the 1992 Metrobank Foundation Painting Competition. Soon many young artists adapted Montemayor's manner of coloring but not his sensibility. Eventually this became trite and lost its freshness. I had wondered why he did not abandon this style and moved on to other things.

Like some artists, Montemayor yearned for and stayed in his comfort zone. He was unable to move on and instead exhausted all

possibilities in creating his typical paintings until there was nothing left to explore. In the end this became his drawback, as he appeared to repeat himself in a market that craves novelty to the point of numbing the senses. Newness, after all, is not the strength of the visual arts. It is the continuous resolution of pictorial problems or search for materials that would suit the artists' techniques or creation of forms. Sometimes, especially in abstract art, it has something to do with rendering a distinctive surface quality. These have nagged artists through the ages, although the circumstances and contexts may be different.

In two of his paintings in the exhibit, "24 Hours" and "Kabayanan" (Town), Montemayor reprised his orange and yellow drenched images. Immediately I felt repulsed rather than attracted to them. But then I willed myself to look at his paintings closely, noticing that his horizons stood out. In "Kabayanan," it is the setting sun that casts its burnt reddish glow on a distant, glimmering spot that Montemayor sees as part of the view from his house and studio in Antipolo. He contrasts this with box-like buildings full of people moving about in the painting's foreground. In "24 Hours," the artist depicts a night sky with a rather large crescent moon hanging over a twinkling but slightly overcast horizon. He made the dark orange radiance come from the yellow lamp posts as crowds occupy narrow passageways between shops.



Kabayanan
48" x 36"
oil on canvas

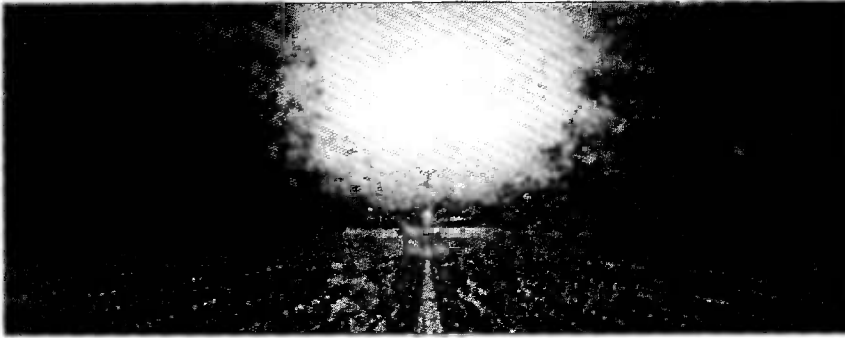
In a sense, “24 Hours” is Montemayor’s transition piece ; here, he discards landscapes with setting suns and replaces them with nightfall. But it is in his two other paintings where he transforms his scenes into the directions to which he is now more inclined. In one, “Lupa” (which happens to be the title of this exhibition), he turned his usual cube-like buildings into cargo boxes and spread them out with more space in a circular fashion. Montemayor provides a converging point for them but brings viewer’s eyes to another perspective that involves the landscape’s vanishing point. In Filipino, *lupa* can mean many things—land, place of birth, earth, and residence.



24 Hours
24" x 24"
oil

The painting “Lupa” is monochromatic and could have been gloomy had Montemayor not filled his moonless, black-gray sky with stars. The photograph accompanying this review does not quite capture their presence. Like the boxes he painted to join at a central place, the stars reflect the light from outside the canvas. The artist acknowledged the true source of light in this work rather than his usual practice of creating illusions from a painted sun or streetlight as he did in his two other paintings.

In his fourth painting, “Believe (Konstrukt),” Montemayor showed another persuasion by revealing a tower of scaffolding that may be taken for a tall church altar. This is his attempt at including



Lupa: Land Series
40" x 96"
oil on canvas



Believe (Konstrukt)
60" x 36"
oil

details not just scenes that make up cityscapes. Rather than copying billboard advertisements, Montemayor chose to mock them. In one, a man is seen reading the newspaper next to a "SALE" sign as if exposing the paradox of newspapers bearing more advertisements than news or the incongruity of his pictures. The monochromatic blocks of images, especially in the center, resemble either icons or scenes from the movies. Unlike the colored hoardings, Montemayor did not paint them with overhead and bottom spotlights. They seem backlit.

But with the lights surrounding them, the advertisements look riveted to the scaffolding. With the word "BELIEVE!" seemingly engraved on the metal-like plate, the paintings' quasi-religious tone is laden on the artist's altar of commercialism.

Montemayor's recent paintings appear to indicate his possible move towards two directions. One involves a cityscape that is rendered more succinct and glistens despite the dark sky, shedding the tiresome amber cast and the tight slices-of-life melodrama. The other involves details focusing on aspects of the city nightlife, such as commercial hoardings. Both point to a more certain painter who no longer feels the need to drench his landscapes with bright colors to allow the light to shimmer on his canvas.

Ferdie Montemayor's Lupa was shown at the West Gallery Glorietta, August 15-27.

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