

**Rodrigo Dela Peña Jr./SELF-PORTRAIT WITH PLASTIC BAG**

# Self-Portrait as a Carpenter's Tools

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Not framed but kept in a box  
for a purpose. The mind's pure  
invention to whittle a rough

surface, easing wood  
into what it could become.  
You are steel's tensile strength,

extension of muscle that nicks  
away excess, pounds a joint  
into place. Each line measured

to be enough, nothing more  
and nothing less than faith.  
You are cross-cutting teeth

sawing across the grain, bone  
of timber broken because  
it must. To be the exact

thing a hand needs to turn the screw  
on a hinge, for the door to be  
a door. You are hammering.

# Autobiography of Fernando Amorsolo

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I was born at the turn of the century in Calle Heran, a speck in a tapestry.

Manila verged on revolution and my family moved to Daet, Camarines Norte.

Playing at the beach, I was nimble with a stick and traced pictures on the sand before the waves erased them.

In the delirium of summer, there was nothing to do but memorize all the textures and amplitudes of light.

After Father died, Mother embroidered to make a living, the fabric of our days creased and ragged.

Childhood was a cracked vessel from which everything else flowed.

From my uncle Don Fabian dela Rosa, I learned about brushstrokes, perspective, the syntax of clouds.

Every window held, if not a truth, then a way of looking into the world.

My trick was to conjure the tropical landscape on the canvas.

When I painted a portrait, I saw how someone could inhabit a face.

I married twice and fathered twenty children and thousands of paintings.

The sky throbbed and flickered while fire licked the parchment city but it was not a dream.

A hand pointed at my brother Pablo, and he was executed by guerrillas.

It was easier to dig one hole to bury all the bodies in the aftermath of war.

I walked along the charred streets and collected shards and shrapnel.

The past became a patina of dust that the wind blew away.

Two of my sons died and I carried grief like a stone, fingering its heft wherever I went.

A blade pierced my eye to remove its cataract.

The dark funneled into my iris, and I stared and stared at an eclipse that would not end.

# Trilogy

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## 1. *Bella Flores Is Disgusted*

by you, dear reader. Nothing  
personal but that's how it is,  
the diva taking stock with one  
withering look, and voila,  
a first and final judgment:

You are not worthy. She can hear  
your heart thrashing inside your chest,  
see past your earnest greetings, air  
kisses tossed around like trinkets.  
Wait, Bella Flores needs to take

a call. . . She slams the rotary  
phone, the thwack a gilded pendant  
in the willy-nilly blather  
of the party. If she smiles (if  
at all), don't flatter yourself

by thinking that she is pleased  
with your bouquet of affection.  
Behind those lips lie the syntax  
of venom, the snake's reflex to sink  
its fangs on a warm-blooded creature.

2. *Celia Rodriguez's Turban*

As headgear, of course, but also  
as stand-in for a menace  
we cannot see. As coiled fabric,  
as glamor, necessary cover  
of and for a hidden subject.  
As object of the gaze, brazen  
and sequined. As device to date  
the period, which is timeless.  
As etiquette for murder,  
as sieve, ragged edge of hunger.  
As peepshow, as startle, dangling  
thread of subplot, as hinge  
turning from this world to the next.

*3. Self-Portrait as Vangie Labalan*

My face looms on the screen, shorthand  
for anger, the kind that uses  
an avalanche of words for kindling.

With an acute sense of smell,  
my nose is a dowsing rod, pointing  
to the direction of conflict.

I'd like to think it's all about  
me: my frown and philtrum, nape,  
my absent clavicle. But the scene

cuts to the meat of the story,  
where I am only gristle.  
You will not see the fluttering

of my chest or how intricate  
the pattern is on my floral  
duster. Will you find my name

in the credits? I am hysteria,  
I am prickle, I am the grain  
of sand that irritates the oyster.

# Self-Portrait with Plastic Bag

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The plastic bag is light and the properties of light. Its life began in a plant somewhere in China, a lattice of carbon and hydrogen. How far it has drifted to bear a burden not its own. It has the patience of stone and can weather a thousand years. Vessel of necessities, its breath smells of the detergent powder it once carried. And now it is discarded. The plastic bag is free. No longer does it want to be a stand-in for Sisyphus. It dreams of flight, as I do and you do. It asks feathers and clouds to whisper their secrets. The wind hears the plastic bag's prayer and grants it the grace to be lifted. It skims the ground lightly before fluttering among spiraling leaves, its transparent face floating over fireworks and buildings, birds and contrails,

rising, fading,  
disappearing  
in the sky.

# Self-Portrait as Magdalene

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I am threading a story  
that has yet to be told  
how your hands touch me

with a ripple of light  
and my heart quickens  
when you reveal yourself alive

for morning breaks the night  
this world stirs anew  
water already changed

by one breath into wine  
and it is your face I see  
your hair your body bare

your name flowers on my tongue  
I come to you dressed  
from head to toe in faith

I want to leave you  
something to unbutton  
something to undo



# After Georgette Chen's *Self-Portrait*

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One day in your life will not be a day  
like any other. Light becomes a mirror  
reflecting your face and for once you can see  
who you are. Your skin not as a mask but  
as your self. Your eyes meeting the gaze  
not of your lover's but your own. Your days  
dappling the canvas, each stroke of the brush  
exactly where it needs to be. The curl  
of your hair. Your black cheongsam, smooth  
as obsidian. You close your eyes and paint  
a portrait: the absence of sorrow, the sorrow  
of absence. One day, you will open a window.  
You will see your face before you were born.