

Abstract

Monochromes photo essays where I documented the year 2020 under lockdown quarantine from the Coronavirus-19 pandemic, set in the neighborhood of the Makati City Red Light District, where I live.

Keywords

Monochromes, photographs, essays, COVID, Makati City

THE PLAGUE YEAR

*Documenting 2020 and the
Coronavirus-19 Pandemic
in the Makati Red Light District
in Monochromes*

WORDS AND MONOCHROME PHOTOGRAPHS BY
KARL R. DE MESA

DISTANCE | THE PAIN OF SYNCING MY BRAIN AND BODY TO KEEP SIX-FEET AWAY

Among the many habits we've learned as the pandemic has progressed are new requirements of keeping apart, six feet distant from each person.

But it was hard for my body to pick up the routine of how to be socially distant.

I wasn't alone. I found out it was the same for at least twelve million people in Metro Manila, barred from traveling outside the National Capital Region last March 15, 2020, when the community lockdown started. It was a hard lesson, since we're naturally such a touchy-feely nation, with our instincts to poke, kiss, and engage in various levels of hugs.

For the longest time I simply didn't go out and talked to my friends in the area on messaging apps. A dim surrogate for actual in-person conversation with its nuances and subtleties. I'm one of those folks who have a high tactile sense of things and while I was more than happy to indulge my introversion as a writer used to long hours of living in my head and as a latchkey kid of the 1990s, my social behavior with friends and family also depended hugely on being able to reach out and accentuate points by feel—high fives for shared jokes, clasps for shared misery, varying pressures on arms and shoulders for emphasis.

At our current August total of 190,000+ infected and more than 3,000 deaths, social distancing obviously still needs to be hammered in, just as high a priority as a clear and data-driven and efficient plan by authorities for containing our infected. Something almost palpably painful for me, personally, whenever I see someone I haven't talked to and my brain remembers that it's best for both of us not to touch. Somehow, I don't think I'll get used to just fist bumps or elbow bumps.

These shots were taken in the early months of the community lockdown in Makati, when the new habits of distance against COVID-19 still needed to sink in, counterintuitive but necessary. Almost six months in, my brain and body have yet to fully sync.

CHAOS BEFORE WE SHELTER



The grocery on March 13, 2020, two days before the thirty-day lockdown with the hoarding madness in full swing. I had already gone to two other nearby groceries previous to this, but their lines were just way too long. I decided to stay and duke it out here.

You could taste the panic in the air, barely restrained and replacing the bonhomie of routine usually found at queues during weekend grocery runs. A Japanese couple talked in jittery, high-pitched tones, their anxiety and short fuses needing no translation. Household helpers kept calling their *senyoras* for clarification on choice of brands. A family of four had brought their baby along in a stroller.

They had run out of carts hours previous, said the manager, but luckily I had brought two huge tote bags with me, intending to buy two weeks' worth of supplies. I stuffed my choices in my totes, fell in line for almost two hours, fished out the items when I reached the cashier, and stuffed them back into my totes. The walk back home was literally a heavy one.

DON'T STEP ACROSS THIS LINE



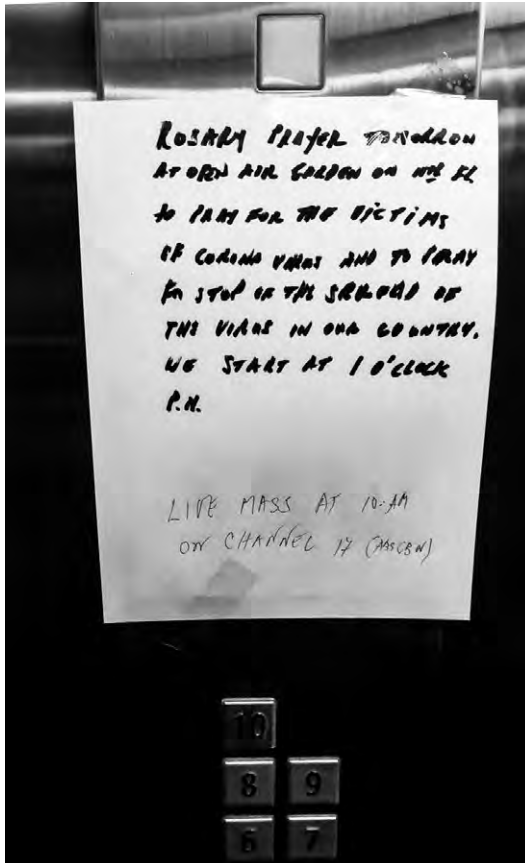
By early May 2020, folk had gotten the message that social distancing was the best way to personally protect yourself and not transmit Covid to your family. Businesses like this fast food chain along a major street in the Makati CBD had painted boxes or lines as markers of safety for the long queues that commonly snaked out to the curb. As of August, this Korean fast food chain at this location has closed down.

EARLY FOR GROCERIES?



A mix of locals and trapped tourists queues outside a grocery store along Makati Avenue. The foreigners who were unable to get out before the lockdown are often afraid to venture too far from their hotels and billets, or go to the wet market with the locals. And while they're frustrated to realize that they should've gotten to the line earlier (because only a maximum of ten or fifteen people are let in by batches), they often have no choice unless they pluck up the courage to walk far enough to another grocery. Often, it's the elderly who would get turned away because they don't have masks on.

WE START AT 1



And I thought my handwriting was awful. A hastily scrawled sign inside our building's elevator posted on April 4 invites residents to gather at the open-air garden on the rooftop. A bad idea, I kept thinking, even as they insisted people would stay six feet apart for the duration of Mass.

MASKS AT THE MALL



By mid-April those who usually make grocery runs for their household had gotten into the groove of the ritual for stepping outside their own door: mask, alcohol, tote bag, the crappiest and most comfy clothes in your closet, and the inevitability of another bath once you came back. I didn't even take a bath on the rare days I had to fetch my wife from her supply runs, since I'd need to get hosed down again anyway. Save more water and the chance to be a filthy bastard outside sans anyone commenting? Hey, I'm up for that.

THE COLONEL IS ALWAYS OPEN



No jolly jeeps. No *carinderias*. This was taken in late March. A dearth of open restaurants and establishments always meant a reliable influx of customers for those places that did manage to keep a skeleton crew on tap—a hard thing sans public transport. This particular fast-food resto was always slammed not just with delivery riders getting take-out for their customers but also with employees from the government and corporate offices nearby. The manager would pace about in harassed body language—seeming to keep it all together by sheer force of will—and follow up orders while multitasking by cooking quick-cook items like fries.

DON'T BOTHER KNOCKING



There's a bunch of white foreigners in the building where I live who enjoy the nightlife and the services for sale at the nearby Red Light District on the regular.

My next-door neighbor is one of those, an old and retired ex-military American, lives on the same floor and never fails to mention the few times we'd talked that he had a steady local girlfriend. "Everyone knows Filipinas are the prettiest women in South East Asia!" he'd declare. The guy has been here for more than a decade too.

One day in late April, I found this dress and pair of shoes outside his door. It's now late August and I still haven't asked him about it even though we've said hi twice, passing each other in the corridors.

MOVING ON | SCENES WHEN WE TRIED TO HACK GLITCH THE SEASON

We've been on pause for far too long in the longest Covid lockdown in the world.

But getting your groove back with resources that simply aren't there when work and life got stopped on March 15, 2020, is like trying to hack a deep and abiding glitch in The Matrix.

This is the season we just can't seem to move on from and tests your toughness, asking how long can you last in deep waters? I know it has tested mine as friends in both the communications and martial arts industries lost streams of income. These guys pivoted to selling and hawking essentials like food and masks and clothes. Others waited too long, relying on their savings and trying to wait out the pandemic, for the economy to open once again, only to do the math by August and execute the hard decision to shutter their enterprise—with a stoic face or in tears it didn't matter, closed is closed in glitch season.

I am reminded of documentaries about The Greatest Generation. Born from 1910 to 1927, these folks who came of age in the 1929 stock market crash, a great depression that lasted roughly a decade, with a 25 percent unemployment rate there's nothing like the economy collapsing to drill frugality into the soul. By September 1939 though, self-sacrifice needed to take center stage with the start of World War 2. Interesting times, to say the least. How tough did these guys need to be to get past economic breakdown and war?

I didn't want to be proud and say I could afford to wait it out. I signed up for both our city's economic rescue package. I also signed up for the culture department's similar rescue package for literary writers. Both amounts helped. Both were gone by the end of the first lockdown, which lasted from March 16 to May 31, 2020.

Why keep your pride in a survival scenario? Death and keeping your pride seem at odds. Alive at the end of it is the only victory. Living with a roof, free of the virus, and three squares is a cut above. We all try to get back our flow and movement, but glitch season is hard to overcome.

Most of these shots were taken when a relaxation on quarantine measures was announced on June 1 until August 4, 2020, when Metro Manila was placed back in MECQ lockdown. Some were taken from August 16 until August 26, 2020, after the second lockdown ended.

NO MASK, NO REST



An African expat can't keep his eyes open anymore and opts to rest in front of one of the closed bars along Kalayaan Avenue.

Zoom in and you'll notice a pair of feet in the building beside him. That's a trio of Filipinos who are also resting on torn cardboard and banig, likely catching a few winks before they resume their long walk home—necessary because there's no public transport during ECQ.

There's been a slight increase in black foreigners from Africa in Makati. Noticed this around 2016, when French-sibilant languages started sounding from below our window, which looks down on one of the most popular bar and restaurant streets in the barangay. A quick check in the 2010 census said 2,573 people from African countries were already residents, and by 2019 that figure is closer to 3,000 plus. One of the Pinoy barbers I usually go to works at a hair service shop owned by a group of South Africans. No surprise they specialize in complex braids.

For months in mid-2019, almost like clockwork, when the bars would close at 4 or 5 a.m., we'd hear raised voices in Afrikaans (or what we thought was what the language sounded like) in familiar tones of argument and threat that needed no translation. Anyone who knows me knows I love to watch a fight. So when I would be lucid enough to be able to grab my phone and look out my window when I heard these guys I'd wait patiently for these quarrels to escalate into a full blown street fight.

Funniest thing? These incidents never did. They always deescalated themselves, much to my huge chagrin and disappointment. I was so frustrated sometimes that I'd muster what little I remembered from French class and scream "Дйgage!" or "Lutte, cochon!" to cajole them to fight. They never did. Not once. Someone explain this shit to me?

IT'S ON THE WALL



By the time the city got back on second lockdown in MECQ, we'd had four confirmed cases of COVID-19 in our building, and the administrators were so frustrated with the violators (mainly old white dudes who wanted to retire here and, as they didn't give a fig about infection, likely die on Philippine soil too) that they instituted fees for first to third time breaches of the mask rule. The admin also put up these signs on each wall of each floor.

ADJUST THE SHIELD



My wife tries on one of the face shields we'd bought. We'd gone out a total of three times in the almost six months of the various transitions and levels of lockdown in the Metro, but the prospect of looser restrictions and GCQ needed to be faced with more stringent personal safety protocols beyond just face masks if we wanted to go further from our city and stay longer in places with more people. A few days after GCQ was declared, our city mandated the wearing of face shields on the street too.

A LOAD OF KOREAN PRODUCTS



A South Korean national oversees the unloading of a container truck with supplies for their bulk-selling business that ranges from cosmetics to drinks and food products. This container truck would come twice a week, sometimes arriving at 3 or 4 a.m., and the movers would sleep on the sidewalk until the manager arrived at around 7 a.m. to open up the shop. Unloading would usually take anywhere from five to six hours.

SO WHERE DOES HE SIT?



Riders of scooters and underbone motors were the busiest during quarantine and would simply tie or, in this case, tape down whatever they needed to carry on their backseat, whatever the size. This guy is probably not transporting a TV. Or so I hope.

VIP BANANAS



When our usual fruit vendors (three brothers whose names all had an R in them) disappeared during the ECQ, we came to know this fruit seller well, who'd positioned his rollaway stall under the sign of the Horizon VIP Lounge, conveniently located beside the Korean Methodist Church on Burgos Extension, in the red light district. This vendor made a killing, selling a single bunch of bananas at Php 300+, but we never begrudged him the business since the inflation likely covered the cost of transport from his sources beyond the city borders. It beat going to the neighborhood wet market, where interacting with people in close proximity was inevitable. No idea if the dancers of Horizon ever made it back to their strip club.

LET YOUR DIM LIGHT SHINE



By late June 2020, I had relaxed my paranoia enough to accept an invite by friends to pivot into a new, slightly tangential industry that might bring in extra cash. I went with them to survey and ocular the place where this potential new enterprise might be set up.

Little did I know that the underreported Covid cases and the clamor by frontliners to ease the burden on facilities would plunge us back into two weeks of another lockdown, putting a halt to this project. At this time though, I felt hope rise like an unlikely source of light, as in this shot of a man walking out of cramped, dark corridor.

After two weeks of the return to lockdown, I still haven't fully exorcised that depression of stopped momentum, flow suddenly dammed up. But I am willing to let this great darkness within me be my own, not something that overtakes me. Glitch season will be overcome if we all keep our lights on and help spark the ones that have gone out.

VACANT | WAKING UP TO A NEW EMPTY QUARTER IN THE PLAGUE YEAR

The gentrification of Barangay Poblacion in Makati started around 2015.

My wife and I moved in around 2011, thinking this quiet, off-CBD barangay would remain a relatively calm enclave that still managed to be near the hub of the malls and offices of the financial center.

Since 2015 creatives and entrepreneurs have steadily taken advantage of the low cost of real estate around the red light district by setting up restaurants, bars, galleries, performance halls, and other fusion spaces.

The hipsters and their attendant media have since rechristened the avenues and alleys formerly roamed only by whores and Joes as PoblSoho. Or the more odious Williamsburgos.

By 2017, around three to four thousand people would swell the population, coming through the neighborhood on weekends and peak nights for the attractions. They came to experience the acquired and yet not too unpleasant frisson made by interacting with the long-time locals, the night workers, the (often white) sex tourists, and the (often Asian) nouveau business owners. They came to drink, eat, and crawl through the pubs. They came to see the prostitutes and the “massage, sir?” girls.

I’ve seen teen couples puking on the street then laughing at their debauch. They absolutely thought the sour taste in the back of their throats was all part of the Pob adventure. I tried to help one couple that looked particularly wasted and literally on all fours calling the crow one night, coming home. The dude waved me away. But the girlfriend called me back and asked me to please take a picture of them outside Tambai as she wiped her lips clear of vomit.

Gentrification has forced many locals to exit as the rent and land prices bloated. Just like Brooklyn in New York. Like King's Cross in London. Currently, a square meter in Poblacion costs around Php 150,000. Next door, in the gated and walled subdivisions of Barangay Bel-Air, the same patch goes for Php 250,000.

Poblacion is 103 hectares total with a population of around 25,000 residents.

The Rub al Khali desert in Oman is 650,000 square kilometers with no residents. Rub al Khali means “empty quarter” in Arabic.

In the first months of the community quarantine, Poblacion felt like the new empty quarter. Sans the noise and crowds, the nightly eco system and cottage industries of parking barkers, rapping kids, beggars, taho, and fishball vendors also vanished.

Here are images I took from the continuing plague year, shots taken from the first night of quarantine to the ruins left by October 2020 as businesses tanked and establishments shuttered without customers or clients.

DARKNESS, QUIET, AND BRIGHT



LEFT

I live at one of the busiest and loudest street corners in Poblacion, within spitting distance of two MC biker bars and the most popular Mexican taco place in the district.

While the city elders have mandated that the hood observe “appropriate standards for community noise” below 80 decibels, in line with the laws of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, this corner of Poblacion with its live bands and a few hundred visitors and tourists on a bad night always amps up the volume to around 110 decibels.

I do however enjoy grunge nights at Handlebar, cracking open my window to let in the nostalgia of ’90s riffage into our apartment.



CENTER



RIGHT

This trifecta was shot on the first night of the ECQ, March 15, 2020. Granted, that first night of the lockdown was a Monday but when you've gotten used to a certain ambient noise level and the resto and bar signs lit up to attract walk-ins, the sudden absence of visual and auditory stimuli was a real fright. I felt nauseated walking around this corner, shocked and delirious snapping these photos.

WHERE HAVE THE BAD BOYS GONE?



The empty husk of what remains of the former MNL Boutique Hotel, on the corner of Santiago and B. Valdez streets, around a week after ECQ was imposed. In the absence of anyone taking over the property, here was where the neighborhood feral kids, on rugby and speedball, would hang out, afternoons to early mornings, and trip to the artwork left on the former hipster hotel's walls. Now, even the bad boys have vanished.

PARKS AND STILL LIFE



All the restos, the convenience store, and coffee shops of Ayala Triangle are closed a week or two after ECQ was declared. I used to teach a fitness-meta of Muay Thai at this park, alongside joggers, the arnis folk, and some very weird people practicing a very unusual form of allegedly Japanese martial arts.

A NEW BLANK CORNER



Normally crowded with employees who work in the CBD, this corner of Makati Avenue and Jupiter Street became part of the new empty quarter a week into ECQ.

FALL OF THE MALL



The usual Filipino weekend pastime of going to the mall was the most dangerous activity during plague time. This was taken around early August, when buying something from the hardware store had become well and truly necessary. Still, the necessity of my trip didn't lessen my shock at the vacant shops and empty common areas, like this popular activity space at a major mall.

RUB AL KHALI IS ONLY IN THE HEART



By April, without much sunlight, the sensation of crawling out of your skin and a general unnameable mental affliction became too much to bear. The wife and I decided that regular trips to the roof deck of our condo building was necessary and also advised by experts. It worked. The sunlight provided my system with a sense of warmth and time and hopefulness. On a good partially cloudy day too, you could see past the river, across to the Guadalupe district and see signs of life with people walking, in movement, proving the empty quarter wasn't so empty after all. On a good day I could wave to other people sunning on their own roof decks. Sometimes they'd wave back.

SIGHT TO BEHOLD?



From my vantage point on the roof, I could look down on the nearby Iglesia ni Cristo church along Mercedes Street and make out the words on the roof of a nearby house lived in by one of their faithful. Around July 2020, already four months into lockdown sans mass testing, with overwhelmed hospitals and businesses starting to permanently close, the love of Christ didn't seem very apparent, if at all.

COVID KILLS DREAMS TOO



Another casualty of the long quarantine. By September, the places that didn't have the margin for finances or the necessary delivery/take-out infra that other more famous ones in the neighborhood did had closed down. It wasn't a very popular joint, but Happy Samgyupsal along Durban Street was always a fixture (mostly because of their grinning porcine mascot outside) and did brisk business.

FAREWELL, TINY FIGHTERS



LEFT



RIGHT

Ringside Bar along Kalayaan Ave and P. Burgos Extension was a cultural landmark of the barangay and of the city itself. Famed for its lady mud wrestlers and midget boxing, its decidedly adult kind of entertainment was almost a rite of passage for the young and curious. Businessmen hoping to curry favor with their foreign clients who were fans of street culture were often brought to these doors. The shuttering of Ringside is the passing of an era. I wonder where the wee pugilists have since gone.

SOMETIMES THEY COME BACK



A homeless family sleeps beside a shuttered restaurant along Durban street. By late September, after the insane experience of the easing of quarantine and then being sequestered back into ECQ, the homeless that always wandered the avenues were back to sleeping in their old haunts, still playing catch-me-if-you-can with the neighborhood tanods and police. For residents like me, the return of the homeless to the streets actually feels like a sign of the old normal, a sigh that harked back to a time prior to the ravages of the plague.

NOT HERE, STILL HERE



I'd been a skinhead since the late 1990s. So one of the strangest experiences during quarantine was not being able to go to a barber to get my head shaved. My hair grew three inches long with the salt and pepper tones becoming clear by May.

When late June rolled in, my wife had bought a cheap scalp shaver with tiny whirring motors and I decided that it was about time I learned how to pare down my scalp, just in time for my birthday the following month. I thought it'd be relatively easy. I thought it'd look like it did in the movies. The learning curve wasn't steep, but the difficulty of that first experience was proof (which took two of us) that there was indeed a learning curve I had to master.

After my first successful self-skinheading, seeing the result helped plenty with my mental health. That feeling that you're living in an alt reality, of being not quite here, not absolutely in the present. The mind wants to balk at the crudeness and cruelty of the situation.

Discarding the hairy bastard on the left that I now associated with the plague season felt apt. The hairless monkey on the right, albeit still dazed

and reeling from the empty quarter of the hipster district that he called home, seemed a far more capable individual. He looked stripped to the essentials, an ordinary decent punk shorn of pretense and agenda, ready to face the new normal.

I'm now shaving my own scalp once every week, in under 45 minutes. The Rub al Khali need not be in the heart. Or the mind.

Plague season is still here. But so am I.

All monochrome photographs were shot with a mobile phone.