

Re/Creating the World through Myths: World-making and Visual Representation of Folk Narratives in the Art of Roberto Feleo

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary artist Roberto Feleo is among those from the Philippines who notably represent folk narratives in their art. His artistic practice that has spanned four decades is shaped by his engagement of the myths of the Bagobos, the Bukidnon, and the *pinteng* legend of the Ifugaos. He has explored unconventional materials and precolonial forms such as the *pinalakpak* (a medium of sawdust and emulsion traditionally used by carpenters), *tau-tao* (a term for his three-dimensional representation of humans and characters from folk narratives) and the *virinās* (bell jars from the Spanish colonial period used as glass casements for saints and objects of curiosity) in his representations of myths and legends.

I investigate what contemporary scholars term as the *weaving of connectivities* or the worlding that happens in Feleo's engagement with folk narrative in his art. This tapestry is woven from threads of different worlds: folklore and the contemporary, past and present, traditional and modern, indigenous and colonial, national and global, the everyday and the mythic, and the tensions and intersections that arise from these connectivities.

KEYWORDS

worlding, folk narratives, contemporary art, tradition, modernity

At the second floor of the Vargas Museum, *Tuglibong* (fig. 1), the first woman, hammers clouds with a pestle inside a glass bell jar. This artwork by Roberto Feleo depicts the mythic time of the Bagobo cosmogony when the sky hung low and interfered with everyday tasks. At the museum's ground floor last October 2015, Bai Gertrudes Layal pounded the marble floors with her bare feet as she swayed to the tune of the *kudlong*, a traditional two-stringed instrument of the B'laan people. Her upper torso periodically bowed parallel to the ground, and rose again, and alternated with arms that raised a scarf to the sky. This performance that was a celebratory dance capped a forum on recent military atrocities that targeted the *lumad*, the indigenous peoples of Mindanao. Bai Gertrudes was there to participate in the *Lakbayan ng Pambansang Minorya*, an event that brought a number of indigenous peoples from Southern Philippines to Metro Manila calling attention to their plight. After the forum Bai Gertrudes would come face to face with Tuglibong. These images of women hammering clouds and pounding earth connect worlds, those of myth and reality that Feleo seamlessly weaves in his art. Roberto Feleo is among artists from the Philippines who visually represent folk narratives in their art. I use folk narratives here in broad terms to pertain to verbal folklore transmitted in prose narrative forms that include myths, epics, legends, and folktales (Lopez 140).

According to the Bukidnon myth, heaven and earth did not exist in the beginning. There was only a *banting*, a bright circular space inhabited by two gods – the ten-headed *Dadanyahan Ha Sugay*, and supreme planner and single-headed *Diwata na Magbabaya. Agtayabun*, a

mythical bird who perpetually flies to maintain the balance of the universe, carries the banting. One day, the single-headed god Diwata na Magbabaya decided to expand the banting so Agtayabun could rest. From this emerged the heaven and earth. The one-headed god fashioned the land, oceans, and rivers from Dadanyahan Ha Sugay's saliva. Using the earth, plants, and water, the ten-headed god molded beings in the likeness of the single-headed god to populate the creation. Diwata na Magbabaya instructed Dadanyahan Ha Sugay to leave the beings alone until he finds a way to make them perfect. But the ten-headed god continued without the knowledge of the supreme planner single-headed god. This led to a conflict that culminated in a stalemate. The gods decided to end the fight and proceed with the creation. Amidst these primordial thunderclaps and lava flows, metals were seeded in the earth.



fig. 1 Roberto Feleo, *Tuglibong*, vitrina, 44.6 x 30.8 x 30.8 (approx.), 2009

Loud shots from automatic rifles and streams of blood marked the drastic reshaping of the lands and lives of the lumads with ores extracted from the earth. A month before the Lakbayan 2015, Dulphing Ogan, secretary general of the Kalumaran alliance of lumads, spoke to the media to condemn the spate of killings and harassment in Mindanao. According to him, the targets were members of different lumad communities in areas where mining activities are happening or being planned. He believes the attacks were systematic and nearly genocidal and were aimed at silencing resistance or driving away the lumads from their ancestral domains. "These areas are the best spots to extract gold, nickel and copper. And these areas are also the remaining forests in Mindanao," Ogan said (Manlupig par. 18). There is a world in disarray.

Art-worlding and the Weaving of Connectivities

Terry Smith defines *worlding* or *world-making* as a "weaving of connectivities," in which connectivity "may be understood less as a state of being connected in some fixed array, more as an ongoing process of seeking out the lineaments of connection, catching glimpses of them, allowing them to resonate, change, and inevitably loosen, only to seek them again" (21-22). He adds that art-worlding

is the process of “imagining the world as a differentiated yet inevitably connected whole” (quoted in Turner 4). This resonates with Michelle Antoinette’s definition of worlding as “finding ‘cultural connectedness’ or ‘cultural connectivities’ through art” (23). Central to this idea is the creation of ‘worlds’ and the exploration of intersections and tensions between them.

For Jean-Luc Nancy, art creates “a certain possibility of signifying” (93). Art, he adds, presents “a form of the ‘world’” where *world* pertains to “a certain possibility of meaning, of circulation of meaning,” or “a totality of possibilities of signification” (92). According to him,

“... art is there every time to open the world, to open the world to itself, to its possibility of world, to its possibility thus to open meaning, while the meaning that has already been given is closed. And it is also for this reason that we always say that each artist has a world, or one could almost say that each artist is a world... a possibility of significations that is in a way closed upon itself but at the same time opening the possible, opening the possible especially by opening the mind, the sensibility of people, us, by opening our sensibility to a new possibility of forms of which it was unaware until then” (Nancy 93).

In this sense, art-worlding is understood as discursive practice articulated through the connectivities that art creates. As Jen Webb and Lorraine Webb argue, *world* is imagined “not as planet, or geopolitical arrangement, but domains of practice and discourse” (64). Art is not simply a mirror of *the world* but a nodule that facilitates conversations between worlds. For them, “ideas are experienced and articulated through the mediation of systems of signification” (65), or through worlds. Within each artwork is a universe of worlds.

Worlds are created or destroyed, only to be recreated and destroyed again in a cycle of world-making. We live in worlds. We summon worlds to understand our own. Worlds cleave and merge. We move through them, shifting fluidly from one to another, straddling a number at a time.

What are the worlds that Feleo’s art conjure? How are these worlds connected as practice and discourse? What conversations transpire between and within these worlds?

Patrick Flores asks about Feleo’s works: “Did the Bagobo people visualize myth at all?” (Visual Vernacular 1). He continues, “(If the folklore were to be presented to those who bathe in its knowledge, would they be able to recognize it and then acknowledge it as their local wisdom?” (2). At the core of these questions are *connectivities* between worlds: the oral and the visual; the worlds of folk narratives and the indigenous groups that traditionally share them, and the worlds of the contemporary artists who articulate these visually; the mythic world of the gods and the physical world we inhabit.

These worlds intersected the very moment Bai Gertrudes’s gaze penetrated the maquette encased in glass: Tuglibong, a small solitary figure surrounded by clouds and strange flora, the sun hovering right above her head. I understand that Feleo’s textual source for this artwork is from the Bagobo people’s cosmogony, and that Bai Gertrudes is a B’laan. Out of curiosity, I proceeded to ask her what she thought of Feleo’s work. She looked at it for a moment and recognized that she and Tuglibong were wearing the same traditional clothes. Immediately, she felt a connection with the character. “*Yan po siguro yung buhay naming katutubo. Yung pang-araw-araw namin.*” (“Maybe that is our everyday life, the indigenous peoples.”). The piece conjured parallel worlds: the simulated and the everyday; the divine and the earthly; worlds that realign to intersect in the space the artwork occupies – the mythological world of the Bagobos, the worlds of folklore and contemporary art, the worlds of Roberto Feleo and Bai Gertrudes.

The World of Myths: Feleo’s Critical Engagement with Material

Reflecting on art’s potential to facilitate worlding, Webb and Webb focus on the important role of representation. They state,

“Art is perhaps under-determined compared with the linguistic medium. But our concern is not with the relative fluency of visual or linguistic media, and more with the question of how imagination and representation work together to conjure worlds. Whether in profound effects on how lived worlds emerge and are understood; and art, because of its comparative muteness, is capable of connecting at an embodied rather than abstracted level, touching its viewers and its makers.” (69)

Thus, art is not merely a tool for discourse through representation but is discursive itself. It is not just a nexus of different worlds, but is also composed of various worlds. Feleo’s creative process and context as a visual artist actively creates these worlds, facilitating recurring conversations among them.

Feleo interrogates folk legend and history in the *virriñas* as his creative engagement with Esteban Villanueva’s *Basi Revolt* (1821) (**fig.2**). The 14-panel Villanueva painting commissioned by the Spanish colonial authorities is a visual retelling of the 1807 uprising led by Pedro Mateo and Ambaristo. The colonizer’s imposition of strict rules in the purchase and consumption of *basi* triggered the event (Constantino 134). The series of paintings documents the incidents that led to the overwhelming defeat of the rebellion and the subsequent beheading of its leaders.



fig. 2 Esteban Villanueva, *Decapitacion de los condenados a esta pena* (detail), oil on canvass, 91.4 cm x 91.4, 1821

In Ifugao folk legends, a warrior who dies by decapitation becomes a *pinteng* who, “in death, is rewarded with a head of fire to strike fear in his enemies’ hearts” (Retablo 52). This intersects with Feleo’s representation of beheaded Ifugao warriors alongside the historical figures of the *Basi Revolt*. In the Villanueva painting, the severed heads of the dissident *indios* were placed in cages to serve as warning to rebels. The execution and beheading that followed, the exhibition of heads in cages, and the Villanueva painting captured a scene of carnage. The brutality inflicted on the dismembered bodies extended towards spectators at whom the images were projected.

It is this context, the spectacle of severed heads and rivers of blood gain chilling power in both the Villanueva paintings and the events they represent. Feleo, however, recast this visualization of violence to convey valor instead of defeat and bloodlust. In the *virriñas* *Pinteng ni Ambaristo* (2007) (**fig. 3**) and *Pinteng ni Pedro Mateo* (2007) (**fig. 4**), the titular characters were represented as *pintengs* tranquil in their nakedness. The figures gain mass and lose their human features in death, and slowly transform to *bul-ul*, representation of ancestor spirits in the Cordilleras, with thick torsos, stubby limbs, and squatting position. Reconfigured into *pintengs* with heads ablaze, the subjects are valorized as folk heroes. By

representing them as bul-ul, they are deified as ancestor spirits. When Feleo intersected the worlds of the pinteng and the Basi Revolt, he reincarnated Ambaristo and Mateo as figures straddling history and folklore. The artist turned history on its head when he made the colonial forces and the natives confront each other in his work. The decapitation meant to discourage defiance of colonial authority becomes the means by which folk heroes attain the power to redirect fear towards the enemies.



(left) fig. 3 Roberto Feleo, *Ang Pinteng ni Ambaristo*, acrylic on sawdust on wood carving, 29.5cm (circumference) x 46 cm (height), 2007, (right) fig. 4 Roberto Feleo, *Ang Pinteng ni Pedro Mateo*, acrylic on sawdust on wood carving, 29.5cm (circumference) x 46 cm (height), 2007 (photos courtesy of The Drawing Room Contemporary Art Gallery)

Feleo's creative engagement with folk narratives as material is not limited to visually representing literary forms. He extends it to his choice of medium and techniques he considers consistent with his practice. Since the beginning of his career, Feleo has distanced himself from the conventions of his Fine Arts education and delved deeper into a practice framed and constructed around distinct techniques, forms, and motifs.

The artist's practice and the *viriniñas* are simultaneously material. Thus, the layers of meaning in Feleo's *viriniñas* are not limited to the images contained within the vessel as the bell jar itself is resonant. Also known as vitrines, they are made of clear glass and were used as covers for hurricane lamps. They were also used as glass domes to encase objects of curiosity and religious images during the Spanish colonial period. The artist relates that his fascination with the form has to do with its ability to encapsulate profound scenes in a minuscule space. In Feleo's version, excerpts from history, representations of folk heroes, and tableau of mythological beings populate the confined worlds of the vitrines. For the artist, the glass is not enclosure but surface that can be painted into sky or sea.

Patrick Flores adds that the *viriniñas* function as a stage where narratives of colonization, historical ruptures, and tensions between sacred and profane play out (Firmament 6-7). The *Bagobo Myth* retold in the *viriniñas*, is an example. Feleo positions the indigenous cosmos face to face with the Catholic images that are typically housed under these glass domes. Just as the *pinteng* gains postcolonial potency when interwoven with the Basi Revolt, the colonial vitrine, when intersected with the indigenous subject matter, similarly infuses the world of myths with new contexts. It is recast

as contestation, calling our attention to the violent imposition of a colonial religion that attempted to eradicate indigenous spiritual systems.

That Feleo calls these sculptural forms *tau-tao* is of note in his art production. This term generally refers to three-dimensional representations of humans, gods, and spirits that include those found in his installative and sculptural pieces and the *virñas*. His use of this term instead of *installation* or *sculpture* is important to him. The tau-tao, according to him, are votive three-dimensional images created by different cultural communities in Southeast Asia to represent ancestor spirits. He adds:

“At the death of a noble, a tau-tao is carved on his likeness by a shaman, dressed in his clothes and adorned with his personal treasures such as a favorite knife. It is believed that the tau-tao would be the repository of his earthly spirit. The tau-tao is then placed alongside the tau-taos of his ancestors lining the balconies of the death cliffs.” (Feleo Tau-tao par. 26).

In precolonial Philippine cultures, these are also known as *likha*, *larauan*, and *calag-calag* (Idols 149-150). His works, according to him, are not simply objects for viewing, but are vessels for the spirits of the characters they represent, similar to the pre-Hispanic tau-tao that indigenous groups living in the archipelago created.

Consequently, the visual representation of folk narratives compelled Feleo to discover mediums from traditional practice. As a student in the 1970s, he reflected on the issues of fine arts as colonial form and immersed himself in discovering the different artistic traditions of the Filipino people. The sawdust and emulsion mix, which he calls *pinalakpak*, is the Filipino carpenter’s traditional *masilya* (wood putty) — a viscous paste used as weatherproofing agent and putty to cover cracks in walls. Used as a medium in art, the pinalakpak is malleable, sturdy, easy to form, light, and yields itself to the skills and creative needs of the artist. It can be treated to look smooth or textured and can simulate the appearance of bronze, stone, solid wood, or clay. As alternative to more expensive materials, it allows for large-scale works. This mixture is staple in Feleo’s artworks.

In a few instances, Feleo is forced to invent different forms and mediums or negotiate with existing ones. For example, the tau-tao is usually made of clay, wood, or stone. Yet he fashions the tau-tao from pinalakpak. In converting the material from its origins to a medium of contemporary artistic expression, Feleo invented a process that allowed him to model forms of varying sizes. The process involves the construction of an armature from expandable aluminum the artist covers with paper. Once this is done, a coating of the pinalakpak would be applied to the surface. Here, the use of pinalakpak is a negotiation: first, in terms of his practice since this is the material that best suits his skills; second, in terms of the nature of the sculptural form that sometimes necessitates a material that is malleable, sturdy, and cheap, and; third, that the pinalakpak, like clay, stone, and wood, is organic — a quality that he finds suitable for the subject. He states,

“My choice of pinalakpak as medium is a compromise. Clay would have been the ideal material since it is the primordial medium of many tales of creation. But in association with Tau-Tao, pinalakpak connotes other things. Although both clay and pinalakpak are both organic and require the same handling processwise, the latter is cheaper and more available. More important, pinalakpak is water soluble.” (Tau-tao par. 32)

It is by way of this inventive spirit that Feleo refuses to succumb to a purely Western paradigm in his art production. He consciously contends with issues in forms and techniques all throughout his nearly four decades of art practice. Thus, there is an evident attempt to create a Filipino vocabulary in contemporary art tradition in his practice. Alice Guillermo notes;

“(W)hile the artist pays little tribute to the academic canons, his work shows a highly complex approach to the materials and processes of art making. Indeed, his art demonstrates, with remarkable virtuosity, the semiotic potency of medium that actively participates in producing the meaning of the work.” (Connecting Myth 120)



fig. 5 Roberto Feleo, *Tao-tao: Bukidnon Myth of Creation*, sawdust, powdered eggshell, and white glue, 1997
(photo courtesy of Regina Starr Abelardo chasingthestars.wordpress.com)

Feleo recasts folk mythological creatures using pinalakpak as medium. In *Tao-tao: Bukidnon Myth of Creation* (1997) (fig. 5), the artist depicts the moment when the mythic gods are engaged in a fierce battle. At the top of the composition is Agtayabun represented as half-man, half-bird. Like a proud rooster proclaiming the expanse of his territory – talons firmly perched on the banting, wings spread, head oriented towards the heavens – the bird-god crows. In his right hand is an *abaniko* while on the left is a flaglet. Below him, at the bottom of the ring he is clutching, are Dadanyahan Ha Sugay and Diwata na Magbabaya who are falling to the ground headfirst. The creation appears to be in shambles – two mounds of soil and a scaffold perched on low-lying islands atop a circular base. It is important to recall here that the figures in the tableau are not simply sculptures but tau-tao. For the artist, they are inhabited by the spirits of those they depict. As such, they gain vitality and are not just objects for iconographic display. They are simultaneously receptacles of the spirits of the mythical gods and, at the same time, vessels of the indigenous traditions they represent. Thus, the scene occurs both in real-time as maquette, and in mythic time as gods engaged in combat, perpetually frozen yet eternally unfolding. The artist associates the pinalakpak with the use of soil and other organic materials that are the substance of life in the creation myth. Viewed from a metaphoric lens, the artist becomes the maker of the bodies that the creator-gods will occupy.

Folk Narratives in the Visual Arts: The Past as Territories

Feleo also participates in the articulation of discourses on folk narratives through visual representation. The folk narrative becomes front and center when viewing his art. In some instances, representations of folklore in the visual arts are imagined as markers of tradition and the past. Art

historian Corazon Hila, for example, takes note of Feleo's tau-tao *Shiva Doing the Twist* (1999), "Thus with this Shiva piece, a mythic past is juxtaposed against the contemporary present, a scenario that generates dialogue and discussion" (11). Myth here is framed by Hila as an object taken from the past and staged in the present through Feleo's art. This statement presents two tensions: the positioning of the past as the milieu of myths, and the baggage that the word *myth* carries. Entangled in the threads of connectivities of folk narratives in contemporary art and visual representation are discourses of past and present and tensions between tradition and modernity. Anttonen explains,

"(T)he concept of tradition is inseparable from the idea and experience of modernity, both as its discursively constructed opposition and as a rather modern metaphor for cultural continuity and historical patterning. For this reason, the discussion of the concept of tradition as well as those social processes that are regarded as traditional must be related to and contextualized within the socially constituted discourses on modernity and modernism.

"The same applies to the concept of folklore, which especially in folklore scholarship conducted in languages other than English is commonly, and often without methodological reflection, treated as a synonym for the concept of tradition." (12)

In modernist paradigm, the modern is the *now* that begins at the moment of rupture from the *not now*. Consequently, as its Other, tradition "refers to that which is regarded as belonging to the past or representing past ways, styles or techniques," which often includes folklore (Anttonen 37). But time should not be imagined as linear progression from past to present, where the former perishes with the emergence of the latter. Traditional and modern should not be seen as forks in the road where modern is defined as that which takes the path of the new, and the traditional as that which continues on the ways, styles, and techniques of the past. Instead, the things that we often regard as *modern* and *traditional* happen contemporaneously, existing in the same space, but are labeled as "traditional" and "modern," and as "past" and "present" in a manner of Othering. These labels are not based on irrefutable fact but are ideological modes of imposing order onto chaos. It is not a rupture, but a construction of meaning through the identification of values -- of deciding what constitutes traditional and modern, of marking the temporal boundaries of past and present.

The narrative of an indigenous past as material in constructing the myth of a nation often affirms an anti-colonial position. Within the context of colonial experience, indigenous history is framed as that point in time that is pure and authentic because it is precontact (Schneider 170). It indicates a history – an origin story that is presumed to have propelled a group of people toward its path to nationhood and its future. As John Clark notes, "The state and the systems of knowledge it constructs are often caught between looking back to the past as repository of values before contact with Euramerican imperialism and looking forward to a future in the historical surge towards which the new nation fuses with the wave of an epoch" (Modern Asian Art 20). In conversations surrounding Feleo's art and those of other artists whose practices are similar, the indigenous is proposed as an essential spirit shared across space and time by the people who identify with the nation and, by extension, its indigenous origin. In her evaluation of Rodel Tapaya, whose visual art practice also draws heavily from folk narrative materials, and his foray in myths and legends of indigenous peoples, Alice Guillermo states:

"(H)is art seems to convey the belief that the workings of the Filipino indigenous mind, as distilled from the myths and folktales of earlier times, should be seen as reflections of our truest and most quintessential self which it would do well to bring to bear on the economic, social, and scientific issues of our time." (Art as Talisman 5)

Here we should note how myths and folktales are framed as reflections of a “true” and “essential” self, here identified as “Filipino.” The past becomes the site where the spirit of the Filipino is located. However, locating one’s origins in an indigenous past represented by myths is not an end by itself, but is an act framed as the source of precolonial wisdom, a claim to an ancestry that dates back to the primordial past. Alice Guillermo continues:

“This also coincides with the approach of some artists and scholars in search of roots: to view myths and folktales not only as vehicles of primordial imagination and thought passed on from one generation to the next as an essential part of cultural memory, but also as bearers of the ethical/moral systems of our revered ancestors – a fountainhead of wisdom.” (5)

In the visual representation of folk narrative materials, Feleo ties another knot in the loom of his tapestry. His conversation with indigenous forms like the tau-tao in his art is to make prominent a period that is “untainted” by colonialism, through a practice framed by the discourse on the contemporary. When envisioned as the living embodiment of a culture that began in a past long before colonization, surviving to this day with very little intervention from foreign cultures, indigenous lifeways and technologies are imagined as a continuation of that past. To invoke these in one’s art practice is to reconnect symbolically with a past that these groups of people are imagined to represent.

In this act of decolonization, he associates his art practice with the subset of practices where the tau-tao, pinalakpak, and other mediums that are the foundation of his art production are defined and redefined as past and peripheral by the new aesthetic and formal systems imposed by colonization. This encapsulates a critique of the colonial experience as a past represented by folklore and contemporaneous with how the present is constructed and imagined in Feleo’s art.

The impetus is at some level, nostalgic. According to Canclini, “In this epoch in which we doubt the benefits of modernity, temptations mount for a return to some past that we imagine to be more tolerable” (Canclini 113). Here, the past is framed as a more ideal time. This is significant to the narrative of loss and reclamation, inasmuch as those who invoke tradition often position folklores as surviving relics of an imagined past and as forgotten objects that are valuable enough to reclaim. As noted by Anttonen, “One aspect of this discourse on the loss is that the ephemerality of the present creates a longing for the eternal and the immediate. Tradition, and folklore as its synonym in folkloristic discourse, serves as a metaphor for that which is solid, fixed, and crystallized” (43).

Feleo’s art practice transcends nostalgia as a simple longing for the past and the desire to return to it. In fact, he hints at revisiting indigenous forms not simply as a symbolic act of reconnecting with our roots, but also “finding common sense solutions to our contemporary concerns.” The artist proposes

“...that culture as a field of study and as reality cannot be isolated from politics, religion, economics, and the general social fabric. How a people finds solutions to their needs often determines their survival. More often than not, these solutions are not spontaneous decisions, but are drawn from instinct and race memory.” (qtd. in *Aesthetics* 34)

He believes that indigenous practices and folk knowledge more accurately respond to local needs, and thus, contemporary artists should be reflexive of one’s “instinct and race memory” in order to fashion an art tradition that is deeply rooted in their own culture. Feleo adds,

“Beholden to the development of painting in the West, Filipino painters, with a few exceptions, fail to appreciate their very own visual traditions. It is about

time they recognize their society as defined by geography, as multicultural and therefore a rich source of images and ideas just waiting to be tapped. Otherwise, they will always be colonized.” (Feleo Appropriation 22)

Modernity imagines the past as the locus where tradition resides. In this formulation, the past embodies not just time but those processes that have been regarded by the modern as *not modern*. The past is not just plotted across time, but also projected in certain styles and ways of doing things. These may still be occurring in the present, but are deemed by the modern as obsolete and need to be replaced with new ways of doing. But the past is not just a matter of time, taste, and technique. In the modernist imaginary, the history of modernity is plotted in a narrative logic where the Western model of civilization becomes the apex of history and the privileged model for modernity: the modern, the now, the present (Anttonen 31). Those practices that are occurring outside the centers of the Western world are framed as *traditional*, *primitive*, and *folk*. This is retold in narratives of the urban and the rural where the present happens in the centers, the urban, the modern, while the past takes place in the peripheries, the rural, the traditional. In this regard, the past is also imagined as spatial. Fernando Zialcita, writing about Tapaya, observes: “Drawing these myths to the attention of *urbanized* Filipinos is what Rodel Tapaya seeks to achieve. One stated reason is to use these images to comment about the *present*” (20) (emphasis mine). Zialcita’s observation places myths outside the realm of the urban and the present.

Feleo’s art practice adheres to a belief that ancestor spirits inhabit his tau-tao. He actively engages with them in his art production, even recounting that he sometimes feels their presence. However, the titles for his artworks maintain the term *myth* to describe the cosmogonies in his art. The tension arises when the source materials that Feleo calls *myth* in his art are actively practiced by the people that identify with their cosmogony. To these people, these are living spiritual systems that are happening and are experienced in the present. In studying the arts of the Aboriginal people of Australia, Robert Nelson makes this assertion,

“The presence of the ancestor spirits is not mythological, which is a misleading term. The word *myth* refers to stories which are no longer believed, dead religion, even if they may have been believed in the past. Aboriginal people profoundly identify with the reality of the Dreaming: it is the central and commanding religious truth and there is nothing mythological about it. Anthropologists still use the word ‘mythological’ with unwitting colonial condescension. Alas, it is inappropriate as applied to the beliefs of Indigenous people.” (10.3)

Perhaps, we can view Feleo’s exploration of folk narrative materials in his art through this lens.

The tensions between past and present, tradition and modernity, center and periphery, colonial and indigenous are not specific to Feleo’s practice. In the bigger structure of the art world, this dichotomy is prominent and ever present. The categorization between fine arts and folk arts, “lowland Christians” and “upland people,” the distinction between the National Artist Awards and the *Gawad Manlilikha ng Bayan*, the widely disparate institutions of patronage between the mainstream and the indigenous are examples. In the complex political economic structure of the Philippines, the indigenous is relegated to the margins, as illustrated by recent experience of the lumads. To express the indigenous in one’s art is in itself value-laden. As Anttonen puts it, “The motivation to ‘discover’ and cast a particular gaze lies not in the object itself but in its value for the one who discovers it, gazes at it, and puts it on display” (79). In this sense, the folk narratives and techniques in Feleo’s art is political.

At this juncture, several questions arise from Feleo’s practice and the discourse he articulates: being outside the traditional shamanistic contexts for the creation of tau-tao, up to which point can

he call his installative and sculptural pieces as such? As a Tagalog, up to what extent can Feleo claim co-ownership of the folk narrative materials of other groups and steer clear of cultural appropriation? Where do we draw the line between postcolonial contestation and essentialism in his conscious effort at embracing mostly folklore materials and techniques in his art production? Up to which point can folklore continue to embody a “Filipino spirit” from a primeval past that transcends time and space without disregarding the origins of the Philippines as a nation – constituted by a colonial power from a group of islands previously governed by separate kingdoms and sultanates and forcefully clustered into an arbitrary geopolitical unit.

Folk Narratives in the Articulation of the National: The Creation and Reordering of Worlds

As an act of constructing national identity, folklore is subsumed into the nation’s long list of traditional practices in order to assert cultural and territorial boundaries. The construction of identity is essential to the concept of nation. According to Canclini, “To have an identity would be above all to have a country, a city, or a neighborhood, an entity in which everything shared by those who inhabit that place becomes identical and interchangeable. In those territories identity is staged, celebrated in fiestas, and also dramatized in daily rituals” (132). Folklore becomes one of the many objects in which this identity is constructed. The nation imagines tradition, the indigenous, and folklore as signs that constitute and consequently, narrate history to legitimize its existence. In many instances, the broader category of tradition is used “to symbolize the inner cohesion of a given group and the continuation of its existence as a recognized social entity” (Anttonen 36).

The concept of *nation* implies a sense of self-consciousness because it presupposes the awareness of belonging to a group of people within a defined geopolitical territory, with a shared history, identity, and aspirations. In the realm of the visual arts, this self-conscious inscription of identity through folklore, tradition, and the indigenous is best seen in the history of the Philippine modern art movement. With the encouragement of Victorio Edades, modern artists included the indigenous, the ethnic, and the vernacular as medium and material in their art (Guillermo History 225). Flaudette May Datuin however observes that this articulation also conveys a tendency to present identity as “an eternal and unchanging ‘primitive’ or ‘ethnic’ moment, often associated with the chthonic and submissive female ‘savage’... or with the peasantry or rural folk...” (53). Whether essentialist or otherwise, these artists had to reevaluate and reinvent the concept of Filipino identity, and constructed through their art what Filipino is and what it is not through images of the indigenous, ethnic, and vernacular.

It is to this notion of folklore in the context of nation which Feleo links his practice. When tasked to answer Patrick Flores’s query, Feleo recognized that the Bagobos might not be able to identify their myths from his works. He asserts that this is a peculiarity of contemporary visual arts, in that they take into account artistic style and creative interventions. More importantly, he invoked national identity. He says, “I am a Filipino. We are all Filipinos. Is it not my right to represent these images visually? If you do not have misguided intentions... if your only intent is to promote appreciation for your fellow Filipinos, what is wrong with that?”

Postulated against the backdrop of the global, the national gains both internal and external dimensions to worlding. As Clark suggests, “‘Worlding’ is a notion which implies a coherence other than that provided by internal discourses: it posits an outside, and this depends on how the nature and extent of the outside were reciprocally conceived” (Clark Worlding 69).

In 1974, the broadcast of the Miss Universe pageant opened with 1973 titleholder Margarita Moran standing in front of the Folk Arts Theater. She exclaimed, “I am speaking to you from the City of Manila, from the Philippine Islands. The Miss Universe beauty pageant will be televised from this magnificent new building, the Folk Arts Theater. It will come to you live via satellite. Mabuhay. Welcome to the Philippines.” The image cuts to the stage shaped like half the sun from the Philippine flag embellished with the decorative *okir* motif of the Maranao. As the 65 candidates paraded in front

of the audience, the camera cut to then President Ferdinand Marcos and First Lady Imelda, both beaming with pride. (Miss Universe)

The Folk Arts Theater was featured prominently as Imelda's creation. In one segment, the female anchor devotes a portion of the program to talk about the venue as a feat of architecture and engineering.

“Wasn't that a beautiful setting? And isn't this a beautiful building. It's designed to be a part of a huge cultural and convention complex to be completed in the next couple of years. It will be the site of folk dances, art exhibitions, and native arts and crafts of all kinds. Of course, it wasn't to be started until 1976. However, the First Lady wanted it to be ready for our pageant. So the word went out, 'Have the building ready in 70 days.' Early in January, our survey team looked at an empty mud flat and went away shaking their heads and looking for alternate locations just knowing it could not be done. But on January 28th, the first piling went into the reclaimed land. Seventy days later, this is what they found. And now here we are.” (Miss Universe)

Imelda, in this statement, is presented as omnipotent – beating all odds to construct the venue. Like the god of creation, she only had to utter the word and, from nothing, the world materialized. In this superfluous display of power, the folk was made to hold its own against the modern design and construction of the building and the state of the art technology by which the show was telecast to the world. In this narrative, the *folk* and the *native* were staged in a modernist space, and to an extent, constituted that space – an international arena for the folk arts. The Folk Arts Theater became the face of Manila's cosmopolitanism. What the world saw that day was modern Manila steeped in tradition, a status articulated through images from Philippine folklore, such as the *okir* and the *sarimanok*, under the cultural patronage of the First Lady. The prominent display of these icons from Mindanao coincided with the rising secessionist campaign by the Moro National Liberation Front. The prolific use of the *sarimanok* in the pageant can be seen, in this case, as legitimizing the claim of the nation to contested territories and as a response to those who challenge the cohesion of its geopolitical unit. Folklore, in this sense, contributes to the co-articulation of the national—the creation of its territories and the construction of its identity, here projected to the world live via satellite. In this context, as easily as artists like Feleo wield folklore as contestation, the state appropriates these symbols to advance its narratives of nation, especially in inscribing identity, asserting powers, and legitimizing control over territory.

It is in another, but related, thread of nation and world-making that Feleo's art practice has taken him to shows in Japan, Cuba, Singapore, the US, and Australia where his distinctive technique and mediums and his tackling issues of identity, colonial legacy, and the indigenous are recognized. But it is not just his individual practice that is embedded in these endeavors. In representing the Philippines in the Havana Biennale in 1989, for example, Feleo became enmeshed in the “creation of a new global order” that the organizers of the show predicated. Rachel Weiss notes of the event,

“It aimed at nothing less than creating, for the art and artists of the entire Third World, a space of respect and stature equal to that granted artists in the developed West. It would replace the historical cultural dependency of the Third World with a 'new international cultural order' by creating transversal circuits of communication.” (17)

Here, an allusion to a “new international cultural order” that would challenge the world order dominated by the West is apparent. While the notion of a “Third World” is problematic, the Havana Biennale locates Feleo in an art world that is aware of international networks linked through

these “world orders;” that these world orders are put into question; that what they do belong to a common global impulse, and; that their actions have global effects. On a similar note, Clark sees worlding as a response to a sense of outerness. He states,

“Worlding’ posits a spatial and temporal discontinuity with innerness, but it is, in the colonial and nationalist anti-colonial conceptions, mobilised by outerness. ‘Worlding’ is marked, sometimes temporarily, by the period when a discourse is supposed to have overcome its inwardness or closure, or it is spatially designated as in distant, regional, provincial styles within an art culture.” (Worlding 69)

Feleo’s works were exhibited in a solo show, but was grouped with artists of living traditions and those who engage folk mythologies, or those who find their creative expressions in the exploration of traditional and indigenous forms. In particular, Feleo’s art was presented in the catalogue, with a cluster of other artists, as such:

“The first *núcleo* includes works that tackle living cultural traditions, with the instrument of the contemporary language of visual arts. It deals with traditions that engage in the cultural field through myths and rituals, or that have bled into some of the aspects of the social and active awareness of a people, or the collective consciousness.” (Núcleo 1 128)

A passage from an exhibition catalogue of Southeast Asian Art talks of Feleo’s exploration of mythologies and early Philippine history, “Religious belief is recast alongside animist practices and the spirit world, as part of Feleo’s stratagem to contest and disrupt colonial narratives, and to challenge the hegemony of entrenched power dynamics” (Bukidnon Myth 96). Here, the indigenous cosmos is not just seen as the passive Other of colonial narratives. It is transformed as an active symbol of contestation and disruption of established knowledge systems.

Similarly, in a belated analysis of the Havana Biennale, Weiss describes Feleo as an artist who, like his contemporaries in post-Martial Law Manila, was “caught up in a popular effort to rethink nationhood and national history,” his topics as “complicated and tense interaction between pre-colonial, colonial and subsequent periods... to an intimately celestial realm replete with divine and human violence” (47). In this formulation, the creation of a new global order would emanate from a postcolonial understanding and rethinking of nationhood and national history through living traditions, rituals, and myths. The mythological gods in Feleo’s cosmos were once again tasked to recreate and reorganize the world.

Epilogue: A World in Flames

Rodrigo Duterte was elected President in 2016, leading to temporary cessation of military operations in a few communities. Bai Gertrudes found momentary peace when they were allowed to go back to their homes. A year after Duterte’s ascent to power, however, in his State of the Nation Address delivered to the Philippine Congress on 25 July 2017, he sends out an ominous warning: “*Umalis kayo diyán. Sabihin ko diyán sa mga Lumad ngayon, umalis kayo diyán. Bobombahan ko ‘yan. Isali ko ‘yang mga istruktura ninyo*” (Leave. I’m telling those in the Lumad schools to leave. I will bomb that place, including your structures”).

Foreshadowing, the world ends in flames in Feleo’s *Ang Urna ng Ikalawang Pagdating* (1988) (**fig. 7**). Scenes of catastrophic violence unfold within the maquette’s hexagonal frame. In the apocalyptic second coming, the ground is glutted by a violent blaze, reddening the mass of clouds above it. A rain of missiles pounds the ground as the winged god Agtayabun, keeper of balance, falls from the sky, head first and askew. A fist, clenching the fallen missiles, rises from the flames and

is about to collide with the hawk-god. The imminent collision threatens to wreak more havoc in the already ravaged landscape.

The world waits with bated breath.



fig. 5 Roberto Feleo, *Urna ng Ikalawang Pagdating*, acrylic on sawdust on wood carving, 20 cm. x 43.2 x 69 cm., 1988 (photo courtesy of The Drawing Room Contemporary Art Gallery)

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