

MANINGNING, POET AND ARTIST

(As seen by her father, Mario I. Miclat)

*M*aningning Miclat was a poet of three languages, prize-winning artist, published essayist, and translator/interpreter. She was a teacher who could, despite the vogueish American saying, "Those who can't, teach." She decided to pass on at age 28.

Maningning was born in Beijing and spent the first half of her life in China. She graduated from the Yimin Primary School and finished her junior high at the Beijing Normal University's Pilot School. She excelled in both language and mathematics subjects. She learned to paint the gentleman's four paintings in xieyi style under Master Liu Fulin at age 10, and proceeded to develop her own gongbi style of painting. She wrote poetry and was included in a Beijing book of top international women poets in Chinese. Her first Chinese painting exhibition was held at the Cultural Center of the Philippines in 1987 at age 15. It was in the same year that she launched her first book of Chinese poetry, *Wode Shi* (Manila: World News Publications).

The second half of her life was spent in the Philippines. She has also toured both the British Museum in London and the Louvre in Paris. She finished her high school at St. Theresa's Quezon City under the personal auspices of Sr. Trinitas. She obtained her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from UP Diliman, cum laude standing, under the tutelage of National Artist Napoleon Abueva, Dean Nestor Vinluan, and conceptual artist Roberto Chabet. She started painting in oil, pastel, lahar emulsion and mixed media without necessarily abandoning her Chinese brush and ink. She won the Art Association of the Philippines (AAP) grand prize in non-representational painting in 1992 for her 4' x 6' oil, "Trouble in Paradise."

Maningning joined the UP Writers' Workshop in 1990, where she won a Julie Lluch trophy as a top fellow writing in Filipino. She likewise went through National Artist Virgilio S. Almario's poetry workshop in Filipino, and later joined its graduates in the poets association called LIRA. She also was a fellow of the Silliman Writers' Workshop for English poetry. She taught

Mandarin for a time at the Ateneo de Manila University, and painting at the Far Eastern University. Her second book of poetry, *Voice from the Underworld*, was published by Anvil before her death in 2000.

Her essay, “A Keeper of One’s Voice” (in *Beyond the Great Wall: A Family Journal*, by Mario, Alma, Maningning and Banaue Miclat, Manila: Anvil Publishing, Inc., first hardbound edition, 2007), may, perhaps, give us some inkling about her thinking process as an artist, if conversely. And I quote:

I wrote my first poem “Shi bu shi [Is it or is it not]” in high school. I was eleven. It was gay and funny. I was so happy. It was a free verse, and I recognized the rhythm in me. When my friends read it, they told me it was a nonsense poem, and I called it a poetic nonsense...

I wrote and read a lot during the regular class hours, under the table. After class, I would go to the swing in our courtyard. That was how I kept my sense of rhythm for my free verses. And that was how I started to dream of becoming a poet and a painter one day.

After graduating from junior high school, which was right after the EDSA Revolution in the Philippines, my family came back to Manila. For a few months, I did not have a school. Then, the ICM sisters of St. Theresa’s took me in. I got a chance to be published at the student page of the *World News*, a broadsheet paper of the Chinese community in the Philippines...

I started to attend poetry workshop in Filipino... I became their youngest member. I indexed the words from a Tagalog dictionary, so I could rhyme. I could not find a rhyming dictionary in Filipino. Most of the time, I kept counting syllables and wished not to commit as many mistakes in the language... I was speaking in Tagalog with a Beijing twang while growing up in China. Coming back to the Philippines, I tried to learn expressing myself in Filipino well... I found it most convenient to keep to the Balagtas tradition of rhyme and meter, especially the twelve-syllable line. It somehow put my uncertainties into a structure bound by words...

Shi is to be in Chinese. Poems are written in English. Tula can only be Filipino.

Maningning not only crosses cultures, but artistic forms as well. Her 44’ x 6’ mural entitled “Soliloquy” (1994) was twice exhibited at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, once at the GSIS Museum, and is now with a private collector. Beside it, she wrote an inscription, quoted in part below:

I want space –
a two dimensional space

To form forms...
with the glacial acrylic paints.

Forms that bring back
the balance and rhythm
of xieyi painting
where yin is left in the whiteness
of rice paper, and yang is limned
by the shades of gray and black ink...

Beside this poem
is a prayer
frozen in the acrylic paints.

Beside this poem
is a mural
– a desire for space.

In relation to her later poems on the Philippine centennial celebrations, she talked about how her project collages at the UP Diliman College of Fine Arts have influenced her poetry. For six months, she did her research on the Philippine Revolution of 1896.

On the one hand, she did her research as material for her poetry, not as an academic but, rather, as “an abstract artist who is looking for interesting images to incorporate in my collages.” She said, “instead of colors, textures and images, I tried to juxtapose pieces of information based on my reading... I used my own sense of balance, rhythm and judgment, and came out with collages in the form of poetry.”

On the other hand, her paintings may be seen as poetic expressions on canvas. And what can the images probably say? Here is another indication we could gather from her essay:

The Cultural Revolution has affected many people in China. I remember during my pre-school days, grown-ups were sent to the countryside to “be reformed through manual labor.” In my case, it was my father himself who asked to be sent to a commune in Southern China...

It was the time of the Cultural Revolution, and even in the city, toys were very limited. The grown-ups wore only clothes in plain blue, white, gray or black. Children like us could wear not only lighter shades of the same colors but also some pink and red, too. We were happiest when we could draw with colored chalk. Their suggestions of a vibrant color excited us a lot...

One day as I roamed around our living quarters with my little friends, we passed by the clinic. We saw that the “barefoot” doctor was not in. Neither the door of the clinic nor of the pharmacy room was locked. We entered the medicine storeroom. Shelves of different sizes of glass bottles – bottles filled with syrup, different sizes of tablets and different shapes of capsules, all in rainbow colors. We were overjoyed! We found a huge sheet of paper and set it on the clinic floor. We started opening the bottles, putting all the tablets and capsules together. Oh, it was fun, really fun. To touch these shapes and all the colors in small shining capsules. Then, one of us started to put these toys into her mouth and started to swallow them, many of them. She had to be rushed to the provincial hospital... We the children have since grown up. Yet we remember the past differently. Fragments of memories tiptoe into the vignettes of here and now. For all that we have heard and said, for all that we have done, for what we have become, we remain keepers of our own voice.

...Be it in poetry, painting, and other mediums.