

**DISTANCE:
CRITIQUE ON WHO OWNS WOMEN'S BODIES?
(SINO ANG NAGMAMAY-ARI SA KATAWAN NG BABAE?),
A VISUAL ART EXHIBIT OF NEW WORKS ON SEXUAL
AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH ISSUES**

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ABSTRACT

The study is the offshoot of a Japanese woman's perception of a discrepancy that exists between a perceived high status of women in the Philippines and their portrayal in the arts as nothing more than just victims of oppression. An anthropologist, not a trained art critic, and one who is guided by the idea that art is mimesis, she uses her discipline's concept of distance created by ethnicity and gender. To prove her point that distance breeds distortion, she subjected to her own gaze the works of art producers who because of differing subject construction as a consequence of gender and ethnicity, have differing representations of women's bodies. In general, the male artists tend to show women as victims without hope. On the other hand, the women, especially the feminists among them, represent women not just as victims but survivors with dreams of a better form of life.

Violence, prostitution, poverty, inequity and injustice.¹ These were the favorite topics in Philippine art that deal with women in the early 1990's when I first arrived in the Philippines. I was then just a young student of ethnomusicology or "musical anthro-

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pology” as Anthony Seeger calls it². I must confess that before long I felt overwhelmed by the ubiquitous presence of women’s suffering and pain. These were drawn and painted on canvas, acted out on the stage, and expressed in poems and in the lyrics of various songs. Female artists, whose works I viewed, often described women as nothing but the victims of oppressors: Ferdinand Marcos as a martial law dictator, foreign colonizers, the rich, and others.³ I remember viewing the works of the two considered leading female artists in the country, namely, Brenda Fajardo’s *Tarot Card Series: Filipina* (1993) and Imelda Cajipe Endaya’s *The Wife is a DH* (1995). Both works deal with the suffering and pain of migrant workers. Upon seeing them I started to question whether this is the only way that women can be described. I asked newly-arrived-in-the-Philippines-Japanese me: Is Philippine society so hostile to women that there is only pain and sorrow, and virtually no more room for hope? This baffled me a lot. Freshly arrived from the land of the Rising Sun, I was then greatly impressed by what I saw: Filipino women conducted themselves pretty well and seemed to me good at handling situations that belie their so-called helplessness. I became aware of a distance. This was the gap between the miserable images of Filipino women in art works and the flesh-and-blood Filipinas from urban and rural communities whom I personally encountered.

In Japan women do not enjoy what their Philippine sisters do. For one, Japanese women do not have the support system that is available to women of the Philippines. Since the *kouido seicho* (rapid progress) period in the 1960s, *jochu* (maids) have gradually disappeared from Japanese households. This means that in contemporary Japan a wife of a nuclear family does all the household chores that include care of the young and the aged. If she is employed in production work, she carries the double burden

of doing both production and reproduction work. As far as I can see, this is not the case with the Filipina. No matter where situated in the social hierarchy she is, in general, less burdened. Maids are available and the extended family system can be relied upon as a pool of domestic workers, and, in some cases, it is not even required that wages be paid. Such is the case with a student who does household chores to reciprocate the free board and lodging the host relative has graciously extended to him /her. And, of course, there are the aunts, uncles, and grandparents who would gladly do housework in the name of kinship and goodwill.

I have also observed that Filipino husbands and children, compared to their Japanese counterparts, are less pressured at work and study.⁴ Such being the case, they can really help in the performance of domestic work. There is also the close kinship system, which I find to be a good social security system. I have observed that even a distant relative who is in need of board and lodging can always approach a better-off relative who usually will take him/her in as a family member.

The Filipina, compared to the Japanese woman, enjoys a higher status in society. I base this assertion on what I have so far seen in the metropolis. I have noticed that in banks, government offices, schools and universities, among others, there are many women occupying top level positions. In Japan such positions are only for men.

In rural Cordillera where I have been conducting fieldwork on music and anthropology, I am amazed to find old women, as well as old men, who remain physically healthy and mentally sharp, both the cause and effect of high respect accorded them by the younger community members. At this point, I would like to recall my encounter with two old women in the Mountain Province. One gave birth to fourteen children. She proudly demonstrated to me how she delivered her babies by herself. She bent forward

and pointed to me how the womb must be positioned for easy delivery, all the while seeing to it that I will be assured that there is nothing to fear about childbirth. The other introduced to me a humorous song that women of the place utilized to lessen the impact of birth pangs especially when one is experiencing prolonged labor. The two struck me as being in control of their own bodies. And very dignified, too. Nothing about them seem to betray victimization with its attendant misery.⁵

It is my encounter with flesh-and-blood women in urban as well as rural communities that has compelled me to see art exhibits on women. I want to validate for myself my notions regarding art as a mirror of reality. Hence, my presence as spectator of the exhibit entitled "*Who Owns Women's Bodies?*"⁶ which is a collection of thirty of the most recent works by Filipino visual artists dealing with a wide variety of themes on women's bodies and lives from the various perspectives of multiple genders. In this essay, I would like to say at the outset that I am not an art critic trained in art studies. My formal training is in musicology and anthropology, as I have mentioned earlier. They are the disciplines which will inform my evaluation of the exhibit.

My fieldwork among the "ethnic minority" groups in the Cordillera Region made me keenly aware of the concept of distance in perception. This is the space between the observer and the observed. No doubt this is difficult to bridge, if at all this were possible. My marriage to a Kankana-ey man of the Mountain Province makes me very aware of this situation. There exists the distance between my husband and myself on one hand, and on the other, non-Cordillera researchers and artists and myself in viewing Cordillera culture. Our respective ethnicity distances us from what we try to view.

If ethnicity produces distance, so does gender. Men who are socially constructed as masculine subjects and women as feminine subjects have their own respective way of looking at the object of

their gaze. As Simone de Beauvoir points out in her book, *The Second Sex*, man perceives himself as the “one” and women as “the other”. This typology fails to include other gender orientations, notably the gay ones.

In this essay, what I will problematize is the distance created by gender. I will investigate how artists of different gender orientations view women’s bodies in their artistic productions. Fortunately, unlike the exhibits of certain feminists who believe in separatism and thus find no reason for including male artists and their works, the exhibit under scrutiny is inclusive.⁷ The brochure says, that the organizers saw to it that “this travelling exhibit truly [is] representative of emerging feminist consciousness in the visual arts community.” As a result, the gender distance became all at once visible. For one, notable is the presence of some women artists who veered away from gender-blind social realism frameworks. The framework that attracted them involved putting woman in the center. This means subjecting woman to the gaze not as the “other” but as the “One”. Such an approach unearthed women’s strengths and possibilities, and the end of the imaging of women as mere victims and sufferers without a promising future. On the other hand, male artists who have not been educated by feminism and therefore can only see woman not as the “One” but merely the “other” continue to portray women as mere victims and sufferers. I have observed that as each female artist takes the issue of women’s bodies as her own personal problem, the resulting works tend to be positive and descriptive of *the Self* without exaggerations.

The centering of woman as *the Self* comes alive in the works of both Brenda Fajardo and Imelda Cajipe Endaya. Both artists challenge the age-old masculine gaze of the female body as man’s object of desire and use by stating in no uncertain terms that a woman’s body belongs to no one else but herself as the “One” and

Brenda Fajardo
ANG SAGOT AY AKO
Acrylic on canvas
2000
244 cm x 157 cm



Imelda Cajipe-Endaya
KATAWAN KO, PASIYA KO
Acrylic and collage on canvas
2000
238 cm x 152 cm

woman's body belongs to no one else but herself as the "One" and not the "other." In *Ang Sagot ay Ako* (2000),⁸ a series of nudes, Fajardo appropriates the body of a woman for women, and more importantly, for herself as a woman artist engaged in the production of art objects under the terms and conditions of a patriarchal society. She does this by locating a brown-skinned body, presumably her own, as the center of the universe. Emphasized is a burning-red heart, not the usual body parts that men appropriate for their own pleasure and agenda. The burning red heart is the center of woman from which all blessings flow (fig. 1). This positive image of woman also resides in Endaya's *Katawan Ko, Pasya Ko* (2000).⁹ In the nude that relaxes amidst a background of blue, the artist affirms herself. Overlapping the nude are magnified reproductive organs as well as a brain and a heart that form a circle when connected with implied male sex organs (fig. 2). In both works the entire body is present and female sex organs play a significant role but do not overwhelm unlike many other works in the exhibition that give emphasis to breasts and the abdomen. Yet another work along the theme of centering woman is Agnes Arellano's *Red Carcass* (2000).¹⁰ The work, a mixed media, is distressing. It presents what looks like a butchered body that is cut wide open in the abdomen. Reproductive organs are absent. What one can see is a bisected carcass that brings to mind the picture of a self surrendering to others (fig. 3). This work according to the brochure, is based on the artist's own experience when she had to have her reproductive organs taken out by the hands of a male physician. Contributing to the buildup of distress in the gazer's consciousness are the two raised outstretched arms that indicate her struggle in accepting what is going on in her body. Yet the brochure explains that the work is the artist's brave affirmation that she herself would decide to accept the reality of her own body.

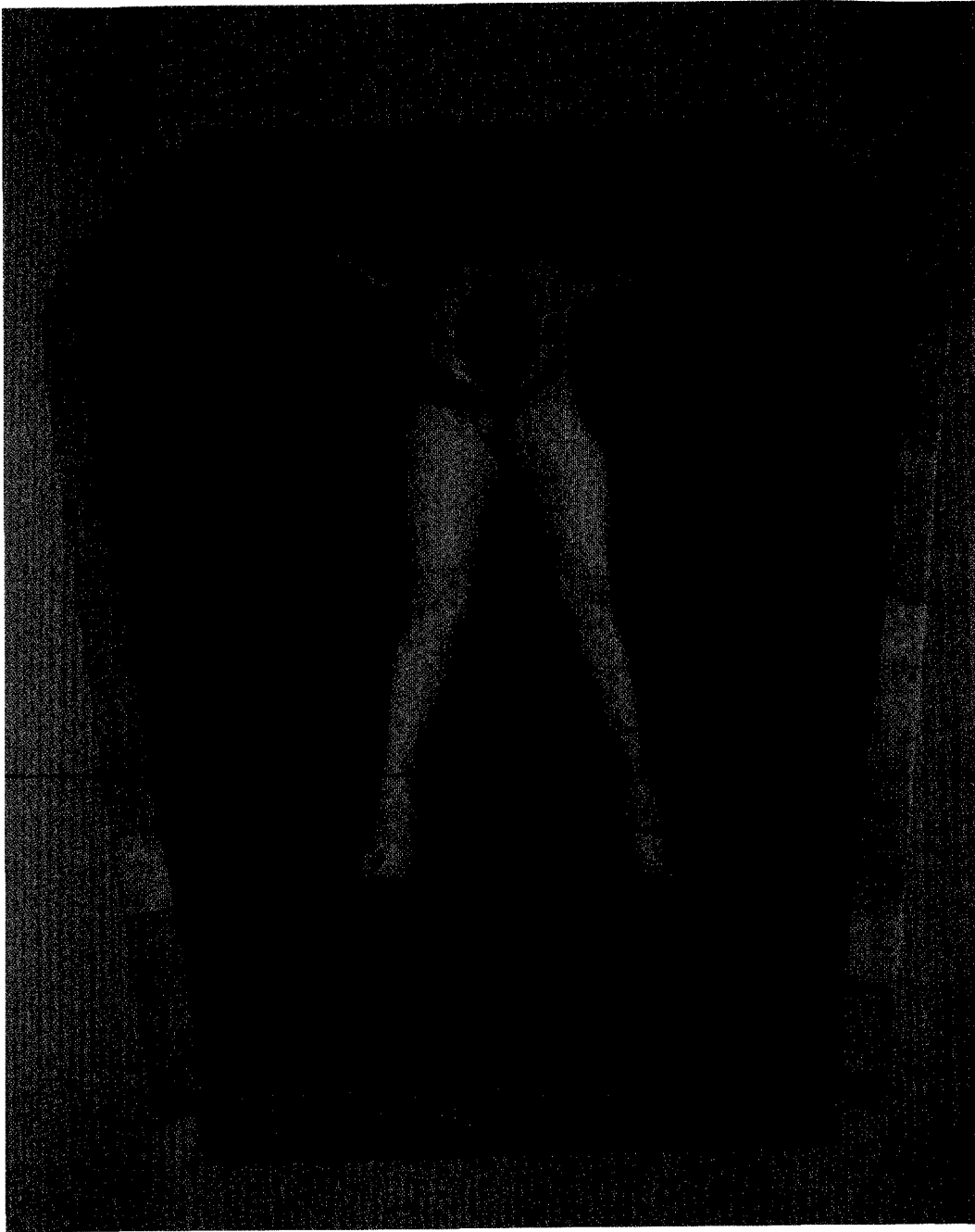
Providing the "other" to the women's work I have just discussed

are the works of the male artists. While the “positive” is emphasized in the women’s works, it is the “negative” that the sons of Eve tend to portray. Dan Raralio’s *Enkargada* (2000)¹¹ depicts a woman on a journey. Surely her trip cannot be anything but bad: She is carrying too much and is bound to a luggage (fig. 4). This emphasis on woman as victim is echoed in Alfredo Esquillo’s *Pagpapaiya* (2000). In this work he presents the dead-end predicament of a single-mother-to-be. Jose Mendoza, not to be outdone by the no-exit predicament of women, emphasizes the tragic aspect of woman’s sexuality in his *Lorena, Luray Na* (2000): It leads to painful childbirth. Because this artist is not “the One” but merely “the other” of women he fails to see that childbirth is a source of women power. For no matter how you look at it, it cannot be denied that this is something which men can’t ever do. Only women can. The same line of portraying women as victims is manifested in Charlie Co’s *It’s Her Body?*¹² (2000). This painting conveys the idea of women’s disembodiment (fig. 5). Because she is not appreciated as a whole person but a mere sex object by man, her “other”, she is portrayed as a mannequin who wears clothes to attract and please men; a walking genitalia (shown by the overwhelming presence of the female genitalia in the background), and a brainless, faceless creature shown by a hollow mask with a blank stare.

In contrast to the male artists’ works which, in general, portray women as too victimized to have any hope of a better life, are the works of female artists. Although dealing with violence, there is still room for hope. Cristina Sollesta Taniguchi’s *Banshee I* (1994) typifies this kind of thematization. She presents a pathetic bleeding nude, a victim of domestic violence against a background of bloody red. However, the work does not represent the hopelessness of a victim. A hint of flight toward liberation from oppression is achieved by the winged and fluttering hair. Andres Barioquinto’s



Dan Raralio
ENCARGADA
Synthetic marble
2000
96.5 cm. x 107 cm. x 56 cm.



Agnes Arellano
RED CARCASS
Plaster, red cement, volcanic sand
2000
36 cm x 238 cm x 260 cm

(2000) contrasts with a terra cotta abdomen by Lia Torralba Tayag which is healthily smooth and plump (*Ang Pinagpilian*, 2000).¹¹ According to the brochure, the former is the consequence of “fatigue, poverty, overuse and age”, while the latter reflects the female artist’s proclaiming “that it is a woman’s choice to produce offspring or not”.

Based on my viewing of art exhibits on women, I have noticed that while female artists like Brenda Fajardo, Imelda Cajipe-Andaya, and Anna Fer have already managed to problematize the “Woman Question” from a woman-centered point of view in their respective works, male artists have not done so. The best that they can do is to show sympathy for women as victims. This, I believe, is due to the distance created by gendering. The female/feminine body is different from the male/masculine’s and this difference is expressed in gendered art forms. And so when a female artist subjects women to her gaze, the distance between the subject/gazer and object/gazed compared to that of the male artist, is less (as in the case of patriarchal or colonized women) or even non-existent (as in the case of those who have reconstructed themselves from feminine to feminist). Paradoxically, the distanced gaze, expected to be more objective, ends up with stereotypical portrayal of women.

In contemporary Asian art, folk elements such as textiles have often been used as handy tool to express the artists’ Asian identity by blending it with Western technique. This is true in the Philippines, where this mode of art production is used as manifesto of decolonization. This is very well illustrated by Brenda Fajardo who uses folk elements and techniques.

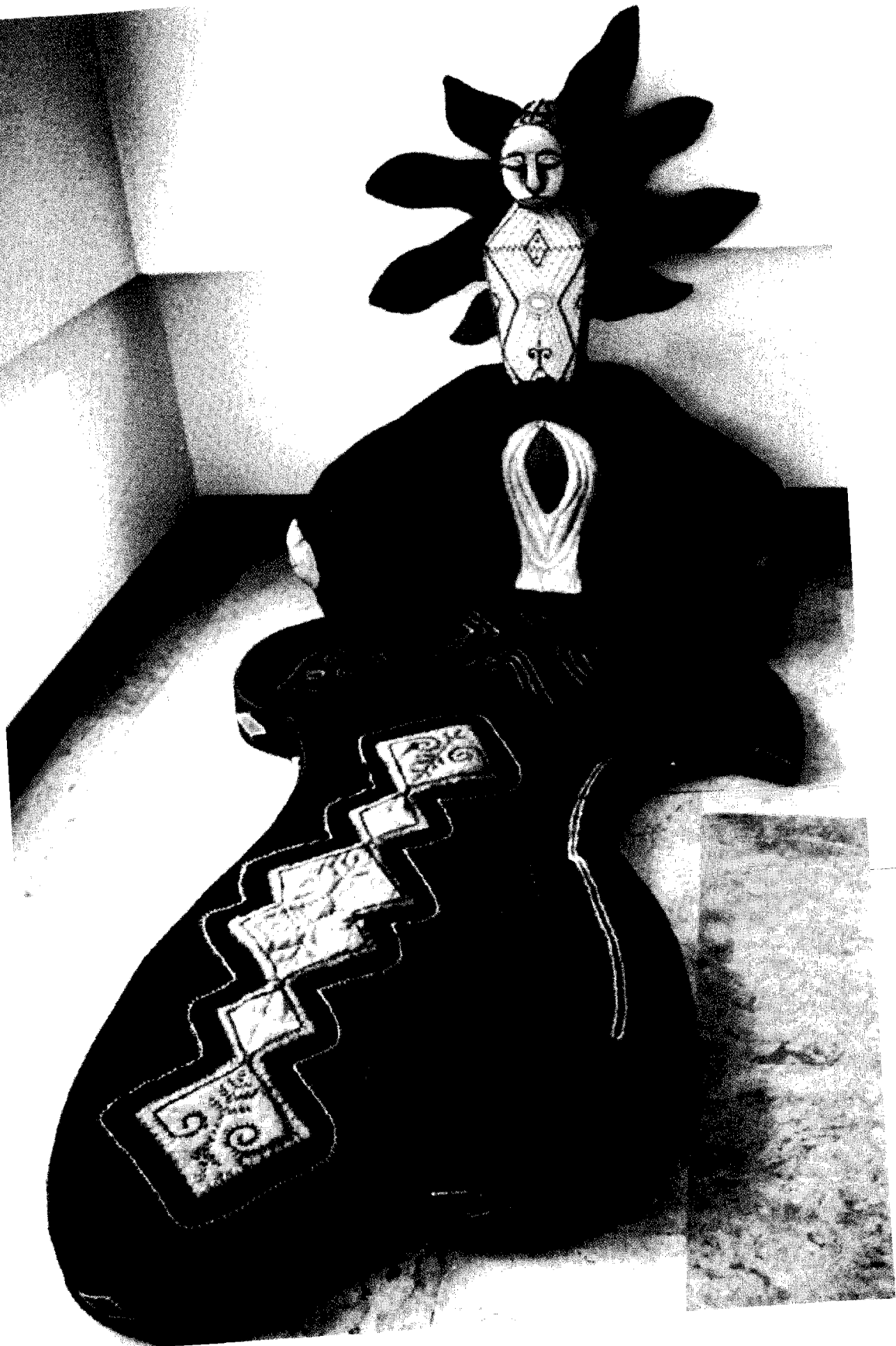
Another method by which artists express their anti-colonial sentiments is the adoption of traditional materials and techniques from so-called cultural minorities. The result of this transportation of what originates from remote areas (the margins or marginalized,

of what originates from remote areas (the margins or marginalized, so to speak) to the mainstream (the center or centered) often ends up with the exaggeration of the exotic image of the ethnic minorities (who remain the *other*), in the artist's expression of national identity reflecting his/her mere nostalgic sentiment to the lost culture of the *self*. This predicament, however, was avoided by Alma Quinto. In her *Nang Manaog ang Balyan* (2000),¹³ she uses textiles successfully as material *per se* in her depiction of female organs that appear proudly yet gracefully (fig. 6). As far as I am concerned, the artist has overcome the perils of exoticism perspectives. Rather, the textile is treated as the very medium for exposing the confident self that dwells in the female body. On the other hand, Julie Lluch's *Muslim Woman* (2000) raises the thorny question of politics and representation. To the majority of Christianized Filipinos, Muslims are "the minority other". This is a one-sided notion of the majority and cannot be anything else but illusory. Lluch illustrates this in her sculpture. She covers the entire body of the terra cotta woman up to her face. The body covering is not the Muslim burqua or purdah, for in the Philippines Muslim women are spared from wearing this piece of clothing. The covering resembles more a shroud that is associated with a body being readied for burial (as is the case with the body of Jesus Christ). The woman's position enhances further the interrogation of the non-Muslim's representation of the Muslim woman. Why is the Muslim woman made to squat when she can stand tall?

Jose Tence-Ruiz's *Balat-kami, Balat-kayo* (2000) and Ann Wizer's *Virus Inside, Virus Outside*, (2000) address the question raised by the exhibit, "Who owns women's bodies?" with the imaginative use of ordinary garments. Ruiz's work presents a scarred cast-off skin as a body covering. Through this skin-as-garment scheme, the artist manages to assert that a woman's body can be hers. The skin, though scarred by body takers and body



Charlie Co
IT'S HER BODY?
Oil on canvas
2000
148 cmx 119 cm



Alma Urduja Quinto
NANG MANAOG ANG BALYAN
Textile, foam, yarn, acrylic, contact cement
2000
129 cm x 215 cm x 117 com

violators, is only an outer body covering. It need not reach the inner being residing in the body. THAT belongs to no one else but the woman herself. The scheme of the outer/inner body dichotomy is employed by Wiser to express ecological concerns. Men's efforts to push civilization toward greater modernization has produced all kinds of consumer goods that include chemical toxins injurious to human beings. This, Wiser depicts with a grotesque jacket with countless empty medicine bags and containers of shampoo, powder and cosmetics attached to it. The art work asks: Is the body inside the jacket still intact? To whom does it belong?

The ecological concern of Wiser is carried in Genara Banzon's *Alagaan: Kalikasan, katawan, kababaihan* (2000). Employing photography, video, text, and drawings on hand-made paper, the installation shows a woman's body with one lopped breast. The sarong she wears carries images of damaged/damaging fruits and vegetables. All in all, the elements put together brings to mind the socially constructed configuration that woman is to nature as man is to culture. Like Mother Nature, woman is used, abused, despoiled and even raped by takers of natural resources (her body like the forest is raped by loggers; like land is pierced with the plow and sowed with seed even when, according to her, it is time to lie fallow; injected/sprayed/bombarded with artificial fertilizer and fungicide without regard to her health, and most often, injurious to her life). The breast that is suckled for nurturance is lopped of. Those who lopped it are rendered invisible. What is rendered visible is the shocking effect of their acts on the woman's body. It is the distance between the invisible and visible that is intriguing. The artistic project invites a confession of guilt and, hopefully, repentance and retribution on the part of gazers.

Today, it is cheering to note that feminism as a discourse which challenges the view that man is "the One" and woman his "other" is slowly but steadily gaining a stable location in the mainstream

discourses of the social sciences and the humanities. Women's Studies is now a legitimate area of study as Asian Studies or American Studies. It is also no longer the private preserve of women who are struggling to problematize gender for women's empowerment and the closing of the gender gap. Men are also entering the field. This is a welcome development to me. I do believe in inclusion rather than exclusion, because it is only when the female perspective is recognized that male perspective can likewise be addressed. I concur with the opinion of James Clifford expressed in the introduction to "Writing Culture", a pioneering work on the narrative and representation in the new "postmodernism" in anthropology, "every version of the other, wherever found, is also the construction of the "self".¹⁴ Indeed, as I viewed the male artists' gaze of their "other" inscribed in their artistic production, I cannot help but recall to mind the following quotation:

If women's experience has been significantly excluded from ethnographic accounts, the recognition of this absence, and its correction in many recent studies, now highlights the fact that men's experience is itself largely unstudied.¹⁵

ENDNOTES

¹An earlier version of this paper was presented in the class of "Art Criticism" (Art Studies 255, 2nd Semester 2000-2001) at the University of the Philippines. I would like to thank Prof. Flaudette May V. Datuin for her inspiring comments.

²Anthony Seeger. 1987. *Why Suya Sings: Musical Anthropology of an Amazonian People*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³For the history of social realist art in the Philippines, see Alice Guillermo. 1987. *Social Realism in the Philippines*. Manila: ASPHODEL.

⁴Here I am referring to over-time routine at offices and a highly escalated competition for entrance examination at levels of schools. Wives are made to become caretakers for men and children in a family who have no time at all even for their personal matters.

caretakers for men and children in a family who have no time at all even for their personal matters.

⁵I emphasize that this is merely my first impression. The longer I stay in the Philippines, the more I realize the complexity and depth of the country's social problems. Definitely those problems must be taken into account seriously.

⁶The exhibit was presented by the Creative Collective Center, Inc. in cooperation with the Ford Foundation. The curator was Imelda Cajipe-Endaya. It was exhibited at the Cultural Center of the Philippines (February 8 - March 31, 2001), as well as in Lipa City (October 16 - November 9, 2000) and Vigan (November 20, 2000 - January 6, 2001). It is significant that the exhibition travelled across the nation. The author viewed the exhibition at CCP.

⁷Irma Lacorte's *Araling Panlipunan sa Mababang Baitang* (2000) is an appeal for the "true liberation of sex" from a lesbian's point of view.

⁸Figure 1 page 217.

⁹Figure 2 page 219.

¹⁰Figure 3 page 223.

¹¹Figure 4 page 225.

¹²Figure 5 page 229.

¹³Figure 6 page 231.

¹⁴James Clifford and George Marcus, eds. 1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1986, p. 23.

¹⁵Op. cit., p. 18.