Asphalt as the eye can see: Taking centerstage as Art Fair Philippines’ special exhibit is “Asphalt,” a rambling installation from sculptor Gabriel Barredo, an intriguing, fantastical folly imbued with the amazing creative and mechanical genius of the artist.

MANILA, Philippines - Asphalt is commonly used to cover streets, fill out potholes and cover fissures. Around 625 BC, this material was already being used in Babylon for building roads. The word has a Greek origin which means “secure” — roughly interpreted as to avert collapse or to thwart a fall. Romans on the other hand changed the Greek’s asphaltos to asphaltus, which is their caulking element for baths and reservoirs.

Interestingly enough, Gabriel Barredo’s kinetic installation commissioned by Art Fair Philippines is titled “Asphalt.” It is 30 feet in length and is composed of a number of elaborate sculptures. Why “Asphalt”?

“Why not?” says Barredo. “I thought of a word that could convey darkness, grime, dirt and detachment all at the same time.”

The installation is a grand production involving light, sound and movement; a tactile performance of mechanical contraptions that is seamlessly choreographed to the rhythm of Barredo’s pulse. Each piece can stand alone; however, as one it is a visual statement to be reckoned with.

Why not, indeed.

“Asphalt” is an allegory on the physical state of this substance. Contingent to the heat it is subjected to, it can either solidify or liquefy. Much like the material it is named after, Barredo’s artwork imbues different states of sentience.

At the onset, one is initially jarred. The senses are bombarded all at the same time. The video projection adds to a seeming xenophobic feel. Rings, chimes, chants, pings and other sounds envelop you. There is a compelling urge to touch the pieces, to pry it open or even to take it apart. The moving sections together with the lighting effects command both focus and attention. Ostensibly, whether by design or suggestion, a faint smell of tar wafts in the air.

However, once the introductory jolt subsides, a different impression is felt. A calm and soothing sense of exploration overtakes you. One notices all the intricate pieces weaved together like a beautifully designed tapestry.

“It took me seven months to finish everything. I worked on different pieces all at the same time. It was an assortment of works in progress,” the artist shares. From food warmers, cheap toys, x-ray images, old photos, glass votives, wires, keys, gears, rubber and a host of found objects, all these found their way into Barredo’s oeuvre. This meditative act of discovering and ascertaining familiar items evolves into a self-reflexive stance.
“I wanted to portray what is genuine, what I see, what I feel. We live in a very different environment from decades ago, yet nothing has changed. We live in a cycle of recurrence. We see the rebirth of evil. The unreal has become real. There are monsters everywhere,” he expounds.

Metaphorically, “Asphalt” provokes this deliberation. Many are lured into the exciting promise that the nefarious side offers. “It sucks us in. We are blinded by the superficial entrapments. It is not that I want to make people sad. The installation is my universal statement on the world’s craziness. We must always question this,” explains Barredo.

Like the humble, dark and gritty material, Barredo’s array of sculptural assemblages pave the way and fortify realizations. Although generally monochromatic, with a splash of color here and there, the complexity of “Asphalt” evolves with every look. From any vantage point that “Asphalt” is viewed, it hits you right at the gut. It induces you to examine its makeup as it redirects the same examination to oneself. Rather than be hypocrites and pretend that everything is fine and dandy, let us be critical.

“There is never-ending agony in this world, yet we are so preoccupied with material things. It is bizarre. There is so much fear. It’s like a piece of Frankenstein lives in all of us, if you think about it,” says Barredo. It is a poetic commentary on our state of affairs; distressing but also eye-opening. The diverse layers, shades and textures portray various sentiments: from anguish, defeat, anxiety and suffering to remorse.

One way to keep us from falling into the same trap is to be conscious. Awareness about our behavior, values, lifestyle, ethics, principles and its effects on the people around us and the world in general is crucial in preventing repetitive acts of damage or devastation. Despite the filth, apathy, grief, disinterest and iniquity that hound mankind, our judicious mindfulness of these will prevent our breakdown.

As Rumi said, “What hurts you, blesses you. Darkness is your candle.” This is the essence of “Asphalt.”

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Art Fair Philippines 2013 held from Feb. 7 to 10 at the 7F and Roof Deck of The Link, Ayala Center, Makati.


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