Rey Paz Contreras: Powerful Voice of the Ethnic

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Photo by Pinggot Zulueta

MANILA, Philippines — Thirty years ago, sculptor Reynato “Rey” Contreras surprised the art scene with his intoxication with ethnic motifs and his insistence to use the pre-historic forms to make unbridled and contemporary comments on Philippine society. His struggles to produce loud-mouthed ethnic characters, supposedly for a modern and debate-oriented audience produced a surprising turn-around: his large wooden ethnic sculptures became the essence of silence, making Contreras a modern master of the ancient center, the real soul and power of Philippine identity.

Contreras is rare in that way among his batch of sociologically, historically and politically conscious artists, a breed that began to emerge in the Philippines in the ‘70s.

“I was surprised to learn that many artists were not as inspired as I was with ethnic-motifs in the ‘70s,” he says. “Many of them wrongly thought that the ethnic motif was for souvenirs (for tourists), for handicraft-type of works, and not for art. I was challenged by this attitude. So I studied how to make ethnic motifs and old symbols gain a contemporary expression -- my true interest.”

Contreras’ psycho-historical approach to understanding a damaged present by looking at an anguished past (the colonial era) and marveling (with romanticism) at how ethnic groups affirmed their own identity even after being colonized, has been a popular option among post-colonial artists.

His constancy in making his series of “sacred land” art, without making apologies for not being a true-blooded ethnic --it’s hard to incorporate this kind of confession in sculpture -- has pushed Contreras, a lowlander, to appropriate the ethnic as his very own. In this kind of assimilation, some questions crop up: Will a true native ask the same questions that Contreras is asking about society?
Does a modern artist need to have an ethnic alter ego to ask questions about his country -- a concern, moreover, that interrogates the future more than the past? Are the authentic ethnic artists doing the same thing that Contreras has been doing with his ethnic-inspired works?

Desperately working on an art that is inspired by memory of a long gone era that he has never even experienced, Contreras is also, ironically looking for liberation from past expressions and forms, the essence of which is consciously recreated with books, research, or anthropological help. In the process, he has morphed into an omni-era and an over-conscious artist whose mind traverses his country’s wide swathe of past, present and future events. This and his predilection for creating
massive ethnic figures result in making his own “contemporary expressions” superfluous because
the figures themselves gain a life of their own; and their silence, the voice of Philippine identity.

“I believe I have succeeded in elevating the ethnic motif in the map of modern art; and my approach
as a viable avenue to resolve the eternal issue of identity crisis among Filipinos,” says Contreras. He
is happy that several groups have organized shows such as RP-Ethnika in 1987, and a group show
of RP Ethnika and the social realists (SR) in 2008. These are proofs that his mind-set has made a
dent on many artists; and his works have taught viewers about alternatives to Western forms.

Old forms intended for modern comments

Implementing his original concept of old forms intended for modern comments, Contreras sculpted
ancient looking masks to depict technocrats, in a show at Galerie Bleu in the ‘80s (towards the end
of the era of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos). “I added big and old weapons underneath the
masks. A common denominator among technocrats is might or power -- thus the old weapons,”
Contreras explains. Could the masks and weapons represent a glorification of power instead? On
the contrary, Contreras says: “It is easy to understand what masks means: may pagkatuso,
nakakainis tingnan, nakakaloko.” In comparison, the technocrats may look benign (mababait), but
could actually be very nasty (pasasalvage ka).”

His “Agrarian Reform,” a show at Galeri Bleu, also in the ‘80s, was a depiction of the evolution of
man and his weapons. “Nakapila sila, parang yung litrato tungkol sa Darwin’s evolution of man)
But what I wanted to show was the evolution of man’s weapons, their tools of production; from the
past to the present, they are for their self defense,” explains Contreras.

In “Noise Barrage,” a show at Manila’s Intramuros in the ‘80s, Contreras made sculptural pieces
that could reproduce sound. His big wooden xylophone was the show’s centerpiece. Instead of
creating political-anger, these pieces fascinated many musically-minded viewers. Lucrecia Kasilag,
former chairman of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) asked for the reproduction of one
big wooden xylophone, for the CPP.

In 1987, Contreras was guest artist of the Filipino community that sponsored an art festival in
Canada. Staying there for six months, he finished more than life-size wall pieces that depicted
participants of Ati-Atihan, a tribal dance held by soot-covered Aklanons with colorful costumes and
weapons in central Philippines in January. The upper part of the wall pieces represented the heads
of the Atis; the lower part was covered with abaca (hemp), portraying the indigenous costumes used
in the festivity.

The Ati-Atihan festivity celebrates a land settlement in the 13th century between invading Malay
settlers from Borneo and the local Atis of Panay The festivity was appropriated by the Spanish
colonials in the 16th century. It has been observed as a religious procession ever since, and has
become a tourist attraction.

“I explained my works to our compatriots in Canada, saying that even before the Spanish colonials
came to subjugate us in the 16th century, we had an established civilization, one that included peace
pacts like the Ati-Atihan,” explains Contreras.

His 1987 show included his favorite wooden xylophone, but added long horns underneath the piece.
He also included a totem pole to symbolize the hanging coffins, used by ethnic groups in the
Cordilleras in northern Luzon. “Instead of presenting a literally hanging coffin, it was easier to
make a totem pole (they can stand alone, no need to hung them) to represent the northern
Cordillera’s culture of respecting the dead,” says Contreras.

He put up his own gallery at SM Megamall on EDSA’s Mandaluyong in 1992.
But he continued holding art exhibits outside of his gallery, one of which was entitled “(recycle) Bote, Bakal (glass and iron)”, held at Alliance Francaise’s art gallery in 1997. In this show, Contreras installed a dama juana (a transparent pear-shaped jar), with the sculpted face of a policeman on its lid. The jar stood on wooden boots and was filled with coins and peso bills -- quite a literal depiction of greed, says the artist.

Reyna ng Kusina depicted a woman’s bust made from an old earthen stove. An antique cooking utensil adorned her hair; a string of spoons and fork, her necklace; well crafted cooking materials, her earrings; and an antique broom, her shawl. Refusing to call it a feminist work, Conteras says, “It’s about my distaste for any form of class domination.”

**Also furniture maker**

While he made all these intriguing art works, the artist’s “bread and butter” remained making massive looking sculpted molave furniture. Contreras’ utilitarian art has found many clients, including religious groups.

**Religious works and new sculpture**

One of his famous religious works, “Inay Maria ang Magnificat”, commissioned by Kairos Philippines, a charismatic Catholic group, shows a local Virgin Mary, carved in molave, who is adorned with different types of Philippine ethnic costumes.

His 21 feet tall and three legged “Trees”, symbolic of the Holy Trinity, made of steel and installed at Fort Bonifacio in suburban Taguig in 1997, is a transition piece because it aspires for “power”.

**Stubborn streak**

The social-minded Contreras has another stubborn streak: to promote collective sculpture-making in contrast with the individualistic form of art production in Metro Manila. When he decided to become an artist in the ‘70s, he started encouraging everyone, especially poor people and victims of disasters to become sculptors.

“I think my workshop near the railway along Tondo’s Tayuman where I source discarded molave together with group of mang-uukit who belong to Daang Bakal Community has formed families of sculptors and craftsmen,” boasts Contreras. “After the railway’s widening project in 2010, many of them left to spread the spirit of pang-uukit to other families in other places,” says Contreras.

Students used to flock to his studio, but this was ended when a railway-widening project put a crimp on his space.

With the help of sponsoring companies, Contreras brought sculpting tools and trained farmers in Nueva Ecija, 1980; poor people in Jala-Jala, Rizal, 1990; Capitol Estate in suburban Quezon City, 1993 and 1995; Capiz, 1997; Malasique, Dagupan, 1999; storm-devastated Nakar, Quezon, 2004; and Santiago, Isabela in 2006.

To compare, universities that offer a degree in Bachelor of Fine Arts hardly produce more than 10 good sculptors in 20 years, he says.

Contreras believes that a community of artists can help nurture artistic activity: “Ang mga artists dapat magkakasama, sa paggawa at sa pagisip para ang handicap ng tumatandang artist ay nacompensate ng batang artist. Ang tumatandang artist, nakakagawa pa rin ang kanyang mata, at pag may sistema ng apprenticeship, makakagawa pa rin siya ng magagandang trabaho.”
“Inherent sa Pilipino ang panlililok. The only way to propagate that spirit is through collective art production,” he adds.

Although he underwent a triple heart bypass last September, Contreras says, “I am regaining my strength. I am now doing a post-operation production. If given a chance, I will aim for a higher level of quality work.”

Contreras was a graduate of accounting and commerce at the Manuel Luis Quezon University. His training in sculpture began at the Eulogio Rodriguez School of Arts and Trade at Manila’s Nagtahan. He is married to writer-sculptor and “feminist-wife” Estrella “Tala” Isla, with whom he has two children: Marinel, an AB Literature and management-business graduate who now manages the family-owned art gallery; and Karlota, an anthropology and history graduate, and museum director of the art gallery of East Tennessee State University.

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