12 Photography

By ZHuang WUBIN

FOR YEARS, Alex Baluyut (b. 1956; Pao, Manila) has taken the older Sonny Yabao (b. 1943, Visayas) to task for his intermittent association with the Marcoses administration (1965-1986). In defence, Yabao argues that it was then the only game in town. Most of the leading artists and photographers at that time must have somehow earned money from the government, unless you went up and hid in the mountains, says Yabao. “Some of us would receive commissions to shoot a modern farm in the north. You knew it was a Marcos project. The images were meant to promote our country abroad. You would shoot it, earn some money and get the chance to travel. Should you be called a propagandist just for doing so?”

But Alex Baluyut would have none of that. If there is anyone in the Philippines with the credibility to challenge Yabao, it has to be Baluyut, who stood firm and worked underground during the Marcos era. Despite their obvious differences, Yabao and Baluyut remain the cornerstone of Philippine documentary photography in terms of their influence, photographic approaches and the subject matters that they tackle. Many of the younger Filipino photographers, either consciously or otherwise, continue to tread in the shadows of Yabao and Baluyut. They are the Yin and Yang of Philippine photography.

Growing up in a small town in the Visayas, Yabao enjoyed literature and spent time reading the likes of Albert Camus, Joseph Conrad and most notably, Gabriel García Márquez. In college, Yabao pursued a diploma in English but eventually dropped out. He served as its chief photographer in 1986, he moved to Manila and found a job in a small commercial studio, developing negatives and making prints. Acquiring a hands-on knowledge of photography, he soon gravitated towards journalism to make a living. Like many photographers then, Life magazine was his bible. But it was the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson that made a lasting impression.

In 1973, after the declaration of the Martial Law, Yabao joined the Bureau of National and Foreign Information. He served as its chief photographer for two years. That stint turned him into a propagandist in the eyes of Baluyut. After the EDSA Revolution in 1986, Yabao worked as the photo editor at the newspaper Philippine Newsday before becoming a freelance photographer.

His early work was more immediate, like The Flight of Payatas (1997-98), in which he trained his viewpoint on the largest dumpsite in Metro Manila. With Memory of Dates (1998-1999), Yabao started evolving.

The work examines the issue of cultural loss experienced by the native peoples at Nueva Vizcaya, Coron and Mount Apo in the face of encroaching state and commercial interests. This erosion of traditional cultures is rooted in the loss of ancestral land. Not only is it a source of sustenance, ancestral land provides the context to the languages and rituals of these indigenous groups. The late 1990s coincided with a period of introspection in Yabao’s life. He started questioning his understanding of documentary photography, which he felt was too limiting. He found pure journalism to be somewhat meaningless because “what you are is only what you will ever get.”

The driving force for change came partly from his earlier interest in literature. In the novels of Gabriel Marquez, he found something parallel to the idea of the decisive moment coined by Cartier-Bresson, who was associated with the surrealistic. Writing from images in his mind, the magic realism of Marquez can also be considered an offshoot of that art movement. What Yabao strives for in his current photographic practice is to combine social commentary and magic realism in a juxtaposition of reality and fantasy.

He elaborates further: “What should be examined is the possibility of pulling out photographs that are more than mere ‘documents’. What I’m looking for are ‘normal’ situations that hint at something else. You can’t set up the picture has the quality of a snapshot, even though it is obvious that Yabao had waited for the visual elements to fall in place. The ‘mystery’ of the shot lies in the man seated behind two other villagers in the foreground. He seems utterly disconnected from the point of interest that had occurred beyond the photographic frame, something that had caught the attention of everyone else in the image. More than anything else, the picture leaves its viewers perturbed and curious.

In a way, it is possible to understand Yabao’s urge to evolve as something that is informed by his inclination towards art rather than journalism. As he slips into his retirement years, the burden of raising a family is no longer a concern. He says he will die a poor man, Yabao is also at a stage of his life where he does not want to please the clients anymore. He speaks of his desire to do projects of his own—to be like an artist.

‘As an artist, you do not retire. You keep doing your craft. It’s not a career but a way-of-life,’ says Yabao.

A few years back, he started Villagers (2006-), which is, in a way, an extension of Memory of Dates. By then, he had given up on analogue photography. Around 2005, while shooting an assignment, he realised he could not afford to buy film anymore. Digital technology has given him the possibility of concentrating on the process of making images without worrying about the cost of film. However, he is dependent on younger Philippine

The Yin and Yang of Philippine Documentary Photography

Sonny Yabao and Alex Baluyut

Palawan women prepare to disembark and join others in their protest of the takeover of the sacred sandbar by a commercial pearl farm, from Memory of Dates (1998-1999) by Sonny Yabao

Wedding at Payatas, from The Flight of Payatas (1997-98) by Sonny Yabao

Videoke Bar, Natonin, from Villagers (2006-) by Sonny Yabao

Middle-aged Ifugao trying to teach children the native dance, from Villagers (2006-) by Sonny Yabao
photographers to help him ‘process’ his images in Photoshop.

The desire to juxtapose social commentary and magic realism becomes a full-blown obsession in Villagers. Even though he did not grow up in a village, Yabao situates the work on a personal level, calling it a revisiting of an era when life was still simple in the archipelago. It was an era prior to the current phase of rapid globalisation. There was not much to buy and families produced their own food.

At that time, his grandfather owned a farm in the village. Whenever it was the harvesting season, Yabao would visit him and have a happy time there. Growing up in a small town, his parents had a servant class. While keeping an eye on the convenience store, his mother would also cook for students and make dresses. As Yabao recalls these details, it becomes obvious that there is a thread of nostalgia that runs through Villagers. For Baluyut, it was also a unique portrayal of a region beyond aware of Mindanao.”

In 1985, when human rights activist Lenny Limjoco arrived in the country’s second largest island, NPA was waging an insurgency in the north, a less volatile region at that time.

In 1987, a year after the fall of Marcos, Kasama: A Collection of Photographs of the New People’s Army of the Philippines became the first photographic monograph to be given the National Book Award. The accolade meant that Baluyut would always be associated with conflict photography. It is an unnecessary burden.

The years that followed winning the award, Baluyut worked intermittently for different papers and for AP. In the early 1990s, the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), knowing very well that Baluyut would not shirk from any assignment, offered him a grant of around 60,000 pesos to do a story on police brutality in Manila. There is no attempt at heroism in Brother Hood because the scenarios and anecdotes are real. This is not cinema. There is no need for setup. The world, as portrayed in Brother Hood, is one in which nobody could be ‘taken right off the street or be killed like a dog for no reason. His rights are not sacred.’ The climax of Brother Hood arrives in the form of the Manila City Jail riot on 26 November 1993. Prior to that, Baluyut had already shot many incriminating images of the police force. He adds: “The people at PNP had no idea what to expect or what to ask me; ‘Where’s the blood?’”

On that fateful day, he knew in his gut something was amiss. He took more rolls of film and brought along Buena’s camera, which had a flash. When the riot broke out in the evening, Baluyut was ready. As it turned out, inmates Edgardo Caayan and Bienvenido Duang had got hold of a WWII grenade, which had been smuggled into the prison during the Christmas party. With the grenade, they took a baby and deputy warden Edgardo Calvario, who was chief abuser at the Manila City Jail hostage. In the end, the SWAT team would open fire, killing the inmates and the warden. Baluyut documented the entire standoff and the incident provided closure to the book. Published by PCIJ in 1995, the book was obviously critical of the Manila police force. And yet, it was also sympathetic to the trying conditions that the cops had to battle with a daily basis. It is a powerful body of work precisely due to the balance that Yabao had achieved in the end. The book registered record sales and won Baluyut his second National Book Award that very year.

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Kasama: a Collection of Photographs of the New People’s Army of the Philippines

Photographs of the New People’s Army of the Philippines quickly took shape. To add to Baluyut’s work in 1981, Limjoco photographed the NPA in the north, a less volatile region at that time.

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In 1997, Baluyut's third body of work, set in the protected areas of Mindanao, a region that has remained close at heart since his work on the NPA. However, violence was still simmering when Baluyut revisited the restive region. But the focus of Gikan sa Area is on the lives and the vanishing cultures of the indigenous groups. The nature of the work is ethnographic, not unlike that of Yabao’s Memory of Dances or Villagers. For Baluyut, it was also a getaway from conflict reporting. And he would try his hands on colour photography on the last trip that he made for the project. The result is an intimate portrayal of a region beyond the headlines of violence. With the work, he has come full circle in his association with Mindanao.

FOOT NOTES
1 Sonny Yabao, interview by author, Manila, the Philippines, May 22, 2009.
2 Sonny Yabao, e-mail message to author, July 30, 2010.
3 Yabao, May 22.
4 Cristina Luisa Sevilla, The Unanswerable Questions of Alex Baluyut, Photographs of the New People’s Army of the Philippines,

At present, his former association with Mindanao. Even though he did not grow up in a village, Yabao situates the work on a personal level, calling it a revisiting of an era when life was still simple in the archipelago. It was an era prior to the current phase of rapid globalisation. There was not much to buy and families produced their own food.

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