

The Aquilizans Turn Colonialist Objects Into Colorful Art

BY RYAN LEE WONG

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Transformer IV (Bartolina), 2010

Courtesy Sundaram Tagore Gallery

A shiny, stainless-steel Jeep juts out diagonally from the back corner of the Sundaram Tagore gallery. Its heavily embossed body sparkles with a motley assortment of words and symbols. "In God We Trust" is stamped in bold letters above the windshield (also the work's title); tattoos from the bodies of the incarcerated – a sacred heart with thorns, a pair of dice, flames, portraits of loved ones – adorn the doors and seat-backs. Nearby, three ornamented car grilles are mounted on the wall, their headlights on.

For their first solo show in New York, the artist couple Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan apply a light touch to objects of colonialism and violence, turning them gaudy, playful, and touching. The Jeep is one of these: When the U.S. military left the Philippines at the end of World War II, it discarded scores of the military vehicles. Reeling from the brutal war and in need of all available resources, Filipinos repainted them in bright colors and retrofitted them as public transportation. This vehicle, the Jeepney, became a quintessential symbol of the postcolonial Philippines.

It also serves as a signature element in the work of the Aquilizans, who first showed their take on the Jeepney at the 2003 Venice Biennale. In 2006, the Aquilizans moved their family from the Philippines to Brisbane, Australia, to escape the poverty and systemic corruption of their home country. Rooted in their lived experience, their artwork plays with the aesthetics of nationhood and survival. The Aquilizans invite collaboration and often deploy multiple media to make those concepts legible. They've sketched and sculpted vertical shantytowns in their "Habitation" and "Dwelling" series, and made assemblages out of cardboard, sweaters, blankets, and other used personal belongings.

At Tagore gallery, the Aquilizans invite visitors to try on one of the 59 crowns made out of old tin cans in their 2014 series "Commonwealth: Project Another Country." The bright primary colors of the original packaging are just visible in the cut, twisted forms. The cans bring to mind industrialization, pragmatism, war rations. For more than three centuries, the Philippines was ruled by the Spanish Empire; the crowns might also be read as a subversion of that royal history, the bootleg democratization of a mighty symbol. Like El Anatsui's shimmering curtains of bottle tops, the crowns make something transcendent out of the discarded and everyday.

In the sculpture *Left Wing Albay* (2016), the Aquilizans create a new icon out of found materials. From afar, it looks like a gray-black feathery wing; up close, it reveals itself to be composed of delicately placed sickles. The Aquilizans are in the process of traveling around Southeast Asia asking farmers and blacksmiths to create more sickles for a series of these sculptures. An adjacent video shows the process of two men crafting the tool: It's a social process, almost musical, as they take turns hammering the red-hot metal.

These works are accompanied by charcoal portraits of workers carrying sickles. The sensitive drawings capture the world of these men: their rough, veined hands, wrinkled faces, and the practical clothes that shield them from the sun. But rather than brandishing their tools, they grip them in front of their bodies, like they might a flag, or a flower. This multimedia meditation gives new life to a classic, even clichéd, communist symbol. In the

hands of the Aquilizans, the sickles become enigmatic: Are they rendered useless and aestheticized, or held in a way that suggests collective power?

Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan: 'In God We Trust: Project Another Country'

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Through November 12