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In conversation with contemporary art's Street Miner | The Artling

Sarah-Tabea Sammel

'Street Mining: Contemporary Art from the Philippines' features the works of Poklong Anading, Louie Cordero, Victor Balanon, Nona Garcia, Kawayan de Guia, Mm Yu, and the collective 'Broke'. The show runs at Sundaram Tagore Gallery from 20 January to 2 March 2018 and has been guest-curated by 'Broke' co-founder Gary Ross Pastrana.

I am meeting Gary for a conversation about the exhibition, to view the works together, and to exchange thoughts about contemporary Filipino artists. I enter 'Street Mining' to find the inviting space of Sundaram Tagore hosting various qualities of movement in thoughts, ideas, and perceptual offerings that are all bound together by the curiosity of exploring space and life – between viewer, artist, and the world, between the organic and the engineered, and between urbanity and our conception of it. 'Street Mining' is an observation of modern life in the Philippines, and a cruise via which to explore observation as a personal and social value as well as transferable skill and artistic craft.

The pieces include Anading's 'Bandilang Basahan', a tent made of street collected rags with a screen placed underneath, showing a video of the artist retrieving his materials from the streets of Manila, installations of billboard sign miniatures by Broke, oppositions in abstract and photo-realistic nature documentation by Bandalon, paintings, photography, installations, and collage material by Yu, de Guia, Garcia, and Codero.

Gary and I begin our walk through the gallery, sit down, keep moving. The space of the exhibition has become our street corner and promenade.



untitled (Divisible Cities no 6) by Victor Balanon, 2017, ink on

canvas

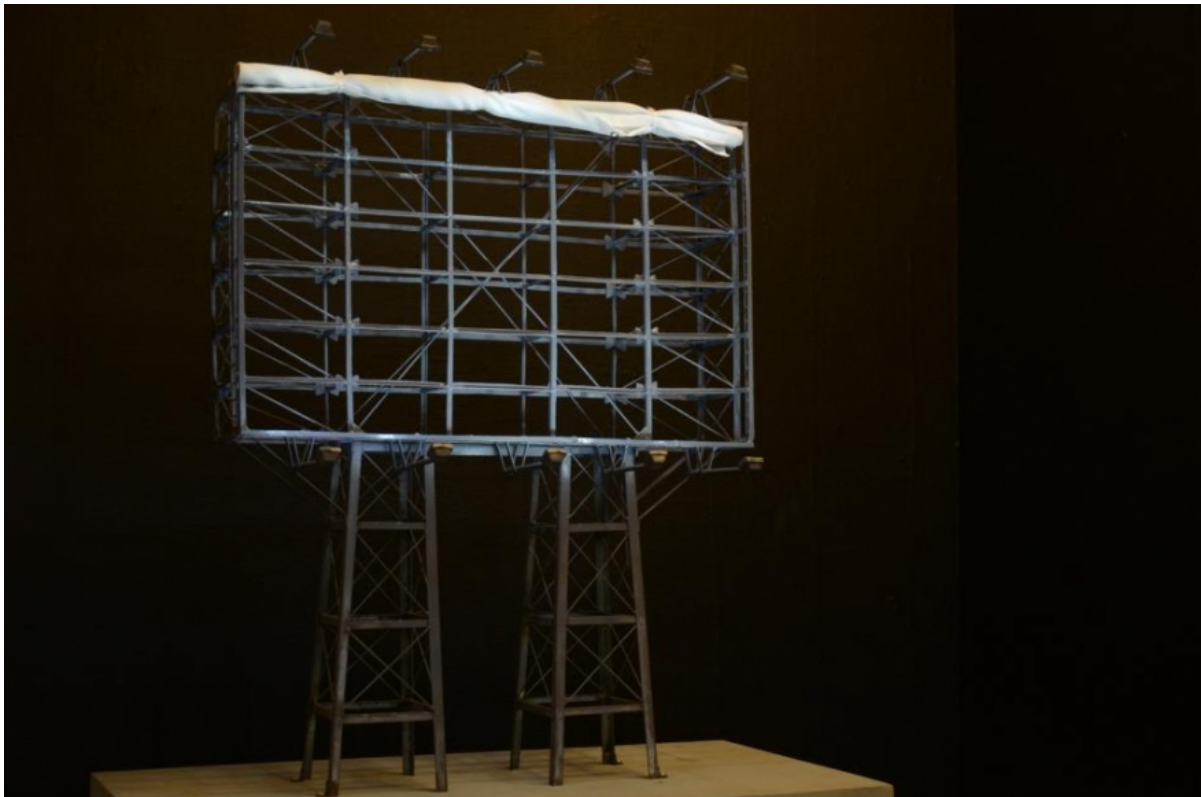
Sarah-Tabea Sammel (STS) How has your curational practice started?

Gary Ross Pastrana (GRP) I don't really see myself as a professional, academic curator. I'm primarily an artist, who from time to time organizes exhibitions, mostly involving my peers, friends, and more recently young artists whose works I like. In 2004, I cofounded an art space ('Future Prospects') with two other people involved in this show, Louie Cordero and Cocoy Lumbao, in a row of run-down shoe stores, where we actually first met Jeremy Guiab, co-funder of Broke. After Future Prospects closed, I started receiving invitations to organize shows for other galleries and exhibition spaces.

I think from the artists' perspectives, it is a matter of abstracting something from the city, from the streets, their surroundings, maybe from life, and then making sense of this particular detail by making something out of it.

Broke's work includes three metal constructions, referring to the frames of billboards; steel skeletons in miniature. All of them are illuminated by tiny LEDs, casting dramatic shadows of constructive, rectangular, layered shadows on the gallery walls. But one sculpture is missing the lamps. When I wonder about this, Gary smiles.

GRP They are ubiquitously seen across Metro Manila, on top of buildings, near flyovers and bridges, and we have three of them in the exhibition. We normally see them covered with tarpaulin-printed advertisements, which are removed whenever there is a strong storm warning. With the metal frameworks revealed, one will see the spontaneous and unstandardized manner in which these things are made, which is kind of scary, humorous and indicative of Manila all together. We first showed this in 2010/2011, and I think this one [without LEDs] just gave up... And it's by Broke. (laughs)



'Signals III' by Broke Collective, 2012 -2017, metal, paint, fabric, concrete, LED lights

STS Frames and constructions seem to appear as key subjects of

the exhibition. Do you see them addressed between singularity and plurality?

GRP I think from the artists' perspectives, it is a matter of abstracting something from the city, from the streets, their surroundings, maybe from life, and then making sense of this particular detail by making something out of it. Like in Poklong's case, with these rags that he collects around the city. From gathering, washing and later classifying them into categories (multi-colored, white, striped, etc), treating this throw-away thing like a naturalist would a certain insect family or a newly discovered genus of plants. This is something that I appreciate in their practice and I thought it would make sense to bring pieces from these artists together, and hopefully create a kind of narrative when taken as a whole. I'm not very theoretical in my approach, I'm more instinctive, and I tend to arrange and layout exhibitions based on how the works feel in the given space.

STS What's your gut feeling with this exhibition?

- As I ask the question, we marvel at the entrance piece of the exhibition, a giant hand sculpture made of, seemingly, huge rusty nails. It raises its middle finger. Next to it, an abstract video installation of trees in the city, and around the corner, a billboard installation; with LED's.

GRP I just began with an inkling who's works might work well together, which I later developed into creating a kind of overall flow

within the space. When you enter, you see that “welcome” sculpture (chuckles) then you see this three-channel video work with the last screen showing an abstracted cityscape, which then leads to the first billboard frame, which to me also refers to the city. In the beginning [of the exhibition], it is quite monochromatic with basic elements like wood, rust, and metal and then it slowly transitions to colour. But in all the works, even in the colored ones, there is still an element of grime, of earth or mud. I like this feeling of roughness and greasiness that permeates everything.



'In the belief that' by Mm Yu, 2006 – 2015, 22 framed prints on wood

We pass to Yu's photography installation of frame-within-frame compositions, resembling the arrangement of altar pieces in street scenarios.

STS Would you say this piece addresses again the frame, and talks about objects as icons?

GRP Absolutely, and the artist doesn't arrange the items in the photographs, she goes around the city and finds them as they are, her input is primarily choosing how to frame and compose these elements in each shot, and later presenting a selection of the photos together as a work. I would say that Mm is also quite instinctive in her approach. I'm sure she would shy away from explaining her practice in an academic way, but I know that when she sees something, she immediately knows if it can be an artwork. She has that instinct.

I'm partial to a slightly more open-ended approach, something that I feel that the artists here have shown. While the context and backdrop of everything is undeniably rooted in the Philippines and Manila to an extent, I believe it is not in any way limited by it.

STS What is the difference between art that is a documentation and an observation, aside its fictional or actual composition, and art that is a criticism or that interferes?

GRP Sometimes I feel that certain artworks are too direct or

one-dimensional, in that the artists who made the work know too well what the work is meant to do, what effect it would have on others, and even what the audience should take away from it. [Poklong's] piece is made of rags (trapo) that people sell on the streets of Manila. Drivers would buy them to clean their hands, the wheels of their jeepneys, etc, and then they will just casually toss them out the window. What I particularly like is that there is no obvious attempt at making a commentary about certain urban issues, like thrash management, throw-away culture or pollution. His personal opinion on the matter is not overtly stated in the piece. You can draw your own conclusions as a viewer, with no prescription on how to feel about the piece, the drivers who use them, or even Manila, where this is all taking place. Victor Balanon's ink on canvas shows a flyover placed inside a garden. From what I know, I assume the final image is taken from at least two different scenarios that he collapsed into a single image. I'm partial to a slightly more open-ended approach, something that I feel that the artists here have shown. While the context and backdrop of everything is undeniably rooted in the Philippines and Manila to an extent, I believe it is not in any way limited by it. Their practice may have been developed in the Philippines, but it can now be pursued anywhere and elsewhere.



'Nature of Currency' by Kawayan de Guia, 2017, mixed media collage

As we walk, Gary remarks on a development in contemporary art, which he observes with concern. He is worried about artists using the voice of national criticism to position themselves on the biennale circuit or the art market, especially in the West. He considers this both a trend among curators, looking for meaningful, political work, and among artists from developing nations, who might identify this as a trend of demand, and pursue work that's critical of their own country or people not for the sake of its meaning, but for the sake of exposure.

What I take away from his thought is that the only recipe to navigate and prevent a situation like this from happening might be to meet both the eagerness of curators and the purpose of artists with

mutual understanding and appreciation for the making of meaning across and through different themes and expositions of persona and portfolio.

STS Do you think a certain quality of transferability is important for today's Filipino artists, beyond the borders of the Philippines, and regarding conceptions of identity?

GRP I'm not really sure, maybe in this case, yes? What I can say in the name of Broke, and someone who observes design, is that we still dream for the day when one no longer needs to refer to or quote the Philippine flag or Rizal, et al in one's work for it to be Filipino.

1977 Philippines-born Gary Ross Pastrana is, amongst other achievements and projects, recipient of the Thirteen Artist Award 2006, participant in Pulse New York and Miami 2010/2011, country representative for the 2012 Triennial 'The Ungovernables', New Museum, New York, and works as an artist and curator internationally.

More information on the exhibition can be found [here](#).

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