

Santiago Bose: Magic, humour and cultural resistance.

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Santiago grew up amidst the conflicts and contradictions of two cultures. As a child at night he would cocoon himself in his blankets with his transistor radio, listening to Radio America being beamed from the top of the next ridge of the Cordillera massif, from Camp John Hay, where American servicemen took their R and R from the lowland heat.

Beyond the pollution of traffic and the too-rapid growth of industrialisation Baguio is still a city of pine forests and flowers where mists swirl and earthquakes rumble and threaten. The Baguio markets are abundant with local produce – with fruit and vegetables, fish and meat and honey and flowers. And in between and beyond the stalls wander the amulet sellers and the fortune-tellers and faith healers for which this city has become renowned.

Popular local parlance describes its own process of colonisation by Spain and then America as tantamount to spending 400 years in a monastery followed by 100 years in Hollywood. The Filipinos treat their ongoing colonisation by a globalised economy equally lightly – the one-liners on T-shirts may be the most cryptic in the world. And the most self-mocking. Yet the processes of colonisation have failed to erode what Santiago would frequently describe as the 'hidden histories' that erupt where you least expected – just like the tremors and eruptions of the earth's crust that are felt right across that scatter of islands. Santi would search across these islands for traces of forms and rituals and traditions that surround the *anting-anting* – the magic amulets that are employed by all Filipinos to ward off evil and to seek better ends. Remnants from a pre-Christian past, these amulets and traditions survived being outlawed by the Jesuits, went underground, and reappeared in new guises, as hybrid half-breeds all the better equipped to deal with the savagery of civilisation.

Later in his life Santi would describe himself as 'a born-again pagan' – as someone who was committed to the resurrection of the past as a way of showing how and where Filipino culture had survived intact. Metamorphosed, but idiosyncratic and intact. *Anting-anting* can still be found throughout the Philippines. In the heart of Manila, outside in the chaos of streets and lanes that surround Quiapo Church where

the much venerated Black Madonna is kept, there amidst the clusters of women selling magic potions, herbs and amulets, little red wax votive candles in the shape of men and women can be purchased to be lit in the church. These particularly Filipino effigies are among the plethora of evidence that bears witness to the particularly Filipino flavour of the Catholicism that is practiced there. Santiago's interest in magic was both academic and personal – his own considerable talents as an amateur magician were no doubt spawned during his boyhood days in Baguio, where his uncle supported a local sect headed by a leader unambiguously self-titled 'Maestro'. He would recall how the magic symbols of the sect, the precision of their rituals, the attention given to the way certain objects were used, all had a particular seduction that was intensified by a certain furtiveness that surrounded their practices.

He remembered also that the secrecy surrounding the activities of the cult and the services they offered was a means of warding off the critical disclaimers of many other members of the community in a small city that was striving to shrug off certain vestiges of local life in its efforts to modernise. At the time, even as a child, he was aware that such practices were looked down on by many educated or Christianised people as evidence of the residue of a pre-Hispanic past. What he didn't know then was that such cults were common among lower class Filipinos; that they were a means by which communities had reinstated local values and beliefs into imposed codes. As a mature artist Santi frequently made reference to these cults in his installations and paintings, using them as examples of Filipino resistance to processes of religious imperialism.

And yet the American air-waves had their own appeal, and he was filled with a curiosity about the US despite his growing sense of irony of the gulf that separated the two cultures. In the late 1950s, when Santi was growing up, Camp John Hay was a sprawling, manicured country resort featuring state of the art cabins, a golf course, restaurant, R and R facilities and... a pet cemetery. Santi took an irreverent joy in strolling among the crumbling tombstones of the cemetery long after the base had closed.



Santiago Bose, *Ayos Ba (It is Alright)*, 2000, mixed media on canvas, 63 x 100cm. Collection: John Batten, Courtesy John Batten Gallery, Hong Kong.

The tombstones featured all the worst excesses of Disney recreated in highly coloured concrete by artisans who misinterpreted them according to local tendencies. They marked the sites of deceased coveted pooches in a town renowned for dog-eating. Such ironies provided another rich vein in Santi's art and life – a deliciously irreverent humour. This humour was also a means of keeping the worst horrors of an unequal world at bay. And it was one that helped him keep the influences of the long years he later spent in New York in perspective. During this time his critical responses to the vast gulf that separated the First World from the Third World were refined and developed. To Santi's way of thinking, it was so painful it *had* to be funny. He lived his world torn between two pulls – his love for a country that he also described as exhibiting a 'parochial narrow mindedness' and the lure of a centre that seemed less appealing, less rewarding, the closer you got to knowing it.

On his first trip to the US in 1980 he had been given a book called *America's in the Heart* by Carlos Bulosan, one of the first union organisers for the agricultural workers in California and Hawaii in the 1920s. The book described the plight of first wave Filipino immigrants to the US, and at the time it provided him with an introduction for understanding the experiences of displacement which later forged the subject matter for many of his paintings.

The deepest influences on his work came from his experiences of folk art practices in his own country. Santi's first professional exhibition opening in Manila in 1972 coincided with the announcement of martial law. After that exhibition he was listed among those artists and intellectuals who were blacklisted by the Marcos government, and who were therefore banned from leaving the country. As a consequence his plans to study overseas were thwarted. Instead, he decided to use the time for another kind of research, and began to plan a number of trips that would take him across the Philippines to a range of regions where he could study the local output from communities. According to Santi, it was during this time that he first came to the realisation that many of the crafts practices and expressions that had grown from responses to local fiestas and celebrations were the Filipino art forms most deeply rooted in a sense of a particular place. Because they had grown from the needs of individuals and communities to make sense of their relationship to that place, they resonated

with an urgency that had withstood and even transformed the influences of colonisation.

These travels reinforced his growing conviction about the necessity of continuing a tradition of contemporary art that was meaningful to Filipino audiences. He had long been skeptical about the commonly held conviction among so many aspiring modernists that Philippine artists were merely second rate copyists of western ideas, and some of the forms and expressions he came across during these travels presented him with possible vehicles from which to challenge such assumptions. These included not only local forms and traditions but also indigenous materials that were inexpensive and offered new possibilities for expression. However, after martial law Santi's curiosity about other people and places continued, and the self-invented *Cultural Drifter* travelled widely and returned to Baguio throughout his career. No matter where he was, part of his mind and a good percentage of his phone bill would be spent on connecting with his community in Baguio, where his political convictions about a range of issues – the environment, the plight of indigenous people and the value of the visual arts to local communities – continued to motivate a large part of his practice.

His commitment to such values was instrumental in the foundation of the Baguio Arts Guild. For many years he led the BAG as its president and chief mentor, and in those roles did everything including launching international arts festivals. Santi's commitment to local communities was central to the international span and focus of his art. He lived his life from feast to famine, from international 'gigs' and residencies supported by wealthy international galleries and events, to organising soup kitchens for earthquake victims, to mobilising support for local treeplanting ceremonies. This span provided the spine of his career as an artist – one whose whole life was devoted to his belief that art, magic and humour were the best ingredients to ensure cultural survival in communities downtrodden by the excesses of a global economy.

The works in this exhibition bear traces of these convictions. *Diary of a Cultural Drifter* is an assemblage salvaged from the institutional garbage dump on the campus at the University of the Southern Cross, Lismore, where he worked as artist in residence for four months in 1994. This work reflects Santi's fascination with the Aboriginal cultures of Australia, and

also belies some of the contradictions that are spawned in the wake of cultural crossovers. Although some critics may protest that Santi's ventures into understanding such issues in a country that was partly adopted by him were ill informed, Santi welcomed such irregularities with an infectious irreverence. The success of other freeloaders and invaders, such as the cane toad, he would argue, was undeniable despite the horror that such introduced species seemed to attract.

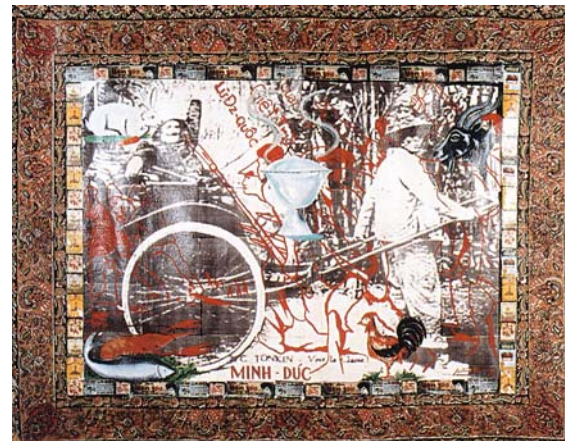
The other work was completed after a period of almost three months we spent together in Hanoi, Vietnam, in 2000. The cheap carpet frames a tourist icon of another kind: a Vietnamese trishaw driver pulling a passenger. Although the original is an historical image, similar images of colonialism can still be seen every day in the streets of Hanoi. They form an aspect of the tourist trade: the marketing of an essence of elsewhere, of otherness, of a place that lies outside the friction of social, cultural and political upheaval. Yet Santi overlays this image, of tourist icon from one notion of elsewhere coagulated on top of another notion of elsewhere (the *Persian rug*) with yet another layer of signs and symbols – ones that refuse to fit, ones that warn of other, more dire outcomes. The figures weave in and out, and ultimately the viewer is led into a world that seems infected by impossible spaces and hallucinogenic possibilities.

And those hallucinogenic possibilities too were part of Santi's resistance. For in the end he found the inequalities and injustices of the global value systems to be more and more of an effort to bridge. The everyday realities for artists making art in the Third World – the poor nutrition, inadequate health systems, over-priced medication – make it all that much more difficult. And these are things that should be borne in mind when viewing art production from elsewhere. No matter how white those gallery walls may seem, no matter how seamlessly they may seem to hold all the assembled work together in accord, their sites of production say everything about the meaning of the work. For in the end, there is no such thing as a level playing field. Never was. Never will be. And art that bears witness to this should be held all the more valuable.

The extent to which Santiago Bose's art has influenced the development of contemporary art in the Philippines has yet to be fully fathomed. His introduction of indigenous materials, his mining of Filipino iconography, his re-writing of Filipino history, his commitment to indigenous forms and practices, his bringing together of new media – such as performance, video and installation – with older forms such as rituals, festival paraphernalia and altarpieces – have made a rich and deep contribution to contemporary art practice not only in the Philippines but also abroad. And along with art practice there is the legacy of his writings, his presence, his long years of commitment to communities in his home town of Baguio and to other elsewheres where he set down roots. Santi's work wove past histories into the present, and then on into probable and improbable futures. In the face of what often looked like insurmountable odds, he always continued to make art that breathed with the potential for new imaginings.

Santiago Bose passed away on 3 December 2002 in Baguio City.

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Santiago Bose, *Hanoi*, mixed media on carpet, 190 x 234cm. Estate of Bose Family, Manila. Image courtesy John Batten Gallery, Hong Kong.