

ing the body of a woman to the public domain of the city and the representation of both on the cinematic screen. The themes that she portrays are still taboo in the Middle East and although entirely based on fiction they do possess some strong resemblances with reality.

In the work of these four artists, the representation of reality and perception of different realities are based on the possibilities and impossibilities of social, psychological and economic mobility for women that are partly fiction and part fact. These artists examine the themes of roaming and questions related to the construction of femininity and a feminist politics in representation which address the geographic struggles affecting the region but provide alternative journeys towards different forms of emancipation.

Kasibulan and the Parallels Between the Personal and the Collective

IMELDA CAJIPE-ENDAYA

A harassed woman, her patriarch-husband cold and unfeeling, a bored dog – this terracotta tableaux called *Philippine Gothic* Julie Lluch was modeling was a narrative of the gender politics then informing her life. *Bintana ni Ninay*, a woman peering by a sawali window, wind blowing grandmother's torn laces, mother's old crochet, and my curtains, was a reflection of my own isolation as a woman and those before me who had struggled for self-transformation. Mystical albeit sensuous intertwining of foliage and a woman's torso functioned as Anna Fer's visual diary as she confronted her feeling of aloneness amidst caring for home and children. The *baraha* or tarot was Brenda Fajardo's way of ordering her views of woman's role in society, revolution, and history, as she went about her tasks as a teacher. Ida Bugayong was tooling and stitching hide, canvas, and ethnic weaves onto bags, shoes, and belts, even as she questioned her role as artist and provider for a dozen craft workers in her *Garahe* (garage) shop.

Civil society refers to the social framework of everyday life. State ideally refers to a disinterested and humane political framework that regulates and provides direction to human affairs. Isolation, rooted in woman's reproductive biology and social mandate of care-giving—whether in nursing our offspring as in the cases of Julie, Anna, and myself, or in caring for dying parents as in the cases of Ida and Brenda—is our circumstance. In our own art, we are steeped in the situation of woman as a subjugated being apropos husband or father.

Yet fired up by the myth of nation and vision of identity and liberation, our matter-of-fact experiences and day-to-day struggles thrust the course of self-knowledge as pre-requisite to becoming initiators in the historical process. The state's neutral and selfless position ruling over human affairs is a delusion, as the state itself is very much a result of conflicts of social life, not mediating but imposing domination of one class over the rest of society, or of one political power over another, or of male over female. The post-Marcos era witnessed the rise of many forms of popular initiatives then called cause-oriented groups, challenging the supremacy not only of the state but also of political parties.

Recognizing the inequities and insufficiency of both state and most organizations in addressing the woman question, we came together as *Kababaihan sa Sining at Bagong Sibol na Kamalayan* (Women in Art and Emerging Consciousness) or *Kasibulan*, a collective commitment to art practice and exchange that would contribute to our own transformation as women, as Filipinos, and as artists. We lined up our goals: to

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Filipina: Migranteng Manggagawa

KASIBULAN
labanan ng mga Sinong at Bagong Sibol na Kamalayan



provide members with opportunities for creativity, growth, and self-sufficiency; to promote women's arts and crafts; to expand the social, economic, political, and cultural consciousness of women artists and Filipino women in general through the arts; to consciously work for the development of distinct women's expressions in language, symbols, imagery, values, and beliefs; to nurture and sustain sisterhood among its members; and to link its members with the larger community of artists and women's groups here and abroad.

In my work, I was often criticized for being "straight in your face," especially when my works point out root causes existing within the social and political structure. In *Kasibulan's* first five years, we emphasized projects in partnership with NGOs that criticized the conditions in women's work, health,

and overseas labor migration. In its seventh year, members objected that *Kasibulan* was much too outward-looking, leaving behind the inner development of its individual members. We were told that socio-political orientation was becoming a dictate of a few leaders rather than an initiative of its larger membership. What right or effectiveness could middle-class women artists speak for what she was not—DH, Japayuki, or Japina (Domestic Helper, Filipina entertainer in Japan, children of Japanese and Filipina entertainers in Japan)?

Were we confusing art with social work? Did we actually help solve problems of those we purported to benefit with our outreach? Baidy Mendoza (founding member and past president) disagreed about focusing on negativity. She asked, "In so doing, were we not encouraging victimization rather than achieving self-redemption?" Flaudette May Datuin, referring to my work *Hulagpos* cautioned that *Inang Bayan* (Mother Country), so popularly used by male and female artists of the anti-Marcos nationalist movement, was entrapping woman in myth and traditional mold. Yes, the woman in feudal bondage should imaginatively free herself, use fresh modes of resistance, and play more productive roles.

Baidy, Lia Tayag, Myrna Arceo, Charito Bitanga, Cecil de Leon, all avid terracotta practitioners, willed *Kasibulan's* departure from its critical stance and high-profile advocacy. Their concern was to steer a direction of joy and celebration in women's art. Soon most every one of us was fashioning sculpture, jewelry, cups, dishes, and mobiles from clay. Anonymous and childlike verve pervaded its ventures in *luad* (clay) and papier mache. Soon the Princesa Urduja, Maria Makiling, Marcela Marcelo, Marcela Agoncillo, heroines of legend and revelation took shape as charming dolls that injected fun and familiarity into the national centennial celebrations.

Like these moves, the *Bai Art in Craft* exhibit in 2000 was a step toward the interchangeable function of art and craft, as these both meant technical skill, spontaneity, play, consciousness of design, and practical use. Baidy underscores craft's role in shaping us to become true artists instead of art celebrities.

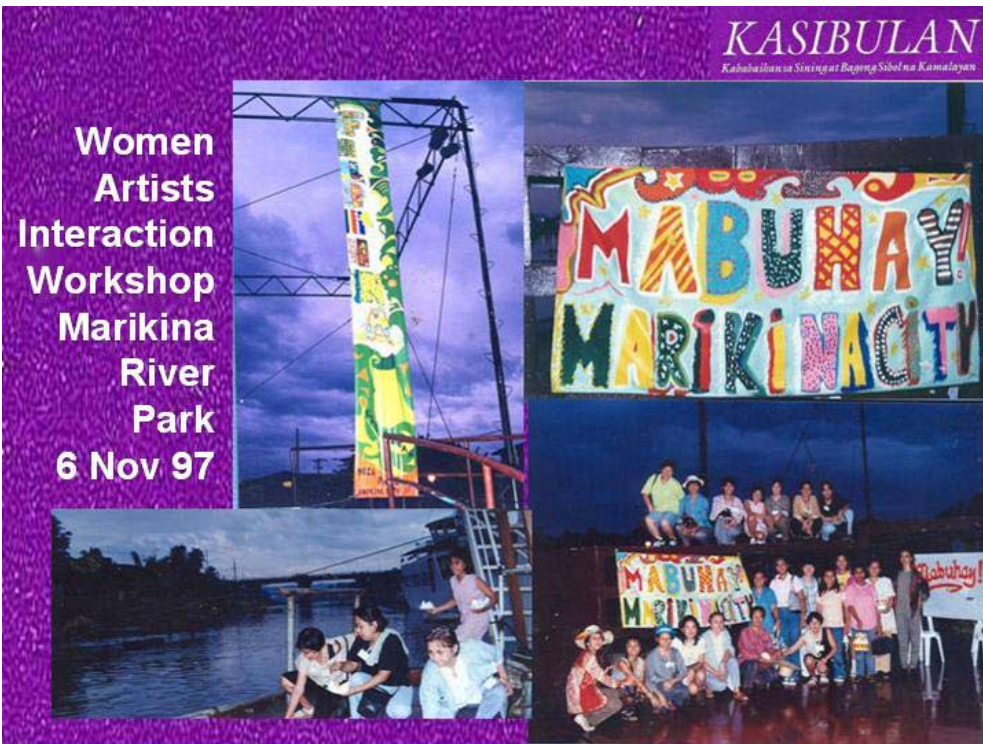
Contradictions will continue to battle within an artist's inner being. Art is my life, my vocation, my meditation, my profession, and my social service. The burdens of such aesthetic attitude become bearable as I take great pleasure in sensually delighting

over the sights, color, and texture of everyday things, magnifying simple situations, even moments of domestic drudgery into imagined social history. Fetish for experimental, accidental nuances waiting for a “voilà” is a reality for any true artist of whatever persuasion. Often, work that spontaneously springs from the subconscious, as one’s spirituality blooms in isolation, is the most successful. My craft is my meditation—a process of centering myself and clarifying the disorder in and around me.

The upside of depicting victimization and root causes is in its provoking a sense of urgency to solve issues. Its downside is that these could be viewed with acquiescence and resignation. My criticism has evolved, as I realize we must celebrate rather than flagellate.

The upside of depicting joy and celebration is that these affirm positive qualities. Its downside is that it could become escapist and illusory. The upside of isolation is that it helps an artist focus and deepen her craft and outlook. Its downside is that one could lose context and dialogue with audience. Thus we see the need to balance one with the other.

In her aloneness, Paz Abad Santos deliriously stitches and knots abaca fibers onto burlap with coconut shells, seeds, and painting. To break her seclusion, she welcomed *Kasibulan* to nest in her home. Her hand-fashioned roof garden of vines, ponds, and hammocks was the monthly setting for us to recreate ourselves and strengthen our ties. Soon, anecdotes, great fun, and laughter substituted the serious fora and artists’ talks we used to have. I thought *Kasibulan* was fast becoming an amity sorority. Though looking back today, Lia defends this period as an effective medicine to *Kasibulan’s* organizational woes. Once Brenda and I chuckled that the group was turning into a “sewing circle.”



In no time, we awakened to the fact that we found ourselves stitching, embroidering, and patching images of ourselves and mementoes of our lives onto rags, shawls, dusters, curtains, and sheets into the collective exhibit *Tahi-Tagning Talambuhay* of 1997. Like the *kambay* cloth of the *babaylan* (the ancient priestess), Fe Mangahas likened our piecing together of tapestries to empowering acts of undoing patriarchal myths.

In no time, Paz and Alma Quinto were literally establishing a trend of stitching and sewing art with Marge, Maria, Aster, Tala, Tita, and the rest. Many remain reluctant about accepting an ideological feminist structure. Yet developing distinct women’s expressions in language, symbols, and imagery within the context of rediscovering indigenous spiritual values proved to be a unifying vision. The confluence of clay, fiber, and textile was inevitable.

Pottery as a function of women’s nourishing role and weaving as a function of her duty to clothe and protect her family have made clay and textile the domain of women, being in their private spaces, while men’s physical prowess hurled them to the public sphere of economic and political conquest. Even if in truth, many women today do half or most of a family’s earning, the woman continues to carry the double

burden of prioritizing her home-keeping role, thus is the shaping of her worldview and her art, says Thelma Kintanar.¹ John Ruskin's thought that "man's power is active, progressive, defensive, speculative; Woman's intellect is not for invention or creation, but sweet ordering and praise" has long been rejected. And the special characterization of women's art being biologically determined or as an extension of her domesticity has been dismissed as western, 19th century, and bourgeois.² Yet, the artists of *Kasibulan*, unaffected by such articulations, seize materials and images of their own confinement only to use them critically and creatively to their advantage.

Alma Quinto reclaims the bed from male hegemony as she sews the babaylan's mattress. According to her, "Ang aking likhang sining ay tungkol sa pagsanib ng itinuturing na hiwalay—ang katawan at kaluluwa—at binigyan ko ito ng bagong kahulugan ayon sa aking karanasan bilang babae." (My art work is about the unity, instead of separateness of the soul and the body, and I gave this unity new meaning through women's experience).

Nadi Xavier, on painting about the clutter of clothes and sheets in her house, says: "Ang mga karanasan sa buhay ng babae ay para bang mga damit na nagkasabit-sabit, nagkabuhul-buhol at nagkadikit-dikit. Habang pinagpipilitan niyang makaluwag sa pagkakabuhol ay lalo naman siyang napapahigpit sa pagkatali. Napapalala ito ng kanyang hangaring makawala at maging malaya." (A woman's life is like tangled pieces of cloth. The harder one tugs and pulls to undo the tangles, the more they become more tightly knotted, tangled, melded together. The tugging and pulling only serves to intensify the desire to break free).

Rhoda Recto, who intensively worked and researched on indigo dyes on textiles, adds: "Ang paghanda ng tela para sa pagkulay ay gaya ng paghihirap ng isang tao. Ang paghanda ng pangkulay na 'nila' ay parang paraan ng pagpapalinis-sarili. Habang ipinakukulo ito ay patuloy na inihahalo at mas mamamasdan ang pag-ikot ng alimpuyo." (When we go through trials and self-cleansing, it is like going through the trials that cloth undergoes in a spiraling whirlpool of dyeing and boiling.)

"Alimpuyo", the spiral, is *Kasibulan's* force, spirit, and symbol. It is about the cycle of birthing and dying, about stirring the soup in the pot, turning the threads at loom's edge, about swirling magentas with white and blue to make a lavender, whisking the white with the yolk, the moon appearing and disappearing from sight, of the planet revolving on its axis around the sun. *Kasibulan* as an organization is also a spiral, working in circles and clusters instead of hierarchies. It is a continuing *pagsibol* (emergence).

Outsiders comment that after 13 years, *Kasibulan* has gained mileage and popularity, yet no one remembers a singularly strong collective art piece. Perhaps they are waiting for a dominant visual style that would make public impact. But the impact of *Kasibulan* is precisely in its being a non-exclusive organization open to all women in art across disciplines who are willing to work for its vision and goals. Women painting flowers, still life, the feminine, graceful, delicate and decorative, and doing printmaking—these images and crafts which correspond so well to the role of abnegation and devotion—are accepted as members. The danger of retrogressing into women's stereotyped values and of her art sliding back into new versions of cute parlor paintings is real. Yet the true feminists among us constantly and patiently keep us awake in gender consciousness-raising.

How has *Kasibulan* fared in providing its members with opportunities for creativity, growth, and self sufficiency? It has provided wide opportunities of sisterhood support and exposure, yes. But on the level of aesthetic, the organization can be more determinate in self-critiquing in order to deepen its discourse on women's art practice. Jurying, curating, and excellence remain to be such feared words among us, as though these ideas are antithesis of women empowerment and democracy. Inheriting Antonio Gramsci's Rx—that class, in our case, gender, should develop its own "organic intellectuals"—indeed women artists should synthesize their own actual experiences as women

and those of their fellow women in order to formulate ways of truly attaining their aspirations.

As Sandra Torrijos passed the torch to Edda Amonoy, Lorna Israel appraised the organization of learning to value and quantify Kasibulan's work in terms of the time, resources, and money that individual members voluntarily put in. While we have come together for empowerment, such omission backfires on us as the woman/mother/housewife's unrecognized and unpaid labor. Kasibulan's roster of members is an inventory of talent and resources and it could very well develop a professional group to further empower its individual members and the organization in economic and social spheres. The collective, like the person, is body and soul in one. Side by side, teen or 70, single, married, separated, grandmother, mother, daughter, sister, straight, or lesbian, we link hands for acceptance and equality. Kasibulan's meaning and impact have been in the emergence and visibility of more and more women artists and their work. Across diversity of outlook, approaches, and chosen media, Kasibulan artists work to express the transforming and transformative worldview of Filipino women in the spirit of openness, freedom, and solidarity to attain their fullest human potential. The dynamic pursuit of feminist values and experimentation in feminist (or femaleist? womanist?) art is a continuing challenge.

Endotes:

1. Kintanar, Thelma & Ventura, Sylvia M. (1999). *Self Portraits: Twelve Filipina Artists Speak*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
2. Parker, Roszika and Pollock, Griselda. (1981). *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.; Pantheon Books.

Birthing Women Artists: Norma Liongoren and the Walong Filipina Exhibition

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For 17 years, the annual *Walong Filipina* (Eight Filipinas) exhibition of the Liongoren Gallery has collectively shown the works of close to a hundred women artists from the Philippines. Exhibiting the works of eight selected artists annually throughout different venues, the show pays "tribute to the creative contributions of women, who often have to juggle the multiple roles of wife, mother, and artist."¹

Norma Liongoren, gallery owner and curator, asserts that the *Walong Filipina* show has literally and figuratively gone a long way since it was first held in March 1990 at the Cubao-based art space, a two-storey residential structure converted into a gallery.

"At the time, it was unheard of [in the Philippines].² Now there are more women artists. In a way, *inaabangan ito ng mga tao* (people look forward to it)," she says of the curatorial gamble. Nearly two decades later, the annual *Walong Filipina* exhibitions continue to gain acceptance in its attempts to reflect, interrogate, and recreate social realities from the perspective of Philippine women artists.

Periods of feminist interventions

Walong Filipina can arguably trace its ideological roots from the socio-political turmoil of the Martial Law and post-EDSA Philippines, which was characterized by the upsurge of women's organized and communal interventions in society. The early years of this era saw the births of collective feminist formations, such as *Makibaka* (organized in 1972) and *Gabriela*, the largest umbrella organization of Filipino women's groups in 1984. The 1980s to 1990s were marked by more interventions in the spheres of cultural politics, such as the founding of Women Writers in Media Now, Concerned Artists of the Philippines Womens Desk, and the women artists group *Kasibulan* (Kababaihan sa Sining at Bagong Sibol na Kamalayan). The contextual conditions of the times led to more women going out, getting involved, and getting together, whether in politics, media, or the arts.