Iza Caparas: Painter of the Urban Life

Gary C. Devilles

“Our vision is a battlefield in which the movement of our culture toward nothingness and disappearance is concealed in the obvious.” – Paul Virilio, *Negative Horizon*

The philosopher Paul Virilio believes that our life in the city is defined and determined by speed, which for him is a form of militarism combined with capitalism that structures our world in a constant state of crisis and an unending cold war of environmental and economic exploitation. Our alienation can be perfectly explained by our orientation to this speed that oftentimes leads to a proliferation of phantoms that obscure our perception of the world or to the saturation of images that deprives us of our energy. It is not surprising therefore that artists often depict the city in abstract forms, transparent, blurry, or glassy. It is as if these paintings try not just to present a space but also our attitude towards it, our way of seeing, including how we want to perceive or desire the city to be. This is the reason that painters and artists always endeavor positively to reinvent our vision of the world, and Iza Caparas' *Urban Life* offers a different vista from what had been articulated already. And yet it adds to the whole discourse of city critique, and gladly leads us away from ruins, from the destruction of our milieu, and towards the ultimate acceptance of the other and of what is different.

Alienation in the City

Iza Caparas is not the only the artist who laments the problems of the city. John Berger talks about the works of Ralph Fasanella and his depiction of Manhattan where the works speak of a frontal protest against the modern city and urban dehumanization, with its empty space and time, and impersonal ahistoricity.

City (Arturo Luz)

In his *City*, our very own Arturo Luz depicts a transparent city of lines and grids, as if life has been reduced to mere geometric figures. Luz' work is not just a matter of style to assert its difference from the somber and dark baroque paintings of his predecessors. Luz is trying to intimate as well our way of seeing things, how urban life is oftentimes about displays and pageantry that are fleeting. In the process, one loses oneself, is run over and obliterated.

Iza Caparas' *Hustle and Bustle* peoples the city with passersby who either stroll aimlessly or purposely go back to their residences or workplaces. One can never tell where exactly these people are going because there is no sense in providing direction. Iza tries to depict the people in blurs and impressions, intimating a form of invisibility that is quite typical of urban life where everything including our bodies and desires become a commodity. Karl Marx would say everything that is solid melts into the air and this is true of our experiences in the city. Here daily life is punctuated by exchanges, by our ability to produce or reproduce such value, which leaves undetermined whether the work is even worth doing or our transactions ultimately are fair. In *Hustle and Bustle* we see ourselves as disembodied and having no materiality. It is quite interesting that *Plants vs. Zombies* is a very popular game among kids today. We can see from the game how we also have reached a stage where we are like plants and zombies: plants for having a life and yet immobile, or zombies for

Hustle and Bustle (Iza Caparas)

having no life and yet mobile. In both cases, the city has its way of transforming us into either plants or zombies. One can't help but see in our call center agents how because of their night shifts they have factually converted their day into night and vice versa. They are the real walking dead: dead in the morning, alive at night. Or one can see as well how the nature of their work has contained them. Most of our call center agents are really intelligent, and yet their intelligence can only be demonstrated within the constricting walls of their cubicle. They talk and receive calls overseas and yet they remain in their stations. Ironically, call centers comprise one of the few industries that keep our economy afloat. Call centers, for example, directly benefit the 24-hour food industry. The city as we experience it and how Iza sees it alludes to this kind of duplicity, that of being caught in between life and death, between being a plant or a zombie.

Night Café (Iza Caparas)

A Way of Looking

In *Night Café*, Iza depicts people as apparitions merging with the buildings and shadows; the viewer is thus given a distant perspective. The ghost-like existence of people here is the very logic of capital accumulation. Jonathan Beller notes how we seldom evoke a clear reference point for Manila, and instead it is the traffic and malls that serve as landmarks, iterations of global forces that explode in all their noxious acrimony in urbanity.

Raindrops (Iza Caparas)

Night Market 2 (Iza Caparas)

In *Night Market 2* and *Raindrops* we see the same saturation of phantasms. This situation communicates, according to Jean Baudrillard, a mechanical euphoria associated with a kind of pleasure that is unrealistic, a kind of suspension of existence, and a kind of absence of responsibility.

Iza's art points to this seeming experience of vertigo in the city, to our hallucinations that reduce our world to two-dimensionality, to an image, and strips away its relief and its historicity and in a way ushers us into a state of contradiction and immobility.

As a painter of urban life, Iza gives us a way of looking at things. In *Parade* we can see all the rancor of city life brought about by the onslaught of capital, and yet this work is not gloomy, but rather explodes in color. The work does not hate but is remorseful, does not reproach but is accepting, and is in the end cognizant of our suffering. Iza may be alluding to the festive and resilient spirit that we can all tap into during crisis, the collective spirit that has animated us from time immemorial and that still informs and forms our attitudes and desires. Iza in this work provides a view from the top, giving us a sense of discontinuity and continuity, such that the street seems to be given a new lease in life, pulsates once more like veins and vessels in crimson hues and cerise outbursts. The modern man is always haunted by a double vision, a vision that can penetrate through the spectacles and the charades, but does not remain aloof and rather works within these and exercises some form of relative autonomy. This is exactly how Walter Benjamin sees the flâneur who walks the city among crowds and yet is not just one of the crowds, but is someone who has the capacity to think otherwise, see the world in its contradiction. Benjamin wrote as well in his contemplation of a Klee painting, that the angel of history sees piles of destruction in what we oftentimes see as progress.

Parade (Iza Caparas)

Whether a flaneur or an angel of history, the artist in Iza Caparas sees the fulfillment of human existence, where the naturalism of man and the humanism of nature are one and the same.

Gallery Nine presents “URBAN LIFE,” a solo exhibition of paintings by Iza Caparas on May 10–20, 2011. Gallery Nine is located at 4th Floor, Building A, SM Megamall, Mandaluyong City, with tel. no. 910–8016.

Care Divas by PETA

Walter O. Ang

Philippine Educational Theater Association’s *Care Divas*, a musical that revolves around the friendship/s between Filipino contract caregivers in intifada-infested Israel, wraps heavy themes of displacement, frustration and loss with song-and-dance. And with sauciness, thanks to the five protagonists who moonlight as drag queens.

These relationships are anchored by the story of Chelsea (played by Melvin Lee) as she navigates her own relationships: with her “care diva” friends, with her employer/patient and, of course, with her love interest. Two other care divas, Kayla (Ricci Chan alternating with Jerald Napoles) and Shai (Vince De Jesus) provide somewhat major subplots, while Thalia (Jason Barcial, Dudz Teraña) and Jonee (Buddy Caramat, Phil Noble), are mostly for comic relief.

On the whole breezy and fun, the musical alternates light scenes with heavier, dramatic episodes, interspersed throughout with music and lyrics by De Jesus and choreography by Carlon Matobato. It ends with, expectedly, a big glamorous production number, feathers and all. Some staging and narrative choices, however, create runs in this production’s stockings.