

IN THE DEFILES OF ABSTRACTION

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Abstract

In this rereading of the history of modern art in the Philippines, Lee Aguinaldo is situated within the turns in the engagement of the field with modernity, beginning in the late twenties until the sixties and so scanning the period after the academic romanticism of Fernando Amosolo through the eclectic modernist styles of the Philippine Art Gallery. In this scheme, the work of Aguinaldo and the manner in which it has been imagined in the context of modern art is revisited, with the view of reflecting on the historiographic and critical language that has been harnessed to explain and understand “abstraction” and the implications of this explanation and understanding in the wider discussion of such terms as “neorealism,” “non-objective,” and “internationalism.”

Keywords

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Fig. 1. Aguinaldo, Lee. *Monday*. 1959. Ateneo Art Gallery.

AMERICA LOOMS LARGE ON THE HORIZON OF LEE AGUINALDO'S ART. It is origin of the kind of modern that encompasses him. It is also the vein from which the freedom of abstraction springs, the condition of the promise of material, its very primeval matter. The relay of America, abstraction, and Aguinaldo under the auspice of the modern had begun in the early part of the twentieth century when America was trying to entitle itself to the modernist project; and Philippine art, nurtured for a long time in the traditions of "academia," felt it deserved the same whimsy.

When Victorio Edades held his homecoming exhibition in 1928 in Manila and stirred the customs of the art establishment that looked to Fernando Amorsolo as the preeminent bearer of its aesthetic, he was in part bringing America to Manila. He was schooled in the modernism of the Pacific Northwest, obtaining undergraduate and graduate degrees in Fine Arts (1925-26; 1928-29) after shifting from Architecture (1919) at the University of Washington. It is chronicled that his "realism" betrayed the "influence" of the Ash Can school (Reyes, *Conversations* 96). Upon keener reflection, however, it may be proposed instead that his style was reared in the locality of Seattle through the tutelage of Walter Isaacs and Ambrose Patterson, both of whom cited the beaux arts in their modernism, one that clearly pretended to being different from the academic mode but at the same time could

not break free from the orthodoxies of Europe (Chewing; Gournay and Pavlos)

Moreover, the circle in which Edades moved was quite diverse. In a news account on an exhibition in one of the city's papers in 1925, his name was mentioned along with the well-known modernist Mark Tobey who lived in the area and who was in the jury when Edades's *The Sketch* (1928) secured a prize at the annual exhibition of northwest artists ("Exhibition of Portraits" 21; "Modernists, New Talent" 11). It is in this context that the modernism of Edades could be more productively probed, inflected by his attentiveness to the traits of the beaux arts (particularly in architecture, which was Edades's first course and through which he met his mentor Charles Frelinghuysen Gould), such as the high regard for the spectacle of scale as manifested, for instance, in the mural, in which the artist specialized and on which he wrote his master's. In fact, the contentious *The Builders* (1928) might have been a study for a mural and not an easel piece; a cursory view of the Edades oeuvre, which mostly consists of portraits in the manner of Patterson, offers very few examples of kindred works. Further deepening this engagement with modernism was Edades's supposed acquaintance with the 1913 Armory Show, which brought European avant-garde for the first time to America and formed the nucleus of some of the more important and pioneering American collections of modern art. This citation of the relationship between Edades and the Armory Show is important, except that it needs to be researched more rigorously.¹

This background of America priming the ground for modernism in the Philippines may be a useful trajectory in understanding the modernism of Aguinaldo that emerged forty years hence. Edades is a cipher in this relay to signify the history of modernism from post-impressionism to early abstraction. Between Edades and Aguinaldo would be the nascent endeavors of Nena Saguil and Victor Oteyza in abstraction, but it was Edades, alongside Juan Arellano and Diosdado Lorenzo, and later Galo Ocampo and Carlos Francisco, who paved the path beyond the hegemonic idealizations of the Amorsolo establishment. This essay tries to scan the turns of this modernism according to three cycles: neorealism/non-objective, abstraction/international, and avant-garde. This is necessary to flesh out the modernism of Aguinaldo and to art-historically apprehend his practice in Philippine culture. The modest argument is this: that Aguinaldo's vector was American modern art and that his class position in Philippine society and access to American cultural life profoundly defined his modernist outlook. It would lapse into severe indifference to the art market, on the one hand, and bourgeois bohemianism that nevertheless accorded him cultural capital paradoxically, on the other. This modernism had a predictable sequence in cadence with its source: abstract expressionism, hard edge and color field, and pop art.

Neorealism/Non-objective

In the most recent survey of Philippine modern art, Lee Aguinaldo is placed

within the continuum of neorealism, a style assigned by a coterie of modernists after the Pacific war who explored a spectrum of artistic options beyond Edades's post-impressionism (Gatbonton). The idiosyncratic term, taken from the literary critic Francesco de Sanctis, was meant to mark both tradition and movement: the norm of realism and its potential, that is, the "new" (Asa 8). Among the stalwarts of neorealism, it was H.R. Ocampo and Ramon Estella who presaged the idiom of Aguinaldo, if we were to trace the pedigree of his acumen for the "abstract." Both dwelled on the possibility of motif and pattern to configure a scape of reality, culminating in Ocampo's striving toward the condition of music around which his own poetry and the principles of music like the "*tempo rubato*" would coalesce. But alongside Ocampo and Estella, who was a filmmaker in a studio circuit patterned after Hollywood, Victor Oteyza proved to be the more daring in investigating what may be broadly called "abstraction" in this period. A trained engineer and theater practitioner, Oteyza's *Plastic Engineering* (c. 1950s) series is almost sui generis in this regard, to be reciprocated in similar register by Nena Saguil's cosmos suite, which had an audience in Paris.

The aforementioned survey locates Aguinaldo at the terminus of the neorealist school, coming after the experiments of Ocampo, Estella, and Oteyza and within the orbit of the likes of Jose Joya and David Cortez Medalla. This phase of neorealism may be appropriately referred to as the Philippine Art Gallery (PAG) school, a term more inclusive than neorealism. The PAG, lair of the maven Lyd Arguilla, was the nerve center of the modernist consciousness in art that made modernism appear ascendant and inevitable through the market, the media, criticism, and collection building. And Medalla, its youngest turk, was the exceptional wunderkind who traveled to Europe in the late fifties and was known for his large art brut experiments. His departure left a vacuum in Manila that was later filled by a largely derivative high modernism, which was suspicious of any social exigency and was intimate with the ruling class and military regime in the seventies. Aguinaldo's art may be situated in this post-Medalla scene, where the polytropic Arturo Luz was mandarin, and modernists channeled their experiments through state-run and market-driven institutions. As one of them would exclaim with the hauteur of an arriviste: "I don't think many Filipino artists read magazines like *Art Forum*!" (Reyes, *Conversations* 126).

Such mapping of Aguinaldo finds its roots in an earlier survey, the First Exhibition of Non-Objective Art in Tagala held at the PAG in Ermita, Manila. Aurelio Alvero, who went by the pseudonym Magtanggul Asa, in the spirit of his nativist predilections that reckoned the Philippines as Tagala,² wrote a monograph on the project that gathered 28 paintings from 11 artists, giving the impression that he had curated it. The popular press, however, announced it as the First Exhibition of Non-Objective Art in the Philippines; it is not clear how Alvero was able to take liberties with the title and change it to Tagala in the monograph. The nomenclature of "non-objective" is curious, and it is under this category that Aguinaldo's

“neorealism” would be better nuanced. Alvero theorizes:

To understand this non-objective movement, one should consider the struggle between objectivity and subjectivity. The former could be said to be the righthand trend of the swing of the artistic pendulum and the latter could be called the leftward trend. The extreme of objectivity would be, therefore, a little short of photography, and the extreme of subjectivity would be, naturally, non-objectivity...

Philosophically considered, objectivity, then, is “the tendency to give undue prominence to the facts of sense-perception.” The objective, therefore, refers to the sensory rather than to the transmuted image. Hence, the emphasis on faithfulness to the object being reproduced. (Asa 2)

Alvero affirms the earlier comment that it was Ocampo and Oteyza who sharpened an incipient instinct for abstraction, hailing them as the “major exponents” of the “trend toward non-objectivity in Tagala” (Asa 9). In this universe of non-objective things, Alvero attempts to engage with the exhibited pieces individually in a catalogue that was published a year later. On Aguinaldo’s contribution, the critic-curator remarks: “For whimsicality of conception, however, one has to turn to Aguinaldo’s ‘The Blue Square.’ The way he put that ‘baby breath’ blue square in a field of colors without either losing it in that field nor causing it to protrude in disharmony is something that speaks highly of his originality and round knowledge of colors” (Asa 13).

The term “non-objective” merits elaboration in the future. It might have been a convenient term used to distinguish art that is “subjective” and not beholden to a known referent: this unknown but knowable quality is its premise and its grail (Flores). It is worth noting that the Guggenheim Museum (1937) was originally named Museum of Non-Objective Painting, which along with the A.E. Gallatin collection and the Museum of Modern Art (1929) furnished modernism in America with infrastructure and the needed theoretical ballast in the early part of the twentieth century (Chipp 506). In the course of time, this non-objectivity, which may translate into “subjectivity,” became abstraction’s defense against the mindset that it was being wrought as a political instrument of the Cold War as an antithesis to Soviet socialist realism’s regimentation. A line would be drawn between the existentialist and individualist dispositions of American artists and the rhetoric of American freedom and between the museum industry and foreign policy. American art was styled as *au courant* in relation to Paris, creative, and original. This image became possible partly because “Pollock, as well as most of the other avant-garde American artists, had left behind his earlier interest in political activism” (Cockcroft 86).

This notion prompted the esteemed Alfred H. Barr, MoMa founding director, to elucidate:

Indeed, one often hears Existentialist echoes in their words, but their ‘anxiety,’ their commitment, their ‘dreadful freedom’ concern their work primarily. They defiantly reject the conventional values of the society which surrounds them, but they are not politically engagés even though their paintings have been praised and condemned as symbolic demonstrations of freedom in a world in which freedom connotes a political attitude. (qtd. in Cockcroft 88)

This “political attitude” of freedom, however, may have been founded on a disavowal of the world, a “subjectivity” that refused its overdeterminations and overinvested its autonomy. The writer Eva Cockcroft explains:

By giving their painting an individualist emphasis and eliminating recognizable subject-matter, the Abstract Expressionists succeeded in creating an important new art movement. They also contributed, whether they knew it or not, to a purely political phenomenon – the supposed divorce between art and politics which so perfectly served America’s needs in the cold war. (89)

But Barr explains that the term “abstract” might be misleading in the sense that artists who are considered abstract expressionists “deny that their work is ‘abstract,’ at least in any pure, programmatic sense; and they rightly reject any significant association with German Expressionism” (Sandler and Newman 232). Thus, to position the “abstract” in stark contrast with “objectivity” or “reality” might be ultimately deceptive:

As a consequence, rather than by intent, most of the paintings seem abstract. Yet they are never formalistic or non-objective in spirit. Nor is there (in theory) any preoccupation with the traditional aesthetics of ‘plastic values,’ composition, quality of line, beauty of surface, harmony of color. When these occur in the paintings – and they often do – it is the result of a struggle for order almost as intuitive as the initial chaos with which the paintings begin. (Sandler and Newman 232)

A gauge of this vexation was the fact that right-wing politicians in America likewise stigmatized modernism as subversive and communistic, forcing Barr to make this plea, testament to the competing interests in the inherent radicality of the modern:

Above all, let us keep our eyes on the two chief enemies of American

Freedom, the Communists and the fanatical pressure groups working under the banner of anti-communism. The Communists are still active, still trying to influence or take over artists’ organizations, still taking their theories

of art from Moscow and savagely attacking modern art that does not conform to Party-line realism, still trying to involve liberals in defending them when they get in trouble. On their part, the fanatical vigilante groups, waving the American flag, but reckless of our traditional liberties, and usually allied with academic artists, are trying to put pressure on museums, exhibition organizers and public officials by repeated attacks on works of art and their makers. It is hard to say which faction is actually the more subversive of our civilization and culture.” (qtd. in Sandler and Newman 225)

Abstraction/International

In the course of time, Aguinaldo’s art would come to be acknowledged as decidedly “abstract.” For instance, the art critic-poet Emmanuel Torres, in his survey of Philippine abstract painting for a large exhibition at the Cultural Center of the Philippines in 1994, makes the crucial transition when he considers Aguinaldo as an “early exponent” of non-objective art. He is of the mind that Joya and Aguinaldo rendered the evocative image in disparate registers: “Joya’s impasto surfaces and broad, gestural strokes correspond to vast, brooding plains and sun-filled outdoor vistas, while Aguinaldo’s ‘explosions’ suggest inner cosmic disturbances or the metaspaces of the subconscious” (*Philippine Abstract Painting* 30). It is at this point of the description when Torres ventures into an attribution of the abstract, a particular type of abstraction that is “abstract expressionism”: “Both (Joya and Aguinaldo) were influenced by a phenomenon raging in postwar New York, Abstract Expressionism and its variant in Paris, Art Informel” (*Philippine Abstract Painting* 30). The implication of the latter is salient, because the coordinate is invoked as well by Alvero in the 1953 exhibition catalogue by way of an exemplar, Hans Hofmann, whose words are quoted as a prolegomenon of sorts to plasticity: “A plastic idea must be expressed with plastic means just as a musical idea is expressed with musical means, or a verbal idea with verbal means. Neither music nor literature are wholly translatable into other art forms, and so a plastic art cannot be created through a superimposed literary meaning” (Asa vi).

The dominant hermeneutic governing Aguinaldo was “abstract expressionist.” Art Association of the Philippines founder Purita Kalaw-Ledesma is certain about this: “He was an abstract expressionist from the start. He painted in the international style that evolved from geometrical forms of pop art with assemblages to hard edge...He was influenced by Pollock, George Matthieu, and Newman” (126). Rod Paras-Perez confirms this lineage when he makes a judgment on the quality of Aguinaldo’s execution of an American style as a watershed “where the gesture attains its generative force” (“International Cross Currents” 162).

Having posited this art-historical site for Aguinaldo, Torres modifies the American derivation in Aguinaldo, which according to his estimation demonstrates restraint:

one that strikes a balance between improvisational gestures and biomorphic forms on one hand, and the hard-edge contours of geometric abstraction on the other hand. Such balancing act is apparent in Aguinaldo's *Explosion No. 141* (1957), which uses a triad of signs reminiscent of Suprematism – dot, square, arrow – forming points to rest to regulate the turmoil of poured paint. (*Philippine Abstract Painting* 30) (see fig. 2)



Fig. 2. Aguinaldo, Lee. *Explosion No. 141*. 1957. Oil on lawanit. Ateneo Art Gallery.

No matter this gradation, the art critic Cid Reyes believes that the said work is textbook Pollock: “the all-over composition, the tangled web of dribbled and dripped commercial paint (enamel and duco), the labyrinthine tracery, the thickly encrusted surface, clotted and puddle passages, interpenetrating layers of pigments” (*The Life and Art* 106).

The art-critical apparatus would sustain this historicization. The foremost critics of the period and beyond construed Aguinaldo's art as belonging to the rubric of “abstraction.” Art critic Leonidas Benesa cracks the conundrum of the difficulty of Aguinaldo's art by explicating that, after referring to the artist as an abstract expressionist, the phrase ‘abstract expressionism’ itself “suggests a subject matter of no mean complexity, requiring a certain amount of mental exercise, and especially a second and hard look into the nature of things” (18). Such inaccessibility is theorized under the coign of abstraction: “In other words, if the works of Aguinaldo resist appreciation and remain alien to our sensibility, in all probability it is because

of our refusal to have the facts and truths of our private inner worlds exhibited in public and in such a fashion” (18). Paras-Perez agrees:

Abstract art is the direction he consistently explored. He may swing from freely applied brushwork to palette-knife-flicked pigments to the more austere, impeccably crafted ‘Linear Series’ with all the strong chromatic contrasts and lucid geometric articulation, but essentially, the *ursprung* was always: abstraction. It was a world whose reality was made of: simultaneous color contrasts, broad linear rhythm, austere form relationships, elegant structure. A visual world as abstract as a fugue. (“Lee Aguinaldo” 27) (see fig. 3)

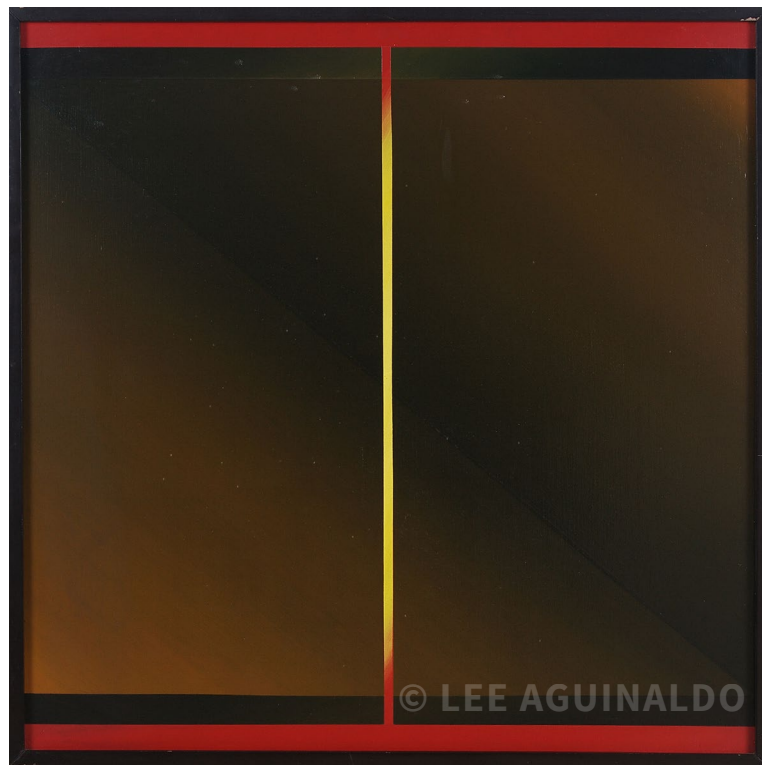


Fig. 3. Aguinaldo, Lee. *Linear No. 21*. 1965. Acrylic on plywood. Private collection.

In an earlier essay, Paras-Perez cautions the reader that the Linear series does not “attempt to portray anything other than lines of colors, or bands of colors as carefully orchestrated as a symphony. Any effort to see into it a representation of something will be futile: precisely the work is not a representation of anything. It is a concrete creation independent of anything” (*A Portfolio* 179). An aspect of this abstraction is the discernment of light and its “circulation” as art critic Alice M.L.

Coseteng would point out:

[His] paintings are actually the painting of light. His two-dimensional surfaces reflect light as they glow in brilliant tones or opaquely subdued. As an artist, Aguinaldo has to be given credit for the painstaking care and patience with which he has painted and composed his colors to capture the glow, the reflection, and the change of light as if on the slick and glossy surface of a car fender. (43)

It, however, took an artist-curator like Raymundo Albano to theorize on this abstraction and to relate its practice in the Philippines to the wider current of discourse on the subject abroad. He would interpret the work of Aguinaldo, alongside Constancio Bernardo's, as "theoretical" and that it has proven, together with Roberto Chabet's own incursions, the communicability of the "abstract grammar...the only logical means of utilizing the medium" ("Modern Art" 16). Albano, who himself grappled with abstraction with fervor, amplifies:

Essentially, abstraction is not an indulgence in the artifice of gestures (or art for art's sake) but a necessary human way of checking responses – visual responses foremost – and to transmit new signs of socio-environmental change. A painting should teach us to see, even if it strains the eyes sometimes. It should make us aware of similar signals in our day-to-day existence and only abstraction – its necessary meaninglessness – provide the pure experience. Its insistence on breaking away from convention as well as its apparent emptiness have always scared uninvolved artists. As a result, the good abstract artists are a select few. ("Modern Art" 16).

This "select few" may be by extension elevated to another level of talent, those who can converse with the "international." According to Coseteng: "To the literate and intelligent but *provincial* art lover – he who has not had previous personal confrontation with the now-in-the-vogue, loosely called, art international style – Aguinaldo's paintings could be a crucial if jarring visual experience" (41-42). It is intriguing for Coseteng to resort to the word "provincial" as a foil to the "international." In fact, Torres would extend this metaphor to make distinctions between the "folk-baroque" and the "international style," and here the emerging financial district of Makati may have been emblematic, where the real estate development of the Ayala family, the architecture of Leandro Locsin, the public art of Arturo Luz, and in all likelihood the modernist interiors of residences, apartments, and hotels came together.³ The polemic is telling:

It is the style one sees in the architecture of Makati: austere designs, straight lines, minimal ornamentation, greater sense of empty space. It is a style

conditioned by technological jet set travel, and industrialization. The perfect embodiment of this internationalism is Lee Aguinaldo, who does not care whether what he creates is nationalistic or not: the rationale behind his geometric forms, graph-like and boxlike designs, straight verticals and horizontals, spacious illuminism, smooth almost factory-finish surfaces is that the imagery of the machine, of space-age technology, of mass-media packaging, is here to stay and such provides a valid stimulus for the creative imagination...Aguinaldo's position is basically this: If a Filipino painter can use these new ideas which comprise some kind of international lingua franca in the visual and plastic arts and create paintings that are artistically good, isn't this all that matters? (Torres, "Nationalism" 172)

This anxiety to be part of the international scene at all cost, by way of education overseas or magazines like *Art in America* and *Art Forum*, was remedial in orientation. According to Paras-Perez: "Lee Aguinaldo belongs to the group motivated by a passion for correctness. Filipinos no longer need to prove themselves the equal of merely a Spaniard or an American with the whole world having now become the stage" (*A Portfolio* 178). Torres gleans in this internationalism a shift in the economy and an "implied rejection of folk-baroque tradition basically shaped by an agricultural and pastoral sensibility that is rapidly going out. It is a refusal to indulge in wishy-washy nostalgia over the past, and resuscitating past forms is no longer relevant to an economic scene that calls for new forms of architecture and new forms of pictorial expression" (*A Portfolio* 172). Thus, this query: By what parameter would this internationalism be appraised in light, for instance, of Aguinaldo's presence in the 1971 Sao Paolo Biennale? Was he contemporaneous with the world, or was he lagging behind? When Jose Joya and Napoleon Abueva forayed into the salons of the Venice Biennale in 1964, in the shadows of Brancusi and Pollock, the Euro-American art world had entered the age of Robert Rauschenberg. Conversely, it is equally curious to know how those who were not deemed modern had been depicted and how their sensibility had been cast as retrograde in an art world that was itself *retardataire*. Kalaw-Ledesma's words are definitive:

These conservative painters had the technique, they had the hand and the eyes. They were good artists in their own right. But what they were looking for was different from what the modernists were looking for. They were after sales, they were after financial security. Painting was their means of livelihood, after all. They were not there to discover new visions in art or push forward some new frontiers of thought. Although they were equipped with excellent technique and craftsmanship, they painted to please their audience. But the modernists were concerned with something else. They were very conscious of the fact that Philippine art was at least 50 years behind the times, and they wanted to catch up with the rest of the world. (qtd. in Reyes, *Conversations*)

27)

The dichotomy between technique and intellection, body and mind, livelihood and leisure, instrument and disinterest runs through this remark and belies the discrepancy in the capital supporting it. This internationalism is not isolated from the idea of the avant-garde, which in equal measure insinuates the same confoundedness. Benesa ratifies: "If appreciation of a painting requires a prior understanding of the work in question, then Lee is an extremely difficult artist to appreciate. First of all, Aguinaldo belongs to the avant-garde in our country, and the spirit of any avant-garde movement is experimentation" (18). This belief in the avant-garde effects a transfer from the peak of abstraction to something beyond it. But more persuasively, such loose implication of an avant-garde that was belatedly mediated from America may be marked out in relation to the modern/conservative debates in Manila in the fifties. Indeed, this theory of the avant-garde in the Philippines warrants a more fulsome disquisition, specifically within the formation of the "national" and its differential relations: the "local," the "regional," the "international," the "west." This said, the internationalist stance, the groundwork of which was thought to be laid by Fernando Zobel and Aguinaldo and "taken up readily by the social elite," was perceived by the early modernist and National Museum director Galo Ocampo as a vogue and might have been, in fact, bereft: "A tide of non-objective works flooded the field from the different art schools. Young artists out to make a name, dashed into the field even without a progressive development either in craft or philosophy, blazing up – and out – like Roman candles" (15).

Avant-Garde

It can be surmised that the avant-garde appellation attached to Aguinaldo derives from certain processes that veered away from the conventions of painting. One of these was the method of appropriation in the galumphing series. Reyes notes:

The excitement generated by the "Galumphing" painting had to do with the tension between the collaged figurative, representational images culled from mostly American magazines, thus "Pop" in orientation, and the "color field" passages of intense colors that emit a cosmetic atmosphere. Their chromatic change can only be described by what Zobel once identified as a characteristic of Philippine art: 'glare.' Referring primarily to the cellular-shaped abstractions of H.R. Ocampo, this 'glare' – which other Filipino artists with a Zen-Orientalist bent hold in disdain – can be attributed to the Galumphing, and the later linear paintings of Aguinaldo. (*The Life and Art* 120)

Not that this was entirely originary in the Philippines. To be noticed in the cubist expression in Manila in the fifties was a nascent intermediality as in the work of Vicente Manansala titled *Dambana* (1956), which incidentally is part-Rouault and part-early Guston, that mingles sheets of tin with oil on canvas. The artist's evocation of the letters forming the word Hispania in his delineation of the blood compact between Rajah Sikatuna and Miguel Lopez de Legazpi is, moreover, an allusion to collage.⁴

The second instance of a novel procedure in art that Aguinaldo deployed was the "flick," syntactically cognate of his frottage. This was described by Coseteng as "explosive, texturally exciting." She continues: "*flick*, because layers of paint were flicked on to the surface of the entire canvas from tips of fine brushes. The technique occurs to me as the refining version of the artist's earlier Jackson Pollock style action painting" ("Art International" 42). Reyes clarifies this eccentric tactic, which may well be an intertext to Zobel's hypodermic *saeta*:

Distancing himself from what would eventually be a manneristic emulation of Pollock, Aguinaldo "invented" a technique of applying paint onto canvas. If Pollock dripped paint from a brushstick, Aguinaldo "flicked" his pigment from a palette knife. Thus, the so-called "Flick" painting which emitted a different mood; the technique turned out to be arduous: only a small amount of pigment could be ladled on a narrow "ladle" of the palette knife. A "flick" painting like *Explosion in Earth Colors* is a consequence of an incalculable number of flicking gestures, an excruciating skirmish between the will of an artist and the recalcitrant technique. (*The Art and Life* 112)

This aleatory bent has been framed within musical metaphors, particularly jazz. Torres describes the resultant imagery as akin to "some cataclysm in outer space that leaps out at the viewer with nervous, quirky, calligraphic energy. Abundantly clear is its attempt at translating the improvisatory and syncopated qualities of jazz in visual terms, not to mention the use of such methods as a means of achieving emotional release from the inhibitions of repressive cultural and personal demons" ("The Rise" 165). Caveat has to be reserved, however: while abstract expressionism projects total risk, a paradigm like Pollock would declare that he also has total control and cerebration: "there is no accident, just as there is no beginning and no end" (Chipp 548). Paras-Perez concurs in his observation on the work *Explosion in Red*: that the "accidental in painting is courted and controlled to a point of formality" ("International Cross Currents" 163). Aguinaldo himself bears this out when he says that, via his guru Zobel, painting is thinking and the artist does not just "depend on chance or inherent instinct...but to take advantage of chance and instinct by improving on these with the conscious brain" (Bunag 9).

It must have been this quick-change performative element in the routine that had led an observer like Lisa Chikiamko to lay the predicate of Aguinaldo being

postmodernist and to try to plot him out as a lacuna between modernism and its afterlife. In this rather burdened thesis, there might be a confusion over the postmodern as an affective tendency and a postmodern reading of Aguinaldo. This is to say nothing yet of the lack of theoretical consideration and critique of the term postmodern itself as well as the political economy underlying its form, its historical facture in a state of mediation. And so, the idea of this postmodern turn in Aguinaldo is at best tentative and inchoate, and if we were to more judiciously pursue it, we would have to move beyond the linearity of the curation guiding the retrospective of Aguinaldo at the Ateneo Art Gallery in 2010.⁵ For all intents and purposes, the said exhibition maintains the stature of Aguinaldo as an abstractionist first and foremost and sort of suggests that his experiments with other media were not sustained practices, more like reveries or digressions that fail to reach the level of interest that his abstraction had evinced. Still and all, these experiments, fascinating as they were, may be easily explained by American modern art's swerve into "pop" from 1961 to 1964 when it consolidated its formal properties and codified them as style: "the explosive definition of culture as everything shrank to an iconography of signs and objects known from outside the field of art. This appeared to be such a drastic operation mainly because the articulate art world of that moment was habituated to the formalities of Abstract art" (Alloway 120).

What this postmodern desire contributes to the discussion is the deconstruction of the Aguinaldo myth as a master, a masculine ideal whom one magazine tried to choreograph as a Pollockian figure. It is this virility of the libertine and ludic genius who on muggy nights paints bare-chested (Bunag 9) that is extolled in the imaginary of the abstract artist whose "creative attitude is one of complete openness to the suggestive nuances of the painting process" (Paras-Perez, "International Cross Currents" 162). Even with the contradictions within this giftedness firmly conjured, it is still difficult to allude to a postmodernity or a link to the contemporary: this theater of self-conflictedness or contrived complexity in fact constitutes a modernist institutionalization of a liberal imagination, a cultivated illogic that flirts at once with alienation and vanity, uncertainty and hubris. That Aguinaldo was prohibitive in all the calibrations of the word (scarce, intractable, unreasonable) is, therefore, a metric of a mythology verging on a psychopathology of sorts, an out-of-this-worldness that could afford flights away from the "real" and yet pride on full possession of faculties. We may have to turn to the denser, more textured transdisciplinary practice of David Cortez Medalla, Raymundo Albano, and Kidlat Tahimik to detect a postcolonial critique of the "modern" and truly imbricate the "Philippine" in the constellation of the global. This is the only way to elude the asymmetries of the "international" and the exceptionalities of the "avant-garde."

Furthermore, in the discussion of the abstract as the valorized expression of the modern, we might be better served if we asked in the same breath about those who were deprived of this valorization. What about the seminal social realism of Orlando Castillo that spoke of torture at a time when Aguinaldo was obsessed

with pigment? What about the “conservatism” of, let us say, the much-maligned Mabini art that plodded through almost as an anathema in the modern era when Aguinaldo was basking in his *succès de scandale*? And what about the hybridity of the abstraction and iconography of identity in the works of Benedicto Cabrera and Abdulmari Imao, a negotiated language of both design and picture that never seemed to perturb Aguinaldo, seized as he was by technicism and the allure of expensive industrial materials? A montage like this of simultaneities in space rounds out Aguinaldo and renders him more gritty. After all, a homage to a master is always doomed from the very beginning. A homage to a putative iconoclast is misplaced.

The final facet of this tenuous avant-garde assertion that may surface in the work of Aguinaldo is the retroactive reference to the artist Rembrandt in his Rembrandt series of delicate drawings in the nineties, something reminiscent of his earlier paeans to Vermeer and Picasso, among others. Paras-Perez annotates:

With consummate discipline Aguinaldo kept exploring various possibilities: an almost black face against a stark white shoulder or collar or cap. Then – even bolder contrasts. His shapes, more frankly abstracted...For Lee Aguinaldo, even the distance from the paper surface to the nose had a tale to tell. He revealed to us the endless nuances possible by simply showing Rembrandt up close – intimating the by-ways of a life in every twist and turn on the topography of the face; or the head shown distant and aloof, barely discernible in the recesses of a shadowed space...And, to capture a character with a simple inclination of the head, all facial features were sometimes reduced into a shadowed mass. (“Lee Aguinaldo” 27) (see fig. 4)



Aguinaldo credits Zobel with this initiation into Rembrandt. That this set harks back to Zobel suggests the germ of a possible late style in which the artist becomes conscious of mannerism and unafraid to confront modalities that are not apparently abstract and incompatible with the preconceptions of the aesthetic. These symptoms of late style may account for certain irreconcilable elements within a system, impossibilities of assimilation into a standard, a reflexivity that defies synthesis.⁶

Fig. 4. Aguinaldo, Lee. *Rembrandt (With White Gloves)*. N.d. Pen and ink on acetate. Private collection.

This return to an initial *kunstwollen* would be signaled a decade earlier with his exhibition at the Alegria Gallery in 1981 in which the works, as Raymundo Albano ruminates, “confirm the artist’s revisionist attitude toward his materials. In this case, ‘materials’ means a magazine page, documentations of his past works and the history of his art” (16). In this repetition of style through the reprographic medium that is reworked, given “another chance,” so to speak, Aguinaldo displays a “catholic attitude toward decisions,” a pluralistic take on a singular image or idea or sensation, and guarantees validity for versions. Such “lateness” reiterates at the same time that it reinvents form within a self-conscious modernism, fretful about both innovation and mastery. According to Albano, this may have been a “planned gesture to refer to his early works, to the point that viewing the new works as they are especially individually, only yields the basic fascination with a deceptively complicated medium such as frottage.” It seems that frottage, along perhaps with collage, permitted Aguinaldo to advance an “aesthetic of tediousness, of surface qualities, of graphic effects...textures, orchestrated details, dynamic surfaces” (“Aguinaldo’s” 17). Frottage was the artful language of an opticality and virtuosity, astute and perspicacious to be sure, taking to the devices of appropriation for sheer effect or flourish.

The opportunity to revisit Aguinaldo is an occasion to come to terms with the fraught problematics of abstraction in the Philippines, specifically the declensions of its naming. Moreover, it compels us to reevaluate the profound pressure of the American dominance in the field of art from the period of the American occupation of the Philippines to the long years of the Cold War, from Victorio Edades, the agent of an embryonic modernism to Constancio Bernardo, student of Josef Albers in Yale who thoroughly imbibed the intricacies of his professor’s aptitude. The high point in Constancio could be grasped in the following quote from him expounding on his theory of color:

When I make the surface of a painting project frontally several inches from the frame in a gallery confrontation so that the eye cannot but acknowledge such projection and yet by touching the viewer misses the relief, that is not magic. It is reality. The reality lies in its power to draw the viewer to this test...

To illustrate my point further: I have three paintings *Bernardian Series Nos. 23, 24, and 25*...These paintings have their own light emission akin to the light emission of the sun in its intensity and commensurate with the degree of illumination they are subjected to. The difference is quite evident; while one gets a burned retina in staring at the sun, here the eye is soothed to a nirvana-like rapture. (qtd. in Paras-Perez, *Visions* 57)

As ancestry is germane, so is resonance. And it is in Aguinaldo where we can partly comprehend why the reified “conceptual” art of the seventies at the Cultural

Center of the Philippines and the satellites and commercial galleries actively promoting it till the present has not fulfilled its promise. It is this opticality that informs the abstract idiom and even the contemporary aesthetic that is passed off as conceptual in the Philippines, thus disabling quite effectively any claim to a politically resistive postmodern turn, a shift that, moreover, did not have the nerve to hazard institutional critique. Aguinaldo himself believes that painting “exists primarily for the pleasure of the eye” (Bunag 9). Thomas Crow, in assessing the “unwritten histories of conceptual art,” comments:

As it happens, this was the most cherished assumption of high modernism in the 1950s and 1960s, which constructed its canon around the notion of opticality: as art progressively refined itself, the value of a work more and more lay in the coherence of the fiction offered to the eye alone. The term visual culture, of course, represents a vast vertical integration of study, extending from the esoteric products of fine-art traditions to handbills and horror videos, but it perpetuates the horizontal narrowness entailed in modernism’s fetish of visuality. (54)

Aguinaldo descends from this line. And if ever a case were to be made about an Aguinaldo effect, it should be an American effect as well, inscribing the gamut of tendencies from abstract expressionism to hard edge to pop art. There is literature, of course, to shore up the speculation that much of the international style was a mystification of the American style, purveyed not only by institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art, but also by the diplomatic and military bureaucracy of the United States government during the Cold War. In the Philippines, such geopolitical strategies would be mediated by the Marcos dispensation that played the game quite well. The local elite likewise struck its pose in this masquerade to further feather its nest. Aguinaldo was very much part of this act, within the inner circle of tastemakers that included Fernando Zobel, his first patron, and fellow internationalists Leandro Locsin and Arturo Luz, and latter-day confreres like Roberto Chabet.⁷ It comes as no surprise that the last event for Aguinaldo before the retrospective at Zobel’s Ateneo was held in Luz Gallery, before which there was an exhibition at the Lopez Memorial Museum. This itinerary is instructive. Much can be said about this tight stranglehold in light of the development of capitalism in the Philippines in the seventies and the attendant “abstract” and imitative “conceptual” attempts of its art world. But the more sanguine aspect of all this is the decline of the zeitgeist of what clearly was a bourgeois episode. The fall of the house of Aguinaldo, the horrid scene of a mansion without light, and the faux heroic tale of a painter being dragged out of his studio in the throes of his final painting trailed a heady season of hedonist carousing, nude photography, and what must have been psychedelic enthusiasms.

The end and excess of abstraction is eviction.

Notes

1. Per conversation with Ramon Villegas, this might not have been the Armory Show of 1913, but an exhibition at the same venue years later. But in an informal talk, Edades's biographer Lydia Ingle is certain Edades had mentioned the Armory Show.
2. Tagala is presumably derived from Tagalog, the term referring to the largest lowland, predominantly Christian group in the island of Luzon and its language, which is the basis of the national language Filipino.
3. In a conversation with David Cortez Medalla in 2006 in Madrid, he confided that the transfer of the art scene from Manila to Makati could partly explain the dominance of the high modernist style at the expense of a livelier proto-avant-garde in Manila.
4. There are two of these paintings: the mural-size work with the United Coconut Planters Bank collection and an easel-type piece (1962) with the Fukuoka Asian Museum of Art collection.
5. See catalogue of "Lee Aguinaldo: In Retrospect," Ateneo Art Gallery, October 26, 2010-February 5, 2011.
6. For elaboration on late style, refer to Said; Adorno.
7. For the intersections between Zobel, Luz, Locsin, and Marcos, see Flores, *Suddenly Turning Visible*.

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