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WINNER JUMALON

JURAMENTO

“My art is survival,” declares Filipino artist Winner Jumalon in a written statement for “Juramento,” his first solo show in Singapore. Held at Yavuz Gallery, the exhibition presented new paintings, drawings and sculptures that vibrate with color, movement and intensity, while toying with images of death and decay. One of the most promising young artists in the Philippines, Jumalon introduced a body of work that is highly autobiographical and replete with historical and cultural references.

Near the gallery entrance, one wall was covered with mixed-media drawings on paper, primarily in black-and-white tones. These works demonstrate the artist’s fondness for drawing as a way to explore new forms, as well as his knack for creating portraits that blur or obscure facial details. Directly in front of this mural installation was a series of sculptures, entitled “Hallazgo Reciente (Recent Find)” (2014), comprising rock-like shapes made from translucent resin with seemingly fossilized toy figurines, gems and bones beneath their surface. Elsewhere in the show, Jumalon presented several large-scale canvases, some of which use encaustic painting—a technique recently taken up by the artist to further blur his portraits through the application of heated wax.

Several artwork titles are in Chabacano, a Filipino creole language derived from Spanish and widely used in the artist’s hometown of Zamboanga. For the exhibition, Jumalon drew from the history and myths of Zamboanga, which is located on Mindanao, the southernmost island of the Philippines, pegged as a “conflict zone” for historic animosity between its Muslim and Catholic populations and current unrest between Islamic factions. In the “Juramentado” painting series (2014), the artist depicts himself as a faceless, sword-bearing Moro warrior clad in loincloth. The figure merges into the brash brushstrokes of color that make up the painting’s backdrop, a neutral rendering for a legendary Moro fighter, considered at once villain, hero and victim. A 19th-century coinage, the term *juramentado* refers to indigenous Muslim swordsmen from Zamboanga who organized attacks against Spanish colonizers.

Other portrait works are grounded in more contemporary times, such as *Nuay Muerte (No Death)* (2014), depicting a man known as Mono’y Fusil, rumored to be a ruthless killer in Jumalon’s hometown. The painting includes images of colorful Lego blocks shaped into the form of a gun along with painted teardrops, juxtaposing childish elements with a presumably cold-blooded gangster. Words in Chabacano emerge from Jumalon’s paintings like graffiti texts, which add another layer to the work.

Jumalon’s ongoing exploration of identity has been influenced by the various places he has lived

within the Philippines. After experimenting with colorful self-portraits in Zamboanga, Jumalon moved to Laguna to attend the prestigious Philippine High School for the Arts, in the lush region of Mount Makiling. The school provided knowledge and skills, but also a new context in which he struggled to define his artistic identity. At this time, Jumalon began painting portraits using a layering technique, as if to show the development of personal identity over time and space.

Several paintings that were presented at Yavuz feature dual figures, as in *El Que Tiene Sospechas (He Who Has Suspicions)* (2014), in which two seemingly identical males wearing black baseball hats are turned toward each other, with one of the men’s faces covered by a reflective sphere, while a similar orb floats between the two of them. Meanwhile, in *Dios Conciente No Para Siempre (God Consents But Not For Always)* (2014), two male figures stand facing each other: one has a blackened face with a bandana around his neck, while the other’s face is veiled with vertical rainbow stripes. Jumalon’s graffiti-like painting style, fully evident in the works in this show, evolved from his time at the University of the Philippines in Metro Manila, a vibrant and chaotic mega-city where he continues his art practice today.

“Juramento” was a powerful exhibition that showcased Jumalon’s unique style, with his biography serving as a starting point to reflect on the culture and historical legacy of his homeland. With Jumalon slated for another solo show in Manila later this year, we can look forward to seeing more works by this promising young artist in the near future.

MARLYNE SAHAKIAN

