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| **Abstract Expressionism in the Philippines** |
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| Abstract Expressionism in the Philippines was one of many post-Second World War tendencies based on aspirations to stay current with international trends while evolving a grounded visual language. Abstract Expressionism also arose as a function of artists’ increased ability to take advantage of Western state grants and educational opportunities in the Philippines’ former colonizing power, the United States. Such artists included José Joya (1931- 1995) and Lee Aguinaldo (1933- 2007). By the 1970s, even as the Philippine art market began to open up to abstraction, most public encounters with Modernism generated indifference or outright antagonism, including charges of failing to deliver on conventional ideas of technicality and mimesis. While abstraction is still regarded as cerebral in some circles in the Philippines, it is also seen as purely decorative in others. On the other hand, in examining intersections between modern-contemporary expression and pre-colonial visual language, some have argued that abstraction does demonstrate affinities with forms present in textile and mat weaving found in both Northern and Southern upland and riverine ethnolinguistic communities, as well as in the architecture, dress patterns, metal, and woodcraft of Muslim and Lumad communities in Mindanao. |
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While abstraction is still regarded as cerebral in some circles in the Philippines, it is also seen as purely decorative in others. On the other hand, in examining intersections between modern/contemporary expression and pre-colonial visual language, some have argued that abstraction does demonstrate affinities with forms present in textile and mat weaving found in both Northern and Southern upland and riverine ethnolinguistic communities, as well as in the architecture, dress patterns, metal, and woodcraft of Muslim and Lumad communities in Mindanao.  As opposed to Aguinaldo’s more isolated practice, Joya’s influence over successive generations of abstract painters came through his teaching at the University of the Philippines, College of Fine Arts. This allowed him to expand his network outside Manila, through the Visayas (via UP Cebu for instance). Other key artist/art educators are Florencio Concepcion (1933-2006) and Constancio Bernardo (1913-2013). Concepcion took his postgraduate studies at the Accademia di Belle Arte in Rome and served as Dean of the University of the East College of Fine Arts. Bernardo studied with Joséph Albers at Yale University and eventually taught art at UP. An earlier artist/art educator who similarly extended the reach and influence of abstraction was Fernando Zobel (1924-1984), who returned from Harvard University to the Philippines to produce a comparatively minimalist yet still gestural abstraction in the mid-fifties and sixties. Zobel eventually settled in Spain to establish his painting practice alongside the launching of the Museum of Spanish Abstract Art in Cuenca. However, before leaving the Philippines, Zobel first nurtured a progeny of Modernist advocate-critics, including Emmanuel Torres and Leonidas Benesa, and bequeathed his seminal collection of early Philippine modernism to the Ateneo Art Gallery.  Filipino critics including Torres have pegged Zobel’s Abstract Expressionist period as the years between 1954 and 1957, when he was regarded to have taken a “musical approach to painting” before shifting to a more chromatically streamlined calligraphic phase. More evident traces of gestural North American Abstract Expressionism are found in the work of Joya and Bernardo, whose paintings at times tended to radiate from a compositional core in contrast to the overall painting of American counterparts such as Jackson Pollock. This inclination to build compositions around masses of texture and colour is also demonstrated in the works of Aguinaldo, who worked in this vein in the early sixties before taking on a more overtly geometric abstraction from the late sixties until his death. A later generation of practitioners, whose collective works demonstrate the unconscious shifting across various streams of abstraction, include artists who have been intermittently associated with this type of painting: National Artist for Visual Arts J. Elizalde Navarro, Ray Albano, Florencio Concepcion, Charito Bitanga, Phyllis Zaballero, Oscar Villamiel, and Eghai Roxas, among many others.  A distinct characteristic of Philippine Abstract Expressionism is its casual regard for gestural abandon. In describing Joya, Benesa (a key Filipino Modernist critic) states: “a number of the drawings and sketches in the mid-sixties show that, however spontaneous and expressionistic the gestures of the artist may appear in the final work, in the tradition of action painting, they have been rehearsed beforehand through the various disciplines of linear melody and tonal rhythm.” Joya, as an illustrative case of his generation, eventually underwent a liberation of both his psyche and “the stiffness in his drawing hand” (obviously in reference to technique) upon leaving the country for further studies in Europe and the United States. Benesa would, at least partly, credit Joya’s overseas studies with the artist’s more visibly organic and charged approach to drawing—a shift to “rivulets of auto-creative line,” a logical development of privileging what was then regarded as a manifestation of the freedom of the artist to draw from an inner, as opposed to external or physical, reality.  File: José-Joya.jpeg  José Joya, Hills of Nikko, 1964, 172 x 198.8 cm, Collection of National Museum of the Philippines  Substantial anthropological and cultural scholarship has critically examined whether global pockets of Abstract Expressionism are merely derivative of American Abstract Expressionism. These critical accounts have pointed out that, while Abstract Expressionism has become enfolded into a canon of art history predisposed to accounts of one-way transfer, its proponents have expressed a debt to Asian calligraphic scroll painting. It is this assertion, encumbered with the post-colonial thrust to establish national identity, which appears to have persuaded artists including Joya to shift his abstraction, though arguably in a mitigated sense, to a referential phase where he would, for instance, render overtly Filipino icons like the Muslim Torogan (1985) using reductive line and colour. Current scholarship seems to settle these art historical questions by invoking a form of artistic poaching, first as a more geometric abstraction, and later involving a degree of symbology using the pre-colonial forms (cabalistic and mandala motifs) that became more widely circulated after the Second World War. |
| Further reading:  (Beltran, 2003)  (Gatbonton, 1992)  (Herrera, M.V., Chikiamco, C. et al., 2011)  (Joya, Jose and Leonidas V.Benesa, 1973)  (Joya, 1996)  (Ledesma, P. K. and Guerrero, A, 1974)  (Reyes, 1989)  (Torres, 1994) |