

JUN ROCHA

As a young child, Jun Rocha would be awed by his travels to the marketplace. Teeming with color, sounds, action, and life, the young artist would find the local *palengke* an excitable excursion. There is much to say about this community of sellers and buyers—a microcosmic world of its own—making immediate the economics of society, its complex negotiations, its search for essentials of survival, and all the vibrant raucous that go along with it. There is a communal expectation in the local markets where vendors and *suki* organically establish a relationship of camaraderie and care. And while some find these experiences utterly ordinary, Rocha sees the magic that lies in its cultural center.

Today, Rocha still frequents the markets—not only as a consumer, but as a painter. At eight in the morning, he goes around the community to travel and search for artistic subjects, hoping to capture the energy of these economic centers as inspirations. It is no surprise that Rocha's body of work has come to be known to carry a consideration for the quotidian experience: *tinderas* in their traditional garb of *baro* and *saya*, holding baskets of fresh harvest and produce including fruits, vegetables, grains, and flowers.

Jun Sergio Rocha was born in 1956. By the 1980s, he graduated with a degree in BS Chemistry at the Manila Central University. But his love for the arts is strong. As early as his elementary school days, he already exhibited an instinct for drawing and figuration. So he took further studies in the field of arts, taking Fine Arts in the University of the East, and later at the American Academy of Arts and the School of Art Institute of Chicago where he took up formal instruction on watercolor and oil painting. While in the USA, he participated as a member of the Palette and Chisel Art Academy, one of the oldest art organizations of the United States, and the Plein Air Painters of Chicago where he further developed his experimentations in figuration and representational art. After two decades, Rocha returned home to the Philippines, following a nostalgic call. Could it be that the spirited *palengke* heralded a longing back to home?

As a chemist-slash-artist, Rocha now works with paints with an experimental insight. Using his knowledge of chemical materiality, he creates unique paint combinations, revealing colors with transparent and translucent effects—an ode to old masters and their respect for painterly light. He shares that he prefers painting during the daytime in an open studio, where the natural light might bring out the same vision in the works. The artist, as well, gathers his own items, or even sometimes makes his own tools, cutting plywood and mounting his own canvas. Like the local vendors whose lives are illustrated by their service and work, Rocha's respect for manual self-service reflects his resonance to the principles of hard work and perseverance, which for him are Filipino values worth keeping.

"I want people to respect them, to honor, and appreciate them," he shares. In *Mango Vendors*, *Flower Vendors*, *Banana Vendors*, *Mangosteen Collectors*, *Wheat Girls*, and *Wheat Milling* (all 2023), we see the artist's deliberate usage of white to cover his subjects in a cloak of purity. Each individual is joyful in their daily task. One might come to ask whether this creative choice

of subject and narrative by the artist delimits the emancipation of the untouched Filipino ideal, but the artist assures that the artist's role in this regard is the preservation of a heritage.

Rocha's most common subject matter depicts the archetypal Filipino in his or her rural role. Even so, there is a careful attention to how the artist negotiates with this trope, as if he is handling a memory of a distant past, to safeguard it for the future. "Contemporary means now," he shares. While Rocha's subjects and their depictions are time-bound, their experiences are in fact timeless—even universal—bringing distant memories of the past as insightful reminders for the present.

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