



Unusual Tranquility



Installation view of "Unusual Tranquility" at Vinyl on Vinyl, Manila, 2020. Courtesy Vinyl on Vinyl.

Vinyl on Vinyl gallery's exhibition "Unusual Tranquility," which opened in early July as Metro Manila cautiously emerged from lockdown, brought together figurative paintings and works on paper by Philippine artists Dennis Bato, Archie Oclos, Roberto Sanchez, and Anjo Bolarda. The all-new works tackle different facets of a society coming to terms with the present state of anxiety.

At the center of the gallery, Anjo Bolarda's large canvas *When all else is stripped away, leaving you bare (II)* (all works 2020) was laid out on the concrete floor beside a black folding chair. The painting depicts four stylized, featureless nude figures—rendered in solid-black acrylic with sparse, white contours—posed as if sitting on an invisible sofa. The chair seemed to invite the viewer to rest along with the characters, but one could not sit down without stepping on the white canvas, soiling not only the work, but also its promise of communion. On the wall behind this piece were small works on paper titled *When all else is stripped away, leaving you bare 13–35*, comprising close-ups of male and female

genitalia from various angles, alongside narrative illustrations of naked men and women in protest, and being tortured by clothed individuals, recasting socially accepted classifications of nude as vulgar and dressed as civil. Works 1–12 from the same series depict 12 common hand gestures, some of which have gained political connotations. The raised fist, for instance, has long represented Black power or resistance to oppression in general, whereas the "OK" sign has recently been appropriated by rightwing trolls to indicate support for White supremacy. By highlighting these gestures, whose meanings depend on shifting visual consciousnesses, Bolarda illustrates how power is grasped and embodied in different ways.

Visually resonant with Bolarda's monochromatic figures were Archie Oclos's portraits of anonymous Indigenous people, recognizable only by the traditional patterns covering their bodies. Oclos's series stems from his fieldwork among vulnerable native communities in the Philippines. Consistent with past works in this series, the characters' faces are entirely obscured by dense clusters of fine, black brushstrokes to emphasize their marginality in Philippine society; without identifying features, they are everyone yet no one. However, Oclos depicts his subjects in moments of kindness and care rather than sensationalizing their plight. In *Akay* (Tagalog for "to guide"), a mother in half-profile carries her child on her back, whereas *Alay* (sacrifice) shows a man directly facing the viewer, holding out his open palms as a gesture of offering.

Elsewhere, Dennis Bato's *Will we be able to patch up the mistakes that humanity*

made 1–10—created by layering black acrylic, oil, and spray paint on wood—feature tiny human silhouettes standing on intersecting white lines against a black ground. The ash-like textures of spray paint and tilted perspectives evoke a turbulent space of floating roads and false directions, pointing to the anxiety of choosing between staying put or moving forward along an unknown path.

The boldly hued paintings by Roberto Sanchez disrupted the predominantly monochrome palette of the show. In *Eternal Recurrence*, a figure in a bright orange hoodie with a large hole in their chest looks down as if in remorse, confined inside the white, chalk-drawn outline of a cube. The title references the ancient theory, later referenced by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, that all existence repeats infinitely. In the painting, an origami paper boat floats above the figure's head, gesturing to the ebb and flow of life. However, in *Amor fati* (Latin for "love of fate"), the same figure is portrayed with their back to the viewer, standing in front of the cube's outline, with an origami plane in the top-left corner suggesting freedom. Together, the works imply that liberation stems from a willing acceptance of destiny.

"Unusual Tranquility" contemplated ways of facing an uncertain future, from collective action to personal introspection. With a focus on ideas of agency, the exhibition was a quiet protest against passive despair, reminding visitors of the choice to reframe their thoughts and actions.

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