

NORBERTO "PEEWEE" ROLDAN

Between History and Hope

BY JOHN ALEXIS BALAGUER



NORBERTO "PEEWEE" ROLDAN in his studio-residence in Scout Rallos, Metro Manila. Courtesy the artist.

On June 3, a fire broke out in the two-story, 1940s-style apartment housing Manila's oldest artist-run nonprofit, Green Papaya. Located in Kamuning, Quezon City, Green Papaya has served as a communal platform for two decades, hosting talks, artist residencies, and experimental projects involving Filipino and international artists and organizations, as well as members of the local community. The flames destroyed most of Green Papaya's furniture, archives, and recent works by its artistic director, the contemporary artist Norberto Roldan. "Pee wee," as his peers fondly call him, co-founded the organization with choreographer Donna Miranda, and had been using the building's second floor as his painting studio.

Given that Green Papaya's space is now disused, I scheduled to meet Pee wee in July in his studio-residence in Scout Rallos, Diliman, instead. Only minutes away by car from Kamuning, the Rallos house is the artist's main base and where he creates his assemblages. It has also become a shelter for the materials blackened in the Green Papaya blaze.

Pee wee had not always lived in Manila. He was born in Capiz in the Visayas archipelago and spent eight years in the seminary as a young man before pursuing a fine arts degree at the University of Santo Tomas, Manila, at the height of the Marcos dictatorship, with the aim of becoming a cultural organizer. "The history of the sugar industry was what politicized me and made me decide to be an activist," Pee wee shares, referencing how he opposed the exploitation of workers in the trade. In the 1980s, Pee wee and his wife moved to Bacolod City in Negros province, where he co-founded Black Artists in Asia, a politically engaged organization of artists that promoted art from the Visayan regions, and in 1990, co-initiated the biennial Visayas Islands Visual Arts Exhibition and Conference, which still runs today, with the same mission of highlighting the culture that exists outside the center of Manila. Pee wee finally settled in the capital when Green Papaya was set up in 2000 as a response to the need for mediation spaces for emerging artists and the developing art market. Its first site was a small apartment in Diliman, Quezon City, before it relocated to Kamuning in 2008.

When I arrived at Pee wee's quaint house in the small neighborhood of Scout Rallos, he greeted me with an elbow bump and proceeded to show me around. "I really don't have a permanent and formal studio," he said. "Since [2015], I've been working inside and outside this house, and in every corner possible." Walking around the bungalow, Pee wee affectionately shares that it was growing up in a family of architects and his fascination with history that led him to lease the Rallos residence, one of the few remaining houses from the 1970s in the modernizing metropolis. After moving in, he made some major alterations to the structure, including walling off one side of a huge window to hang artworks and painting the whole space white.

At the time of my visit, Pee wee was constructing an assemblage piece in his garage. He intends to include the work in an upcoming exhibition in November, which will feature installations utilizing debris from demolished houses, antique furniture, small glass bottles, and vintage *stampitas* (prayer cards). The artist borrows from personal and collective memories of everyday life when addressing political and cultural issues such as colonization, and religious and secular authoritarianism. "The salvaged materials come mostly from postwar bungalows and cottages that are quickly disappearing," he explained. "Objects represent people's way of life. But their meanings also change over time. When an object from the past is appropriated as a 'found' object in the context of contemporary art, the object does not shed off its intrinsic materiality but signifies new meanings. The object then acquires a new life." Like the materials found within Manila's shifting landscape, the Rallos house is ever morphing. Artworks do not stay long as finished pieces are shipped to galleries for storage, and Pee wee's materials for art production lie around in boxes, waiting to be transformed. "People don't really notice them," he said.



At the Rallose house were some of Pee wee's works that had been damaged in the Green Papaya fire. Photos by John Alexis Balaguer for *ArtAsiaPacific* unless otherwise stated.



The artist was working on an assemblage piece with vintage prayer cards in his garage.

Yet, I found many curious things in the bungalow. In the office space, for example, are two early models of Apple computers from Peewee's previous stint as a graphic designer. He keeps the obsolete machines as part of his personal archive. "The first time I encountered the Macintosh SE/30 was when I reported on the first day of work at Graphic Atelier Manila in 1992 as a senior designer. That was also the day I started to learn how to use a computer for graphic design." The other one is a 1998 iMac, "My unit in 'Bondi blue' was acquired in 1999 and became the workhorse of Green Papaya from 2000 until 2006," the artist told me.



The office space, with the two obsolete Apple computers on the windowsill.

Displayed around the main entrance and inside the office is the series *100 Altars for Roberto Chabet* (2013-). The triangular assemblages of wood and architectural debris are tributes to the father of Philippine conceptual art, and are based on his 1970s series *Ziggurat*. "His works are meditations on space, the transitory nature of commonplace objects, and the collisions that occur with their displacement," described Peewee of Chabet's practice, touching on their shared artistic concerns. Unfortunately, these works and many others transferred from Green Papaya to Rallos are damaged and are now pending projects.

On the other side of the office are two paper works that were donated to Green Papaya: *Inéng: Dalagitang Maranaw* (1979) is an etching by feminist printmaker and painter Imelda Cajipe-Endaya, depicting an Indigenous Maranao woman from Maguindanao, while Santiago Bose's *Human Teeth*, from the *Solar Art* series (2002), shows a dental chart drawn over with tailed creatures and a folk Catholic prayer. If there's anything constant in the studio, it is this work by Bose. Peewee professed his fondness for the artist, community organizer, and founder of the Baguio Arts Guild, which foregrounded the region's traditions and Indigenous materials in art. Bose passed away in 2002. "What he was doing for Baguio, I was doing for Bacolod," Peewee reflected.

As we settled down in conversation in the living area, Peewee became more enthusiastic talking about politics, the state of society, and local art history, even springing his leg up to the chair's arm in eagerness when we came to discuss his role as a community organizer. He recalled being invited to an Arts & Museum Summit in Makati in 2017. He shared how frustrated he was that he was talking about the plight of independent spaces at a museum, far from the immediate contexts of these platforms, which often serve specific groups. "Green Papaya is more of a community than just a passive space," he asserted. "Without its community, we could have not gone this far. While it is a privilege to have a space to hold gatherings, it is the gathering itself that brings life to a community. Cooking, sharing meals, making coffee, drinking, and having conversations are essential to community building."

Our conversation drifted to the future of Green Papaya. In 2017, Peewee announced that 2021 will be the space's final year of operations. With this in mind, they have been digitizing the organization's archive. After the fire, 70 boxes of documents from Green Papaya's history were sent to Lopez Museum's laboratory for fumigation and conservation. "We found a new space that we plan to move into. It is also along Scout Rallos street. Once the lab work is completed, we hope to move all these materials to our new rented place, rebuild our archive facility, and move on from there." Ultimately though, he plans to relocate to Negros once everything is settled and make a new life. "I have lived in Negros in the past so the place is not new to me," he said, recalling the early days of his socially conscious practice. "My relocation to Negros after Green Papaya closes down in 2021 will be a continuation of a long journey."

Peewee described the Rallos house as many things: a residence, studio, and office. It is also where Green Papaya occasionally holds talks regarding various subjects. The Rallos house's fluidity as a studio for reconstructing historical fragments, a safe haven for salvaged objects from the community and the fire, and its bearing as a platform for critical community engagements reflect Peewee's art practice, activism against institutional monoliths, and advocacy toward community making. In all his myriad roles, it is his belief that materials and people are catalysts for new narratives that shines through.



Imelda Cajipe-Endaya's *Inéng: Dalagitang Maranaw* (1979) was hung in the office.



A treasured work, Santiago Bose's *Human Teeth* (2002) was also in the office.