

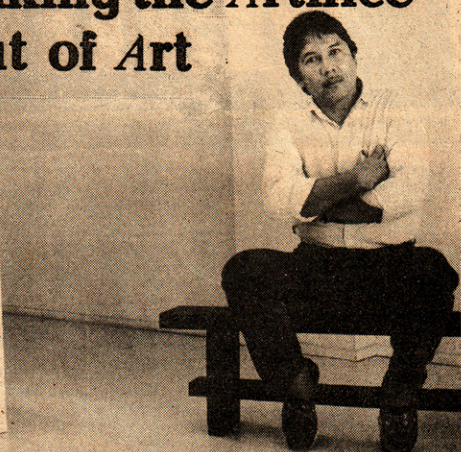
SPOTLIGHT

HIRAYA'S BOBI VALENZUELA

# Taking the Artifice out of Art



Photo by MANUEL GARCIA CHAVES



VALENZUELA, exponent of active curatorship, and Renato Agustin Ong's "Wagi" figures.

By ELIZABETH LOLARGA

The tightly knit, almost incestuous art world is still reeling from the news that curator **Bobi Valenzuela** has 13 days left before he exits from Hiraya Gallery. The modest, one-storey-plus-mezzanine magnet on United Nations Ave., Ermita, has been drawing the counter-culture set.

When it opened in October 1980, writer **Pet G. Cleto** right away predicted that Hiraya would be imbued with Bobi's "historical and Don Quixotic sense," and how correct she was.

Even if owner **Didi Dec** decides on keeping the gallery open after Bobi's departure, the unique curatorial stamp will be missing. And that means little but justified touches like shirking from ribbon-cutting ceremonies, guests of honor, cocktails and other superficial

night, presenting the works of social realists **Pablo Baens Santos**, **Jesus Abrera**, **Edgar Talusan Fernandez** and **Heber Bartolome** (a daring gesture considering the Draconian times then) in direct, ideological contrast to a previous show of apolitical, abstract and therefore pleasingly decorative art by **Lito Carating**, **Rock Drilon**, **Benjie Cabangis** and **Roy Veneracion**.

Then there were those rap sessions around an antique, circular table, talks fueled by Bobi's servings of decaf coffee, tea and hot *uron* (bought from a street vendor), conversations steered to wackiest extremes by gallery regular-house comedienne **Gigi Dueñas**.

Hiraya is to the 1980s the way the Philippine Art Gallery of **Lydia Arguilla** was to the '50s, the Luz Gallery to the '60s, the Heritage Art Center (when **Odette Alcantara** was its sampaguita-crowned doyenne) to the '70s.

Bobi said, "All I wanted to do was avoid the mistakes of previous galleries — bad relations with artists, delayed payment. I hold artists in high esteem. I wouldn't dream of doing anything to offend them. I wanted so much to expand the audience for the visual arts, but I noticed that the same people attended opening nights and turned up for the duration of the show year after year. Why?"

Along came associate curator **Manuel Garcia Chaves**, a former advertising man and graphic designer-photographer, and the tandem sought answers. Hiraya came to be known as the gallery "*na tanong nang tanong*." They saw that the gallery attracted "the culturati, the cognoscenti, the buyers, the art patrons *kuno*," Bobi said.

He concluded that "we were catering to a small sector of society, to people who were not even the ones I would like to be associated with. I found them pretentious, shallow, snooty, money-oriented. There were exceptions. But with the kind of arts we were promoting, I was turning into an impresario of Western art. This realization led me to see that our art-making and art activities alienate us from our people."

An impassioned Bobi continued, "I believe that these activities should lead to the development and enhancement of a true Filipino identity, but this isn't happening in the art scene. My concept of an artist is of a fine human being who, through his medium, is of service to his people."

Quixotic was the apt descrip-

tion for Bobi's attempts to debunk myths and fallacies about art, namely: that the artist is a superstar, "*na ang bawat gawin niya ay masterpiece*"; art-works should be original and should last forever, and if they are "Western derivatives or outright imitation," so much the better; that the gallery staff should be subservient to art patrons and interior decorators for their bread and butter (make that rice and fish, we could almost hear the Pinoy in Bobi correcting us).

Manny added, "Our traditions are carving and weaving, not painting. These traditions are tied with rituals of the community. The spirit blankets of the Cordilleras are an example of a refined craft. *Alin ang mas malapit sa atin, mas kayang bilhin, mas totoo, mas nagagamit?*"

Despite the viewing public's warm reception to the exhibit of photographs by the hottest photojournalists of the day (**Joey Fernandez**, **Alex Baluyut**, **Andy Hernandez**, **Bullitt Marquez**, **Mike Yabut**, **Luis Liwanag**, **Claro Cortez IV**) and cartoons by **Nonoy Marcelo**, Bobi and Manny were disturbed.

Manny described their curatorial duties as "an elitist concern. Why frame and sell for a higher price a photograph or cartoon which you can see in a newspaper that is priced at P2 only?"

Worse, Bobi received reports that the humble craftsmen whose works they unveiled before an appreciative audience were changing. "They started cultivating airs that they were artists in the negative, prima donna sense. We were accomplices in this (development). We were the Dr. Frankensteins, and we had created monsters."

It dawned on Bobi that he could not go on questioning the gallery system if he stayed in that structure. "Counter-productive *na rin 'yung pangungulit mo*." His decision: leave the gallery and its trappings.

Manny also realized that multiples were the art form for the Filipinos. These were "mass, democratic, not one of a kind."

The valedictory exhibition is suitably a collaborative project with **Renato Agustin Ong**. Entitled "Wagi" (win, triumph), the show is made up of 10 male and 10 female figures that have heads done like ivory *santos* and bodies "after the pre-conquest *bulo* of the Cordilleras." The materials used were polymer resins, industrial copper tubing, brass welding rods, sawdust, woodstains, varnishes and plastic toy crocodiles.

Manny explained, "When you have a show of multiples, *sampung pare-pareho*, you already question the principle of a gallery. With mass reproducible art, *minumulat natin ang tao*. *Ito ang art na hindi sinasanto, hindi pinepedestal*. Where do we seek answers? Out of the gallery." And armed with a new kind of portable, usable art for the people.

This development of Hiraya presents a way out of the quagmire in which Filipino artists find themselves. **Seth Mydans**, writing on the local art scene for *New York Times*, observed, "In a country with a history of politically engaged art and literature, the events of the last two years, rather than stimulating creative artists, have left them exhausted, divided, bewildered and uninspired. Many have slowed down or have mechanically repeated earlier themes. Some who have attempted to build on recent history have found themselves in trapped clichés."

As for Bobi's own internal development, it has a parallel found in his past, in 1971 to be exact when he and some friends put up the coffee shop *The Little Prince* in the University Belt, Sampaloc, to serve as "hang-out for kindred souls." Coffee was the only thing available, and the pastries came "from anywhere."

The cafe easily hauled in "the serious young crowd" of the time. Bobi left when the place started serving beer and the ambience became stained with something unpalatable to him. But he clung to the ideal that led to *The Little Prince's* founding, the **Antoine Saint Exupery** line "You are forever responsible to what you have tamed."