



Gathering Dust

AN ARTIST PUTS A CREATIVE SPIN
(AND A STENCIL OR TWO) ON THE WELL-WORN PHRASE.

BY ANNICKA KOTEH

HARDLY ANYONE SPARES DUST a second thought; not until it's clogged sinuses, caused allergies, or revealed enough of itself to ruin furniture. The specks are a nuisance, meant to be swept into another's breathing space as soon as free time allows for impassioned cleaning. And like the most relentless of suitors, these little buggers keep coming back for more—usually in even greater numbers. Artist Vermont Coronel, Jr., however, has transformed a microscopic, everyday annoyance into an unusual visual medium.

The concept was first brewed in his studio, which was near EDSA, and therefore susceptible to inordinate amounts of dust despite having the windows closed. "It wasn't ordinary dust, but black dust that was harder to clear," he says. "Things from my table

would have an imprint when I lifted them, and that gave me the idea that I could control the imprint by means of a stencil."

Control it, he did. Vermont typically takes a few weeks to cut the stencils, and later pastes them on paper to create a framework. But instead of spray-painting the design, he let Manila's dust settle into the intended crevices, applying layer after layer of adhesive before using a fixative on the final print. The result? Images of concrete barriers immortalized in dust, exhibited during the 2015 Cultural Center of the Philippines Thirteen Artist Awards, and displayed semi-permanently now in the Metropolitan Museum of Manila.

Still, Vermont found himself working with the medium again. When he and Alfredo

and Isabel Aquilizan (known collectively in the art world as the Aquilizans) were commissioned for a project in Hong Kong, the group set out to use unconventional local materials in their art. The Aquilizans formed vehicular *molyes*, or leaf springs into the sickle-shaped components of a gigantic metal wing, while Vermont turned to dust—as a technique, not an idiom—for the second time.

"To create a body of work in connection to theirs, I used the images of the buses that take the Bicol route, since they had help from Tabaco, Albay in creating the sickles. Buses are the kings of EDSA, whether ordinary, air-conditioned, provincial, or city," he explains.

Perhaps aspiring art connoisseurs or environmentalists would read more into

it. What Vermont calls highway royalty, he wields pollution to reimagine. Dust in picturing the dust-makers, so to speak. Yet, any advocacies gleaned from these pieces are merely consequences of juxtaposition. "When I started using dust, I didn't intend to focus on creating a direct connection between buses and pollution," Vermont says. "What I wanted was to capture the floating particles present in the city. I wanted to create a visual from a rather invisible, but cannot-be-ignored part of urban living."

"Oftentimes, artists with themes that are rooted from shared experiences are pressured to define the direct connections between our work and what they should mean to the viewer. But I believe that what is exciting and meaningful in viewing art is the creation of the viewer's own meaning and interpretation," he continues.

Nevertheless, Vermont frequently makes a case for the overlooked and underrated. It's an artistic argument bolstered by his own experiences through the years, and that ultimately came to characterize his style. In light of this, he shares two appropriate narratives.

The first: A southerner-turned-city-dweller gets a job as a bike courier, explores the twists and turns of the metropolis on pedal, and covers more uncharted ground than he ever could have as a point-to-point commuter. Vermont recalls: "I saw a lot of places that somehow reminded me of Laguna. There was an old stone house that had been abandoned, with flora starting to take over the whole structure. And when I stood in front of it, there was this feeling that I was closer to home."

The second: A couple of college students witness the French artist Fremantle paint a woman's portrait with aerosols and about 12 layers of stencils. The kids scour the Internet about him and his craft, eventually stumbling upon a forum for all things stencil-related. And that was how Vermont's curiosity took off in a definitive artistic direction.

Both stories built the man. Vermont is still the boy from Santa Rosa looking for his hometown in the nooks and crannies of a big city, but he's also the artist with an outlet to channel that yearning today. The bike tours of his youth have likewise granted him a novel perspective on what others perceive as ordinary, and a contemplative worldview that emerges uninhibited through his works.

"For me, the point of my art-making is to re-introduce people to places or things that they ignore because these things have been such constant fixtures in their daily routes," he says. "Whether it's an old, abandoned

structure; crazy-tangled electric wires; or simple dust accumulations; these are images that, when given second glances, can produce interesting imagery."

Vermont has stenciled this mantra to canvas in two solo exhibits: *Spirit of a Place* in 2012 and *Dream/World* in 2013. The former featured city sights reminiscent of his childhood home, while the latter highlighted disintegrating structures that were once purposeful, yet lost their use over time. Between these and the dust pieces, he's had quite the inventive career. But there is always room to create and innovate, and that's exactly what Vermont plans on doing.

"I would like to continue creating works using stencils, and I'd love to discover other media to use," he says. As for projects, he's looking forward to another solo show this January 2017 at the Drawing Room Gallery

in Makati, as well as Pilipinas Street Plan's 10th anniversary exhibition. Vermont joined the local street art collective in 2006, and has since grown in his craft alongside a similarly talented community. He has painted walls, exchanged stickers, and done exhibitions with the group in that period.

Yet, when asked about how he classifies his art, Vermont easily replies, "I'm an artist, but not a street artist. What I have done so far can be categorized as street art or stencil art. [But] an artist can do a lot beyond the labels." It's a bold, albeit truthful statement mirroring his philosophy about what inspires him: the interesting qualities of a scene that the regular observer fails to notice. And frankly, it's an exciting declaration, as much as it is an assurance that just like dust, this guy is always going to come back with more. **E**

