Inside the World of Adeste Deguilmo

Words by Kristoff Peralta

This piece was originally written in 2020 for the now-defunct Southwall Magazine. I was commissioned to profile Cebuano artist Adeste Deguilmo. Unfortunately, this never made it to print and the online article is no longer accessible.

Adeste Deguilmo's career as a visual artist has felt like a divine providence that prodded him to where he is now. But like other artists, his career was slow magic.

For artists, the cradle of their art is an important chronicle in their life as this permits them to return to their roots and retrace their development as an artist and of their art form. Basilan-born Cebuano visual artist Adeste Deguilmo could attest to this act of coming home.

We arrived at the residence of Adeste in Canduman, Mandaue City, and he led us inside his quaint studio cabin that he revealed to be his solitary confinement, where he can be his most creative and divine. Inside houses an impressive exhibit of some of his artworks that assaulted our visions as soon as we came in; and a number of antique furniture pieces that add charm to the place—we fancied an old turntable that was playing a vinyl of jazz music in the background. Behind the capacious windows of the studio there is a lush oasis outside. We knew we were in for a treat.

Adeste was the sole child of a middle-class family. He could still recall his awareness of his passion for art at the age of four when he would lay on the floor of their house in Isabela, Basilan and fill it with doodles of chalk markings. Unbeknownst to him, this little corner of space would later on become his first canvas.

At their little sari-sari store, he would coax a neighbor to play him the guitar and draw him anything in any piece of paper that Adeste would later replicate as a form of practice. He also revealed that he used to draw the art projects of architecture students who had rented rooms in their house. In high school, he would consume a large amount of encyclopedic information on famous artists.

Even as a child, his father had been supportive of his passion. One summer during his fourth grade, he and his father would approach a film poster artist. The idea was for Adeste to expose him to the inner workings of the art world. This artist would someday

introduce him to the works of Martino Abellana of whom would become his future mentor.

Like other artists, he also faced a similar dilemma on what to take up in college. His uncles would persuade him to take up a medical course but he decided against it. It was like fate had a hand in this because he would later on take a Fine Arts degree at the University of the Philippines Cebu in 1983, where he would become a student and mentee of renowned Cebuano painter, Martino “Noy Tinong” Abellana, whose works he’d been exposed to at an early age. It was also in UP Cebu where he would meet his contemporaries such as Jojo Sagayno and Tito Cuevas.

After he obtained his arts degree in 1986, he went back to Basilan. But his family was forced to relocate to Cebu—where his mother came from—when Basilan was under siege by the rebels in 1987.

It was in Cebu where he landed his first job, painting mirror frames for a German export company. Three months later, he would move to Manila to realize his dream to work as a comics illustrator. His great interest in comics was consequential to this. However, it didn’t transpire when he was offered a job in the advertising agency, Olbes, Ogilvy, & Mather. For five years, the advertising world had become his playground as an artist.

Adeste eventually returned to Cebu and, together with his contemporaries, helped established the art group, Cebu Artists Inc., that would shape the art world in Cebu.

In 1999, he became a faculty member of the Fine Arts department in the University of San Carlos. He saw this as a chance to share his knowledge and philosophy of art to the new breed of artists. But it didn’t sit on him well that the academic life had curtailed his time from his true passion which is painting. He left the university in 2006 to focus on painting. His encounter and friendship with Celso Pepito would be crucial to his career. It was at this period that he would launch his career as a full-time visual artist.

From one movement to another

Drawing was the foundation of Adeste’s artistic development as evident in his earliest drawings and sketches bore from years of honing his craft. He would replicate illustrations from old illustrated bibles, comics, and film posters.

It was during his time at UP Cebu that he started to focus on painting. He began experimenting with realistic painting. His compositions are of diverse subjects and

elements, from mundane objects to portrait painting. His realistic paintings are adorned with women in their native dress of Filipiniana or Baro't Saya, ornate architectural structures that resemble famous European structures, natural landscapes that date from his trips abroad, and scenes of both modern and pastoral lives. There is a sense of homeliness and nostalgia in the way he captures these themes in his paintings.

In the course of his career, he developed a predilection to impressionism, an art movement introduced in the 19th century developed and popularized by Claude Monet, that uses short brushstrokes to capture the transient effects of light. He weaves this with a realistic aesthetic in a manner that is not overburdened with several elements or techniques all at once.

Adeste is also best known for his distorted art. He has put a contemporary spin called distortion art that started as a series of visual art. Distortion art, or as Adeste would call it, *distortus*, that is derived from Latin which means "to twist into different ways", is an art form that amplifies or exaggerates the qualities of a subject—a visual deviation of the natural. Reality is distorted in a way that is still perceptible and visually appealing yet peculiar and absurd. This art form evokes an enhanced emotional response to the viewers. His distorted art features humans with extended and disproportionate bodies like limbs and necks, and inordinate and intensified facial expressions.

Poetry without words

Adeste equates visual art to poetry in a way that both art forms are able to transcend the mundane experience to a spiritual plane. Both can capture the splendor and sorrow of life. Both forms communicate through our senses, which unfold as we experience each form.

He also reiterates the importance of art in one's life. In whatever form that is, painting, poetry, or music, art is a divine sustenance that is meant to feed the soul, and not a mere ornamental. This is his philosophy on art that is manifested not only in his works but as well as in his life. There is so much to see and understand in art but for Adeste, what matters most is for one to understand that art should free the soul.

"Whatever art movement you prefer, as long as the quality and soul of the work won't be compromised," said Adeste.

For Adeste, his art is a depiction of his faith and soul, a cornerstone of every facet in his life.