Joy Rojas

Words by Kristoff Peralta

I was commissioned by ArtPlus Magazine to author three artist profiles for their coffee table book, Ode to the Abstract, that was launched in November 2021. The two other profiles are Fred Tan and Macoy Coching.

Known to most as Joy Rojas, Jose Ferdinand M. Rojas II has worn too many hats to count. He is a lawyer, leader, writer, radio host, lay minister, and equestrian. Notably, he served as the chairman of the Philippine Racing Commission from 2008 to 2011, and the vice chairman and general manager of the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office from 2010 to 2016. But one thing is certain: he will always be an artist by heart.

The youngest Rojas among seven siblings, Rojas grew up filling up his notebooks from grade school to high school with drawings and sketches. Although he has a distinguished career as a lawyer, it would take him some decades to consider a career in painting. Even before, he has always nurtured his creative side. From his home to his workspace, he personally designs the interiors which also has helped him develop his own composition for his artworks.

Rojas is known to be a prolific painter. With four solo exhibitions already under his name in a span of three years, such is a testament to what writer Bum Tenorio calls as the omnipresence of his muse and his feverish desire to paint.

His abstract works were first seen in 2017 in his first solo show, *Strong Material*, which was well-received by the art critics and the art community. This was immediately followed by a second sold out show in 2018, *Material Maker*.

His oeuvre spans various elements and is inspired by several artistic stimuli. In his first two exhibitions, he explored the use of *matterism* or matter painting—a technique that emphasizes the material qualities of paint through heavy impasto into which other materials are added such as glass, sand, papers, buttons, and shells. Working with matter painting is like walking in an uncharted territory: it takes intuition and inspiration for all these materials to work as a whole. Rojas shows discernment in his works with his careful selection of elements and colors, and a subtle approach to materials and mark-making.

Horseshoes were his material of choice for a particular work. This experiment with horseshoes is his take on his experience as an equestrian and personal interaction with race horses in particular. As a horse breeder himself, he takes his inspiration from these venerable creatures that embodies freedom, speed, and power. A number of his pieces were named after race horses—"Majestic Ruler", "Silver Story," "Sun God," "Jade Hunter", and "Animo".

Apart from race horses, his spiritual faith and devotion also inform most of his works. In his third solo show, *Res Judicata*—the name of his champion racehorse, and a homage to his profession as a lawyer—Rojas veered away from block shapes and employed an emotive picture of the cruciform, which he accentuated with his signature renderings of seemingly old and worn textures and monochromatic palettes, with the addition of several layers of materials such as metallic foil, minute glass beads, pulverized volcanic rock, and sand.

Rojas is also best known for expressing depth and light through the use of metallic and iridescent hues which add an elaborate movement of sheen on each piece.
He also takes inspiration from his travels around the world. But the way he grasped his memory of the place is like a reversed color synesthesia. He would associate a certain color palette to cities and places he once visited, where the sensations he once felt in the place are transformed into colors—gold and copper recall Moscow and St. Petersburg; warm earth tones represent the western part of Massachusetts or New England States in autumn; blue and purple hues remind him of the idyllic South of France, particularly Biarritz, Saint-Paul de Vance, and Carcassonne.

This kind of stimulation in his memory informs his intuitive grasp of his pieces. There's a stark balance of restraint and reckless abandon in the way he treats the surface. There's an impression of spontaneity but also a harmonious stimulus in his oeuvre, like a state of calm violence.

Artist and art critic Cid Reyes would later describe his fourth solo exhibition, *Rising Sun*, as a deserved honorific because it augurs the coming of another great Filipino artist.

For Joy Rojas, his abstract works represent much more than simply a means of describing the world. His works are his way to synthesize and sunder his imagination,

memories, and emotions that surface as he paints, abstractions that “canter and gallop”.