Fred Tan

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 Macoy Coching and Joy Rojas.

Unlike other artists who started in their prodigal years, Fred Tan's career as an artist set off when he finally picked up the brush at the age of 50. He's old by societal standards. But in the pursuit of art, one is neither too late or too early. Unknown to many, his journey as an artist had been marked by grief and trauma. He had to lose his way in order to find the path of the artist he is meant to be.

The son of a Filipino-Chinese businessman, one would think Fred Tan had it easy and comfortable. At the height of the Marcos regime, he was forced to flee the country at 17. His father, Vicente Tan, sent him abroad to study in the US after Marcos had ordered a government takeover of companies that included the Continental Bank and Philippine Trust Company (Philtrust) of which Fred's father was a majority owner. His parents would later be detained at Fort Bonifacio for almost four years.

In 1996, his father strived to return to the banking business only to find out that eighteen months later the bank would go under. Fred moved to Singapore and started his own business of shophouses which did well for a time being. In 2014, he had to sell his business to return to the Philippines and help his father. Growing up in a traditional Chinese family, he was expected to uphold a positive pursuit for success. But success was lackluster.

He would lose his grandmother to a protracted illness and his grandfather to a sudden stroke. Then he was to deal with another loss of two of his friends who took their own lives after suffering from depression. The impact of these losses to Fred was too much to deal with that he had to confront and examine his own life. Grief, an ironic fate for this artist, became the compass that led him to what he truly desired to do: painting.

But before he showed up as artist Fred Tan, he was Toro and Luis Balmes.

Fred isn't inclined to describe himself as an artist and makes a humble claim as a painter. He feels the need to detach himself from the definition of what an artist should be; so he created and assumed different personas and hid under pseudonyms to afford himself a sense of freedom to create and put a facade of confidence.

As Toro, Fred was able to, in particular, examine and poke fun at the power of mass media, the culture of fame, and bad carbs in his third solo exhibition, *Over Carbs*. Celebrities, actors, and models were present that night that seemed to reflect the subject of his exhibition with the inclusion of a brass band, pole dancers, and Fred's own impression of a celebrity. Not to mention the incorporation of a video clip of Charlie Chaplin as the *Great Dictator*. The whole exhibition was a satirical spectacle that critiqued the role of spectacle.

Fred also became Luis Balmes--a portmanteau of a street in Quiapo and his grandfather's landlord and a third generation member of the family that produces Machuca Tiles, Luis Machuca.

It was the managing director of Galerie Francesca, Susanne Tiausas, who influenced Fred to be true to himself. He was adamant to stand behind his works as Fred Tan because it meant he had to embrace his past. The personas he created were an attempt to separate himself from his past and the name he felt marred of pain and loss. He felt disconnected with himself but he would learn much later in his life that to heal means to embrace his past.

In his first solo exhibition as Fred Tan, titled *Not a Sage, Not a Saint*, he came out to the public bearing the humble awareness that he only knows the inherent abstraction of life, and that he has yet to arrive at the knowledge of what life is supposed to mean.

In turn, his art became manifestations of his newfound philosophy that to take control of life isn't the plan of action but to let it flow as it presents itself rather than impose certain wishes and dreams to make it work.

"In another sense, the paint goes where it wants to flow to. The painter has no real control so is the life I live. I have no real control," Fred admits.

Fred lets the colors and the gesso speak for themselves, to flow on its own, to paddle into the unknown, that evokes and cascades an emotional rhythm and liberating

textures and fusions. He becomes one with the medium, and in the process, his compositions channel and elucidate his concealed emotions and inner turmoil he cannot contain or explain. “No matter how much resentment, pain, mistakes, the carefree wind blows to and fro. The mighty ocean waves come in and out. Allow the wind and waves to blow and wash out the resentment, pain, mistakes.” Clearly, grief and its aftermath became the impetus of his art.

In the end, it was art that started Fred’s healing journey, became the cornerstone of his success, and carried him through the vicissitudes of life.