

BUEN CALUBAYAN

The Artist as Biographer

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About the Author

Brylle B. Tabora, who graduated from the University of Santo Tomas with a degree in B.S. Biology, currently works as a television writer. His screenplay won second prize in the 2015 Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature. He was a writing fellow for poetry in the UST Summer Creative Writing Workshop (2014) and the 52nd Silliman University National Writers Workshop (2013), and a fellow for fiction at the 12th IYAS Creative Writing Workshop (2012) in Bacolod City. His short stories and poems have been published in the *Philippines Graphic*, *Heights*, *Montage*, *Silliman Journal*, and the *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, among others

For two years, visual and performance artist Buen Calubayan has engaged in the act of self-historicizing, as seen in his 2015 installation *Biowork* that takes stock of his own personal history. The exhibition is composed of paintings, sculptures, performance, documentation, and text. Accompanying the installation is a detailed timeline which includes his readings from Zizek to Steiner, and the highlights of his life informing his later artworks.

But the exhibit is nothing close to navel-gazing or artistic masturbation.

For the most part of his artistic career, Calubayan has been railing against systematic oppression, a fact greatly supported by his installation as part of the group exhibition for Thirteen Artists Award in the Cultural Center of the Philippines. His work, “On Spectacle and (Other) Awkward Rules on Killing by Means of Natural Selection,” invited audience to either poison the rats or just let them die of hunger. Perhaps this is a nod to OuLiPo founder Raymond Queneau, who said: “Rats who build the labyrinth from which they will try to escape.”

In his essay “Documents of Sabotage and Complicity,” Angelo Suárez says “Calubayan traffics in the readymade by traversing the functionalities of the divisions of the art context per se. On the one hand, he constructs wall-bound objects that display breathtaking craftsmanship that deserves hanging amid furniture that matches their palette in a collector’s home... On the other hand, these saleable objects constitute content—fodder, even—for the dynamic form of his biowork, whose totality may resist saleability but nevertheless remains commodifiable.”

LIGHT AND RESURRECTION

For most people, Calubayan is a self-effacing artist who holds pragmatic views. Although already a successful artist in his own right, Calubayan still seeks validation from other people. He had been struggling to remain true to his work, battling with the “demons of uncertainty” he has conjured. His good friend Susan Quimpo, a therapist, said “it was a struggle to know one’s self amidst an art trade that entices commercialism.” Calubayan felt he has lost touch with his success in the art scene. In 2012, he came in for an art therapy session with Quimpo in the hope of “validating” what it means to be an artist. “What’s next for me?” he asks.

Quimpo suggested to Buen to take a trip to Mt. Banahaw, where for some 10 years she had led annual pilgrimages. And he did. His research trip to Mt. Banahaw would frame *Biowork*. Overwhelmed by his journey, he took out his copy of

Reynaldo Ileta's groundbreaking book *Pasyon and Revolution*, cutting it into thin strips which he meticulously wove into a hammock.

"This exhibit, with the careful chronography of Buen's work, is his journey to finding his own liwanag," Quimpo said in her essay included in the catalog, titled "Biowork—The Quest for the Color Green, Light, and the Resurrection." "I am equally amazed at the twist and turns of Buen's journey... All these have profoundly ushered Buen... through a sleuth-like quest for the color green, light and resurrection."

Biowork is proof of Calubayan having lived a fruitful and interesting life. In it, he traces his artistic history from 2009, and even extends his plans to 2020.

In his earlier days, he worked as an instructor and museum graphic artist at the University of Santo Tomas. In 2011, he was dismissed for allegedly disregarding the University's by-laws after some officials questioned his paintings portraying atheistic themes. Calubayan filed a legal battle that he eventually lost.

In 2013, he would go on to win the Ateneo Art Awards for his exhibit titled *Fressie Capulong*. Subsequently, he was selected for the Ateneo-La Trobe University Visual Arts Centre residency grant.

POTENTIAL REVOLT

Part of *Biowork* is a stand-alone project called "Vanishing Point," which provides viewers with the opportunity to see an object with different points of view through a series of photo and video documentations. In his instruction, Calubayan remarks that the way we view things is shaped by our own belief system. But he made it pretty clear that our imagination has its limits, so our perception of things may differ from other. But while our imagination is bound by limitations, it is ever-expanding, a journey which can be spiritual.

In his artistic statement, Buen notes: "Vanishing Point seems pointless. This pointlessness can result [in] failure, then boredom. But while failure results [in] progress, boredom can lead to enlightenment. So, embrace it."

"Despite all of Calubayan's rage he is no mere rat in a cage," Suárez says of Buen's social experiment, "On Spectacle and (Other) Awkward Rules on Killing by Means of Natural Selection." "His inward flight towards the systemic oppression he must

embrace in order to critique could constitute the ground for a potential revolt,” Suárez concludes.

In his exhibition, Calubayan has laid down his past and future, which are nothing but “byproducts of the present.” So, what’s next for him? Judging from his personal history, a much more exciting career up ahead, and more stunning works in the foreseeable future.