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## **Conversations on Philippine Art, edited by Reyes**

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CONVERSATIONS ON PHILIPPINE ART. Edited by Cid Reyes.  
Manila: Sentrong Pangkultura ng Pilipinas, 1989. 198 pages, illus.

Think of a balmy afternoon by the sea. You're sipping a glass of iced tea. In comes a coterie of artists, critics, art historians and gallery owners. The conversation turns to sundry things about Philippine art: art movements, artists' careers, the gallery scene, influences on Filipino artists, art schools, critics and their critiques. Conversation gets stuck on "Filipinism" and defining that elusive Filipino quality, occasionally on some *tsismis*, fond memories of failure and triumph, nostalgia for some master who has since crossed the bar. There are moments of near agreement, but sometimes emotions get ruffled. There is never a dull moment as the artists, once stereotyped as inarticulate, become strangely articulate. There seems to be no apparent direction to the conversation, except that a persistent voice seems to steer it, leading insistently yet gently.

This gathering of artistic lights never happened. It's a dream. But Cid Reyes's *Conversations* is as close as we can get. Here, in the very contemporary form of the interview, are the actual words of thirty-one persons: twenty-eight artists, six critics/art historians, two gallery owners. If the mathematics doesn't balance out, that is because divisions are not clear cut. The critic might also be an artist, as Rod Perez is; or a gallery owner as is Arturo Luz. In fact, the conversations show that the whole of art-making—creating, critiquing, promoting, selling, and documenting—is very much like a cottage industry, namely, the product of the interaction among a small group of people bound by family ties, schooling, interest, or a transcendent love for beauty.

*Conversations* corrects many errors of fact, reminds us of many details we have forgotten, and tells us many more we don't know. Juan Arellano, not Victorio Edades, painted the first modern painting in the Philippines. That Edades came to be called "father" of modern painting, came from his learned debates with the classicists, Amorsolo and Tolentino. He became a spokesman because there was no one as articulate as he. And the debates, we are told, centered not on modern art versus traditional art, but on beauty and the "ugliness" of Edades' work. *Conversations* reminds us that the beginnings of AAP (the Art Association of the Philippines) weren't all that earthshaking: an informal gathering of alumni/alumnae of UP's School of Fine Arts. *Conversations* remind us that Fernando Zobel's lectures on art appreciation at the Ateneo in Padre Faura were the beginnings of modern art criticism. *Conversations* reveals to us the artists' work habits: H.R. Ocampo is obsessively systematic, Norma Belleza can work anywhere, Joya uses the lowly painter's *ubok* for impasto. In short, *Conversations* is grist for any future art history as it is contemporary art history itself. But it is precious grist, made more so by the passing away of many masters whose memories, words and passions are captured in the text.

The interview is a much-abused form. Less gifted and less intelligent writers can subsist on a few stock questions: who are you? what have you done? why

is your work significant? what do you want to tell our readers? The interview in less intelligent hands is banal. Interviewers can learn much from Cid Reyes's style: it is intelligent, informed and prepared. Preparation is the key to Reyes's success. Here is a sample of how he leads the artist/critic onward so that each question reveals even more than the one before. The conversationalist is Alfredo Roces, painter and critic. The conversation starts with Reyes' question on the "early years of modern art in our country." That leads to a discussion on the role of Edades in the birth of modern art, then to the work of artists H.R. Ocampo, Cesar Legaspi, Fernando Zobel, Arturo Luz, Anita Magsaysay-Ho, Jose Joya, Malang, Ben Cab. Then follows a whole discussion on why pop art cannot yet flourish in Manila. (Manila is just on its way to becoming pop!) This leads to conceptual art, to Filipinism in art and Botong Francisco, and the conversation goes on, led by Reyes, from whose tongue roll questions like: "Can you imagine, for instance, as a send-up or emulation of Warhol's Marilyn Monroe paintings, a serial painting on Nora Aunon?" The interviewer is knowledgeable in his field, and so the conversations become intelligent and intellectually satisfying.

*Conversations* is a very important work, and can set the standard for future works in the same genre. One's delight in it, however, is marred by printing flaws, and the newsprint edition which I read did not show the art pieces at their best. The text could stand more careful copy editing, or perhaps the publisher should change presses.

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A VOICE FROM THE HILLS. ESSAYS ON THE CULTURE AND WORLD VIEW OF THE WESTERN BUKIDNON MANOBO PEOPLE. By Francisco Col-om Polenda. Translated and edited by Richard E. Elkins. Manila: Linguistic Society of the Philippines, 1989.

This is a unique and lovely book, fully deserving of the National Book Award given it by the Manila Critics Circle in August 1990. It is certainly the first of its kind, being a voice from remote hills, from a people who have seldom been heard in their own voice.

Francisco Col-om Polenda is a Western Bukidnon Manobo. His people are the indigenous inhabitants of the southwestern quarter of the province. Barrio Barandias, his village, lies in the foothills to the southwest of Mount Kalatungan, about 30 kilometers west of the town of Maramag, Bukidnon. To this area came, in 1954, members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics to study the Manobo language and culture.

In 1956 a government settlement program brought hundreds of landless lowland settlers into the region, causing rapid change in the community, and