

Search for gems

Filipino artist Rodel Tapaya's works examine why people leave their homes to look for material treasures elsewhere

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Arts Correspondent

You could get lost in *Finding Diamonds*. Disparate images – an airplane, a backpacker looking through a telescope, curling vine leaves – overlap and collide in surreal fashion in this huge painting by Rodel Tapaya.

The 183cm by 222.5cm acrylic on canvas is one of the most striking pieces in his second solo exhibition here, *Diamond In The Distance*, on at Arndt Singapore in Gillman Barracks till Oct 25.

Filipino artist Tapaya's work draws on the mythology, folklore and fairy tales of his country, with a sprinkling of the spiritual. *Finding Diamonds*, painted earlier this year, is inspired by *Acres Of Diamonds*, an early 20th-century essay by American Baptist minister Russell Conwell.

The central theme of Conwell's work is that one does not need to look elsewhere for opportunity, achievement or fortune, as these can be found in one's own backyard, community and family.

Tapaya, who made his name with large-scale paintings which use ele-

ments of the Philippine mural tradition as well as elements of Latin American magic realism, says he was very taken by Conwell's idea.

"I look at the plight of overseas Filipino workers who look for gems elsewhere while leaving the people they love behind. Sometimes, they do not even realise the diamond mine is in their own backyard," the 35-year-old says.

This led him to a series of works exploring the distances traversed by overseas Filipino workers in search of material treasures.

Diamond In The Distance features 18 works with prices ranging from US\$5,000 to US\$63,000 (S\$6,950 to S\$87,600).

He tells *Life*: "I try to make visual narrative paintings. These are usually large scale and combine myths with issues we deal with in our everyday lives."

In 2011, he won the prestigious

Asia Pacific Breweries Foundation Signature Art Prize given out in Singapore. While he has been working on themes relating to Filipino migrant workers for 10 years now, his works have evolved to go deeper into many of the issues. There is greater stylistic experimentation as can be seen in the more complex and gestural brushstrokes in his recent canvases.

He now presents some smaller works too. These clearly demonstrate that he can also do more intimate portraits outside of his large tableaux.

Another equally compelling and layered work in the show, titled *Slave Broker*, was inspired by media reports on a Filipino former domestic worker in Indonesia, Mary Jane Veloso.

She was sentenced to death for drug trafficking in April, but was given a temporary reprieve by the

Indonesian government so she could serve as a witness during the trial of her alleged human trafficker.

Says Tapaya: "I was intrigued by her case. It shows one of the many victims of human trafficking, wherein illegal recruiters and organised crime syndicates entice poor people to work abroad for a better life."

"These people then sell everything they have just to raise money for the promised employment in a foreign land. They are often trapped into doing illegal things."

Despite its pop of colour, the images of a skull, cage and hooded figures cast a shadow over *Slave Broker*. Tapaya says the work is about how ignorant migrant workers became easily dazzled by these slave brokers offering false "diamonds" – better salaries, lives and future – and end up leaving their homes, livelihood and families behind only to face danger.

Never shying from dark and disturbing themes, Tapaya feels that, as an artist, it is important to address the injustices of the world. He lives in Bulacan, near Manila, and is married to Marina Cruz, also an artist. They have two sons aged seven and five.

Being an artist, he says, "is having licence and freedom to give form to one's ideas and thoughts" and go deeper into stories that sometimes get a brief mention in the media.

German gallerist Matthias Arndt says it is Tapaya's fascinating use of iconography that makes his paintings "globally appealing" and gives him an audience beyond his own country.

"The issues he represents through art – precarious living and working conditions, unfair wealth distribution, corruption and political conflicts – are universal topics that concern us all."

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VIEWIT / DIAMOND IN THE DISTANCE
BY RODEL TAPAYA

WHERE: Arndt Singapore, 03-21 Gillman Barracks, 9 Lock Road

WHEN: Till Oct 25, 11am to 7pm (Tuesday to Saturday), 11am to 6pm (Sunday), closed on Monday and public holiday

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: Call 6734-0775 or go to www.arndtberlin.com



Artist Rodel Tapaya (above) and his works, *Finding Diamonds* (top left) and *The Helpful Crocodile* (top). PHOTOS: ARNDT SINGAPORE