

Awestruck with Agency: Mark Andy Garcia's *The Attack of the Righteous**

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A large, stylized, dark grey letter 'W' that serves as a drop cap for the first paragraph. The letter is composed of three main vertical strokes with curved tops and bottoms, creating a sense of movement and depth.

When one looks at the latest works of Mark Andy Garcia, particularly those in *Recent Works* (Ayala Artist Space, June 2015) and *Blessings in Disguise* (West Gallery, January 2015), one would sense a ready (and easily readable) picture representing a pared-down narrative, occasionally with Biblical underpinnings, that portrays his favorite subjects—essentially his family and people around him. A body of stillness pulsates within the lush forest of his expressionistic brushstrokes, a palpable calm in the joyous, unstoppable rhythm of his gestures—whether he is evoking a modern-day, countryside Eden or the tangle of vines in an impenetrable woods.

Such an autobiographical strain has been the mark of the artist since his first solo show, *So Near Yet so Far*, at West Gallery in 2008. “His art indeed comes from the depths of his being,” writes Alice Guillermo on his show, *Things are Different Now*. “Perhaps he is among the most personal of artists as he draws from his life experiences the material of his paintings and reflects on them to gather what meanings they may reveal of his existence. He himself as artist felt himself as the living subject at the center of his universe” (“Painting Memories”).

But in *The Attack of the Righteous*, which won the grand prize in the painting category of Metrobank Art and Design Excellence in 2007, the figures are symbolic rather than representational, the silence is not present. In fact, the point of the work is to *subvert* silence, to blast off even its minute

* This piece won the Metrobank Foundation-Alice Guillermo Award in Art Criticism in 2015.

possibility in the *horror vacui* that is his work. Incinerating it is the visual rhetoric evoked by a multitude of forms—from recognizable imagery of religion, folklore, the military and contemporary life to a confetti of dashes and strokes. Together, they are articulated, juxtaposed and layered in *medias res*, without a beginning or an end, without an introduction or closure.

Such is the iconoclastic quality of the work that it offers not as a reliable precedent to what Garcia would eventually create as a successful full-time artist: *The Attack of the Righteous* is an outlier. While his succeeding works would feature a more refined sensibility and a more masterful control and certainty of the hand, the painting, in its first instance, embodied the energy of the artist at its most extravagant and violent, a collapse of all the deeply held notions about the proprieties of composition, a cry in the dark from all the psychical wounds connected to identity and history. It is one of those paintings that are essentially unrepeatable.

For Garcia, who has been recently proclaimed one of this year's recipients of the Thirteen CCP Artists Awards, the picture field of "The Attack of the Righteous" is a battleground of conflicting forces, dominated by a figure who spews a projectile—at once conflagration and flood—that curves, ribbons and ramifies in its attempt to scorch a small chapel which is protected by a band of red, fierce flames. The tank on which he is astride attacks the Sacred Heart while seemingly holding it aloft in its scintillating white fire.

Off-center, a figure weeps and verbalizes a cross, which accrues to some kind of incantation when one considers all the crosses that litter the canvas, visual punctuation marks that fill yawning gaps and delineate forms, both symbolic and fantastical. (In the upper left-hand corner, even the shadowy silhouette of a fighter jet looks like a cross.) A dog snarls and opens its jaws, all threat and no bite.

The painting—with its explosive images, broad painterly licks, repetitively manic marks and other gestural interventions—nods at Basquiat as much as Picasso, at Ang Kiukok as much as Garibay, but the totality of the artist's searing vision is unmistakably his own, as he forges along, attacking the canvas, unleashing the complexity from multitudinous worlds, offering no respite or platitude but, rather, a series of perpetual, energetic, almost violent displacements and juxtapositions: a rude awakening, a tonic for the sleeping mind.

It is a slippery slope then to concoct an overarching narrative with which to connect the disparate images without losing the stamina on which the work sustains itself. The painting's impact lies on its resistance to being verbalized. Each pocket of space seems to be saying something, but when taken with the adjoining field, a new image is formed, a new correlation is established. The painting is like a map: Navigation is only possible when the town or capital we are looking for is contextualized within its surrounding environs, within a larger world. The key is to take in the painting all at once.

When we look at the painting in its totality, we are confronting raw intelligence detonating its power on canvas, exorcising our expectations not only of what a painting should look like, but how it should act. Here, movement everywhere is enacted—a fleet of fighter jets, a rain of missiles, a field of coruscating marks. In this world—or worlds—created by Garcia, everything is governed and operates with agency, already alive at the first contact of brush, accruing to such a fever-pitch intensity that everything seems to be on fire. This is not fire of self-annihilation, but of control towards others, by necessity or malice, both with brutal force. The painting burns.

While it is easy to assume that the scene in the painting acts out the fight between good and evil, between forces of power and symbols of piety, what it ultimately represents is the texture of history itself, how it is not a succession, but rather an accumulation, of events. Perhaps, the painting is a vision of the wreckage that Walter Benjamin alluded to in his reading of *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee, the terrific pile of events (that constitutes human civilization itself) which the Angel History stares at with horror but can't turn his face away from, as he is dragged by fierce winds which the philosopher called "progress."

In Mark Andy Garcia's work, that history is our own.

Works Cited

Garcia, Mark Andy. *The Attack of the Righteous*. 2007, mixed media, Cultural Center of the Philippines.

Guillermo, Alice G. "Painting Memories." *MarkAndyGarcia.com*, 9 Mar. 2013, www.markandygarcia.com/2013/03/recent-solo-exhibition-things-are.html. Accessed 17 Aug. 2015.