"The Picasso of Philippine Pottery" Gulf News June 4, 2004 by Barbara Mae Dacanay

April 03, 2014 / Hadrian Mendoza

Mendoza has perfected the abstract and minimalist forms that went well in the making of stoneware pottery

Hadrian Mendoza, 30, a stoneware maker, can be called the Picasso of Philippine pottery because of his fearless and audacious search for the unusual and indigenous forms, including expressionistic shapes, despite the limitations of pots and vases.

Mendoza was a business administration graduate of the Mary Washington College and a one year old student at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington D.C., before he hankered for roots and willfully transported himself to Manila to become a stoneware potter by end of 1997.

"I gave myself 10 years to pottery then," he recalled.

At the start, he had an eight-month of apprenticeship with Jon Pettyjohn, a famous Fil-American master potter in the Philippines. Mendoza's quid pro quo for the master then was "energy for wisdom in pot making". True, Mendoza was on the road to become a humble craftsman.

"But the truth is, I wanted to put some culture into my work. I didn't know how, but I knew it could be done by working in my own country," Mendoza explained.

While in Manila, he meditated on being a Filipino. In the process, he slowly metamorphosed into an individualistic and a nationalistic artist with a keen and hungry eye for Southeast Asia's indigenous forms, even as he perfected the abstract and minimalist forms that went well in the making of stoneware pottery, the way it is currently done in the Philippines.

The perfection of his craft, he said, always remained inversely proportional to his intense and deliberate attempts at achieving heavy cultural undertones for his works, a predicament that began when he vowed to be become a potter while he was still in the US.

In eight years, Mendoza has made three distinct phases that could be called major landmarks in Philippine pottery, in terms of achieving meaning and symbols for his works.

From 1996 to 1997, while he was still an arts student in the US, he made 30 gigantic jars, some of them taller than his 1.77 metres.

His "Chain Vase," made in early 1997, is a tall brown jar with a distorted, semi-sunken, and anguished mouth. Its tapering body and round belly are textured with coils that were earlier shaped by his fingers. The vase is decorated with criss-crossing black chain that, after a long glance, begins to look like a spine.

Gaping windows

Another piece, entitled, "Bahay Kubo (the Philippines' nipa hut)," has four round pots stacked on top of the other. There are small gaping windows (or wounds) at the seams where they are connected, making them stand tall with fragility. The whole piece is embossed with spine-looking chain.

"The bahay-kubo was implanted in my mind (when I was a young boy). But when I was making pottery, I didn't realise that I was making bahay-kubo with pots until the whole piece was fired," he said.

Mendoza's first jars have become archetypal of his "coming of age," of a voice that strongly speaks of rejection of oppression, of a strong desire for manhood, identity, dignity, and the flowering of one's culture, a passion common nowadays among many Asian artists who have been separated, by force, from their own cultural milieu.

"I think I have found my home here," he said. It was a subtle way of saying, "I don't want to be alienated again," a phrase often heard from many talented Fil-Americans, who in search of intensities and identity, have decided to come home and arduously embrace their own culture, with intuition more than reason.

In 1980, Mendoza was seven, in grade one at the prestigious San Agustin Elementary School, in Dasmarinas, Makati when his mother Rica brought him and his older brother Jo-Vincent and younger sister Patricia to stay in the US. His father, Victor, a corporate giant in one of Manila's rising companies, was left behind. Although the new Filipino immigrants settled in a good neighbourhood in Washington D.C., Mendoza recalled, "There were times when I saw my older brother being beaten up and I could not do anything about it."

Even in hindsight, Mendoza barely underlines anything personal and cultural to the old pieces that he has made in the US. Explaining them, he said, "I was making pots that were taller than me to test how big I could work on stoneware; to test how high the clay could go, how thin and thick the clay should be, how to stack them together, and create a distinct mark on where they are attached.

"The bigger the size of the piece, the better is the movement for the glaze. There is more challenge in applying three layers of glaze without brush strokes coming out on the big pots," he explained. "There is intimacy in making big jars," he added: "You spend a couple of days with them. You're dedicated to them. In comparison, you finish small pieces in a day."

Importance of bamboo

In March 2003, five years after he became a potter, Mendoza accidentally discerned the importance of bamboo, a common grass in the Philippines, as a possible core of Philippine indigenous form. He was then creating nodes with a piece of wood, on a vase that was turning on his potter's wheel. Instantly inspired, he made three tubular shapes which he stacked together,

and created bamboo pieces as high as three to four feet. Glazed with ipil ash, they were subjected to reduction firing in his 1.5 metre tall kiln, which he made near his home in Laguna in 2001.

"My goal is to put culture into my work, so that when people see my pieces, they are not only recognised as Mendoza's, but as pieces that come from this region," he explained.

But after creating 50 bamboo jars and its variations, Mendoza said he was done with the "very Philippine shape".

Some of these pieces were shown at the 139 Gallery in Makati Commercial Centre's Glorieta in December 2003, and at the Magnet Gallery in Makati's Paseo de Roxa Avenue in January 2004.

In early 2004, Mendoza started experimenting on the Manunggul Jar, a prototype of Southeast Asia's 3,000 year old funereal vessel, (dated 710 to 890 BC), which was unearthed by Filipino and American archeologists in the Tabon Caves of Palawan, in southwestern Philippines in March 1964. The remains of a 3,000 year old man were also discovered in the same cave.

When the old Manunggul Jar was found, anthropologist Robert Fox was delighted and said, "It is the work of an artist and a master potter. It is the most beautiful burial jar [ever] found by archeologists in the whole of Southeast Asia."

A drawing of the old Manunggul jar is featured on the P1,000 bill.

On top of the cover of the old Manunggul Jar is a death boat with two seated figures, one at the rear is holding a paddle, and the one infront who has his hands folded on his chest. Both have covered heads and jaws.

Enamoured with the piece, Mendoza said, "I have the same boat and the same seated figures. But look closely, the bodies are moving differently [they are not as deathly and as zombie-looking as in the old jar]." He also placed the boat with seated figures on a big circle with a stand, which has been used to symbolise the male and the female gender.

Lower depths

With his new pieces, the youthful Mendoza who, as an artist, has had his share of the overpowering lower depths, believes that he has resurrected life and claimed the value of courageous journey from the antique Manunggul jar. Placing more colorful glaze on his new jars, he thinks he has also overpowered the underlying sense of life's eternal return on the old Manunggul jar.

"I am not afraid of taking things of history and putting them in my work. I am not replicating them, I am imitating them and putting them in a different form (to achieve a different meaning)," he explained.

Living in the Philippines has challenged and energized him. In 1998, his personal and avant-garde pieces were featured in his first one man show at the Metropolitan Museum. One of them

was entitled "Self portrait," a red and brown piece made of three straight cylindrical shapes stacked on top of each other, at the top of which is a small tip with curly locks, similar to his hari-do at the time. He has enlarged a small antique Chinese jar for beer, to three feet and to make it look like an overweight hedonist.

He almost failed to settle down in Laguna, southern Luzon where his studio is located. Soon after his apprenticeship with Pettyjohn an his first one-m,an show, he returned to the US in late 1998, where he fired kilns in exchange for studio time at some artists workshops. "There were times when things got stagnant and I felt strangled,"he recalled. Changes happened when Pettyjohn asked him to come back and establish in 2000, the Pettyjohn-Mendoza school of pottery at Makati's Greenbelt commercial centre.

At home with his clay, he said, "Every time I make forms, subconsciously (or instantly) I can think of glazes," He has developed an intimate relationship with his works. "I can see what a piece went through from the time it was shaped to the time it was fired. I can see how the clay was made thin, how it was stretched out and moved in a position it does not naturally like, until it was shaped and fired to one's desired shape," he explained. He has become a humble craftsman after serving at the feet of his own cultural dilemas as an artist.