

## **JULIO JOSE AUSTRIA: OFF-SHORE, ONSHORE, ASHORE**

By: Jeho Bitancor

"Art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can only be explored by those willing to take the risks".

*-Mark Rothko*

As a statement or a dictum aptly abided by the artist, the pursuit of art (or the life associated with it) is not a trip to paradise. It is not an easy route for those who denounce apathy, complacency and mediocrity. And while uncertainty is a byword or a maxim operative within each act of creative articulation, the decision to deviate or pursue is guided by intent; through whim, intuition, wisdom or sheer sense of adventure. Thus for Julio Jose Austria, who manages to bring-forth manifold layers of meaning through his recent show entitled REROUTE, the act of making art and the pursuit of it (by all means and cost) becomes an Apotheosis for the creative but nevertheless suffering/struggling individual.

REROUTE as a word, indicates redirection or change. Could this be the artist's formal explorations into the "unknown," or his actual physical relocation in an unfamiliar ground? Either way, the artist acknowledges multiple forms of impetus that parallel his migratory experience, of defining his sense of being while establishing his locality at the same time. For Austria, to deviate is to evolve in the creative process, while discovering other avenues of engagement from where to discern commonalities and differences, and eventually assert/assess particularities as contributions.

As typical of a Filipino, Austria can best narrate by heart, by taking us on a pictorial journey travelling through a myriad hurdles as we move and pass. As we take this journey offered by Austria, our perception warps us to view

comfort and ease as remote aspirational societal order. The artist also uses as metaphor natural phenomena such as typhoons and tropical depressions (that have mired our country ever since) as symbolisms for the tumult inside of him. In his eleven medium to large scale paintings in oil, picture planes are treated as colliding cosmos of disparate shapes, ambiguous lines, and clashing contrasts of colors and texture that defy conventions of pictorial organization. Austria explores tension, struggle, contradiction and movement as proverbial definitions of Diaspora, in his signature and characteristic bravura that he has been known for.

In the particular work entitled "Armed Struggle," androgynous silhouettes are suspended in the air, as if hoping, aiming, and aching to reach the void beyond, while the murky background spews vowels of destitution. "Fresh off the Boat" represents the quintessential depiction of the wanderer as a clueless soul, disembarking upon elsewhere or nowhere. Moreover, the artist's crude, almost naïve application of paint coupled with constricted formal organization of elements, echo the same existential anguish made iconic by Edvard Munch's seminal work "The Scream."

Such tensions are explored and presented further in more dynamic compositions that mimic a deluge or the certainty of doom. "Projected Path," "Spring Passion," "Dynamo," and "Assimilation" resonate with the same energy that stands out as outstanding representation of the artist's ability to generate emotional response by his commendable ability to manipulate form and color. In these works, swirling waves of strokes and dissonant drips battle against the dominant masses of grey clouds, even as minutiae of vague figurations eke out manifestations of existence from beneath. Are there crawling beasts beyond his and our sights? Save for the representational elements that have been used to weave together the elements of the exhibition theme, Austria's command of the visual language rendered in the narrative of abstraction can very well stand exceptionally on its own merits.

While artists' in general confine their narratives within the boundaries of their personal concerns, Austria transcends these boundaries. His art is not the dilettante's affair, usually betrayed by the slapdash manner and "aimless meandering towards nowhere." We see Austria as consciously and continuously evolving as an artist of integrity and vision, so much like his esteemed peers who have reaped bounties of accolade in different but equally challenging fields of art.