

Santiago Bose 1949 – 2002

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Put simply: one of Asia's greatest artists died last December.

Santiago Bose was a complex, many-layered man. Santi Bose: friendly, articulate, humorous, engaging, intellectual, jealous, angry, funny, loving, disorganised, artistic, organised, promiscuous, temperamental, competitive, entertaining, creative, revolutionary, committed, rebellious, caring, self-centred, generous, annoying, polite....

....thank God I knew him because words – these sort of words; and, believe me, Santi's character did reflect all these adjectives – are immeasurably inadequate to describe him.

Santi died in Baguio City, Philippines on 3 December 2002 of renal failure – earlier that day a cardiac arrest had left him unconscious. Text messages peppered the widespread Philippine art and cultural community around the world with the news. And later that morning shocked text and email messages announced his death....'I miss him already....' stated one.

Santi constantly complained about living in Baguio and the Philippines. And often talked, though it sounded more like a threat, of moving to Australia or Canada. As I often joked with him: if you lived in the 'efficient' West, Santi, you would have nothing to complain about. He would growl and then immediately launch into another story, another joke, another tangent, or squint at his cell-phone and chuckle at one of the many silly jokes that cluttered his mind and would be a constant amusement/exasperation to his listeners on the re-telling (all thinking to themselves: if he would only stop chuckling before the punchline the story/joke would be told so much quicker!). Santi's heart was in Baguio, in the mountainous Cordilleras of Central Luzon. He often left and he always returned.

Santi was a true bohemian; his lifestyle, loves, drugs, friends, interests. A life generally free of the middle class impedimenta that many aspire (though, strangely, Santi would – often without any hint of sarcasm - dream of these very same status symbols and trappings - and concerned enough for each of his children to have solid university education). His interests were scattered and eclectic. He often said that he preferred 'hanging out' with writers and film-makers – indeed some of his most vivid anecdotes related to the Marcos years of the 1970s when the arts were heavily supported and art, writing, music and film thrived. He was at the time art director of *Ermita* magazine: an intellectual beacon (in the Australian *Nation Review*-ilk) covering arts, culture and politics - still considered a high point in Philippine publishing.

I have rarely met a person more interested in knowledge and intellectual debate. Fixated in my mind will always be Santi's intonation on learning something new – his questioning acknowledgement of "is that right?". And I have rarely met an artist so interested in the work of other visual artists: he would look, look intently and talk to artists about their work and ideas.....

Art: his life was committed to it. He was passionate and would talk endlessly: his opinions, his likes and dislikes; art personalities were freely talked about and praised or dismissed. His many enthusiasms were infectious and he had a rare ability to create an atmosphere, bring people, diverse people together. Santi was one of the founders of the Baguio Arts Guild; one of Asia's first artist-run collectives that organises the Baguio Arts Festivals. It was a meeting point for artists from around the world and much of its success was due to Santi's hard work and friendly persuasion. In later years 'the Guild' – with its disparate group of artistic characters – was racked with wrangling, argument and intrigue; Santi was often in the middle of it!

Santi explored an eclectic mix of media and techniques in his own art. He was a graphic artist, printer, painter, installation artist, web-page, film and video designer and years earlier when asking another artist how he was able to attend so many international art events discovered that if he became an installation and performance artist then he himself would be invited to travel rather than just a crate of his paintings. That was Santi – no artistic challenge was ever dismissed.

When the histories are written, Santi's work will be seen as pivotal. Santi developed a hard-nosed visual re-writing about Filipinos and Filipino history. His fundamental artistic 'innovations' include being one of the very first modernist Asian artists to consciously use indigenous materials in his art (1) rather than just working in the Western canvas and paint tradition. And, it is in his early controversial re-assessment and explorations of post-colonial (both Spanish and American) Filipino psyche and history that contributed to opening up a new genre of Philippine artistic expression. He was one of the leaders and is an important precursor and influence on the work of younger artists (Mark Justiniani, Alfredo Esquillo, Manuel Ocampo, Alwin Reamillo, the *Sanggawa* art collective among others) who later explored similar themes and always saw Santi as one of the few Filipino artists of his generation who 'didn't sell out'.

Over many years Santi's work saw the development of a particular angle ('style' is not correct as Santi was never about style!). He used pre-colonial animist symbols combined with post-Spanish *anting-anting* (amulets often depicting bastard Latin and religious imagery) that would be painted or transferred over a central painted narrative (2) – Santi believed that both pre-colonial animist and post-colonial Christian symbols was a metaphor for your average Filipino and this body of work makes powerful historical and contemporary socio-political commentary (3) - it was also unique, innovative and shocked many viewers to acknowledge that Filipino life and Filipino history needed to be critically portrayed and analyzed.

Santi's links with Australia were strong: a regular visitor, a 'friend' of the first three APTs, art residencies at Griffith University and Southern Cross University, performances at the Adelaide Festival of Arts and, of course, his long artistic, personal and intellectual relationship with Pat Hoffie and their daughter Visaya.

Notes:

1. See for example his installation *Passion and Revolution*, installation, mixed media with bamboo and hand-woven textiles, 135 x 324 x 54 cms, 1983, and then reconstructed at the First Asia-Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery, 1993.
2. See for example *Of Martyrs and Nationhood*, acrylic on canvas/painted panel, 122 x 210 x 2 cms, 1997. Collection of Singapore Art Museum.
3. For further explanation see John Batten: 'Santiago Bose', *Asian Art News*, May/June 1997; and Alice Guillermo: 'Renewing Historical Memory', *Asian Art News*, January/February 2000 and various web-sites.

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