

# Santiago Bose

by John Batten

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Santiago Bose has strong views about art, society and culture - he believes each bounces off the other, freely intermingle and often collide. The global village is here and with easy travel opportunities and mass communication cultures will irrevocably be changed: domination by one culture over another is inevitable. However, positive synergy's will occur; and, sometimes, misunderstanding.

"While in Australia in 1994, I produced work by using a magnifying glass and burning paper. I was once accused of appropriating the dot-style and images of some cave paintings (see *On Meeting the Dreamers of the East Coast*) usually associated with Australian Aboriginal artists; I replied that no-one owns culture - that appropriation has to be in context. If anything, the dots and lines I used in Australia have closer links to the body art and tattoos seen in The Philippines or even the dashes seen in Lapita pottery - an historical style used throughout the Pacific. The cave paintings of France are very similar to those seen in Australia. It was only over time that cultures diverged."

It would be ungenerous for anyone to accuse Bose of appropriation or of other acts that undermine minority cultures - his art always points an accusing finger at institutions that demean, have destroyed and are destroying traditional cultures. Bose's art focuses on the stultifying role of the Catholic Church, the weakening of basic social values due to modernity and the Philippine's long heritage of colonial oppression and cultural domination.

Santiago Bose's art is all about culture - social, political, religious, personal, individual: all serious culture. He believes artists must share ideas and educate people and reflect the concerns of society. There is a constant dialogue happening in The Philippines - social injustice, inequality, the loss of traditional Filipino values and entrapment in the poverty cycle is blatantly apparent on the street - and it is debated and discussed on street corners; the media is also one of the freest in Asia - so, Bose's themes are actually an accurate mirror of the concerns of many Filipinos.

"You know, historically there's no word for 'art' in any of the Filipino languages - the tagalog word 'sining' has recently been coined, but its meaning is closer to the English word 'culture'," says Santiago Bose. So, traditionally art was never considered separate - decoration of a bowl was seen as integral as the domestic functions of the bowl.

In many ways this view of art is still paramount in The Philippines. Says Bose: "If there were a hierarchy of the arts in The Philippines most people would probably place writers and film-makers at the top - visual artists are considered craftsmen, or, at best, on the same level as other two-dimensional artists, such as tatooisists".

It's difficult being accepted as an artist in The Philippines; your value to society is often viewed problematically, and the idea that an artist is also an educator is treated with (often, good humoured) skepticism. Bose - an artist with such strong social and political convictions - has often received greater recognition away from The Philippines than from within. He has exhibited in Australia, USA, Japan, West Germany, Indonesia, Central and South America and has travelled to international art conferences in China, England and Australia.

Bose has been a pioneer over the last 15 years in promoting Filipino (and Asian) art to a world that often only looks to the West for benchmarks of excellence. Bose has now been joined by a younger generation of Filipino artists who strongly feel that Asian art has something to say and an ability to say it well. Bose has been an inspiration to this younger generation of artists who have also travelled and received international recognition - artists such as Mark Justiniani, Alwin Reamillo and Noel Cuizon have all benefited by the trail that Bose cut.

"I left The Philippines and lived in the USA during the 1980's - it was there that I discovered my Filipino-ness." Experiencing life as a member of a minority culture and working closely and collaboratively with the Cherokee artist Jimmy Durham helped Bose shape a strongly expressive style of art - in a series of installations in USA and through the numbing experience of working as a commercial artist in New York, Bose developed his own ideas and a set of themes that he has been exploring since the 1980's.

Bose is from Baguio in the mountains of Northern Luzon - he is a native Ilocano speaker and his own values are strongly influenced by his rural upbringing; a life so different from the urban inhabitants of Manila. In Baguio there is a sense of place and a concern for community that Bose feels is quickly being destroyed in urban Manila by TV, pollution, the pressures of money and mass communication - traditional Filipino values are under pressure from the cultural domination emanating from economically stronger countries and the trappings of consumerism. Bose uses the example of jeepneys (elongated jeep-shaped Philippine public transport) that are often named in homage of the country that provided employment and helped buy them: jeepneys such as "Shinjuku Ninja" - bought for her Philippine family by a Filipina overseas contract worker working in Japan and named after the Tokyo area in which she works.

"I greatly respect our ancestors - they perfected a balance in their living". Bose's involvement in the Baguio Arts Guild often reflected his basic Ilocano respect for nature, the environment and traditional community values. The Baguio Arts Guild runs community arts education classes and during its Art Festivals (the next scheduled in 1998) Bose's own art has centred around installations using found and natural objects - still expressing his characteristic political and cultural themes - it's his acknowledgment of being Filipino.

An attraction to mountain air, a laid-back lifestyle and an opportunity to teach led Bose to accept, in 1994, a position as a Visiting Research Fellow at Southern Cross University in Lismore, Australia - a town with a similar, albeit Australian, character as Baguio. This residency was particularly successful - his ability to relate to a wide variety of people led to many friendships and his artistic output was inventive, critically well received and prolific. Bose presently spends equal amounts of time in both Brisbane, Australia and in Baguio.

Bose's latest exhibition was in March 1997 - *Anting-Anting: Reflections on Power Symbols*, at Manila's Hiraya Gallery; he powerfully explores cultural domination in his latest series of mixed media paintings - this is in-your-face 'education' at its most uncompromising. Using *anting-anting* - Filipino amulets or talismans - as a reference point and physically placed on his constructed paintings (see *Opium of the Masses* and *Dasal ng Kawal* - "Soldier's Prayer"), Bose explains that, "anting-anting (have undergone) a process of empowerment, mostly through rituals, incantations, sometimes even through leaving them underneath statues and churches for a period of time. That's how they gain their spiritual and magical powers. These objects and symbols give people hope through difficulties. They are a material reflection of the Filipino people's collective psyche that have been used for centuries to protect them from cultural domination." 1.

In The Philippines the trappings of cultural domination are everywhere - the Eagle's *Hotel California* can be heard *ad infinitum*, the radio DJ with an West Coast accent, and the wearing of baseball hats are all obvious examples. In Quiapo - on the edge of Manila's Chinatown - the Catholic church seems to be having all-day masses and prayers; there is a constant stream of people entering, genuflecting, receiving mass and generally being spiritually cleansed - but just outside the open doors of the church a mass of old women is selling *anting-anting*.

The contrast between the western Catholic church and the animist amulet sellers is large - it is this type of cultural conundrum that Santiago Bose attempts to explore in his art.

1. Santiago Bose, *Journals of a Cultural Drifter*, Southern Cross University Museum, 1994, p 8.

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