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Eulalio Fabie De Silva Interview

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Interviewer: Alvin Sandique

Artist: Eulalio Fabie De Silva

**In person interview- DePaul University Arts and Letters Building, Chicago, IL
5/18/2012; Follow-up phone interview 5/25/2012**

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Arts & Culture during the 2012 Spring Quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design.



Photo of Eulalio Fabie De Silva by Michael Patrick Silva
Courtesy of the artist ([face book.com/fabiedesilva](https://www.facebook.com/fabiedesilva))

Artist Bio: Born the 6th of June 1968 in Manila, Philippines, Eulalio Fabie Silva, III was named after his internationally acclaimed Philippine artist father [see Bueno Silva interview, 2010]. Growing up within an artistic environment helped him set himself in the footsteps of his father in the endeavor of the visual arts. Eulalio, the first of 4 siblings of the elder artist, emigrated to the United States in 1980 and later continued his quest to become an artist while being educated at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1989. De Silva has continued exhibiting in various group shows around Chicago while serving as a curator/exhibitor at the North Lakeside Cultural Center of Chicago during the early 90s. He has exhibited to make his own indelible mark in creating his own genres and compositions based on visual observations of landscapes and figures amidst their emotional or existential life. He taps on the famed Gauguin's ever questioning stance: *D'où Venons Nous / Que Sommes Nous / Où Allons Nous (Where Do We Come From?)*

What Are We? Where Are We Going?)...the question of our own identity, our immediate surroundings and other beings.

De Silva's main influences are from the plein-air artists and abstract expressionists of the 50s and 60s that favor the formal qualities of a painting processes of building then rebuilding, creating then defacing while giving importance on expressing the internal turmoil and triumphs through brushstrokes and color.

Signing his work "Eulalio Fabie de Silva" set himself separate yet descended from his father while having the same name and endeavor on the arts while acknowledges his mother's maiden name "Fabie" – a tradition inherited from the Spanish culture that occupied his homeland, the Philippines for 350 years. "De Silva" is from the original surname before it was "shortened". Thus the symbolic gesture correspond to the "new" name signify a new outlook in life as a person and as an artist.

De Silva is married to Roseanne Rasmussen of Niagara Falls, NY is an aspiring poet of her own who recently published her poem "The Homeless Man" with other poets in the anthology entitled: "ETERNAL HEARTLAND". Michael Patrick Silva, their lone offspring is a potential artist/chef/inventor at 13 years old who won the Best of Show, 1st Prize (Kindergarten - High School), Best in Painting and Critics' Choice award in Bloomingdale Art Museum at the age of 4. He is now a 7th grader at Aspira-Haugan Middle School.

- Bio courtesy of the artist, 2012

Interview Transcript:

Alvin Sandique: What did it feel like for you at first stepping outside of the shadow of your father?

Eulalio Fabie De Silva: It feels so *au naturel*. Though it was only latter part that I seemed to come outside of the shadow of my father, I've been drawing my heart out since I was a kid. Thus even now while I am painting, rekindling my childhood wasn't so hard in order to evoke the childishness in the modality of my painting processes – which is quasi-abstract-expressionistic and demanding a childlike mannerism of sincerity and playfulness combined. Thus, it is only a public perception that questions like this one would hope to conjure responses that would rhyme with redemption. But really there's no feeling of that, but in fact more of "ah, this is what my father has told me about" together with the information I've learned from school.

AS: What kind of inspiration has your father being an internationally known artist done for yourself and your works and your inspiration as an artist?

EFDS: My dad is a self-taught artist and he found his own voice. Though I went to school, I feel that I am a self-taught artist likewise. It's not like I found it in school...I grew up within the arts going to galleries, museums and seeing my dad exhibits. Working

with him and had a personal relationship with him beyond the dad-son thing, but in an artistic way. We were in the papers while living in Fredericksburg, VA in the 80s showing me holding an umbrella for him as he paints *plein air* [location painting in the tradition of the French Impressionists]. We discuss, argue, live and eat paints, if you will, and even now he is still a bit insecure about not being able to go to school as an artist but little does he know that his knowledge, expertise, talents are BEYOND what they teach in school....beyond theories. He is eloquent with the brush, though not verbally. Humble, reserved but confident and able. And so I have learned to instill inner strength through inner passion; those things that I've learned, observed and part of life that cannot be ever taught in schools.

And so for me, it is inevitable that he was acclaimed internationally - first being associated with Marcos back then and First Lady Imelda painting dignitaries that include Prince Bolkhia of Brunei [Borneo], Pope Paul VI, whom he met and was acclaimed and given a medal, Pope Paul II via First Lady Imelda and his portraits were published and [his] paintings brought to the Vatican. He also painted the late President Ronald Reagan in the early 80s supported by the GOPs but unfortunately didn't get to meet him personally but was invited to go to the White House...unfortunately President Reagan was shot and after that, security tightened and didn't push through. The portrait was missing, a mystery when it was stored in San Francisco, under the Philippine Embassy...to this day nobody knows where it is.

But, back to his internationally acclaimed status, sure I find it as an inspiration. It is inevitable though. But instead of being in the shadows, it strengthens me further that I can have my own identity and thus I think that I am living his legacy, but in my own accord as well. I know that he is proud of me too and we both LEARN from each other. Yes, even in his advanced age, he continues to learn new things, and so for me that is a big moral and a teaching tool that nothing is really hard. So art has become a playful thing for me....sure the dilemmas expressed but all in all, the joy of explorations and expressionism has overshadowed the dark side of it.

What dark side? Well, every artist has to deal with their own self-perception and dilemmas. Their own demons if you will...as for me, I am still young and discovering more and more, thus I think that I don't have to bog down and single out any specific styles, thoughts or concepts but just as the Filipino/Spanish term "Tira" [meaning shoot]. "Just Tira!" - my father can easily say those things figuratively and literally, and he still does. So both of us have instilled a deep and quiet resilience, and the artistic being to explore what life offers. I do have a distinct view of life despite our sharing of life and art, thus my own individuality is already persisting but despite that, the more I "pull" myself from him, the more I see that I am assimilated with the world. Thus confirming that art is indeed universal.

AS: How did you feel about getting into art even though your mom didn't want you to be involved?

EFDS:In the same token I didn't feel the redemption part but like the above question, I

do feel *au naturel* about the whole thing. Retrospectively, I really think that it did me even better that I was muzzled since all the bottled-up expressionism was tamed and disciplined in so much that I have learned to be patient and have a lot of gas in the tank, so to speak, to express and explore for the rest of my life/career. Coming out, if you will, was a relief but I know that I didn't have to use these alibis to fuel my art. My art bespeak of universality albeit unique in that it is through my own existential experiences.

AS: What piece of yours are you most proud of and why, and if there was one, which one do you think was most controversial?

EFDS: The *Existential Woman/Man* series. The "Writing Man" that wasn't included at DePaul and the current *Waiting to Meditate* series [in 2012, DePaul University purchased paintings by De Silva for the new Arts & Letters building].

AS: Why?

EFDS: Because I feel that I am finding my inner voice gradually as it is presented to me while I meditate both literally and figuratively. I don't have to be political while I am having fun with the satirical pieces or rather ironies; they became a playful jab.

AS: Can you go over in detail about the "Existential Man" and the "Lady in Red"?

EFDS: Ultimately, whether you are an urbanite, or a suburbanite, we are all the same. It is just that I made the suburbanites philosophical, introspective and thinking/feeling creatures to go against stereotypical banter against them that they are materialistic and just being cultureless. All I did was create a play for the existential woman/man series, so while I don't like politics, I do exercise my artistic license to create ironies. "The Lady in Red" was a previous exercise that was a precursor of the *Existential* series.

AS: Can you explain in more detail about "La Bulaquena" and how that idea came about?

EFDS: Since it was for the show at the Philippine Consulate in 2010, I really wanted to rile up the people there, our officials. So I devised a piece that is an indirect attack against them without them knowing. They are all a bunch of "yes sirs and yes mams" because they were employed via political appointment here in the States without really knowing anything about our arts culture and Filipino American culture prevailing here.

AS: Was there a reason you wanted to challenge their authority?

EFDS: It was a nude rendition of Juan Luna's piece. He was a celebrated Filipino artist back in 1895. The piece was actually showing a demurred Filipina clad in traditional "Maria Clara" garb/dress to show her being a tamed, *religiosa* - a "yes woman" to a Filipino man. She's obedient, but my version is a 'nude' one in the lower half suggesting her independence and ferocity.

AS: What was their reaction?

EFDS: The reaction was that they didn't know shit and what was it about and so I was just running circles around them.

AS: [in your artist statement] you talk about equality within Filipino man and woman. What do you think about that in context with Filipino culture?

EFDS: Though the pre-Spaniard or pre-colonial times many of our tribes are matriarchal; the Spanish brought the chauvinism, the Chinese too. So for me my own rendition of the *bulaquena* [woman from Bulacan] was politicized. The original was from Luna who won a prestigious Grand Prix in Europe in the late 1800s. I think that women are indeed equal counterparts politically, socially and economically. It's a social commentary statement for me while not being a feminist.

AS: Where did the *kuya, ate* concept come from again? [male and female terms of respect that Filipinos use to refer to anyone older than themselves].

EFDS: Seniority, we also got that from the Chinese and Indonesians/Malaysians.

AS: Was that something forced on to us?

EFDS: I don't think so, before the Chinese, the Indonesians and Malays were already here [Philippines]. But then again we were part of the land bridges with mainland China "millions of years ago" (that is not an accurate dating but a figure of speech) and so no, I don't think it was forced on but is a general Asian thing. Even then there's a hierarchical society based on ranks, so family structure is also the same way.

AS: You talked about classification and how that has paralyzed a lot around society, can you elaborate on that.

EFDS: In my humble opinion, our society has been so enamored with what the Greeks have taught us Westerners, and that is to exclusively think within the parameters of logic and knowledge. Both are used to classify life in a quasi-scientific way that everything we do revolve around logic and knowledge. Our society's industrialization brought up life in specialization-mannerism. From our jobs and job hierarchies, to the way we drive in our streets and highways, groceries...and just about everything we do – we have become logical creatures steeped in knowledge. Imagination was curbed early on in school in favor of a cookie-cutter mode of thinking. Standardizations led towards classifications as if race, gender, socio-economic ranks and political affiliations aren't enough...there's the prejudice that comes with it. And if one doesn't fit the classification, then you are part of "the other."

Art to me is an individualization of the world, albeit speaking of universality, it is yin and yangs seen as a macrocosm/microcosm of life, that irony [is] everywhere. But I am not anti-logic nor I am anti-classification. I am only anti-fixation on both. Thus perhaps my 'coming out' from the 'shadows of my father' and the mom's resentfulness about me

being involved in the arts – have a lot to do with my psyche that was developed. Together with my Catholic upbringing, the regimented life were my informative years and ‘coming out’ seemed to be within that theme. But what was seemingly a painful ordeal back then they are but a source of my strength and inspiration for my arts now.

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AS: How is it universal again?

EFDS: Universal, that I speak with that, not really my own - universality which is ironically what Catholic meant from Greek’s Katholikos, meaning universality. Unfortunately they used it as propaganda and refrained toward Religare, meaning to bind. That’s the etymology of religion, a government to bind and control.

AS: And your art challenges these notions of control correct?

EFDS: It is a necessary evil if you will, but we as a nation cannot exist without it, religion works the same. But the term “government” is an oxymoron. To govern is a little misleading. Yes and no, my art does not favor any side, it is just a play, a soliloquy, if you will, my statement.

AS: Why do you say it is an oxymoron?

EFDS: The term “government,” to govern also means to control. While that isn’t really true all the time, it is often abused [power]. I may be accused as a fence sitter while just making statements and having fun, but though true, I’m being impartial as well.

AS: Why do you think that people in Western culture have this obsession with having a sense of status in the world?

EFDS: I don’t think that’s a Western/Eastern issue, but a human issue. It’s natural but just more apparent in the west due to the supposed free market environment where competition is encouraged.

AS: So it is more a human’s thirst to compete and succeed.

EFDS: That is because classifications that we made are artificial, and that were all the same human species wearing different hats.

AS: Do you think that is something people fail to realize when they get lost in their own stature?

EFDS: Yes, attachment towards artificialities and fabricated classifications, were all guilty of. Look at the brand of shoes, cars, phone, TV, etc. we all do it. Buddhist/Taoist wisdom says it is not about being attached to ideas, concepts and materialism is something that I am learning. And that is the way I paint.

AS: What does your practice of Taoism and Tai Chi do for you as an artist?

EFDS: Taoism and Buddhism showed me to be myself and not attaching to any idea or dogma for it to be validated as truth, it is the quiet stillness of the mind I sought for. And art has become one with me, instead of a tool. I am the paint, I am the brush, just like what Jackson Pollock said that astounded the media and art writers when he said “I am nature.”

AS: Do you think being one with your craft is a goal of all artists?

EFDS: Goal? Don't know. I can only speak for myself, and that is really and ultimately I have no agenda or propaganda but be myself. I am only amusing myself and it can be seen in an introverted light but to me art is a play, but a serious and honest play. So art is not only an extension of myself, it has become me. My paints and brushes, I am that, and the viewers I am them too.

AS: Can you re-explain your theories on why there is some rivalries within Filipino Americans?

EFDS: I don't think that it is exclusively Filipino or Filipino-Americans but in nature that people can be divisive more often than not but we can also observe the geographical rivalries of New Yorkers vs. Texans per se...or West Coasters vs. Easterners. The same way, Filipinos in general have those rivalries. I've formulated my own opinion from information as an armchair historian knowing that Philippines was comprised of 7,500 island while being conquered by the Spaniards and naming the islands after King Phillip II in the early quarter of the 16th century when Magellan first set afoot in Mactan Island. Many dialects can be seen from different islands or within the islands - different tribes, different customs, rituals, food; and only unified by the Spanish conquistadors. This set up and conditioned the islanders towards their 'just paranoia' while also trying to repel other invaders aside from the Spaniards. Specifically, the Indonesians, Malaysians, Chinese, Japanese, Indians, Europeans and lastly, Americans for about 50 years.

Many Filipinos also have the colonialism intact – for example when Filipinos have a Spanish surname or rather have a “stronger” Kastila' blood [Castillaño from Castille, Spain - Spanish conquistadors dominated the Philippines] sees themselves having better pedigree than those “Indios” [this is the name that the Spaniards called the Filipino natives]. Or the Chinese Mestizos hold a better chance of holding a business or political career due to their lineage.

The Filipino-Americans, whether 2nd and 3rd generations as immigrants and later as naturalized citizens, have been less and less relatively geographically-oriented since they've been more or less been 'Americanized'; some of it still evaded the filtering of being part of the mainsteam American citizenship.

AS: How much of a detriment do you think it is our culture?

EFDS: To me it is rather funny now. Detriment? I think it adds flavor but it is what it is. I

am not that idealistic that society should be this and that, but that is just an astute observation and a topic that we don't have to artificially apply. In my case the arts but it is [an] interesting dialogue...awareness and humor. I am not trying to be a moralistic social critic as an artist, but rather to poke fun at it. I used to be idealistic growing up in a very hardcore Catholic environment. But now I just laugh at it and a vast source of topics ingrained in my arts.

AS: Do you think our identity as Filipino Americans is misplaced in any way?

EFDS: Misplaced as in being stereotyped? Maybe. But since we don't have a single-land mass to really unify our national identity before coming to the United States, much confusion has set in. I can say that it would probably be the similar way with the generic "African-American" label because if one would ask an African-American, he most likely wouldn't know where in Africa did their family history come from either, albeit the Filipino-American would know, outside of that, it is simply a name. Most [people] don't even know that [the] Philippines is an Asian country, nonetheless.

AS:. What kind of cultural dilemmas do Filipinos face in today's American culture?

EFDS: Cultural dilemma as Filipino-Americans? I probably answered much too that already from the previous question but not to make our issue something exclusive but the better question should be directed towards Americans in general. We as Americans have a unique position, much more than any other citizens of the world, that because of the obvious conglomeration of all citizens of the world, there is a much urgent question to answer: Who are we as Americans?

AS: How does your work tie into everyday dilemmas of your average and typical Filipino American?

EFDS: Since I don't directly work with politics of image perception or as in political imagery being a Filipino-American, I think it is rather on the viewers' outlook, expectations and stereotyping – that a Filipino-American have to create somewhere in the same lines of my cultural lineage, and more specifically images such as fiestas, the farmer and his caribou [wild buffalo], tropical fruits as still life, tropical vistas, figures clad in cultural clothing's and other stereotypes. I consider myself as a human being before I became politicized and that's where I try to draw my inspiration as. However, I do use the stereotypical images as part of the play, as in indirect social criticisms or playful visual satires such as "The Existential Suburban Woman and Man"...the playful jab on the issue of 'urbanites' being cultural and taking a stance on "defending" the 'suburbans' being philosophical and introspective thinkers to upset the suburbanite's expectations of candy-land materialism of having big houses with 2 car garages and obviously with 2 cars.

And so when one sees my works I really don't like to portray or exhibit myself as a Filipino-American. I have no interest of playing the political cards or political empowerment using my art pieces, but rather as part of a critical and aware but whimsical

outlook on life wherein, life is full and unexpected – and full of ironies.

AS: What do you think about Catholicism's role in Filipino American culture?

EFDS: Much like the Polish, Mexicans and the Irish, the Filipino's have their distinct Catholic-ness in them - Catholicism hybridized with their colloquial culture. So seen from a Filipino-American like me, I think that it is a unifying force amidst the fragmentation of Filipinos due to geographic-orientations I talked about but more and more Filipino-Americans are also shedding their old traditions in favor of the more contemporary culture. Catholicism can be seen as an old-world model persisting despite the world's modernism. Thus it is a challenge for the Catholics in general, and not just for the Filipino-Americans. But pertaining to Art and Catholicism, I can still see it as a force among the Filipino-Americans. Nothing exclusive about that since the whole world has been Catholicized for about 2 thousand years now.

AS: I know you said something about how something is only something as long as you make it out to be that way? I know you used basketball as an example. Can you clarify that? [referring to a previous conversation not in this transcription].

EFDS: I think you are pertaining to how one sees life...or life in art, applied. And I used basketball since you have told me that you play basketball to make a stronger argument. In that, for us – it is a challenge to find our own voice, our own life, our own thinking, our own feelings in these times. We have modernized and standardized man that going back would seemed to be an oxymoron in these times. So in my art, it is a challenge to really sift through all our conditioning, culturalizations, brainwashing, and then some. The key now, in my humble estimation, is to find ourselves despite modernization.

In our information infested, politically correct, standardized, logical world – I find it more encouraging to be an artist because it is an “easy picking.” But to be different is not much of my inspiration because it seemed so artificial to use that as reason to be an artist. Politics isn't my strength and have no interest to use ART as part of propoganda nor it is didactic so as to influence anyone towards my own thinking.

AS: When you told me about one of your pieces not making it into the Arts & Letters hall [at DePaul] because of it being a little provocative, and then they had Michelangelo in one of the offices, what struck you about that bit of hypocrisy from the school?

EFDS: I don't think it is the school per se exclusively nor it is the architectural firm responsible for curatorial of the art being displayed but could be a combination of both. I understand that the it is a sensitive issue for the school, while being a Catholic establishment, to display nudity among works and thus their [combination of DePaul and Architectural firm] decision not to display that specific work I've mentioned. As an artist however, I do feel that the arts in general have been slighted – not me personally. That an educational establishment should be able to display nudity while a replica of a Michelangelo nude sculpture can be seen being displayed in the same building at the same time.

AS: On your website, you talk about doing artwork as both humbling and god like, how is art both to you?

EFDS: “Humbling” that it is that while seeing that my exploration and expressionism have taken a life of its own. As I create, I don’t fully take credit of it because I believe that I am only an agency to which creativity is being disseminated, as in, in this mind and body from which I am currently residing at the moment. That to be able to see the microcosm of creation, it can be very well the very same process from which everything was created. I am not alluding towards the Creationism as faith per se nor I am referencing the Evolutionism but that IDEA was first created and then it takes a life of its own, as a process. As a visual artist, I am much aware of the known while there’s much of the unknown. The objective and the subjective if you will...all partaking as part of the process of creation, and in my case, my artworks. Thus it is also “god-like” that I seemingly “created” my pieces but I would like to stress that it is a fleeting moment wherein I am part of the participant. Not the main lone creator.

AS: How much satisfaction do you get when you see your son begin to gain confidence and success?

EFDS: Oh man, that would be utopia, for now, he wants to be a chef. Now he is going to [a] Military academy, so I think the disciplined and structured environment will be right for him. He’s philosophical and creative too but obviously still young to find his own voice.

AS: You think he’s too young to find his voice? From an artist’s perspective as well as a father’s - why do you think that is?

EFDS: Well everybody is different, some more mature than others and so with him, he is naïve still which is natural. All kids should be as naïve as they can be instead of forcing them to grow up fast. On our society they have been exposed to early conditioning in sex, commercialization and consumerism and all the negatives in our society due to industrialization and commercialization to just about everything. Look at how McDonald’s uses toys for early propagation of consumerism. So for me I want them to grow up in their own pace. Art is one way for them to express and explore the world. So I wont push him to be an artist. He can be whatever and whoever he wants to be as long as he puts his heart and mind into it.

End.