

Contemporary Artists

Ramon G. Orlina

Reflections of a Transparen + Life

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RAMON ORLINA

by Reuben Ramas Cañete

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The first thing that hits one who is confronted with the glass sculptures of Ramon Orlina is that of sheer stupefaction: how can such beauty result from such an ordinary material? After all, it is merely industrial glass, the type that is shaped into sheets for window louvers, skyscraper facade cladding or dining tabletops. If one is sensitive enough, though, like peering through the thickness of your tabletop, you can see the same aquamarine green that animates Orlina's sculptures like a living sea organism. The prismatic effects of glass as it bends light is also evident as one peers at the rough texture of louver glass, but enlarged due to the piercings and cuttings that Orlina makes into the block of glass, which is then contrasted by the crystalline finish, done by bathing the surface with acid, and then polishing it smooth.

Achieving the material alone is laborious enough, requiring the cooperation of the glass foundry (in Orlina's case, the Republic Asahi Glass in Pasig City). First, the glass furnace where the material comes from must be shut down, which only happens once every five years (for servicing, and relining the furnace with the specialized refractory brick material that guarantees the furnace's constant efficiency). It is then allowed to cool down for at least two to three months before the glass has safely "cured" or condensed into solid form without cracking. By "glass" we refer to the waste glass that pools on the bottom of the furnace when it produced kilometers of sheet glass used by various industries, like construction. This often achieves pooled depths of up to five feet. The properly cured glass, called slag, must then be removed by jackhammers from the furnace, and trucked to Orlina's studio in the heart of Balic-Balic, Sampaloc.

It is here that the miraculous process of transforming "junk glass" into works of art is achieved. The first step is to size up the shape of the drilled blocks of glass that fits to a design pattern that Orlina is trying to achieve. Because of the nature of the glass breaking up during the drilling process, and its fracturing due to temperature differences, no block of glass can be bigger than six cubic feet. Most are often no bigger than two cubic feet, or ten-by-eight-by-twenty inches. This is then traced with pen markings to indicate the shape, and grinded or cut to the proper proportions. The final steps are then the acid-bath and polishing.

Arts & Artists

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Developed in the late 1950's and early 1960's in America, the studio glass art movement has found its most faithful Filipino proponent in Orlina, who practices a variant from the normal process of hot glass-making utilizing a cold-glass carving technique. Practicing since the mid-1970's, Orlina combines his veteran eye for stability (architecture was his first profession until 1974) and sensuality in form and execution.

With the above-mentioned process, Orlina has made a name for himself in the very rare field of glass sculpture, which is still shaking off the reputation as a "mere craft," due no doubt to the still-attached discrimination of glass figurine makers in Europe and America as craftsmen, not artists. One such reason for this is the perception of craftsmen as inherently ignorant of design, often doing the glass piece to an artist's specification. In this case, though, it is Ramon's mind that still generates the design, being no art ignoramus himself (graduating as an architect at the prestigious University of Santo Tomas in 1965, and having as a school friend the sculptor Eduardo Castrillo). His apprenticeship with glass art started in 1975. With the loss of clients due to the effects of Martial Law, and the economic crisis spawned by the oil cartel embargo, Orlina shifted from architecture (being a staff architect of the legendary Carlos Arguelles) to Fine Arts via an initial exhibition of paintings done on sheet glass, titled "Reflections" at the Gallery of Hyatt Regency, which caught the eye of Republic Glass executives, and led to an offer to educate him in glass-making. Orlina accepted a revised scholarship on condition that he could learn and apply his glass making skills in any field he wanted, either locally or abroad. Thus was born a collaboration between glass maker and glass sculptor, whose relationship remains sound today.

In 1976, Orlina got his first break via an offer from the Enriquez owned Silahis International Hotel, which commissioned him for an artwork that would grace the hotel lobby. The result was Arcanum XIX: Paradise Gained, which was a revolution in the way that sculptural relief was to be treated in the Philippines. Instead of the usual hardwood, metal or stone bas relief, Orlina made an assembly of interlocking glass blocks fit into a hexagonal bronze frame, which was then cantilevered from the lobby wall, creating a space for them to bounce off the marble wall, and reflect through the glass block. From that point on, there was no looking back, as local and foreign institutions vied with one another to get an Orlina commission: the Manila Hotel (Arcanum 7, 1977); Makati Greenbelt Chapel (Dove of Peace, Mudras Cross, Tabernacle Altar, and God the Father, all in 1983); Singapore's Forum Galleria (Fertile Crescent, 1985); the ASEAN Sculpture Park in the CCP Complex (Oneness, 1987); Benedictine Abbey Church in Ayala Alabang, Muntinlupa (Stations of the Cross, 1987); Mandaluyong's Our Lady of EDSA Shrine (Crucifixion, 1989); and the Singapore Art Museum, (Quintessence, 1995).

Through his studies in glass, Ramon was able to visit and compare notes with glass sculptors abroad, notably in Czechoslovakia in 1983, and more recently in Seattle (1996), where he was able to meet up with two of the most famous glass sculptors of the Pacific Rim: the American glassblowing master Dale Chihuly, and the Swedish glass casting expert Bertil Vallien. But it was primarily through important exhibitions in the late 1970s and early 1980s that really established Orlina's reputation as an artist of serious import. Among them was "Trends in Sculpture" at the Museum of Philippine Art (MOPA), and "Five Directions in the Philippine Art," also at the MOPA, both in 1980. Another was his qualifying entry as the Philippine Representative to the prestigious XII Grand Prix Internationale d' Art Contemporain de Monte Carlo in Monaco (1977), and the VIII Bienal Internacional de Arte Valparaiso in Chile (1987).

Most importantly, it was his victories at the Art Association of the Philippines (AAP) Annual Art Competitions in 1982 (Best Entry in Sculpture) and 1983 (Gold Medal, Photography) that convincingly cemented Ramon Orlina's reputation locally.

Leading the AAP as its president since 1992, Orlina has also exhibited extensively with his glass sculpture. His more recent exhibitions since the 1990s have all concentrated on themes revolving the human body, animals and abstract curvilinear and cubical shapes, such as his Naesa (1988), NingNing (1992), Lumba-Lumba (1994), Emerald City (1996), and Kalayaan (1998) series. Despite the many challenges and hassles that go with the job of being the leader of the largest, most prestigious artist organization in the Philippines (founded in 1948, with current membership at 1,000). Orlina still finds the time and effort to continue on with his glass sculpture, helped by his wife Lay Ann (who serves as his executive secretary), and inspiration from his children and colleagues of the art industry. The 21st Century is indeed a time to look forward, as Orlina not only brings the dreams of the AAP (such as its own Art Center) to fruition, but also the completion of his personal dreams: the modern studio being finished next door to his home, and the encouragement of glass sculpture in Manila, through a possible school. In this, as in all things, Orlina's defining style and elegance will be the catchwords to a better tomorrow in modern sculpture in the years to come.

AN A&A INTERVIEW WITH RAMON ORLINA (Glass Sculptor / President of AAP)

A&A: What is your personal definition of art?

Art is creation. Creating something new, something original and something different. It is doing something to change a subject, to build. Art is life. It is creating life on a material and making inanimate objects to have life. To create art is to give life.

A&A: What made you decide to become a sculptor?

Actually, I started as an architect. Sometime before, when I was 31 years old, somebody asked me when did I become an artist. I looked up in deep thoughts and answered, "thirty one years ago!" I believe I was born an artist. My artistic inclination was quite evident even as a young boy when I started drawing. I may have inherited my artistic genes from my great grandfather named Antonio Pintor. During the time I took up painting, sculpture and architecture classes, my classmate asked why I became an artist when all of us are architectural students. I remember in our freehand drawing class, I was the only one exempted during prelims and final plates, making my classmates conclude that I am more of an artist than an architect or sculptor. Nevertheless, I continued with my studies in architecture and it became a good background for me and helped me a lot in doing things I want to do. If you look at Renaissance artists like Michelangelo, Donatello and Donalesi, they were architects, sculptors and painters combined. Artists should not be limited in one field but must be adept at other artistic fields as well. I think, I became a sculptor because I met all the requirements to become one.

A&A: Did you undertake any formal training?

No, not really. I work on the glass medium, and in Southeast Asia, there is no tradition of glass sculpture. Glass is more of blowing and casting. What I do is sculpting glass in the same manner that one sculpts stone, marble and wood. My work is totally different because of my medium. When Republic Glass allowed me to visit its factory and observe glass, I was

granted a 3- year scholarship to study anywhere I want to go but I decline the offer because I know there are strings attached to it. It is also a good thing that I did not accept because if I did, then I would have been influenced by what I will see. I trained on my own through trial and error, so I had no influence or a master to follow. I was able to go on my own direction and for me it was a good training. It was all determination, invention and improvisation, everything. One must always be creative. When I create, it is all from within myself. I create on my own and did not learn any technique or style from anybody or any school, though there are some influences of course. All my techniques and styles can be considered an innate and homegrown. When I was in Czechoslovakia, people there were amazed with my work because I have proven that I did not copy anybody's work and that for me was good and very fulfilling.

A&A: Have any artist(s) in particular influenced your style?

A lot of sculptors have influenced me particularly on the different periods of my work. I like linear before so I admire linear sculptors. Then changed into curves. I liked Arch, then Henry Moore. Influence is according to what you maybe doing at a certain time. I also changed in my stages of development. This development is very angular, to very cubists, to very curvilinear. Then I tried texture because of the sculptor La Gucci's work having textures. All of these somehow influenced my work.

We are now living in a world where everything we see especially in the Internet can influenced us. But of course we must try to be original in our creations. With La Gucci, his textures were good but different from mine. In his work, you can see the texture only on one side while in my work, I can see the texture from more than one side because of the glass medium I'm using.

A&A: If given the choice of sculpting like any sculptors, past or present, whom would you choose?

I don't have any choice in particular. There are a lot of sculptors like Arch, Moore, La Gucci or Calvel but for me, I don't really look on one aspect of what they do. I try to look at things I perceive to be a source of inspiration.

A&A: What motivates you to do sculpture?

I do sculptures because of my yearning to create, to make something alive, something that can give happiness to others. These are things that satisfy me as an artist. I don't think much about money. Money will come. For me, it is more on the creation wherein there is a process. Innovation, process and other significant things that I put into my work motivates me. My family, my wife and my daughters always inspire me.

A&A: How do you select your subject matter?

I base my subject matter from my environment. There was a time (eight years) when my wife was breastfeeding our daughter and because of this 'exposure' to her role as a mother, I came up with a series of busts sculptures I called "Ningning" series. I am happy being married and my family is my inspiration. I also like to do birds, fish and preferably 'abstract' things.

A&A: How do you begin a glass sculpture?

When I work on a glass, I look at it on all its sides, front, left, right and back as I study all the angles. I start working on the glass without any preconceived ideas of what it will come out. Exceptions would be my work on "Ningning" series. I just look and feel the glass and let my work lead me into something that would pop up in my mind during the process.

A&A: What do you regard as the important element in your work?

Element is actually oneness of the materials involve. Though my medium is glass, sometimes I also use support for it like stainless steel or cast bronze. But most importantly, is the element of transparency or translucence is hard to find in marble because it is limited to one face.

With glass, it is very important that I meet the challenge of seeing the transparency in all directions and angle. A distinctive element in any sculpture is light. Shadow is important based on the amount of light. In my sculpture, light can go into my glass medium thereby creating another light inside.

A&A: Do you keep or throw away any sculpture you think did not meet your standard?

I just keep them. I have a lot of unfinished work for the past 2 or 3 years. When I'm doing something, I sometimes stop and start a new one. Usually, I go back to continue and finished most of them.

A&A: Do you have your own style and how did you develop it?

As you can see in my work, my style has developed since I started in the '70s. From prismatic to curve, then frosted. I did a "Naesa" series with polished and frosted effect. I also tried works with holes, with attachments and other different approach. I don't really change my style but trying different things is part of my development as an artist. I want to see all the possibilities of my medium because my medium is still new in a way and still unexplored compared to others.

My style depends on the development I can apply on my medium. The textures, with its effects, the frosting and the acid etchings are done to produce variety. As an artist, my work evolves from my artistic knowledge and emotions together with the technical style I learned from my on going process of working with glass.

A&A: How long does it take you to finish a glass sculpture?

It varies depending on the size I'm doing. For example, a medium size of 16 to 18 inches will take me 3 days to one week to initialize preliminary work. Then, it will be ground and smoothed by my assistant. On the 3rd week, it will be polished and returned to me again. By this stage, I can now visualize one side and work on it. On the 4th week, it will be polished again up to the 5th week. The longest period is two months due to the cutting, grinding, smoothing, and polishing stages. Some simple process I entrust to my skilled workers but supervise them intensively until we finish a sculpture.

A&A: What do you expect a person can derive if they view your work?

Of course, what I expect is for people to appreciate my work. For them to touch it because it adds up to more communication than just the visual kind. When you hold it, there is a sense of touch that becomes another sense of appreciating the artwork. Touching sends a signal to the brain more than just looking at the medium. As glass is a tactile medium, when you see it, the tendency is to touch and feel it.

A&A: Aside from sculpture, what other interest(s) do you have?

I sing and dance. I play the piano. I'm also fond of fortune telling. I believe my ESP is intense. I have a background in science and physics. I can also build a house.

A&A: Do you read art books?

I don't really read art books. I just look at the pictures or visuals. I try to absorb the artist's philosophy and appreciate the form of their works as I make

my own interpretations and judgements. I read what the critics wrote but don't rely on their opinions. I believe everybody has his/her own likes and dislikes and must not be pushed to others. I read only to appreciate other artworks.

A&A: What does art/sculpture mean to your life?

Modesty aside, I think I started this (glass sculpture) kind of work in the Asean region. I represented the East by creating my glass sculptures as they have Chihuly in America or the West. I'm proud that I was able to pioneer something in the Asean and have been well recognized in the world. It really means a lot to me to accomplish this because I created this particular form of art.

A&A: Any future plans, goals and wishes regarding your sculptures?

My plan is to finish building my shop and employ apprentices for my work. I have an assistant but no followers. Somebody who works for me in six months will know my technique. But I cannot teach anybody my art. One has to seek his/her own style and direction. I don't want other people to copy or imitate me because art is creativity and originality. If somebody copies me then he will just be another Orlina and it would be unfair to that person. I want somebody to be his own person and established his own identity.

A&A: Do you belong to any art group or organization?

I was the former president of the Society of Philippine Sculptors and since 1992, I've been the president of the Art Association of the Philippines. I did a lot specially in helping the young artists. I'm happy doing those things even though it takes a lot of my time. When you help people, the blessing that you give out will come back to you more than you ever know. I can say that I have no regrets in helping people despite the intrigues. In the end, what matters most is what you did for others and not limited just to yourself.

A&A: Could you give advice or words of wisdom to any aspiring or amateur artist?

Art is a hard struggle. Maybe an artist shouldn't marry early. In my case, I married a bit late because I established myself in my work and I did not encounter problems in bringing up my children. You have to see that you are stable with yourself or you would be easily discouraged and put down by others. If in the beginning, you are still unsure where you are going. Then the struggle would be hard in achieving your goal. What's important is to create, to make something new and original.

As an artist you have to make your own mark and develop an original work for you to become known. If you tend to copy other style, techniques and medium, you will be just a second rate artist. Of course with dedication, hard work and definitely an inspiration from God (the most important), success will eventually come your way. Don't forget that God keeps everything in control.

One-Man Exhibitions

1975 REFLECTIONS

1st One Man Exhibition,
Paintings on Glass, The Gallery,
Hyatt Regency, Manila

1976 PAINTINGS ON GLASS

Citibank Center, Makati Metro Manila

1980 PRISMATIC GLASS SCULPTURE,
City Gallery, Manila

1983 GLASS SCULPTURE
All frosted finish of the
"ARCANUM" series,
Ayala Museum, Makati Metro Manila

1988 NAESA,
Lopez Museum Gallery,
Pasig Metro Manila

NAESA CHIAROSCURO
Le Meridien Singapore, Singapore

NAESA CHIAROSCURO II
National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur,
Malaysia

1990 BATANGAS CULTURAL EXHIBITION
San Sebastian Convent Exhibition Hall,
Lipa City, Batangas,
Philippines

1991 PREVIEW
Artist's Corner,
Hotel Intercontinental
Makati

FORMS OF LIGHT
National Museum Art Gallery,
Singapore, Singapore

1993 PREVIEW OF A TOUCH OF GLASS,
Gallery III, Ayala Museum, Makati

A TOUCH OF GLASS
The Grand Hyatt
Hongkong

1994 RECENT WORKS
The Art Corner
Lobby, Rufino-Pacific Tower,
Makati

1995 ORLINA IN DAVAO
Genluna Gallery
Davao City, Mindanao, Philippines

1996 RAMON ORLINA
SCULPTURES,
Bryann Ohno Gallery
Seattle, USA

1998 SALAMIN NG KALAYAAN
George Sison Gallery,
Seattle, USA

INSPIRATION
Shangri-La Hotel, Manila

Awards / Merits

1982 BEST ENTRY
35th Art Association of the Philippines (AAP)
Annual Competition,
Exhibition Hall
Philamlife Building, Manila

1983 GOLD MEDAL
Art Association of the
Philippines (AAP)
Photography Competition, Main Gallery
Cultural Center of the Phils.

STUDY TOUR GRANTEE
FROM THE MINISTRY OF
CULTURE CZECHOSLOVAK
SOCIALIST REPUBLIC
Visited Studio Glass Artists of
Czechoslovakia: Libensky,
Hlava, Soukup, and others

CERTIFICATE OF HONOR AND MERIT
From the Art Association of the Philippines (AAP)
for invaluable contribution to Philippine Art

1985 NATIONAL MEMORIAL OF THE PHILIPPINES
COMPETITION
2nd Place Winner together with Eduardo Castrillo for design

OUTSTANDING THOMASIAN AWARD
In the field of Arts and Culture,
University of Santo Tomas, Philippines

1988 ARAW NG MAYNILA/MAYNILA DAY CULTURAL
AWARD FOR SCULPTURE
By the City of Manila,
Philippines

1993 ASEAN AWARDS FOR
VISUAL ARTISTS
Conferred by the Asean
National Committee on
Culture and Information at
the Third Asean Awards
Ceremony for Culture,
Communications and Literary Works,
Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam

1994 THIRD ASEAN ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS FOR VISUAL ART

Conferred by the ASEAN Business Forum.

Presented by

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur.

1996 DANGAL NG BATANGAS AWARD

Awarded by Governor Hermilao I. Mandanas of the Province of Batangas on the occasion of the 415th Batangas

Foundation Day,

Batangas City

THE PRESIDENTIAL SPECIAL AWARD

Bestowed by the United Architects of the Philippines

for Excellence of Sculpture at the Shangri-La's Edsa Plaza, Hotel, Mandaluyong City, Metro Manila

RIZAL COLLEGE OF TAAL, PLAQUE OF RECOGNITION IN THE FIELD OF ARTS

Bestowed by the alma mater of the artist.

OUTSTANDING TAALEÑO AWARD

Presented by the Ang Bayan Kong Taal for excellence in the field of visual arts. Philippines

1999 Mr. F. Price

"Silver Moon"

Tayamura International Sculpture,

Biennale '99

Hokaido, Japan

Sept 19

Some of his works

- "Nasa Pugad II"
- "Kasabay ng Hangin"
- "Ring of Life"
- "Kaisou," 1991
- "Silver Moon"
- "China Doll"
- "Bagwis"
- "New Horizon," 1999
- "Ecstasy"
- "Golden Sun"
- "GradualEmergence"
- "The fountain Hero"
- "Emerald City II"
- "Quintessence," 1995

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