

Emmanuel Garibay

Emmanuel Garibay, the 2010–11 resident artist at the Overseas Ministries Study Center, is a Philippine painter known as much for his expressionist figurative style as for the content of many of his works, which often express a keen social and political consciousness. After graduating from the University of the Philippines with a degree in fine art, he studied European and Philippine masters on his own. His first exhibition was held in 1993, and he built on some of the recognition he received there by exhibiting and traveling more widely in Europe, Asia, and the United States. Garibay often paints ordinary people in scenes of political, religious, and social complexity, where controversial issues of justice and truth are presented vigorously and colorfully. “Art is all about an idea that you want to share, a way of seeing the world that you want people to appreciate in their world.” In May 2011, Daniel Nicholas, OMSC director of communications and publications, talked with Garibay about his book, *Where God Is: The Paintings of Emmanuel Garibay*, published by OMSC Publications.

To purchase a book or for more information about the artist, go online to <http://secure.omsc.org/node/446> and www.emmanuelgaribay.com.

You have a beautiful book here, Manny.

Thank you.

What motivated you to paint in the way that you do, with social commentary and also religious and Christian belief mixed in?

If you come from a land like the Philippines, the daily realities of the people’s life, you see a lot of poverty, a lot of hardships. These things don’t exist in isolation; they exist as a result of injustice and a lot of exploitation. And it is very hard to ignore them. The longer you are confronted by them, the more you see the different forces at work. And the sad part is there appears to be some complicity—complicity by some institutions that are supposed to uphold the rights of people. By this I’m referring mainly to church institutions, or church-related

institutions, which for a long time have favored and seem to have given blessings to the leaders and to the people behind these, I would say, exploitative institutions, or structures, such as businesses and the military.

How do these wonderful, beautiful paintings express your personal faith in Christ?

It’s kind of a complicated story, but the thing is it’s very hard to disassociate life in society and faith. And the more I observe what’s going on, the more I have tried to make a connection between that and my faith and then the more I explore the different meanings in the faith—the traditions, theology, biblical interpretation, all of these—and eventually they come up with attempts to try to make a relationship between my faith and society. To me that’s the only way my faith can have any

sense or any meaning, because that's where my life situation is. So in that case I see more affirmation in my faith as a Christian because one of the things I realize is something very radical about Christianity. For instance, the birth of Jesus to me is a very radical statement about a king being born among the poor, being born in a manger instead of in a palace. To me that is a very strong political statement. Many of my reflections are started from that viewpoint.

Are your motivations for each of the paintings people that you have met or seen, or are they composites of thoughts that you have had?

It's both: people I've personally encountered and then, like you said, composites of the people who represent human situations.

[Comment to readers: You'll have to have a copy of the art book to appreciate this.]

Let's begin just in looking at each one of them. We'll start with page 13. Give the name of the painting and then just briefly say what is going on there, what motivated you, how you thought of this.

On page 13 the painting entitled *Pietà* is a take-off from the famous *Pietà* sculpture of Michelangelo, except that in this image the one who represents Mary does not have the dead body of Jesus on her lap. Instead she is carrying a picture of someone who was made to disappear. This is something that was rampant in the Philippines some time ago but still is going on until now. These are people who disappear because of their political beliefs, because of how they pursue their aspirations of changing

society. So they have been made to disappear, and this action is mostly attributed to military authorities.

The man in the picture frame wears a crown of thorns. Does he represent Christ?

Yes.

Reunion, on page 14, is about Jesus and the twelve disciples meeting each other again after 2,000 years. They decide to have their picture taken together—except in this case, at first you will see that the twelve disciples are all wearing ecclesiastical dress, and are seemingly very content and happy in their situation, because they have now become leaders of their own denominations. The irony is that the central figure, which is Jesus, is still nailed to the cross. They seem to be oblivious of him. This is an ironic picture, my statement about some churches that put more emphasis on the perpetuation of themselves instead of on the pursuit of realizing the Gospel.

The next one, on page 15, is probably your most provocative painting, according to some people. Jesus is revealed in a totally shocking and really unexpected identity. Will you talk about that?

Emmaus is taken from the last chapter of Luke. As the story goes, Jesus walks along with two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and this is a long walk. The disciples are not able to identify the person they are walking with and having a conversation with, even after a long walk; this is very strange, because Jesus is somebody they know very well—they know him intimately. In the painting I'm reflecting

on this, and I thought about what the story means to me. And I thought to me it's the way I have been conditioned. Growing up in the Philippines I was conditioned to see Jesus as a white bearded male with long hair and blue eyes, as well as the other representations that are known of the saints and Mary; they're all Western and Caucasian. So I developed a very fixed image of Jesus. Later on I realized that—and it's because of this that I feel I have been alienated from my own self in my faith.

I thought that by representing Jesus in a radically different way, that of a woman, and especially a woman who seems to be of ill repute, the painting would really challenge the viewers to carefully consider the implication of seeing Jesus in other people, especially those who are downtrodden, especially those whom society looks down upon. That's why in the picture the disciples, the two men beside the woman, are laughing so hard, because they have just realized their mistaken notion of Jesus. It's like a joke. All three are laughing at the joke. I guess this is a contrast between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of the resurrection.

Doctrine and Wisdom, on page 16, is a commentary, a critique of many church scholars—theologians, Bible scholars—who have a tendency to have a disproportionate sense of self-importance and entitlement; they see scholarship that way, as a means of establishing prestige for themselves. And in the process they lose their ability to perceive reality. So if you look at the image, as the man takes off his eyeglasses, the eyes come off with them, so all you see is just an empty socket. That desire to be famous as a scholar is represented by the apple on top of his head; the apple represents temptation. And then there is a small, hardly visible squirrel on

his shoulder, which represents a contrast to that: the way of nature, the wisdom of nature, or the way of God. This was painted in autumn, and I noticed a lot of squirrels going about, looking for food, preparing for the coming winter. The way of nature is a constant cycle that has been around for a long time and has sustained nature for a long time.

Empire, on page 17, is all about how we were colonized as a nation; this is true also for other nations who were colonized by European superpowers, mostly taking place during the 16th and 17th centuries. In the image you see a friar who seems to be bestowing a blessing on a native boy, but at the same time his hand gesture might also be seen as drumming on the head of the boy, who has a banana in his hand representing the banana republics. This pattern is repeated in the background, where a friar and a boy are seated on top of the hills; there's a repetition of the same image. That is how the idea of the empire is told.

Page 18 is *Sagrada Familia*, the Holy Family, but in a way that I've never seen them before.

Yes, well, the Holy Family without clothes, naked. And they are riding inside a jeepney. The jeepney symbolizes journey, because this is not just the Holy Family: it is the Holy Family on the flight to Egypt. So this is escaping poverty and persecution; persecution is represented by the barbed wire on their heads.

On page 19 is *Tahanan*, a word that in the Philippines means “home.” In contrast to the previous painting, they are not just *riding* in a jeepney: this time they are staying in an abandoned jeepney which has become their home. Again, this

is to dramatize the state of poverty that many Filipinos are in right now.

Rush Hour, on page 20, is just a scene inside a jeepney where different things happen. You see some sleepy passengers. The jeepney is so crowded that some people have to stand from the outside taking the risk of maybe falling off. This painting is just to show people, especially those who are not familiar with the situation in the Philippines, what the jeepney looks like from inside.

The same jeepney as in the previous painting?

Yes, and then in the next painting, on page 21, which is entitled *Sanctuary*, or sanctuary. It's a dark picture. Again the scene is inside a jeepney where people are taking a ride. This symbolizes a journey, and I use the jeepney as a metaphor for the Philippines as a nation that is going through a very dark journey. But if you look further ahead, you see an image of a horse, a decorative horse, on top of the hood; and much farther than that is a light at the end of the road, which symbolizes hope.

Fiesta, on page 22, in a way is partly how I came up with the title of this book, *Where God Is*. This painting is saying that where people are, there God is. The fiesta is a celebration among the people, and most of them are urban poor who live in very crowded streets. So if you notice, part of the painting is an elevated road that separates the masses of people from the high rises.

If they are urban, and poor, and struggling, what brings them happiness?

It's a very strong sense of community. The fiesta is actually a religious event, and it is exactly the religious aspect of the event that they celebrate and at the same time makes them feel connected to each other.

The painting on page 23, titled *Komunyon*, is a Philipinized version of the Communion—and that's exactly what it is, because it now represents Philippine heroes, especially Philippine heroes in the struggle against colonialism or colonization. I did this because in the Philippines there's a tendency to dissociate history from faith, and we hardly give special value to our heroes. So I took the artistic license to designate our heroes as representing Jesus and his disciples. But in this case, the disciples are not just made up of men; you see images of women and even children. This is to emphasize the inclusive nature of Jesus' ministry, that does not exclude people on the basis of their gender, on the basis of their age, on the basis of their class.

This painting is from 1996, the previous one was in 1995, and one before that was 1994. How have you grown as an artist in your style and your motivations?

Well, I think at this point I have developed more technically. There is more deliberate use of the colors. But my earlier works reflect, I think, a more engaged connection with my subject. It's something I hope to recover. The older work is rougher and it's much less polished than my later works, but it reflects more connection with the subject.

On page 24 the title is *Indakan*, or dance. But this is actually a sad story, because it's about the dance to their last harvest. These are farmers dancing, but they are not happy as they dance, because they know that after that, after the last harvest, the farms will no longer be theirs. So this is a story about land conversion that is taking place in the Philippines, where many farms are being converted into commercial, residential, and industrial use.

On page 25 is *Saranggola ni Neneng*, which means Neneng's kite. This is about women who leave the country, and many of them during the time it was done, this was in the early 1990s. This was about women leaving for Japan to work as entertainers, and actually that's just what I call it. But it has a lot more meaning to it. Many of them come from the provinces, as is shown in the picture.

Page 26?

Page 26, *Tawid*, or crossing, is about the chaos in the streets in most cities in the Philippines, where Filipinos don't seem to have gotten used to a sense of order. In spite of the presence of a pedestrian crossing above the road, it is seldom used. So you see a mother and a child crossing the street, and the mother is oblivious to the cars around her. She's crossing the street while texting in her cell phone.

In *Banana Que*, on page 27, these are women in the marketplace, cooking glazed banana but talking about some naughty subject that stirs up some mischievous laugh among them, so it has something to do with men.

Then *Mendiola*, on page 28. My other title for this painting is *Jacob Wrestling with God*. I got this from Genesis 32, where Jacob wrestles with the angel and prevails, which is how he gets his name "Israel"—Israel means one who contends with God. To me this is a very interesting image. If you actually try to think of the implication of a mere mortal wrestling with God and prevailing—it's a very radical idea. I was brought up in a very kind of traditional, conservative, pious way of looking at God. And then suddenly you encounter a text that says Jacob wrestles with God. As I reflect on it, I see wrestling with God as actually wrestling with life; and the more you wrestle with life, each time you prevail the closer you are to God, because you gain a deeper understanding of life. So the image here is that of protesters trying to fight off police authorities; in this case these police authorities are trying to evict them from the place where they are staying, because they are squatters.

On page 29 we are back to a very different market scene.

Yes, *Market Scene*. I deliberately made it modeled almost . . . if you look at it, a quick look would almost make it look like an abstraction. Again, this is a similar statement to the painting of *Fiesta*, emphasizing the throbbing life in the market, where the people are. And where there is life, there is God.

Page 30, *Manyila*. Many parts of Manila are really in disarray and hard to figure out because of the crowding, because of the filth, because of the daily chaos that takes place. In spite of that, you see a

sense of pattern and form if you look at it long enough.

Page 31 is about a journey to an unknown destination.

Yes, *Pilgrim* is the title. There's not much about it.

Who are the pilgrims?

I'm referring to the pilgrims as us in this world. . . . The ultimate destination remains unknown.

Martyr, page 32, is a painting of people who die for their faith, for their beliefs. If you notice, there are several crosses.

Marka, page 33, is actually referring to the mark on the hands of the figure, so there is a stigmata there. While this refers to another kind of stigmata, or identity mark: of those who commit to follow Jesus.

Page 34?

Dalangin, page 34, means "prayer." I made this drawing as a way of trying to keep still and seek tranquility, quiet tranquility in spite of the chaos and noise and disharmony around you.

This work and the previous one are pastel and charcoal on paper, rather than oil on canvas, and represents a much softer feel. Why did you choose this particular medium?

Pastel is actually one of my favorite mediums, because with it I can be more spontaneous. That's one of the qualities of works that I seek and that automatically comes out. It's a growing and a

painting at the same time. It has the spontaneity of a drawing but it has the complete image of a painting.

Page 35, *Tres Personas*, or three persons, is actually the trinity, but not the Holy Trinity. I'm referring to the institutions at work in our society—the government, many of whose elected officials enrich themselves in their positions. Some clergy, or some of the church people, give a legitimization by supporting a worldview that a hierarchical arrangement in society is how God wants societies to be; and the mass media or the entertainment industry keep people distracted from the real situation, from being sensitive, from being analytical by keeping them distracted and entertained.

What do you intend by the fact that the three are hooded?

They are hooded to conceal their faces, meaning the painting is really all about deception. The hoods keep us from being able to see who they really are.

Page 36, *Resurrection*. If you notice, the image is holding a hammer, a red hammer, and a plumb line, and below the hammer is a crowbar, which is used as an instrument for dismantling. This implies that the event of the resurrection is the time when the dismantling of the old ways has taken place and a new way is being rebuilt (that's why there's the hammer) and a new life (red refers to blood); so new life is being rebuilt along an upright path.

Page 37, *Hybrid*, is in reference to the Filipinos right now, because we are a product of colonization's mixture of different races and different cultural influences.

Indio, page 38, is referring to Macario Sakay, who was the last resistance leader during the American occupation. It shows his resilience, the ability of his person.

How does it show these things?

With the blue heart. In spite of his almost invisible presence, it's retold in the images that can actually be rotated.

Eman, page 39, is about another martyr/activist/poet?

Yes, his name was Eman Lacaba. He was a poet and activist who was killed during the time of Ferdinand Marcos. Many young people were influenced by his martyrdom. He was very idealized.

Empty, page 40, is actually about the state of emptying your cares, your worries, so that you achieve a state of calmness and serenity.

Misionaryo, page 41, is a largely critical but ambiguous image of my view of the mission work, which started in our case during the Spanish colonial era. Partly what this is saying is the difficulty of the separating mission work from the colonial enterprise.

You mention in the subtext here that “colonization obscured the benevolent intentions of the European missions.” What went wrong, in your opinion?

There were occasions where many mission authorities were in collaboration with the military

and colonial authorities in subjugating the native population. In addition, I think the more lasting effect of colonization on our part is having been introduced to an understanding of God that disconnected us from our history, from our ancestors, from our identity. So it introduced an alien theology packaged in an alien culture.

Page 42, *Ang Pasya*, is translated as “the choice.” Here you see the first persons on earth, Adam and Eve, in a passionate embrace. In the foreground, which is not so noticeable, you see the apple, or the fruit, which appears to have been discarded. What is being implied here is that the fruit had not been eaten; thus humans continued to harmonize with nature.

Page 43, *Ang Pagdating*, meaning “the coming.” The emphasis in this painting is on the fractured cross in the sail of the ship. This one to me symbolizes the distorted theological motivation for missions. The woman represents the native population.

Ang Mensahe, page 44, means “the message.” This work dramatizes the situation being experienced by many Filipino women who worked abroad of being abused, maltreated, some of them actually ending up dying because of the abuses of their employers.

On page 45, *Kodakan* is colloquial, or street language, for picture-taking. You see here a wedding picture of a newly-wedded couple and their families. Again there is the statement of their being oblivious to the presence of the crucified feet of Jesus on top of them. It's all about people enjoying their lives and oblivious to the sufferings.

On page 46, *Kalinga* roughly translates as nurturing care. It's an image of a mother and a child in a tender embrace.

That's the same with the next painting, *Tabing Dagat*, which actually means "by the sea." It shows a tranquil image of tender love from the mother towards her son.

Representing God's love for people?

It can be, yes.

On page 48 the title is *Ina*, or mother. This time the painting is more deliberately a representation of God's love for humanity. This can be derived from the text of John 3:16, but in this case you see a mother. My point in using the image of a mother is that in this case you see a mother giving: not just giving birth to her child, but also giving life and nurturing her child, and in the process being consumed by it. The idea is to really make the viewer understand the concept of God's love.

***Ang Pagabablik-loob*, page 49, has a classic theme but with a different kind of interpretation perhaps.**

Yes. *Ang Pagabablik-loob*, or reconciliation, is an image of a father and a son—in this case the prodigal son. It has basically a conventional interpretation; I just emphasize the tender embrace by the father to his son.

On page 50, *Baliktaran*, back-to-back or mirror image, just shows the two foremost heroes in Filipino in Philippine history. This painting and the next one are on wood. I like to paint on wood

because it has a very good quality and a very good way of reflecting the colors of the pigment, that is oil.

Anino, page 51, means "shadow"; it's just showing or suggesting the face of Christ as an apparition.

On pages 52 and 53 we see *Alpha* and *Omega*. *Alpha* shows the figure of a face, but if you look at it closely there are actually two faces, so this represents man and woman in one person. So in the beginning there was unity, oneness. *Omega* is an apocalyptic image where you see the face of a person whose flesh seems to be rotting and who is crowned with barbed wire, again suggesting the nature of his suffering. But at the same time you have two sets of eyes; this denotes some kind of an appropriation of being divine. So while the human aspect of the image is subject to decay, there is also a counterpoint by which at this stage he is also acquiring divinity or transcending.

Boys' Club, page 54, to me is a harsh commentary on what I view as a predominantly patriarchal worldview and ideology in many churches that promote the idea that God favors men over women. The central figure, which is that of a female Christ, shows that because of this insistence on a predominantly male-favored ideology, the women suffer.

As is typical in some of your other paintings, the men are ignoring the character of Jesus.

Yes, and you see that again on the next page in *Bayang Magiliw*, meaning "a jubilant nation"—actually the first line in our national anthem. But the picture is really meant to be an irony and an indictment of

every one of us in our nation, saying that all of us are taking part in the act of crucifying Jesus. We all take part in oppressing, abusing, exploiting other people, especially marginalized people.

That's on page 55. Let's look back briefly at page 54. We see some interesting symbols there—a Nazi swastika, and a McDonalds on a Bible.

Well, there are different strands of distortions or perversions of Christianity. The swastika represents Nazism or the Ku Klux Klan and other perversions by which our Christianity is distorted and used as an ideological tool to prop up people's ideologies of hatred. And then the McDonalds symbol on the Bible represents trivializing the faith into popular forms; it's analogous to fast food, which fills your stomach but does not really provide the right nourishment.

On 56 the title is *Sisa*. Sisa is a character in a novel by José Rizal, our foremost national hero. It tells of a woman who actually represents the Philippines as a nation, who becomes insane upon finding out that her son was killed by abuses in the church. She goes around in the streets crying out the name of her youngest son. In this image you see her clutching a picture, not of her son, but of our national hero. The reason why I did that was to say that the Philippines is looking for the essence of its identity, which can be found in our heroes.

Page 57, *Sintonado*, again shows one of our national heroes, a revolutionary leader named Andrés Bonifacio y de Castro. The title means "without tone." He is holding a guitar without strings. The picture shows different aspects of his life, knowing the way he was betrayed and the

way he fought against the Spanish authorities. The face on the guitar is his muse. He's a poet, and his poems have musical quality. I don't think he plays the guitar, but he's an actor. A curious thing about our heroes is that actually they are artists. One is a novelist and the other one is a stage actor.

Pages 58 and 59 show other Philippine heroes. First, in *Gabriela*, is Gabriella Silang. She was another heroine in the fight against colonial authorities. But in this case she is holding an AK47, which wasn't the weapon during her time. By this, I'm suggesting the continuity of the struggles of women up to the present.

In *Tagapundar*, page 59, the title means "a founder," and the figure is that of Apolinario Mabini y Maranan. He is the one who drafted the first Philippine constitution.

Pakiusap, on page 60, is a plea. You have an image of a farmer pleading to a church figure. In his hand he has a tiny placard that says, "End feudalism." The church is actually a symbol of not just feudalism as a practice, but feudalism as cultural ideology.

Where might righteousness be found in this picture?

I don't think it is there. But there is self-righteousness on the part of one who prays and deliberately ignores the presence of the person behind him.

Taimtim, page 61, is another commentary on piety, a kind of spirituality that preaches individual piety but at the same time does not give attention to issues like social justice.

What is the individual praying for, do you think?

Well, it's usually directed toward the desires of the self, or maybe a prayer for a place in heaven.

In *Duet*, page 62, two figures are sleeping, but sometimes when you sleep you open your mouth while you snore. They are seated beside each other. In the Philippines there is a practice of self-flagellation, and men (usually) do this during Holy Week. So I just made this figure seated beside a church official.

Does this man represent Jesus?

Not exactly, because these men also allow themselves to be crucified on a cross, so that they're imitating the passion of Jesus.

The Flood, page 63, records an actual event in Manila where there was massive flooding in the city. It resulted in many deaths. There's a folk image of Jesus in the background, and it may say one thing, that Jesus also suffers with the people victimized by the flooding.

The Commission, page 64, is one of my newer works. In a way I'm putting together images that have a bizarre look, putting in question the motives for why some institutions are doing mission work.

Who is the figure kneeling in the front?

It's some high church figure. It suggests that there is a bigger power behind him, and it's that bigger power that distorts the worldviews. So you have the world behind him, but there's this sea on top

of him. It's deliberately made to break the logical, rational arrangements and perspectives as we know them.

Page 65 is a critique of theology? What's behind that?

Worldview, page 65, is all about a popular Christian worldview that asks or tells people to endure their suffering, because in the afterlife there is a better life. It's all about the pie in the sky by and by.

Dogma and Wisdom, page 66, is quite similar to *Doctrine and Wisdom*, but in this case dogma represents a very traditional high church in contrast to a cherubim, which represents wisdom, and the cherubim is pointing out the window. This is a commentary on many worldviews that tend to be trapped in medieval, prescientific outlooks. This prevents people from having a more open mind and deeper understanding of the works of God, and of seeing that even science is an instrument of God to enlighten humanity.

To an Unknown God, page 67, is taken from the Book of Acts, but this time I'm using it in a different context. Again, this is a commentary on the church and many other institutions or people in society who claim to be pious. In the foreground are images of those figures or characters, even including Santa Claus, which dominates the image of Christmas. You also have soldiers, you have professional athletes, you have some politicians. On top of these figures is the image of Jesus on the cross, and again it shows how they are oblivious to his presence.

Tell us how you came to paint this, because you did it during one of our worship services.

Well, I gave it some thought and I reflected on what would be the best image to present for that particular gathering. I read the Scriptures, and I searched for ways by which I could give a new perspective in reading the Scriptures.

Except for the color, you completed this in about 20 minutes.

Yes. Some paintings can be finished in a very short time, especially if you have a predetermined idea of the outcome.

Tong-its, page 68, is the name of the card game going on here. It's a very popular card game and is a pastime for many Filipinos; most of them don't have jobs, so they just stay in their houses and play games. It's the way by which most of them socialize.

In *Bahay Misteryo*, page 69, the title means "house of mystery." Again, this is a commentary on what is for most part a prescientific worldview that dominates many people in the church.

The final painting in the book, *Sea Breeze*, page 70, is deliberately a contrast to the heavier subjects of the previous pages. This just tells of a bonding between a father and a son, now taking a leisurely bike ride by the sea.

What is the painting on the cover?

The painting on the cover is *Santuario*, or sanctuary, which I discussed earlier. Again, it's

about people on a journey. So it's a metaphor for the Philippine nation on a journey.

So where is God?

God, to me, is in situations where people are struggling to uphold or just to find meaning and dignity in their existence. God is found in people who generally struggle and who engage God seriously in a wrestling match in order to understand why they exist.

If we were to look at your paintings five or ten years from now, what would be different? What's ahead? What directions are you moving in your art?

I really don't know right now, I can't really tell, but definitely I can say that my experience at OMSC will be a major factor as to what would come next; it's a pivotal point in my career. I just need some time to digest the experience, the insights I gathered during my stay here.

We have certainly been blessed by having you and your lovely family with us, and we've also been blessed by looking at your evocative paintings and being inspired by them. Thank you very much.

Thank you.



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