



Collateral Matter

By: Leo Abaya

One pull of the trigger and the bullet is fired. The ammunition's casing is ejected from the weapon's chamber. As it is disengaged, the projectile performs its act of violence and destruction to man, animal, object and property. In a nanosecond, what once held projectile, propellant and primer together like adhesive and receptacle, becomes waste material. It is a shell, at once empty and full because, perceived like footprint, thumb mark or track, it is doomed as collateral index to its source. A used cartridge is the junk of gun use, and this is the reason for its infamy.

For several years now, the ammunition shell has been used as raw material of Josephine Turalba's art, incarnated as sculpture, costume or prop-object of and for performance. Seen as critical sign and decorative motif, it has drawn its own audience both in praise and in opposition to its employment as semiotic trope and strategy, a preponderant observation being that it promotes gun use and by extension, violence. Nothing could be further from the truth. And much can be understood by unpacking the process.

At the outset, defining it as re-use is flawed. The raw material is not used again as cartridge or any of its collateral forms. Neither is it broken down into raw materials to make new ones. In fact, being torn apart prevents its re-use. While the term recycle may apply, it needs to be qualified further.

The Dictionary of Sustainable Management provides that "most recycled industrial nutrients (materials) lose viability or value in the process of recycling. This means they can only be used in a degraded form for components other than their original use. White writing paper, for example, is often down-cycled into materials such as cardboard and cannot be used to create more premium writing paper."

Therefore, in the works of the artist, the ammunition shell is down-cycled. On the other hand, because the material has been given a new lease in life as artwork, it may well be up-cycled if we see this process as the conversion of waste materials into new and useful ones.

The rationale of recycling is to avert the negative environmental effects of unbridled industrial production. The artist's strategy runs parallel to this if we cast the idea of violence as a class of human production that intentionally uses force and power, threatened or actual, against another person, group or community regardless of the intention or effects. Understood as a basis of our existence, violence comes in the form of uninhibited personal instinct for survival and a culture's resistance or imposition of itself against another.

Isn't this collateral to the development of civilization itself?

Apparent in history, the question and challenge for man seems to be the containment and control of violence either by force that explains much of scientific and technological advancement, or by taking the position of non-violence for which countless causes in its name have been raised.

Of control and containment, there are the armed forces and penal system in governments, themselves prime examples of what Judith Butler consider as structures of bellicosity that take various tributary forms in civil and private life.

For non-violence, there too is the irony that it is hardly a quiescent practice only because it is a struggle. Butler eloquently describes this in her essay *The Claim to Non-Violence*.



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“ It is precisely because one is mired in violence that the struggle exists and that the possibility (*italics mine*) of non-violence emerges... it is not the same as determinism... and that is also why the struggle often fails... Non-violence is precisely neither a virtue nor a position and certainly not a set of principles that are applied universally. It denotes the mired and conflicted position of a subject who is injured, rageful, disposed to violent retribution and nevertheless struggles against that action. The struggle against violence accepts that violence is one’s own possibility.”

A quick scan of aggression and skirmishes between and among people in the name of religion, social justice, protection of territory, preservation of tradition within society, notably the multiple cases of violence against women’s bodies and spirits inflicted by husbands and kiln, clearly evidences that Butler’s reflections are hardly rhetoric. In these scenarios, the profile of gun use is high.

A used cartridge shell means a bullet has been fired. A bullet, where it hits, causes relative destruction to a body or an object. For this reason, its empty shell when used in art, continues to have a life as a highly charged raw material capable of framing a strong context to forms and configurations as the works of the exhibit attest.

Highly misunderstood, its infamy will continue.

References:

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Leo Abaya (b. 1960)

Lives and works in Quezon City, Philippines. His explorations in painting, small sculptures, installations, and video inquire about histories, remembering, and the body. The imagery that he creates and methods he employs come from a plethora of sources, including his earlier background in film, his interest in popular culture, and his occasional engagement with design for the theater, print and broadcast media.

Initially educated as an Economics major, he eventually worked as a production designer, for which he won numerous awards from industry and critics. He formally studied art in UP College of Fine Arts as a Painting and Art History major and graduated magna cum laude in 1995. He lectured in the school shortly thereafter, then earned his MA Fine Art degree at the Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton in the United Kingdom in 2005, as a fellow of the University of the Philippines.

He has had several solo and group exhibitions in Manila and the region. His works are in notable private collections as well as in institutions like the Singapore Art Museum and the extensive UP Art Collection.

He had curated shows for museums and galleries in Manila and galleries in Singapore.