

EAST CITY ART



East City Art Interviews: Academy 2012 Artist Toym Imao

Interview by Eric Hope, July 18, 2012



"Reversed, Expanded, Exploded- POPped!" pre-performance video still. Image courtesy Toym Imao.

Editor's Note: This is part of a four article series on Academy 2012. Read the Wade Carey Interview with Jamie Smith, founder and curator of Academy 2012 by [clicking here](#)

Last weekend East City Art had the pleasure of attending the opening of *Academy 2012*, Connor Contemporary Art's annual summer survey of some of the region's most promising MFA graduates. The exhibition featured works in a variety of different media, from the traditional (acrylics) to the outlandish (microbial growth). One artist however piqued our interest with an installation that fit no distinct category. Toym Imao's contribution, *Reversed, Expanded, Exploded- POPped!*, encompasses painting, video, performance art and sculpture simultaneously. Leigh Connor graciously put us in touch with Mr. Imao, who is currently in his native Philippines for the summer. (Author's Note: The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.)

East City Art: *I do believe this is our first overseas interview! From your biography we see your first university degree is actually in architecture. How did you segue into the visual arts?*

Toym Imao: I come from a family of artists, and my dad is a respected figure in Philippine art, but he was the first one to discourage me in taking fine arts in college. He said: "try something a little more

professional"... so, architecture was the most logical alternative. I established an architectural firm, and practiced for some time, but slowly found myself slipping back to my first love – the visual arts.

ECA: *How does that formal training in architecture inform your visual arts practice?*

TI: I found myself particularly involved early in my career in doing public art, and my background in architecture has benefited me as I was more confident in dealing with the sculptural forms. I also believe, next to film, architecture is one of those disciplines that combine all the other art forms.



"Reversed, Expanded, Exploded- POPped!" video still. Image courtesy Toym Imao.

ECA: *A Fulbright Scholarship enabled you to study in the United States. We imagine that as a Fulbright scholar, you'd have your pick of schools to choose from. How did you settle on MICA?*

TI: I had several options, but it all boiled down to good vibes. When MICA called me up for my phone interview, it was near midnight in Manila. I happened to be driving out of town and had to pull over at a dark corner of the highway for the interview. Luckily, I was driving with a friend, because while I was on the phone, a highway patrol car pulled over, and my friend had to explain to the officer that I was having an interview. The experience made a lasting impression on me! MICA was also a perfect fit; there was something like a "punk rock" vibe that I felt in my first month. It's also within a city that for me has a certain degree of being a creative sanctuary, but [the attractions in] DC and New York are close by. Leigh Conner and Jamie Smith [of Conner Contemporary] visit MICA at least once a year to have individual critiques with the graduate students, and this is how I got acquainted with the projects of the gallery.



Koon's ASAP portrait detail. Image courtesy Toym Imao.

ECA: *Your artist statement mentions that growing up in the Philippines has given you a traditional, “Asian” cultural view of art and that Fulbright Scholarship allowed you to come to “The West” and cultivate new paradigms into your work. Can you comment on what the concept of “Asian art” means for you, and what specifically you’ve gleaned from studying here in America?*

Ti: When I use the term “Asian view”, I generally refer to a more traditional way of creating imagery within frameworks of certain “ritualistic” processes that involve spirituality, religion, or cultural affinity. That said, I think contemporary Asian art is not much different at this point in history than with its Western counterparts (at least the works that “get out” there) in terms of imagery or themes since the age of information and the internet has continually blurred the traditional demarcation lines. My Fulbright Scholarship in the past two years has allowed me to immerse myself in the Western contemporary “traditions” in real time. I have had a chance to experience the works... [first-hand] which is much, much different from textbook or virtual experiences of artwork. What I have... [found fascinating] in terms of European/American art tradition in the contemporary realm is the “sense of urgency” in conjuring imagery that is specific to a particular time.



Video still from “Versed, Versus the Verses” (portrait of a suicide bomber). Image courtesy Toym Imao.

ECA: *Your piece in this exhibition, "Reversed, Expanded, Exploded- POPped!" is dominated by what looks like a painted portrait covered in a frenzied abstraction of shredded paper and pigment, but there is also a sculptural element off to the side. Can you walk us through the installation and explain how these various components all relate to one another?*

TI: The installation consists of an 8 ft by 8 ft Acrylic on tarp canvas portrait of **Jeff Koons**, employing a technique I term "Auto-Serendipitous Action Painting" (A.S.A.P.). [I started] by creating a life size paper maché effigy and installing fireworks inside that ignite the sculptural element and blast stuffed pigments and shredded texts cut like fortune cookie strips onto a large scale portrait. The charred debris, dripped pigments and fallen texts are bounded onto the painting to create an image of random chance. The "portrait" utilizes the text of Koon's Wikipedia article and the tale *The Emperor's New Clothes*, and the audience is invited to sift through and find coherent and/or serendipitous patterns and phrases.

The sculptural component towards the right represents a detonation box, fabricated in brass and has a facsimile of the mask that was used in the actual burning process of the effigy. The finish of this detonation box mimics that of some of Koon's polished sculptures. You will notice that the face pulsates with some strobe lights as if the entire mask surface is a mass of silver cloud being illuminated from the inside by lightning. Looking through the eyes of the mask reveals a video loop inside the box showing the actual burning of the effigy.

ECA: *Blowing up Jeff Koons is pretty gutsy! From your portfolio, we see you've used imagery of Jeff Koons and a suicide bomber in your ASAP works. How do you decide upon the themes for your underlying portrait and your paper mache effigies?*

TI: When I was thinking of who to burn first, hands down it was Koons. I wanted my first burn to have a historical connection to my experiences and since Koons was at one point a part of MICA he was number one on the hit list. What was funny is three weeks after I burned his effigy, I had a chance to actually meet and chat with him about the work after he gave a talk at MICA – quite surreal! The suicide bomber choice as a subject was more of an academic decision to tackle a very sensitive phenomenon. I know it is the kind of work that I cannot easily exhibit without a careful contextualization of the imagery involved in the work. My father is a Muslim and my mother is devoutly Roman Catholic. I have come to appreciate and respect both religions [and feel] this work somehow touches on my spiritual connection with both, as well as how mortality figures into my creative process. Burning of an artist effigy and that of the suicide bomber involve the very same process of transformation of imagery but the metaphors and the sensibilities involved in the reading of the entire artistic process of both effigies are poles apart.

My intention for burning an effigy is not the symbolical destruction of a vilified figure, but more centered on the idea of renewal through the use of fire and explosion as transformative agents from one form to another, akin to the laws of conservation of energy. I am currently doing in my studio, the effigies of Damien Hirst, Sidney Sherman, Ai Wei Wei, Marina Abramovich, Takashi Murakami, Bruce Nauman, and Chris Burden. I am also doing another Koons' variation.



"Reversed, Expanded, Exploded, POPped" partial installation view at Academy 2012. Photo Courtesy of the artist.

ECA: *What led you to this idea of Auto-Serendipitous Action Painting?*

The Fulbright [Scholarship] was an offer I couldn't refuse. It offered a chance for reinvention and the ability to move away from the static, publicly-funded mural work I was producing back home in the Philippines. Being technically unemployed for 2 years is allowing me to create and explore the works I've always wanted to do, and so a certain kind of hybridity was inevitable to break out from my original mold. My undergrad was in architecture and my first foray into the visual arts was painting. I studied film for a year and even wrote for a national daily after college. I asked myself, "do I concentrate on one, or I can combine all in one process?" The logical outcome was ASAP.

ECA: *In addition to sculptural and canvas elements, works in your ASAP series also contain a video documentary aspect. How does this use of video relate to the other elements of your installations?*

TI: Simply put, it is a documentation of a performance. I consider the performance to be the work of my two collaborators: fire and gravity. I consider myself more of a production designer as I prepare and set up the components of ASAP before burning. Once ignited my collaborators, like actors on a stage, step in to give substance to my vision. It's the chemistry of each individual cast member among each other that produces the actual visual impact that their audience can appreciate. The video documentary makes the work credible. I consider the documentation as the most important component of the piece since it is the only visual reference that reveals my cohorts (fire and gravity) in the production of the final piece which is the debris-encrusted portrait painting. The painting is a bonus, and becomes the visual definition of "serendipity" which also continues the conversation of the piece with the audience who would "sift" through the randomly composed fragmented words, phrases and pigments to create their own narratives of the work.

ECA: *You have also described the ASAP process as "transformative". Can you comment upon what that means for you? Are you thinking in terms of how its transforming the architectural element into a fine art piece or does it mean something philosophically deeper than that to you?*

TI: I am fond of trying to draw parallels between scientific laws and artistic processes; the "Law of Conservation of Mass and of Energy" is my all time favorite. The *Conservation of Mass* states that the mass of an isolated system (closed to all matter and energy) will remain constant over time. This principle is equivalent to the conservation of energy, in the sense when energy or mass is enclosed in a system and none is allowed in or out, its quantity cannot otherwise change (hence, its quantity is "conserved"). The mass of an isolated system cannot be changed as a result of processes acting inside the

system. The law implies that mass or energy can neither be created nor destroyed, although it may be rearranged in space and changed into different types of particles; and that for any chemical process in an isolated system, the mass of the reactants must equal the mass of the products.

ECA: *You're sounding more like a physics professor and less like a professional artist!*

TI: Beautiful, isn't it! In my personal view, the art world is that "closed system", governed by its own rules and dynamics. The "mass" is the accumulation of all the artistic traditions, processes, and body of work developed over time. Energy is the creative impulse to create art, tempered by socio-political, historical and spiritual factors within a particular era of an artist. Ever since the dawn of humanity, whatever we create will emerge from a finite system, and our actions and creations will always fall within the confines of the human scale (spatial/ architectural anthropometrics), and evolve based on the limits of our biology... We build on the imagery that artists have set before us. We feed on their impulses and create a response (our own artwork) of either a reaction or allegiance to their artworks. There is symbiosis occurring — whether, we are conscious or unconscious about it, or whether we acknowledge or deny it.

ECA: *The notions of chance and serendipity play key roles in your current creative process. Why are they becoming important to you at this stage in your career?*

TI: I come from a profession which is very structured and technical, [and so I] love the idea of just letting go at one point of the process of art production and let chance conjure the images for me. It is also a partly a reaction to the more controlled and calculated processes I have observed in most contemporary artworks in the United States. I wanted to approach my process with a little more uncertainty but with a calculated level of risk. Static work does not just deliver the amount of punch I wanted to bring out of the work. That is why I have come to appreciate performance art. Also, as an "outsider" to the western art scene, I wanted to bring some eastern spiritual sensibilities into the process of creation by letting the forces and elements of nature run the show at one point of the art production.

ECA: *Well we certainly hope to see more of your "ASAP"s in the future. What are your plans after your scholarship ends? Will you remain in the US or return permanently to the Phillipines?*

TI: I believe I'm on to something really exciting with my ASAP's. It's the kind of work that continuously reveals something new or another facet of the work that I may have overlooked or wasn't conscious about. Home is where the heart is, and Manila has to contend with the fact that Baltimore or the east coast will be sharing my affection in the years to come. I will be starting an artist residency at the Creative Alliance this August courtesy in part through an Apperson Fellowship for a year, and the residency comes with a beautiful and generously spaced live-in studio. I will attempt to practice art in on two fronts and, funds allowing, it will mean shuttling back and forth from the two cities every couple of months and/or or a lot of skyping with the studio back home while I'm in Baltimore.

ECA: *Thank you Toym for taking the time to share your art with our readers.*

TI: Thank you so much, it was a pleasure having this conversation with you.