



RITCHIE ARIES DOÑA

Born in Cebu in the Philippines, Ritchie draws from traditional basket-weaving and fabric-wrapping to transform discarded industrial materials, often working with large community teams. He writes,

“Material discarded from factories around the North West of Tasmania are shipped from other shorelines but are discarded in this land. I aim to collect these materials, make them into art by using traditional techniques, construct them into an artwork, and then ship them back offshore again”. The careful, elegant attention to detail Ritchie brings to his work serves to sanctify the discarded, bringing community together in processes of shared conversation and care.

I was born in the province of Cebu in the Philippines. I was two years old when my mother left. My father had already left after I was two months old – I know very little about him other than the fact that he had curly hair. This is a fairly unusual characteristic among Filipinos – one that is often associated with the Negritos – the original indigenous inhabitants. It’s a characteristic I’ve inherited. I was taken care of by my grandfather and my step-grandmother in their family home in Negros. I was raised believing that they were my parents.

I returned to Cebu after my grandfather died – I was nine at the time. I can still remember this event vividly: the person whom I had always believed to be my mother led me to a house I’d never entered before. She

took me to a woman I could never remember having seen before and simply said, “This is your mother.” I felt complete confusion – my step-grandmother had brought me up well, – she’d always treated me as her own son and I felt complete attachment to her. The confusion was exacerbated by the fact that my mother now had two small children of her own from an Australian man she’d married. I felt as though I was less important than them; the two months I stayed with my ‘new’ family in Cebu were shot through with feelings of confusion and jealousy. She wanted to restore the affection between us but it had been so sudden and unplanned.

After my real mother left to return to Australia I continued to live with my step-grandmother for a little

while, but my mother did not want me to live with her, so I was removed from her care to be looked after by her brother and his wife who had never been able to have children of their own. This was doubly difficult, especially as a result of the fact that I was never given a chance of saying goodbye to my step-grandmother. I lived for a year with my aunt and uncle, and during this time, unbeknownst to me, they prepared the paperwork to get me to Australia. I was sent off to Australia in December 1997 at the age of thirteen. I travelled on the plane alone and I couldn't speak English. The prospect of traveling huge distances to live with a woman I had only known for a few weeks, who was married to a man I'd never met, and in a country I'd never heard of with a language I didn't understand were enormous.

My mother was living in Gatton, Queensland. The following two years were akin to an emotional roller-coaster ride that included domestic violence. I was inevitably the odd one out in the family - I was less white and I was struggling to learn the language. I didn't like school, but it was a sanctuary away from the trials of home. At first I had to translate what I was learning back into Filipino until gradually it got to a point where I was thinking in English and translating in English, and later, by the time I left home, the fact that there was no one else to speak to in Cebuano meant that I had lost my skills in my native tongue.

After considering the domestic situation I was in, the school counselor recommended that I leave home, so at fifteen I was sent to Withcott, a little town near Toowoomba. The Social Worker placed me with a family to be my legal guardians. I stayed there until the end of grade twelve, surrounded in my home life by the other children in the family and also by others like me who had experienced difficulties in their own homes. At the first school I attended I had been bullied because of my colour, my accent and my imperfect attempts at speaking English, but when I went to live in Withcott I went to the Christian Outreach College at Toowoomba, where the bullying alleviated. It was here that I flourished at art – my teacher Mr. Robert Gunter became my ersatz 'father'; through his encouragement I was successful in applying to the University of Southern Queensland to complete a Degree in Visual Arts after I graduated from high school. He helped throughout my university studies, and I've continued to keep in touch with him. After my graduation I enrolled in Honours. My studies were proceeding reasonably well, but there was one particular event that turned my practice around completely. One of my lecturers - Charles Robb – had had a profound influence on my practice. I loved sculpture, and spent a great deal of time in the ceramics and textiles studios. In 2004 I'd invented a way of folding books that completely transformed them. I wanted to imitate the books by

using clay slabs with paper clay but had been faltering with approaches and methods and it was taking me ages. In the critique before the assessment Charles gave me a particularly stern critique, after which I went back to the folding book work and threw myself completely into the project. The work produced a work that was chosen as the only representation for the USQ for Fresh Cut - the prestigious annual exhibition of emerging artists at the IMA (Institute of Modern Art). As a result, a representative from the State Library of Queensland commissioned chandeliers made from the folded books. And immediately after this, a representative from the Brisbane Airport bought my other works when they were exhibited at Crafts Queensland's Artisan exhibition space. I often reflect that if I hadn't listened to Charles I might not be where I am today. The downside of this success was that the demand for my studio work had taken my focus away from fully focusing on the written aspect of my thesis, and as a result I was unsuccessful in completing my Honours.

In 2007 I went back to the Philippines for the first time since I'd left. I wanted to find out more about my family on my father's side, so I asked members of my mother's family to show me where my father's side of the family came from. They took me to a region inhabited with mountain people, and although there was an occasion where someone called out to me using my father's name, they claimed to have never seen my father since I was born either.

In 2011 when I reconciled with my mother I tried again to find out from her about my father's side of the family. She explained to me that there had been differences of opinion between my mother's father and my biological father, and that was why they had refused to have anything to do with my father. My speculation is, looking back, that the problems between my mother and I have probably had a lot to do with the fact that, especially due to my curly hair and appearance, I look so much like him.

When I'd moved to Toowoomba to study I'd lived on my own with Youth Allowance, and worked 40 hours a week at Domino's Pizza to pay the bills. When I graduated I moved to Tasmania to study at the Tasmanian Preaching School. All my life I've been religious – like most Filipinos, I was raised to understand that worship should be included as an integral part of daily life. Although I was brought up Catholic, when I'd parted company with my mother in Australia I'd renounced my Catholicism. The family I moved in with in Withcott were also religious, and they were keen for me to attend their particular church with their family. But it was during this time I began to question the contradictions in religious ideas and beliefs. And when I'd shared accommodation with a friend who worshipped at the Assembly of God, in Toowoomba,

the contradictions and the questions they raised for me seemed increasingly complex and compelling.

At the same time every Sunday night a local community radio there would play Filipino songs – I'd listen to it in part to test my capacity to understand Tagalog language. The program after that was run by the church of Christ, and I'd continue to listen. Eventually I called the man who ran the radio program, and gradually became more involved.

I made the decision to study the Bible more seriously, and as a result applied to undertake a two-year Diploma course at the Tasmanian School of Preaching, in Devonport. By the time I'd completed it I loved Tasmania so much I decided to stay. What I learned there has provided an integral part of my role as an artist: I use mainly rubbish for materials, and undertake mentoring roles with youth and also work in the Juvenile Detention Centre, using my art as a metaphor to see and show value in what can otherwise be thought of as worthless. Because of what I went through, I want the young people I work with to have the same opportunities I was given by special individuals. I can use art as a way of getting those I work with to see their own value.

What makes where you live and work different? (to a metropolitan area/to other regions you've experienced)

I love the laid-back lifestyle in Burnie – you have time to think here – to incubate your ideas and thoughts and creative processes. From early childhood I grew up in small places – I don't like the chaos of cities – they rob you of your own thinking.

What might make it difficult?

The difficulties include access to resources like materials; for example, the band-saws I use to cut the books require parts that are only available in Sydney. If you don't travel there yourself to pick up certain tools, you have to buy online – this can also be costly.

And where do the other challenges lie? But are these challenges worthwhile? And what kind of benefits are there?

The challenges lie in distance and expenses - but this makes me be more resourceful and inventive – I have to change and compromise my ideas. This constantly happens in my projects ... I often need to cut costs but often, as a consequence, the outcomes are better than the plans I'd intended in the beginning.

Do you think that galleries and the artistic communities around them (the artists, designers, arts workers, volunteers) have shaped the local community? To what extent?

Because I see my role as a 'community artist', I don't

really work through the galleries as much, so I can't say for sure... but as an 'art worker' I have to be in touch with the broader communities because an essential purpose of my work is to engage these communities. The galleries come in with the final presentation of the work, but then most of my works are not even presented in galleries – a lot of the time they're in public places that the community has contributed to building – like libraries and council halls.

Did you ever envision yourself living and working in a place like this?

No – never. I guess the best answer for this is to just say that, as an artist, you just go with the flow. One of the reasons I moved to Burnie was because I was invited here to participate in the Makers Workshop that was started by the Council for artists from a broad range of disciplines to work in specially designed 'pod' where people could chat with them – it was a good way of engaging with the public while selling your work. But since UTAS has taken over the initiative, the dynamic has changed, and last year I left.

How does it feel now?

I've never really had a sense of being fixed in one place. All my life I've been moving. The place I'm living now is where I've stayed longest in my life – I'm coming up to my fifth year here. Even in my childhood we were constantly moving. As a result, I don't have a particular sentiment attached to a particular place.

What relationship does 'your' place have to the general scene in metropolitan-focused art in Australia?

The answer while I was living in Toowoomba would have been different to how I would answer this question now – back then I was doing more work for Brisbane than for local exhibitions in Toowoomba. From my point of view now, I very much depend on workshops in a range of places from the library to juvenile detention institutions to all kinds of broader community initiatives. The last project I was engaged in at Lorne in Victoria was regionally focused. Perhaps art has now gone well beyond the conveniences of galleries.

Is it cheaper to live in the regions?

I have a good situation with where I live at the moment, so I can't complain at all. Fuel and food is generally more expensive – the competition is not there. And the fact that you have to travel a bit more adds to the expenses.

Do you think it's important to 'get out' from the regions and come back in again?

In some ways – yes. You can lose track of what's happening. When I was recently in Lorne I could see that the descriptions of art they were engaging with – and the language they were using – had changed. The issues change all the time, and unless you leave every so often to get involved, you can get out of touch with this. But this can also be a good thing, as it can give

time for your creative impulses to develop.

How important are region-to-region contact and relationships?

Absolutely crucial – because regions connect each other through their communications across a range of media – and cultural exchange is important – even though no region is completely isolated.

Do you think place still matters...or do you just think that the importance of place has been dissolved by social media, international marketing and the onslaught of the multi-national conglomerates (Facebook; Apple; Amazon; Netflix; Google etc.)?

Especially in Tasmania – place is very important to people ...right now, while I can say that I can build my own sense of contentment wherever I go, I love the people here – I have a strong connection with the people through my art. I am not on social media, but I'm aware that it can break people-to-people connection in a way that disconnects them from place. I can say from my own experiences that when I work most closely with communities in developing my art projects – that's when I build the strongest sense of – and connection to – place.

What is the role of your work?

My primary purpose is to have the interaction with other human beings both physically and socially – my art encourages shared conversations. The processes are simple enough that everyone can do them, and the materials I use have an ethical significance with psychological interpretations - to see value in something that's worthless.

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