



**FIGURING, ABSTRACTING...
ON EXTENDED WINGS**

**A DECADE OF KENNETH
JOHN MONTEGRANDE**

BY DAVID JONATHAN Y. BAYOT

*At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.*
– Wallace Stevens, “Sunday Morning”

“On Extended Wings”—this is how and where I first met the Filipino painter Kenneth John Montegrande. That was in early December 2018. And the arrival of this 4-by-5-foot painting at my residence has, in a significant sense, marked the beginning of my collaboration with the artist. The partnership began initially with me as an amateur collector of his artwork; later, as a sounding board of his various ideas on art and other life stuff; and, on a few significant occasions, as a title giver of his artworks, among them the two paint-

ings that are now housed in the Malacañang Palace collection—“Transfigurings of Freshest Blue” and “*Perla del Mar de Oriente*” (both: 2019, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches) are notable examples.

For a few weeks after the painting was delivered and displayed in the guest room, I had been delighted that the art piece had enthralled several of my Christmas visitors. The artwork did, in fact, exert a powerful fascination over the guests. Many of them spoke of how the energy of the brushmarks surged out forcefully to reach them. Another commented on the painter’s vivid mark making as the latter translated an image of a spiritual awakening gathering momentum onto the canvas

(though some said that, given the heavy darkness hovering the space, the piece is more like a representation of a spiritual agon). Quite a number of the visitors said that they thought it’s a Betsy Westendorp piece! In fact, when I showed an image of the work to Westendorp during our Christmas lunch, the 90-year-old painter said that, for a moment, she really thought it was her painting since it resembles to a great extent her *atmosferografias* (as her cloudscapes are dubbed by the late Spanish art critic Eléna Flores).

However, despite the generally heartening words from the guests about the Montegrande painting now displayed on our wall, I honestly still felt a bit queasy

(BELOW) “Transfigurings of Freshest Blue”, 2019, 4 x 5 feet, acrylic on canvas. The Presidential Museum and Library, Malacañang Palace Collection. (OPPOSITE PAGE) “On Extended Wings”, 2018, 4 x 5 feet, acrylic on canvas. David Jonathan Bayot Collection.





"Clouds of Hope", 2021, 5 x 5 feet, acrylic on canvas.

about the "nameless" status of this work. I mentioned my concern to the artist and told him that we better have a title for this artwork so that, at least, I would have a frame of reference to ground whatever "art talk" would be occasioned by this work.

The title finally came. One Sunday morning, over coffee, the painter asked me what I found appealing in that particular painting. I remember I responded to him candidly, and I told him the painting didn't really "appeal" to me (though I didn't mean that to be a bad thing). Rather, the painting's configuration of images and colors struck me as a charged representation of the concluding lines of a Wallace Stevens poem.

In "Sunday Morning," the poet concludes the poem thus: "*At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make / Ambiguous undulations as they sink, / Downward to darkness, on extended wings.*" I told Montegrando how, over the years since my first encoun-

ter with the evocations of those lines, the image of a group of this fairly ordinary member of the Aves class – *sinking, downward, to darkness, on extended wings*, and the *ambiguous undulations* that characterize the act – has always had that haunting, in fact, unnerving effect on me.

Somehow, I felt I said something that struck a chord with the artist especially when I mentioned the exultant word "momentous," in the same breath that I said the eerie word "ominous" in my depiction of the artwork's effect on me. I recall in hindsight that this segment of our conversation was where the artist picked me up from my side of the world to his. From this point onwards, during that same conversation and on the many that follow, he began telling me, as linguistically as he can (and he was unabashed about this "struggle"), the artist, the man that he thinks he is, as well as the life and the core that he thinks forms as well as in-forms his

artistic production, whether the work is figurative, or abstract, or something of the former teetering on the edge of the latter.

As we're on the "subject" of "On Extended Wings" (which, at that point of our exchange, was already the title we affixed on the painting) and knowing that I have a penchant for a "discursive subject" (as if the world is really just a classroom writ large), Montegrando began to talk intently on "the subject," and he said,

I appreciate paintings with "subjects" (for instance, J.M.W. Turner's famous "The Fighting Temeraire"). And I certainly feel a strong passion for those "without a subject" (such as an Improvisation piece of Vasily Kandinsky). Maybe it's important to mention that although I've time and again referred to myself as an Abstract Expressionist, I would also say I'm an Impressionist or, in fact, a romantic just like my hero Turner!

More often than not, I really have no specific subject or concept in mind when I start painting. While it's true that many of my paintings carry titles that are indicative of certain subjects like silence, insomnia, mystery of life, solitude—generally, these themes come after the painting process has been completed. By saying that, I don't want to give the impression that I start a painting in a state of tabula rasa. I certainly have some "notions" in mind, although I wouldn't say they're "concepts." Most, if not all, those notions are emotionally charged. And I would say that the process of my painting is one of translating those notions – most of them unidentifiable or unnameable – into strokes and color of my preference. I mention "my preference" because some would say that my paintings remind them of those by Betsy Westendorp, Per Kirkeby, Frank Auerbach, or Emil Nolde. I'm, of course, very flattered by the association. But the truth is, I didn't have them in mind at all when I was doing my work. In fact, I got to know about them and their art much later. I'm a Mass Communication graduate



Beholders of Montegrando's art – enacted in the language of Impressionism, Expressionism, and the abstraction that go with them – are sure to be delighted to witness how the artist, with his rich, spontaneous, and gestural brushstrokes, produces swathes, swirls, and sketches of somber as well as exuberant colors, layered over the canvas in an eloquent manner.



and a self-taught artist, as you know. And that's my way of saying that on the crime of ignorance of art history, I plead guilty as charged.

When I was painting "On Extended Wings," I wasn't really thinking of Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning," as you did after you saw the piece. I was filled with notions and images of darkness, light, struggle, surfacing, drowning... while I was painting the piece. It's only now, after you told me about the poem and a possible interpretation of it being about one's voluntary descent into the earth of darkness or death "on extended wings" as a path to light and meaning, that I began to recognize in hindsight what could be going on in my system when I was painting that piece.

I was about to ask the artist for an account of the impetus behind the "emotionally charged notions" that could explain the "explosive" texture of his paint(ing), when he gently shifted the talk to another topic. I knew he needed a break from the "heaviness" of the "subject" of

our conversation so far, and I just rode along with him down the path of what he called, in jest, his "miseducation" as an artist.

In 2012, while I was performing my role as the events and media strategist of the Intramuros Administration, an agency affiliated with the Department of Tourism, I found myself inspired by the artworks of the Filipino artists who were exhibiting in the Intramuros Arts Festival. The festival was organized by the IA and the Intramuros Visual Artists Philippines (IVAP) in conjunction with the National Commission for the Culture and the Arts (NCCA). In this event, I got the chance to meet notable artists, the likes of Pancho Piano from Bicol, Al Perez from Bulacan, and Nemesio R. Miranda, Jr. or Nemiranda. I was so inspired by their works and their words of encouragement, and the following week, I found myself purchasing materials for my own art making! And that's how I began as a painter. In short, the education route I've taken as an artist is quite "out of order"!

And that should explain why I got to know about Vincent van Gogh's "The Starry Night"—and, take note, after I heard Don McLean's "Vincent"!



My first serious collaboration with Montegrando began with *Remarkable Imperfections*—his sixth solo exhibition at the newly constructed Altro Mondo Creative Space along Chino Roces Avenue on April 27, 2019. And that event was made memorable by the presence of esteemed personalities in the Philippine art and advertising scene who inaugurated the exhibit—Betsy Westendorp and Justin "Tiny" Nuyda, together with Ronald and Marivic Garcia.

For that occasion and several of the subsequent exhibits of the artist, some among them at Artes Orientes and the national art fairs of the Philippines (officially known as *ManilArt*), I had the opportunity to put into words the afterlife of my visual encounters with the art of Montegrando and, later, to present personal sketches of the artist and his art in various venues, mostly in *The Philippine Tatler*.

(AT RIGHT, FROM TOP) "Midnight Blue (Abstract Version)", 2021, 4 x 4 feet, acrylic on canvas; "Good Morning Sunshine", 2021, 5 x 5 feet, acrylic on canvas. (OPPOSITE PAGE) "Light of Wisdom", 2021, 2 x 3 feet, acrylic on canvas. Artist's Collection.

I have considered his philosophy of art and wrote that, for Montegrando, his paintings are in effect compelled by an inner (if not innate) *obsession* to create, express, and grow something on canvas or, in the words of Joan Miró, to "give birth to a world" and "reveal...something alive." I said that the inexplicable obsession to articulate the "indefinable" and to confer figure(s) on the intractable is a defining reason why the artist often identifies himself as an "Abstract Expressionist."

I mentioned too that like his fellow Abstract Expressionists – Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler, and even Per Kirkeby – Montegrando often translates his obsession into large-scale works, thinking that via such artistic magnitude, he could maximize the physical impact of his paintings on his viewers and invite the latter to think and feel more deeply about one's Self in relation to all that comes with life and living.

A lot of what I frequently wrote and spoke concerns the singularity of Montegrando and his versatility in generic translations. I would often say that while he's fluent in the painterly language of abstraction – where, through the syllables and phrases of colors and lines, he could conjure a dazzling array of figurations and speak a babel of discourses – he's no less eloquent in the Impressionist tongue(s)!

In all occasions where I have been asked to write or speak on the artistic achievement of Montegrando – including his latest exhibition last March 2021, where he held a two-man show with Maestro Juvenal Sansó at the Fundacion Sansó – I would inadvertently reiterate what I've always said: that beholders of Montegrando's art – enacted in the language of Impressionism, Expressionism, and the abstraction that go with them – are sure to be delighted to witness how the artist, with his rich, spontaneous, and gestural brushstrokes, produces swathes, swirls,



and sketches of somber as well as exuberant colors, layered over the canvas in an eloquent manner.

I would always invite the viewers to look closely at how – in various genres of the artist’s work – every slash of brush or palette knife, the dripping and the sharp ridge of impasto would carry with it a compulsion and obsession to create figures (in the broad sense of the term) in defiance of oppressive and meaningless void.

And I would never miss telling the observers of the artwork the latter’s evocations in me: that from the built-up paint surface, oftentimes caked with the artist’s painterly “aggression” against the empty psychic space represented by the canvas, has emerged an artistic personality, a configuration of fascinating artistic expressions that talks not but speaks.



Sometime in the first quarter of 2019, Montegrando and I met at my place to plan for an exhibition of his “representa-

tive” works at the Malacañang Palace. An exhibit entitled *A Glimpse of Montegrando* (*Selections from the DJ Bayot Family Collection*) intended for public viewing was scheduled to run from July 15 to August 16, 2019 on palace ground. And in that meeting, we found ourselves continuing, albeit obliquely, a subject we left off in our conversation a few months ago—the impetus or story behind the “emotionally charged notions” that eventually got translated onto the canvas, into his paintings.

This time, the artist’s narrative personality had shifted from that of an easygoing third-person observer to someone who’s an “I” tunnelling down towards some dark sedimentation. And he began to tell, in an understated manner, of the troubling flow of his life-story. He mentioned how in his life since childhood, separation has been a nagging, defining theme that just wouldn’t go away. He then spoke, in quite a dispirited manner, how at various points in his life as a teenager (and even before that) he had worked as a construction worker, a vegetable vendor, and a janitor.

While the artist was referencing that “inscrutable riverward” path of his life track, I could feel a Henry James description of a London street—“packed to blackness with accumulations of suffered experience.” Such darkness, Montegrando muttered...And his gaze soon turned to the painting on the wall, “On Extended Wings,” which he said he would like to include in the set of artworks for the palace exhibition. And I know why.

He mentioned how those periods of darkness weighed on him as the extended wings of cloud-waves on that painting came crushing down on the imaginary characters inhabiting the fictive space. The artist said he felt that all that Life had offered him till then was that fragile, puffy whiteness called “dream”! He continued: during those years, he had dreamt hard against the harshness of life, he had insisted on dreaming to be otherwise, and he didn’t for a moment dare to close his eyes to his dream for a canvas from Life, where he could paint all the anguish of his past and to paint “anew” of his days to come.





(ABOVE) *"Perla del Mar de Oriente"*, 2019, 4 x 5 feet, acrylic on canvas. The Presidential Museum and Library, Malacañang Palace Collection. (OPPOSITE PAGE) *"Inner Strength"*, 2021, 4 x 6 feet, acrylic on canvas.

As the artist got to that point in his narrative, I involuntarily turned to look again at my first Montegrando painting. Somehow, I recognized (more clearly this time) how the cloudscape has indeed been invaded by an unmistakable sense of anguish and forlornness.

After a while, the artist pointed to an abstract painting hanging adjacent to *"On Extended Wings."* This abstraction is a bright contrast to the darkness of the Expressionist figuration of the cloudscape beside it. The canvas of this abstract piece is marked by a web of dynamic lines tracing their way rhythmically across a picture space filled with shapes painted in vivid colors. The piece, I told the artist, has the look of a musical notation that, in fact, evokes joyful emotions. He then shrugged

off his earlier gloom, stood up in excitement, and pointed to me three word-images tucked under the many layers of paint on the canvas of representation: FAITH, HOPE, LOVE. *"Keep Going"* (2019, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches)—that's the title of this exulted piece, and the artist wanted it included in the palace exhibition as well.

I soon followed the gentle nudge within me to turn again for another look at *"On Extended Wings."* And this time, I started to notice the bright accents of the indomitable orange that glows on the contrasting darkness and whiteness filling the canvas. And I couldn't help feeling the elation of recognition – that these two seemingly different paintings are, in fact, complementary visions articulated in the

same picture space of Montegrando – "moments," in the words of Henri Michaux, "that, placed side by side, go to make up a life!"

With mixed emotions, the artist said he couldn't thank God enough for the beautiful family given to keep him going during those dark nights of his life—his wife Jilliane Pauline Jacela Montegrando and his two heartening daughters, Cassandra Ysabelle and Claire Denise Montegrando. Because of the glow of warmth they brought him in the "forest of the night," the artist said he one day woke up from this impalpable thing called Dream – gratefully in disbelief – to be the first Filipino painter and also the first Southeast Asian artist whose works are housed in the prestigious collection of Yusaku Maezawa,

a Japanese tycoon and mega art collector who founded and currently directs the Contemporary Arts Foundation.

And as we continued to pore over his artworks in my family collection and ascertain the pieces to display in this month-long and first-of-its-kind exhibition for public viewing at the Kalayaan Hall in Malacañang Palace, he said at one point, “this exhibition is certainly still a dream to me, and I hope God will allow me to continue dwelling in it even after the exhibition is over!”



A Decade of Kenneth Montegrando—that’s the celebration that will take place at Art Lounge Manila from July 23 to August 5, 2021. And for this occasion of great significance, the curator Ricky Francisco has thoughtfully assembled an impressive selection of the artist’s figurative and abstract work—with a display of fifteen fairly large-scale works by the artist, with sizes that range from 2 x 3 feet to 6 x 6 feet. And in this momentous event, enthusiasts of Montegrando’s art will get the chance to see two of the paintings showcased and presented to the public in the Malacañang Palace exhibition back in 2019.

One Sunday morning some two years ago, I had the good fortune of commencing an interesting conversation with Kenneth Montegrando via a painting of his, “On Extended Wings.” The two of us have talked since then of his many endeavors to figure, to abstract, to explore the space between...in order to reach and access that zone of human experience that is, by definition, intangible, unintelligible, and invisible.

And now, I could sense from the inside a fervid feeling, a hunch, most likely—



that in the course of *A Decade of Kenneth Montegrando* and the time after that, conversations are bound to be occasioned by Montegrando and the aficionados of his art. And somehow, I know that these human exchanges will be expeditions that will wind their way through the most concealed of one’s darkness as they head towards the iridescence of one’s capacity to dream...from the downside of darkness... on and onto one’s extended wings. 🍷

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