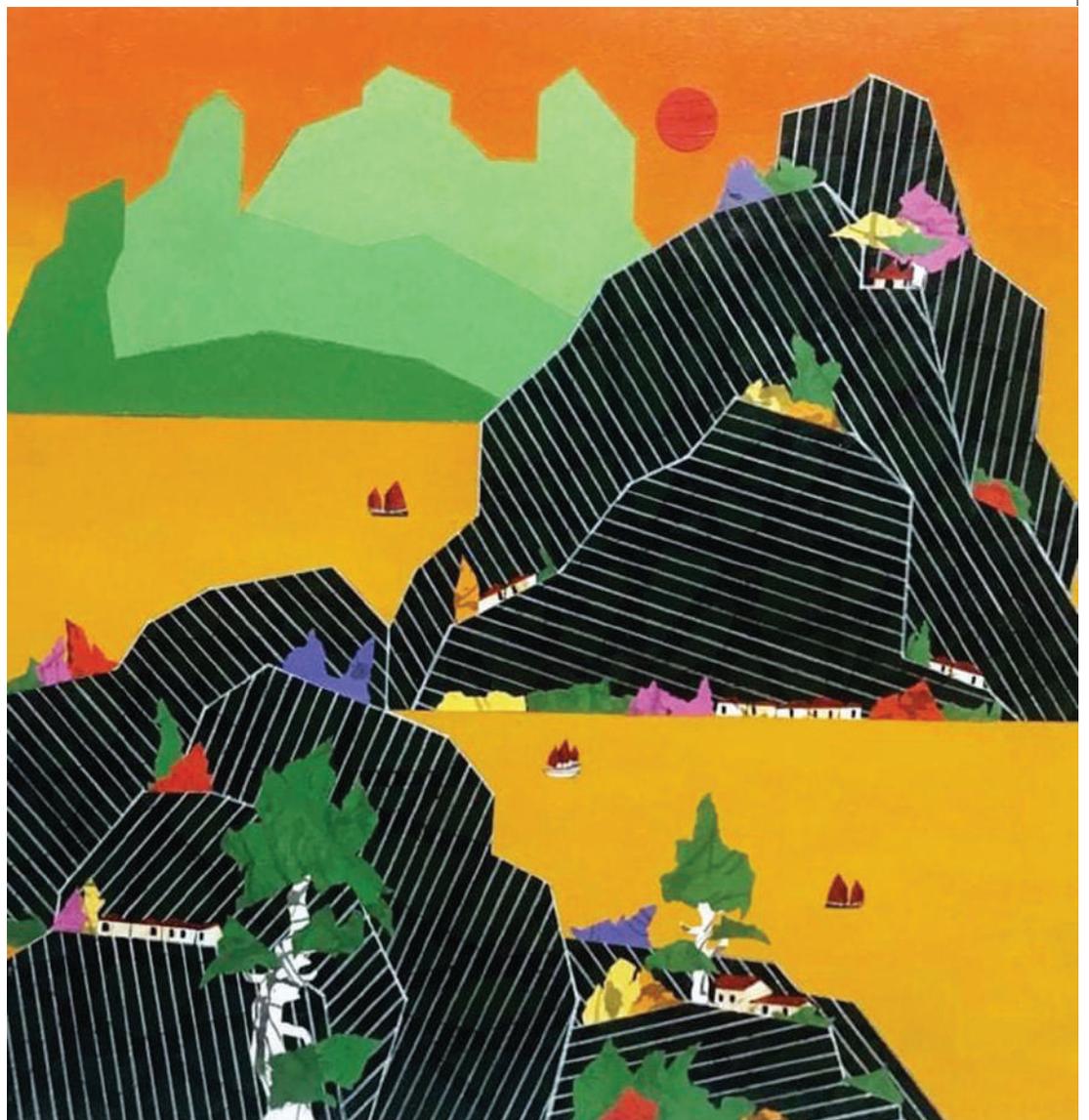


## A PALIMPSEST, IN MEDIA RES

The Interfusionist Art of  
Sir Levi Yu.

BY DAVID JONATHAN Y. BAYOT



*Ever he hastens to the issue, and plunges his [audience] in / into  
the midst of events [in medias res], as though they were familiar...*

– Horace, *Ars Poetica*

**I**n the midst of events—this is where Filipino painter Sir Levi Yu would defamiliarizingly begin his every art-making narrative. *Into the middle of things*—there, the beholders of Yu’s art would ineluctably find themselves “hastened and plunged into” (as Horace would have it). *In medias res*—here’s where the viewers commence their shuttle along the reception pathway, in search of the painter’s art- and mark-making.

In 2012, when the De La Salle University Publishing House (DLSUPH) was established, one of my first endeavors as executive publisher was to work with a handful of young graphic artists who share my faith in a John Cage aphorism: that “we are involved not in ownership but in use.”

Time came for the university press to release a book in 2019 to celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> founding anniversary of a research institute of the university. And for this volume that intends to celebrate the possibilities ahead – after 40, where life is said to begin – the design team thought it was apropos to collaborate, this time, with the art of an emergent name in the burgeoning artistic terrains in the country (since earlier, the collaborations were

with the works of canonical names in Philippine art, namely, Federico Alcuaz, Benedicto Cabrera [BenCab], José Joya, Arturo Luz, and Betsy Westendorp).

The team thought that the intriguing, “original-unoriginal” painting by Sir Levi Yu would make an engaging piece of cover design for the aforementioned book.

For some time since the launching of the book, Yu’s artwork has been displayed in the university press office on campus, with the intention of inviting members of the academic community and visitors of the press office to have a look at the actual artwork.

Yu’s painting had drawn quite a number of interesting and provocative comments from guests who dropped in on the press office. Some were amused by the collage of colorful pieces of castles, trees, rocks, sailboats, and sun, set against a backdrop of mountains depicted in linear and geometric patterns in the painting. The viewers appeared delighted when told that the pieces are, in fact, handmade papers fabricated by the artist—handworks which the painter subsequently drew on, colored, and collaged on the picture space he has laid out.

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It wasn't surprising when a couple of visitors looked disturbed after they saw the artwork and lamented the pervasiveness of plagiarism in the art world. They alleged that Yu's artwork, with specific reference to the series of lineated adjoining mountains, is indelibly a blatant copycat of the signature linear and geometric style of National Artist Arturo Luz. In fact, a pal didn't hesitate to rap me over the knuckles, as gullible and condoning, for collecting and displaying such work in a public place.

Prior to being put on the spot as such by the abovementioned "purists" among the viewers of Yu's work, I had heard from the painter himself that, over the years, he has found himself constantly beleaguered by allegations of non-originality. He said that he had, on many occasions, discussed the ethos behind the facticity of his "unoriginality" by explaining his *interfusionist* view of art(-making). He would elaborate on the intention of his *interfusionism* to foreground – and *not* background – the stylistic features that distinguish the work, especially of the Filipino artists, whose art and aesthetics have made a deep impression on him.

Yu would go on to elaborate on how his encounter with the works of his artistic

predecessors have brought about the impulse to re-locate and re-place and, in turn, the inclination to "paint through" (as John Cage would "write through") the masters' strokes as well as their picture space. He would speak of how the works comprising his Mountain Series (which is the reference point of this paper) are his interfusionist productions—reproductions, positions-repositions *from* the mark-making gestures, not only of Arturo Luz, but also of Manuel Baldemor, Juvenal Sansó, Jeff Dizon, and his own father, the notable expressionist painter William Yu.

What then is this interfusionist style about, and what is it up to? How does interfusionism face up to the "acclaimed" touchstone of *originality*, which "common sense" would consider a sine qua non criterion for the valuation of an artistic production?

It's really quite ironic that Yu and his artistic endeavor should be judged deficient by the pervasive and deeply entrenched Romantic myth of the artist as an original genius, while it is precisely such Romantic assumption that Yu's art has consistently and resolutely called into question.

For Yu, an artwork is far from being a self-existent matter of fact. It's definitely not an invention out of nowhere. It is rather

a fabric of signs, sign systems, and artistic conventions that the artist has inherited from the past and which, in this case, Yu the artist has chosen to foreground to the spectators. The foregrounding is aimed at defamiliarizing and "alienating" the viewers from the work, to a point that the artwork could occasion an inner speech within the viewers and a dialogic—where an exchange of logic takes place, not only between the beholders and the artwork but also, equally importantly, between the beholders and their individual/collective frame of reference (intellectual, as well as psychological).

The deconstructionist artist that Yu personifies holds that no matter how gifted and "original" an artist may (appear to) be, his entry point in the grand narrative of art has been "in/into the middle of things" (*in medias res*). The entry point is always already a reentry point. And the artistic creation has never happened "in the beginning" (no matter how convinced some artists are about their creative act as analogous to a godlike *creatio ex nihilo*).

I would liken Yu's conception of art (or his art, at least) as a *palimpsest*, of which David Macey offers an effective description: "a paper or parchment on which the original



(FROM LEFT) "Swiss Alps Series", 2019, 24 x 30 inches, mixed media, David Jonathan Bayot Collection; Artist Levi Yu. (OPPOSITE PAGE) "Mystical Mountains of China Series", 2020, 24 x 24 inches, mixed media, David Jonathan Bayot Collection. (NEXT PAGE) "Santorini Greece Series", 2020, 24 x 24 inches, mixed media, Joel Tugade Collection.



text has been partly erased or effaced to allow a new text to be written, leaving fragments of the original still visible.” Macey continues, “the term is also used in geology to describe a rock formation displaying features produced in two or more distinct periods.”

What then is the point (of departure) of this interfusionist/palimpsestic notion of artistic practice exemplified by Yu? Surely, it’s not to rehash the proverbial notion *nihil novum sub sole*—that there’s nothing new under the sun?

A key to understanding Yu’s notion of art lies very close to the motivation behind Horace’s advice to the young poets or makers: for them to carry their readers or audience into the midst of the action in the space of the art-making event. In short, the vision of Yu’s interfusionism is to bring the viewers to witness the different worlds that are presented, represented, and framed within his picture space. The palimpsestic condition of his artwork is, in short, an invitation for the spectators to enter into an inquisitive, dialogic relation with the artwork (and all the intertexts therein).

For Yu, the audience of the artwork are central as con-figurers of the artistic creation and its meaning-making event. Every understanding of the artistic text always involves guesswork and inference, and the meaning of an artwork is always plural, unstable, and contextual. And the collaging, as well as foregrounding of the influences and intertexts of

Yu, right within the painter’s art frame and picture space, carries his strong intention to free the viewers from a circumscribing habit of meaning-making *with* art, *in* art—to fixate the meaning of artistic marks in the contexts of their earlier incarnation(s).

With his interfusionist art, Yu envisions the emergence of a language among his viewers—one that is at home with ambiguity and which engages the viewers to participate in the generation of possible meanings other than those prescribed for the signs when they appeared in their “original” contexts.

After having traversed – in bullet train fashion – the interfusionist world of Yu, I’m reminded of an impromptu performance of an artist-musician-jazz innovator after seeing Piet Mondrian’s abstract painting *Broadway Boogie Woogie* at the MoMa. Jason Moran treated Mondrian’s piece as a score and played it on a piano in a backstage corner of one of the museum’s theaters. And in this unusual intertextual performance (translating visual art into music), Moran was interested in underscoring a Mondrian point: that abstraction in art and improvisation in music share the same ethos—both foreground the questions art *can* evoke and resonate in the inner recesses of their audience.

Now, I begin to wonder how Sir Levi Yu’s interfusionist art would be played out in the minds of those who care to enter art *in medias res* and to dialogue with it, a palimpsest!