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For love of art and environment

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MANILA, Philippines - A fleeting e-mail exchange with Virgilio "Pandy" Aviado got me hyped up about the upcoming Valentine's Day exhibit in Puerto Princesa City of the recently formed Samutsari artists' group.

Aviado, one of the country's foremost printmakers and a pillar of Samutsari, is curating this pioneering effort to draw the Pinoy artist into the mainstream of the social debate. In this case, Samutsari members have committed to donate their masterpieces to the cause of environmental protection as espoused by the environmentally conscious Mayor Edward Hagedorn of Puerto Princesa City.

No mean feat for photojournalist and art provocateur Melvyn Calderon who primarily instigated the Samutsari Artists for Biodiversity. Deliberate or otherwise, the effort signifies an emerging movement in the Pinoy art circles equivalent to the trend of corporate social responsibility that has swept the business sector lately.

Top-billing Samutsari are National Artists Napoleon Abueva and Ben "Bencab" Cabrera, both of whom have executed art pieces specific to the occasion of Puerto Princesa's own award-winning environmental project Pista y ang Kagueban, or Feast of the Forest, last June.

The heavy convergence of Samutsari artists includes social realists Elmer Borlongan and Antipas Delotavo, Pandy Aviado himself, accomplished abstractionist Gus Albor, potter Pablo Capati, fast-rising Dumaguete artist Mark Valenzuela, Plet Bolipata and multitalented sculptor Julie Lluch.

Most of them traveled to Puerto Princesa last June to participate in the Pista y ang Kagueban organized by the city government and its NGO partners. They began toiling on their works for the exhibit on the foothills of Mt. Irawan.

Abueva's "Forest Lovers," a huge masterpiece in wood, is bound to carry a price tag of at least half a million pesos, according to the organizers. Bencab's "Guardian of the Forest," a signed sketch of a Palawan native musician, is also a shoo-in collector's item.

As conceived, the proceeds of the affair will be managed by a nonprofit group for the protection of Puerto's Irawan watershed.

Apart from the artworks that will be auctioned off, the City of Puerto Princesa will also be endowed in the process by owning a permanent collection of each of the artists' chosen work.

The exhibit, to be formally opened by Hagedorn and Bantay Kalikasan head Gina Lopez at the City Coliseum, is among the highlights of the mangrove tree-planting activity "A Love Affair with Nature." The event takes place in the bakawan forests of coastal Puerto Princesa.

Artists reaching out

"It is a case of Mohammad going to the mountains," explains Aviado, to stress how the Pinoy artist is trying to reach out to the provinces and speak on the issues that confront them.

The engagement is both an immersion of Manila artists in the Palawan art scene. It also helps Samutsari members from Palawan and in the provinces earn a place in this elite group of artists—all united by their concern on saving the country's biological diversity.

Dinggot Prieto's Palawan Artists' Guild, composed of six of Palawan's top visual artists, will be joining the exhibit with their own works placed alongside their more illustrious peers. These include mixed-media specialist Jonathan Benitez, H. Dan Habaradas, Zaldy Jumawan, Pat Marquez, Frances Mary Mendoza and Mario Lubrico.

"It is very exciting for us to be with the big guns of the Philippine art scene," Benitez says. "We are comforted by the thought that we share a common commitment to protect the environment."

From Aviado's colorful and whimsical "Tree Planting Series" to Jumawan's intricately crafted portrait of a mystical woman of the Irawan forest, the exhibit is not merely a showcase of a wide range of artistry but also a political statement of the Pinoy artist in defense of Mother Earth.

The convergence of natural science and the arts has spurred interest groups like Conservation International (CI) to support the

Samutsari auction. CI and other environmental groups have committed to support the local and international auction of over 40 donated art pieces that will be featured in the exhibit and develop a robust work program to put the money to good use in protecting the environment.

By donating their works to the cause of environmental protection, Samutsari artists say they are giving back to society a token of gratitude, a social gift.

Since hatching the initiative almost a year ago, Calderon says they have been swamped with requests to replicate the Kagueban project in other places such as Bohol, Iligan and as far away as Melbourne, Australia.

The exhibit, says Calderon, will eventually be put on display in a Manila gallery before traveling to other key cities around the country. Auctioning of the art pieces will begin upon opening of the exhibit, the organizers say.

For details of the auction and exhibit, contact Pandy Aviado at pandy.aviado@gmail.com

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