

Press

Review from Artweek's December 1998

views

Review from Artweek's December 1998 issue

Renato Ortega at the Palo Alto Cultural Center

Every drawing is an expression of a continuing moment, not unlike the slow inhalation and exhalation in breathing meditation, or the mindful shifting of weight in Tai Chi. I place my mind on the tip of the ballpoint pen. The tip rolls on the paper. I draw until the drawing breathes. Then I let the object go. I move on to another, and continue the cycle." This statement by the Philippine-born artist Renato Ortega, who prefers to be called Renato, aptly expresses the tranquil and perdurable Zen quality of his ballpoint pen drawings, currently at the Palo Alto Cultural Center. This is the first exhibition of his work in ten years, a hiatus during which, intrigued by the paradoxical and ineffable logic of Zen koans, he began to practice Zen meditation, which eventually led him to become a Maryknoll missionary in Tokyo where he became a member of San-un Zendo.

The unlikely use of the ballpoint pen as his medium of preference obviously imposes physical requirements of pressure, weight

and surface texture that, as improbable as this seems, make it the perfect medium for his habit of expression. This habit is rooted in the artist's sketchbook and journal, one volume of which is on view, in addition to 28 ephemeral but exquisitely palpable drawings. Renato controls shading and the distribution of ink to line not only by the pressure and sensitivity of his hand, but also by varying the undersurface beneath the paper so that it presents a softer or harder ground. And indeed these drawings have the immediate effect of delicate aquatints or old master sepia drawings.

Every drawing is of a single object—a ginkgo leaf, a wasabi, a deflated balloon, a tea bag, a miniature pair of just-dropped, plaid boxer shorts upon no-floor, a banana recorded in daily stages of consumption, decay and deterioration, a chicken bone, a melting bar of soap closely watched upon a washstand, an undersized potato peeler, a meticulously unfolded fortune cookie and fortune. The subject, however, is always the process itself and the transformation of the artist and the object before him, which he says he "touches with his eyes." This visual touching is intuitively passed to the artist's hand and thence to the ballpoint pen in a truly Zen-like fashion, whereby artist, object and the process of drawing are stilled, isolated in an instance of vision that transparently fixes artist, object, and process in the continuum of time.

The randomness of Renato's choice of subject is not achieved by an arbitrary but ritualized process in the manner of John Cage's singular use of the *I Ching*, but through the accidental encounters that the artist experiences with the exter-

remarkable is that looking at Renato's drawings re-creates these instances of meditation for the viewer. The mind does not seem to be available to come to bear upon the object, only the eye.

Yet there are "contexts" in these drawings, contexts that perhaps can only be known by asking the artist himself. For instance, his drawing of the cross-section of a halved pear with its severed top and stem placed beside represents to him a severed relationship, where the interior of the pear with its doubled seed represents female genitalia, and the parted top and stem obviously stand for the male phallus. And the fortuitous fortune he found in the unraveled fortune cookie was: "Complicated things are better left undone." These data, however, are only incidental "mindful" things, mental information, that confirm the accuracy of his meditative vision.

Renato has rightly not titled most of these drawings, which further contributes to their transcendental and timeless quality. Only two have titles: the severed pear, called *Pair: Pear*, and another of a Thai stringed instrument, which he calls *The Fourth String*. Also, none of these drawings is to scale, except perhaps for the pear; all the rest are drawn smaller than life, most, except for the boxer shorts, just slightly reduced to produce a parallel, another world the exact-but-one of ours. Although this reduction in scale may be due to the size of the paper Renato chooses to draw upon, this, too, becomes part of his vision and the precise method needed to create the transference between object of the world and object of the eye. This exhibition does us the great service to allow us to share Renato's vision and participate in his moments of meditation.

—Frank Cebulski

nal world and its objects. The objects are transferred, by looking, into a different state and realm. The method is the same that all artists use who keep a sketchbook or a journal, but the transference that Renato achieves is undeniably an instance of pure meditation. What is

Renato Ortega: *Ten Thousand Things That Breathe* through January 10 at the Palo Alto Cultural Center, 1313 Newell Rd., Palo Alto.

Frank Cebulski is a freelance writer based in the East Bay.