





(Am)bivalent Images



Portrait of MILJOHN RUPERTO. Courtesy
Ann Sophie Von Bulow.



MILJOHN RUPERTO

RINI YUN KEAGY and MILJOHN RUPERTO, *Ordinal (SW/NE)*,
2017, still from digital video: 43 min 44 sec. Courtesy the artists.

BY MELANIE POCOCK

A conversation with Miljohn Ruperto can feel like the mental equivalent of walking along multiple meandering paths and unexpectedly finding that they all converge. With interests in philosophy, art, and digital technology, the artist draws from diverse sources for his works. Among his influences are geomancy, a method of divination derived from decrypting patterns in nature; theories of the apocalypse; and parallels between molecular science and animism.

Underlying Ruperto's wide-ranging approach is his skepticism of concepts of originality and essentialism, which he believes reinforce the false singularity of art. He is more interested, as he explained to me in one email, in understanding the contexts in which art is made and how these shape particular ways of thinking about the world. Collaborating with practitioners from different fields is one way in which he folds multiple contexts into his works. From 2015 to 2017, for example, Ruperto worked with filmmaker Rini Yun Keagy on *Ordinal (SW/NE)* (2017), an experimental documentary about the fungal infection known as "valley fever," exploring Californian cultures of migrant labor and mythologies around contagion. While Ruperto focused on structuring the film's subjects, Keagy encouraged him to think about the audience's experience, an angle that he feels made the work more accessible. The two co-authors both relate to migrant populations—the point at which the film's various themes intersect.

Born in 1971, Ruperto moved to the United States from the Philippines with his parents when he was eight years old. However, he feels that he did not suffer from the usual issues of integration because, he recalls, "The culture shock was dampened by the diversity of California" and an extended family awaiting his arrival. Yet, he admits, his assimilation into US society has not precluded reflecting on his Filipino heritage, the politics and culture of which he has "always been invested in." His video *Appearance of Isabel Rosario Cooper* (2006–10), for instance, focuses on the eponymous Filipino-Scottish actress who was a mistress of US General Douglas MacArthur during the 1930s. In the work, Ruperto blurs the backgrounds of film clips featuring Cooper, literally and symbolically bringing to the fore her marginalized image.

In *Ordinal (SW/NE)* (2017), Ruperto similarly highlights the imperceptible presence of an American Filipino woman. Never shown on screen, her voiceover recounts the pernicious spread of valley fever, carried by dust in the air. The disease is scientifically proven to severely affect

Filipinos, who are most susceptible to developing its fatal form, disseminated coccidioidomycosis. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the film has an uncanny new relevance, with its protagonist, a young Black man called Josiah, illustrating numerous symptoms of the disease, such as high fever, coughing, and shortness of breath. The suffering of Josiah and the Filipino narrator, who catches valley fever at the film's end, evokes criticisms about the vulnerability of minority ethnic people to diseases. In the case of Covid-19, this has been attributed to the socio-economic circumstances of certain Black and Asian communities. The film also interweaves references to literature of the Americas, tying John Steinbeck's *Dust Bowl* novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), to the ancient Mesopotamian demon-god Pazuzu, a symbol of the southwest wind, as dust and disease are both spread by the wind.

When Ruperto showed the installation *Geomancies* (2007–17), at REDCAT in Los Angeles and later at the 2019 Singapore Biennale, he reiterated this connection between wind and infection through a digital animation of a photograph taken by a former Chevron Oil employee that shows a dust storm engulfing the San Joaquin Valley in California. Titled *Re-animating "Valley Turbulence" by Sam Chase* (2016), the looping image also forms the ominous overture to *Ordinal (SW/NE)*, which is presented inside a triangular viewing room oriented according to geomantic principles. A lenticular print, titled *Demonology: Pazuzu* (2016), guards the entrance. The demon-god appears to follow viewers as they move outside the room.

In Ruperto's and Keagy's film, illness is linked to other forms of embodied experience, such as "mimetic contagion." Formulating the idea while he breakdances with a group of friends, the protagonist Josiah likens the phenomenon to "dance fever," in which dancers "catch" various moves by imitating them. In *Symmetrical Composition (Possession)* (2017), Ruperto merges the imagination of contagion with its bodily impact, turning the expression of the latter into means of channelling the former. In the performance, two dancers mimic the motions of actress Isabel Adjani as she is inhabited by a demonic spirit in Andrzej Żuławski's film *Possession* (1981). The vivid reprisals of the demon by Ruperto's dancers are unsettling, and mirror as much as they dispel Adjani's original performance.

Living near one of the world's largest film industries has clearly influenced Ruperto. From performances like *Symmetrical Composition (Possession)* to the film *Ordinal (SW/NE)*, their forms, while infused with

the gradual crescendos of Hollywood films, are also punctuated by stylistic ruptures characteristic of experimental works. Within Ruperto's personal pantheon of films is Stanley Kubrick's portrait of a man rebelling against proprieties in mid-18th century European society, *Barry Lyndon* (1975), and an updated version of HG Wells' novel directed by Simon Wells, *The Time Machine* (2002). Central to the appeal of these films for Ruperto is their failure to reconcile what he calls the "the modernist language of cinema" with "their need for historical verisimilitude," their contemporary metaphors always seeming to get in the way of the latter's rendering.

Seemingly contradictory viewpoints increase the allure of Ruperto's own images. Rather than trying to reconcile paradoxes, his works create spaces for them to unfold, emphasizing the plurality of postmodernity. The looping video *Janus* (2013), which Ruperto made with illustrator Aimée de Jongh, is an animation featuring what looks like both the head of a duck and a rabbit rasping its final breaths. The duck-rabbit figure—made famous by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein—leaves viewers in a constant double bind.

Similarly, Ruperto's series of looping animations of rocks seen from the alternating perspectives of the left and right eye, *Mineral Monsters* (2014)—also created with de Jongh—perplex viewers about the nature of the quivering forms. The title of the series is inspired by a phrase from the book *Knowledge of Life* (1952) by philosopher and physician Georges Canguilhem, in which he states that there are no such things as "mineral monsters." The illusion that the rocks are moving is an effect of the bifurcated perspective. With this technique, *Mineral Monsters* maintains the inertness of the depicted rocks and Canguilhem's thesis, while underscoring humanity's tendency to anthropomorphize nature.

Implicit in works like *Mineral Monsters* is the notion that humans have limited perceptions of their surroundings. This not only reflects current anti-anthropocentric discourses, but the artist's ongoing research into the ethical dimensions of aesthetics. As he voiced to me during one of our conversations, "What is the responsibility of the artist to their subject, material, history, and nature?" With their multiple and intersecting perspectives, Ruperto's works already provide some answers to this question. Through them, viewers appreciate continuing needs to investigate time-old phenomena, as well as the importance of recognizing the limits of human concepts in the face of natural enigmas.