

Tokens of a Time Gone By

Reanimating History as Art in the Work of Noel Ed De Leon

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The title of Noel Ed De Leon's first solo exhibition *Life As I Know It* (Philippine Embassy, 2011-12) spoke a subtle and telling truth about the artist's creative outlook. Amidst decisions which are made by us and bestowed upon us, *Life As I Know It* played upon the fact that we can never fully know life or the directions it will take. Likewise, much of De Leon's art is malleable in nature. I discovered this while writing this essay when, to my surprise, the artist added new elements to his sculptures and experimented with the layout of his installations. His work ran parallel to mine, yet in the opposite direction. While I was attempting to fixate the form and meaning of his art, he was breathing as much life into his creations as he could before parting with them. Observing his progress, it dawned on me that we have come to expect objects displayed in museums and galleries to remain in the same, immutable condition as when we first saw them. In contrast, De Leon's creative process was grounded in re-assembling objects and unearthing similarities between artifacts, all the meanwhile granting new identities to materials.

The beginning of De Leon's artistic career in England may be traced back to 2012. Two years ago the artist first took part in the London Biennale and staged a performance artwork on Trafalgar Square outside the National Gallery. Stationing himself literally 'outside' the canon of Euro-American art (here symbolized by National Gallery's collection), De Leon invited passers-by to try on a gas mask and see how long they could endure the struggled breathing on the hot summer's day. Through this interactive performance, the artist explored how he could simultaneously position his body, communicate with others and handle objects in order to articulate a concept – that beneath the representations of victory and progress, there remain many individual, economic, political and cultural hardships which constantly test the permanent migrant.



Noel Ed De Leon, *Life As I Know It*, Trafalgar Square, London, 2012, Photo: Fifi Komaira

The conviction that objects are always in state of 'becoming', to borrow the term from the late cultural theorist Stuart Hall, is characteristic of De Leon's work. Much like human identity, artifacts have the potential to change their form and function over time. They too respond to the circumstances around them. Thus, when the renowned artist David Medalla spent the night at De Leon's family flat in London in 2012, leaving behind several items in the morning, De Leon did not treat these objects as *matter out of place*, in the words of Mary Douglas. Rather than throwing them away or storing them out of view, he promptly wrapped them using the orange blanket in which Medalla had slept and thus created a sculpture which celebrated Medalla's presence in his home. This piece which is now known as 'This is not Emanuel Radnitzky' (2012), survives to-date as an unwrapped bundle. Its unidentifiable form invites viewers to guess what lies within and unravel the mystery of De Leon's connection to Medalla, while the soft, warm blanket works to preserve the inner contents in a manner similar manner to post-war German artist Joseph Beuys' use of felt as a metaphor for healing and nurturing.



Noel Ed De Leon, *This Is Not Emanuel Radnitzky*, Multimedia Sculpture, 2012

Since 2012, De Leon's work has moved beyond exploring the migrant experience to examining how histories, in a broader sense, are recorded and retold. The works displayed in his solo exhibition, *Tokens of a Time Gone By: Reanimating History as Art in the Work of Noel Ed De Leon* (Philippine Embassy of London, 2014), reflect De Leon's evolving experimentation with materials and techniques as he responded to the 2014 London Biennale's theme of 'Maps, Mazes and Mysteries'. Reformulating this theme, De Leon asks: *What does it mean to map out the past? How do we use objects and materials to guide us through history? Do these 'maps of the past' simply tell us how events began and ended, or do they also invite us to reconsider the mysteries beneath the alternative routes which could have been taken?* These questions are most pertinent in exhibition's central work- the multi-media installation 'Tokens of a Time Gone By' (2013-14).

'Tokens of a Time Gone By' is a monument to the complex relationship between history and documentation. It comprises old cameras, projectors, film reels, suitcases and trunks, trumpets and boxes, among other objects, which De Leon collected in the Philippines and England. In the context of a museum, such tokens from the past may be found individually enclosed behind glass, where they may serve as 'records' of how previous generations experienced, travelled and captured the world around them. However, their presentation alongside and on top of one another in De Leon's towering mound, hints at the complex socio-political value which is afforded to recording and reframing the past.



Noel Ed De Leon, *Tokens of a Time Gone By*, (detail) Multimedia Installation, 2014

Susan Sontag reminds us that capturing a moment is inevitably filtered by the eye behind the lens which holds the power to tell one story over another. Alluding to this subjective nature of documentation, De Leon's lofty installation is reminiscent of the countless reels and snapshots which reside in archives worldwide. Balanced, yet delicate and fragile, the installation visualizes how at any point in time the camera may be 'pushed over the edge' and transformed into a biased tool. It may become an instrument for selectively cropping the past and masking over history's complex nature, a subject which the artist explored earlier in his debut performance.

By introducing prized personal and family possessions such as old trumpets and dolls amidst the base structure of cameras and cases, the artist presents the belief that documentation can never fully capture the complexity of individuals' stories. He furthers this message by screening photographs which he uncovered in his parents' home in the Philippines alongside the installation. These pictures show his maternal grandfather,

Mario F. Herrera, during his travels around the Philippines over the course of the 1960s. Mario Herrera's life was a true testament to the 'flaws' of all-encompassing historical narratives. Half-Spanish, half-Filipino, Herrera traversed the Philippines, fathering several children outside his marriage. His story challenges both the notion of a 'pure' Filipino identity, and a 'complete' family picture. Yet, in his grandson's work, Mario Herrera's tale is not dismissed as a marred version of an ideal history. Rather, it is embraced as a divergence which deserves to be salvaged and given a second life in the contemporary imagination. By juxtaposing personal and family tokens with devices used to document grander pasts, De Leon thus calls on viewers to ask- *When we retell History, where do we draw the boundary between the personal and the collective, the recorded and the forgotten? What is left out in the stories we tell?*

On a more personal level, the incorporation of family photographs – a glimpse into the private world of the artist's family – elucidates the artist's nuanced distinction between private and public. *Maps, Mazes, and Mysteries* – as the theme of the London Biennale goes – inspired De Leon to present the private, intimate artifact as a navigator through mystery that is past. In the work 'Tokens of a Time Gone By', the personal artifact has the power to evoke deeply personal emotions and nostalgia in the viewers as they recall the objects found within their own and their parents' homes. This moving use of family objects is also impressively present in the conceptual work 'Remembering Their Souls: Memories of an Important Time' (2014).



Noel Ed De Leon, *Remembering their Souls: Memories of an Important Time*, 2014

This piece employs the artist's grandparents' grave lettering which De Leon recovered from his family's storage in the Philippines, then polished and arranged into the original gravestone texts. He places the texts onto blocks of Bermuda grass, thus creating a living, 'replenishable' altarpiece for his deceased grandparents. Unlike a gravestone, this memorial is not tied to a specific location; it may be easily disassembled, transported and even re-arranged. As such, it alludes to the (now) commonplace practice of relocating one's material possessions when moving from country to country (an experience which the artist's family underwent when migrating from the Philippines to the England). Furthermore, it is a potent reminder of the inherent danger of losing elements of the past in the process of relocating one's home. In response to this problem, this portable altarpiece presents an alternative solution to ensure that histories are not lost and forgotten; it teaches us that by caring for and respecting objects of the past, one may give them a new life in the present.

By salvaging old items and situating them alongside contemporary materials, De Leon also draws attention to unexpected parallels between objects from the past and present. For instance, despite the different functions of grave letters and Bermuda grass, both are fundamentally markers of disintegration and regeneration in the world around us. The former is used to revive the memory of the deceased, the latter is used to replenish and repair worn-out surroundings. By combining them together, one material symbolically breathes life into the other as the viewer's gaze flicks back and forth between the soft green grass and the cold, hard metal. Allowing materials to interplay is widely present in De Leon's works and appears prominently in the light-hearted assemblage 'Breath of Life' (2014). Here, De Leon places two starkly different materials- stone and nylon – beside one another in order to create a work which, literally, appears to breathe new life into one of the objects.



Noel Ed De Leon, *Breath of Life*, Multimedia Sculpture, 2014

Evoking both the comic and the absurd, 'Breath of Life' employs a gargoyle (an architectural feature characteristic of a given period) and an inflatable boat (a device used to stay afloat and save lives) in order to question why we use certain materials over others to preserve memories of the past. As the stone gargoyle creates the illusion of breathing life into the kayak, it reminds us that many of 'markers' of a time- for instance, official sculptures and architectural features - are only a surface-deep record of history. They mask over individual tales and hardships. The artist reflects further upon this subject in another assemblage known as 'Under Pressure' (2012).



Noel Ed De Leon, *Under Pressure*, Multimedia Sculpture, 2012



Noel Ed De Leon, *Time in a Battle*, 2013-14

In this work, De Leon once again employs a gas mask, making reference to his earlier performance on Trafalgar Square in which the mask had served as a symbol for struggle and survival. In 'Under Pressure', he places a gas mask on top of an old pressure cooker as a comment on the relationship between domesticity and survival. In order to establish a life, this work suggests, survival alone does not suffice. Attaining stability and creating a home to provide one with care, ease and nourishment are essential to feeling wholesome and 'at home'.

Martin Heidegger described this comforting feeling of rootedness as *dwelling* – a state which we achieve by attributing our worldly possessions with deeper meanings and developing a sense of purpose and fulfillment as we interact with our surroundings. Granting objects subliminal meaning is deeply characteristic of De Leon's art. In all of the works discussed above, the original function of the objects is transcended as they are afforded fresh values in their new environment and combination.

Giving objects a subliminal meaning surfaces in a haunting way in the sculpture 'Life and Death of the Unknown' (2013). This powerful work embodies the artist's personal struggle to preserve the memories of the deceased residents of the old-age home in London where he worked. In order to create this piece, De Leon collected the deceased's rosaries, crucifixes and icons which would otherwise have been discarded. Assembling them in an old musical case, the artist once again created a portable memorial and, in doing so, preserved the essence of comfort, consolation and faith

which these objects gave to their owners in their final years. Much like the central role afforded to sacred objects and ceremonies in *all* religions, De Leon uses art-making as a sanctifying process in order to commemorate, remember and preserve the past. Thus, through their new combinations, the objects come speak to contemporary audiences on issues of migration, war, creativity, religion and recollection. In time, it is the artworks themselves that become the true *tokens of a time gone by*.



Noel Ed De Leon, *Life and Death of the Unknown*, Multimedia Sculpture, 2013



Noel Ed De Leon, *See Saw Seen, Go Went Gone, Cut Cut Cut*, installation, 2012-2014