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Filipino designer artist wins plaudits in prestigious London Open

By Lian Ladia at Rappler.com

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The Filipino art community is beaming with pride.

Pio Abad, Philippine-born, educated in Manila (U.P. Diliman), Glasgow (Glasgow School of Art) and London (Royal Academy of Art) was recently hand-picked by a distinguished panel and featured at the prestigious London Open. He bested 1,800 applicants.

The London Open is Whitechapel Gallery's triennial exhibition located at the center of emerging trends in contemporary art in Western Europe.

At the same time, the winners of the 20th Annual Deutsche Bank Awards for Creative Enterprises was announced. Pio Abad's name is once again in the list.

Selected from an open submission, The London Open launched the careers of artists such as Anish Kapoor and Cornelia Parker in the blossoming phases of their youth.

Abad's work in general is a parody of the aesthetic experience — he engages on loaded political subject matters with such ease; exposes difficult histories as something decorative or trivial; finds absurd historical connections with similar random facts.

For example, the work that ended up getting selected for the London Open was part of a series on silk inspired by the decorative bathroom of Saddam Hussein. Abad printed and drew on a silk scarf and used it as a pictorial vehicle to commemorate historical events.

He shares, "The scarf series came out during the fall of Baghdad in April 2003, when the American soldiers found these ornate bathrooms in Saddam Hussein's palaces decked out with gold water taps. Suddenly, this benign bathroom fixture is transformed into a symbol of dictatorial excess.

"In the silk piece *Loot*, Saddam Hussein's gold plated tap becomes the central motif in an imitation Versace silk scarf. I was interested in banal objects becoming cultural weapons."

On the other hand, Abad's winning proposal to the Deutsche Bank Awards for Creative Enterprises was a project entitled "Tele Nobela," a collaboration with Manila-based artist, Maria Taniguchi.

Tele Nobela is a visual art project that will commission exhibitions and run a parallel program publishing essays to encourage a vibrant and more international arts community in the Philippines.

Abad left Manila in the middle of college. He shares, "My aunt Pacita (Abad) was a big influence in making me leave the Philippines, and she had done it herself, having travelled a great extent all her life. She was actually the one who suggested art schools for me to look at."

In Glasgow, he found a tight-knit artist community filled with possibility. Students were setting up D-I-Y (Do-it-Yourself) galleries in their bedrooms. These same artists were exhibiting in Venice, at the Frieze art fair and are recipients of the Turner Art Prize.

Abad reflects, "For me, having a sense of possibility at that particular stage was crucial in seeing how I can work as an artist."

And work he did.

After finishing his BA in Glasgow, he found a lot of opportunities to exhibit his work in Scotland for a few years. As an international student, he couldn't afford most of the exorbitant fees institutions in Scotland charge for a Master's degree. The next logical step for him was to apply to a Graduate school that offered scholarships.

Abad was then accepted with a full scholarship at the Royal Academy of Art in London. Being at the "belly" of the art world, Abad's work changed significantly.

He recalls, "I came to the Royal Academy with a practice very much focused on drawing; but in the last 3 years, my work has expanded to textiles, photography, sound, sculpture and text."

After years of art studies in Scotland succeeded by a scholarship in London, Abad's work was in full throttle. To him, his graduate work really pushed him to constantly question and be in a perpetual state of creative crisis.

His works have ranged from designing and printing 80 meters of wallpaper, turning a mannequin into an orange Bo Derek and even hunting for Philippine history on Ebay. His recent accomplishments did not come out of thin air. He states, "If you're just in cruise control then I think you're wasting your time."

Pio Abad, the artist, comes from a place of cultural complexity and draws profound humor in subjects.

Conniving but, at the same time, cathartic.