

House of Pleasure:
Balay by Max Balatbat

In his body of work, Max Balatbat has always explored the community in Caloocan in which he belongs, particularly the brothels that are its regular features. Through various climes and seasons, they have stood defiant, these rundown spaces which offer the promise of pleasure and escape from the brutality of urban life, which springs to action as soon as one leaves it and joins the traffic of humankind in busy streets strung with wires, billboards, and the looming shadows of the LRT.

These brothels take front and center again in his new exhibition, Balay. While the title of the show seems to be encompassing of all domicile ("balay" means "house" in various Philippine languages), it zooms in on these whorehouses, evoked as patched-up makeshift structures, held together by something that is at once ephemeral and enduring.

True to his trademark composition, these works are made up of skins and skeins of acrylic paint in various colors and patterns, juxtaposed in the most tenuous of ways. The houses are all surface, making secret the vulgar action that conceptually transpires within them, disclosing nothing to the eye. But the commotion of surfaces suggests something hectic, physical, and determined—perhaps the expenditure of energy during sexual intercourse.

Contrapuntal to these houses are the still lifes that depict a rendition of a potted plant, but still pulsing with the bravura of energy similar to that of the brothels. They point to something that is delicate, needs tending, and yet asserts a sense of undeniable autonomy. These may be a stand-in for the prostitutes themselves, or at least what they trade. Embedded in the word "halaman" is "laman," flesh that can be had if the price is right.

Extending the theme is an installation in the middle of the exhibition space: a simulated house where one can physically enter and see the wall-hung "potted plant" suddenly three-dimensional, its colors vibrant against the dark interior of the space. It sits on a table amid a slew of black underwear, in which the act of eating is correlated with the prostitute's trade. While "eating" could mean something sexual, in this case it is borne out of need. There will be no food on the table if these pieces of underwear are not removed. Providing a backdrop is the "Last Supper," present in many Filipino households, suggestive of the sacred intersecting with the profane or, simply, an ironic tone to the general tableau of the interior.

In persistently exploring the subject matter of the brothel, Balatbat insists on what many would wish to remain marginal, under-the-radar, unspoken: prostitution, the bitter pill that some people continue to swallow if they are to keep body and soul together. What the artist aspires is to minimize the malice and intrigue that surrounds what is considered to be the oldest profession in the world and reduce it for what it is, a transactional gesture. By so doing, he raises more difficult questions: What is then not prostitution? What is exactly respectable trade? A rude awakening, Balay interrogates the limits of the viewer's sensitivities.

-Carlomar Arcangel Daoana

BALAY

MAX BALATBAT





BALAY ALAY 0001
48 x 36 inches
Acrylic Skin on Canvas



BALAY ALAY 0002
48 x 36 inches
Acrylic Skin on Canvas



BALAY ALAY 0003
48 x 36 inches
Acrylic Skin on Canvas



BALAY ALAY 0004
48 x 36 inches
Acrylic Skin on Canvas



BALAY ALAY 0005
48 x 36 inches
Acrylic Skin on Canvas



BALAY ALAY 0006
48 x 36 inches
Acrylic Skin on Canvas



HALAMAN LAMAN 0001
48 x 36 inches
Acrylic Skin on Canvas



HALAMAN LAMAN 0002
48 x 36 inches
Acrylic Skin on Canvas



HALAMAN LAMAN 0003
48 x 36 inches
Acrylic Skin on Canvas



HALAMAN LAMAN 0004
48 x 36 inches
Acrylic Skin on Canvas



BAHAY ALIWAN SA AMING HARAPAN

60 x 48 inches

Acrylic Skin on Shaped Canvas



PATAY SINDI NA PALARUAN

60 x 48 inches

Acrylic Skin on Shaped Canvas