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Paul Pfeiffer

MAKATI

Bellas Artes Outpost

PAUL PFEIFFER

INCARNATOR

Opposite page

Gathering in a geodesic dome during
Buckminster Fuller's visit to Singapore
1974
Archival image color slide, 5 x 5 cm.
Courtesy M+ Museum, Hong Kong.

This page

PAUL PFEIFFER
Hand Holding Audio Recorder (Left);
Justin Bieber Torso (Right)
Both 2018
3D print duplicated in Santol wood, 16.4 x 22.3
x 11 cm; wood and paint, 62.4 x 48.7 x 23.2 cm.
Installation view of "Incarnator" at
Bellas Artes Outpost, Manila, 2018.
Photo by At Maculangan
Courtesy the artist and Bellas Artes Projects.

An "incarnator" can be interpreted as one who materializes abstract concepts, while the Spanish equivalent, *encarnador*, refers specifically to the craftspeople who render religious statues human-like by applying skin-colored paints. With these two understandings of the term as his departure point, Paul Pfeiffer undertook a six-month residency at Bellas Artes Projects in Bagac, during which he worked with artisans to investigate the historical and contemporary making of icons, and their sacredness. The results were displayed in his solo show, "Incarnator," at the Bellas Artes Outpost in Makati.

The gallery space was illuminated with overpowering fluorescent lighting, such that the show's wall-mounted and untitled wood sculptures appeared to be floating. The pieces were modeled on various sections of pop star Justin Bieber's body and carved with craftspeople from Paete, the centuries-old center of Catholic santo production. Two varnished arms with blushed, open palms, displayed on opposite ends of a room, are covered in tattoos mimicking Bieber's. Copies of his tattoos also appear on a truncated torso: a bear, cross and lion are inked across the chest; an eagle and the words "Son of God" and "Purpose" are on the lower abdomen. The fragments of Bieber's body, finished with the same lacquers as those used on wooden religious icons, are recast as objects of worship. The subject of Bieber—an evangelist and entertainer with god-like status, at least among his "beliebers"—served as Pfeiffer's lens to dissect the impacts of mass media on the shaping of our consciousness and realities.

Philosopher Guy Debord wrote in his 1967 text *The Society of the Spectacle* that the "spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social

relationship between people that is mediated by images." The works speak to how the star's body markings are documented, reproduced and their meanings changed from tools of self-actualization to cultural emblems via idolization. Further pushing this notion were a pair of busts; one faithfully takes Bieber's likeness while another is caricaturish, as if to say his identity belongs to the audience who consumes his image. It is the translation of images that supplants the real, the same way lived experience has been displaced by pictures on a screen. The sculptures of Bieber thus question conceptions of authenticity and what it means to appear rather than to be.

Interspersed with the Bieber pieces were carved snippets of anonymous lives. The absence of a devotional statue is pronounced by marks atop a weathered blue stand; a hand, made from untreated wood, holds what looks like a controller device; another similarly unvarnished hand wields a digital camera; a leg is bent over a tree branch; and 455 miniature monks sit on a set of steps. These sculptures are all re-creations of elements seen in Pfeiffer's film *Incarnator* (2018), which was screened in an adjacent room. The video intercuts scenes from Bieber's 2013 visit to Typhoon Haiyan victims in the Philippines with recordings of his young fans in Bataan, emulating his gestures, as well as documentation of the exhibition's production process, found media of praying monks, and children singing Bieber's version of the raunchy hit song "Despacito." By clipping the unnamed figures from the video and giving them three-dimensional form, Pfeiffer once again toys with the effects of transliteration, imploring audiences to interrogate how an image accrues significance in its dissemination, just as its context shapes its interpretation.

Such gestures of erasure and reproduction recur in Pfeiffer's oeuvre. Encapsulating this were the wood busts of craftspeople's children lined up on a shelf on the edge of the room. The hand-carved forms were based on scans and three-dimensional prints of the children's faces. Their contours are unique, yet the figures seem to guard their true identities. The sculptures' lack of detail hint at the corruption of information, resulting from the convoluted process of their making, which in turn mirrors the dissemination of mass-media and its effects on our collective consciousness.

In a country where fierce devotion surrounds religious icons, the show was engaging for its exploration of the contradictions that arise when objects of representation are held up against the myth of contemporary culture and embraced in all its artifice.

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