

Developing a Visual Language: The Urban Environment and Its Inhabitants as a Resilient Organism Through Layers of Painted Wood Assemblaget

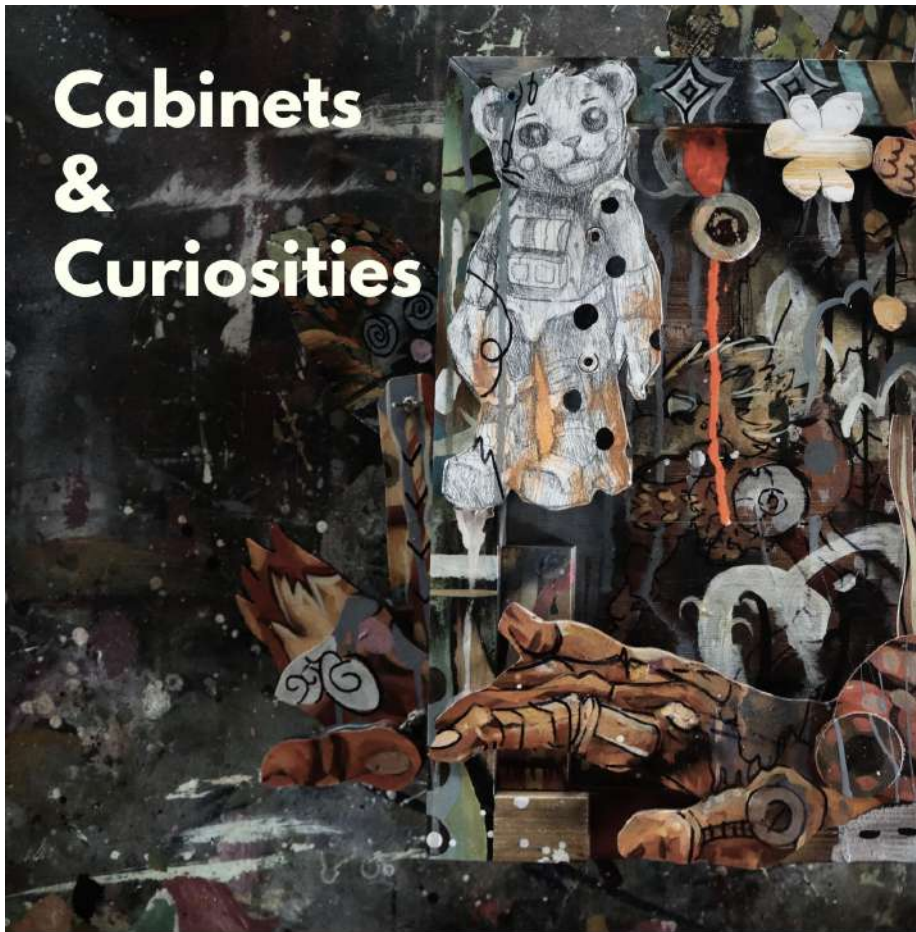
Rainer Ma. F. Cruz

Introduction

In this paper, I want to show my creative process in developing a personal visual language that depicts the city and its inhabitants as a singular, interconnected organism. My recent one-man exhibit, *Cabinets & Curiosities*, held at Vinyl on Vinyl, was inspired by the socio-ecological dynamics of an urban environment. My approach to Urban Ecology aims to illuminate the inherent solidarity within a community - further exemplified by its capacity to foster resilience during periods of adversity (Mukherjee, J. 2015).

Community resilience was investigated through the experiences of survivors following Typhoon Ondoy; positive attributes were exhibited by members of a community significantly impacted by the typhoon (Adviento, M. L. G. & de Guzman, J. M., 2010).

In depicting the city as a single organism, I begin with an inquiry into the socio-spatial context of my hometown, Las Piñas City. The creative process commences with observations of the visual and experiential elements that constitute the daily life (quotidian) of these urban environments. This initial stage is further enriched by a process of introspective analysis, drawing upon my personal experiences within these spaces. The collected observations and introspective insights are then transformed and synthesized into a cohesive artistic depiction of the city.



Rai Cruz Solo Art Exhibit

VINYL ON VINYL

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Figure 1. *Cabinets & Curiosities*

To execute this synthesis, my artwork will juxtapose two distinct visual elements: the non-living or non-organic built structures and the living or organic inhabitants of the city. This deliberate juxtaposition aims to foster a deeper understanding of the dynamic interplay between these fundamental components of the urban environment.

I will employ wood assemblage as my primary artistic material and technique. This resonates profoundly with the conceptual underpinnings of the work. Dmitrievich (2022) highlights the versatility of assemblage in conveying complex narratives. In this context, the act of assembling disparate wooden elements into a cohesive artwork mirrors the interconnectedness and collaborative spirit inherent within a community. This material choice fosters a thematic bridge between the depicted urban environment and the notion of solidarity amongst its inhabitants.

As mentioned above, a component of developing my visual language is the non-living or non-organic structures of the city. My analysis focuses on the visual presentation of walls within the built environment, specifically those associated with commercial buildings and residential structures. The focus lies on the interplay of weathered paint textures, superimposed layers of vibrant street art imagery, and the diverse visual elements present in advertising materials.

The second component is my examination of the human element within the cityscape. It centers on the transient flow of commuters, the economic activity of street vendors, and the presence of non-human inhabitants like stray animals. Additionally, the unexpected resilience of plant life is evident in the presence of potted plants and vines thriving within the very cracks and crevices of the urban infrastructure.

My assemblage process employs a three-stage process. The initial phase involves the preparation of the component surfaces. This stage encompasses selecting and treating materials that will ultimately be incorporated into the artwork. The second phase focuses on applying paint and drawing directly onto these prepared surfaces. Here, a range of artistic techniques may be employed to imbue the individual elements with meaning and visual interest. Finally, the construction phase involves the composition and integration of the individual components into a cohesive assemblage.



Figure 2. *Plywood of varied thickness is mainly used as a material for the assemblage.*

The foundation of my surface preparation process lies in utilizing various wood types. However, plywood assumes the role of my primary material due to its confluence of practicality and thematic relevance. The affordability of plywood aligns with its prevalence in urban, low-cost construction projects, as documented by Seike et al. (2018). Similarly, Malaque III et al. (2015) highlight its frequent use in economical, incremental housing extensions. This material choice fosters a thematic connection with the subject matter of my work, further solidifying the dialogue between the artistic medium and the explored concepts.

As for the preparatory phase of building the assemblage, the wood undergoes a process of manipulation to achieve the desired shapes and dimensions. This stage commences with creating a preliminary chalk sketch directly on the wood surface. This initial outline serves as a guide for the subsequent cutting process, which uses various tools depending on the project's specific needs. Commonly employed tools include handsaws, jigsaws, bandsaws, circular saws, and scroll saws.

For wood elements with existing paint layers, a light sanding process using 120-grit sandpaper facilitates optimal adhesion for subsequent paint applications. This practice aligns with findings by Yuningsih et al. (2020), who emphasize the importance of surface preparation for successful paint adhesion.

The selection of cutting tools is further informed by the plywood's thickness. For plywood with a thickness of $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{3}{4}$ inch, tools such as circular saws, bandsaws, or jigsaws offer efficient cutting solutions. Conversely, intricate designs on thinner $\frac{1}{4}$ inch plywood are often best executed with a scroll saw, as evidenced by designs in the book of Spielman and Spielman (1986), who highlight the machine's suitability for such tasks.

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Figure 3. *Shaped wood with visible sketches.*

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Figure 4. *Using a scroll saw machine.*

Following the wood shaping phase, attention is directed toward surface preparation to optimize paint adhesion. This crucial step involves the application of a sanding sealer. The primary function of the sanding sealer lies in effectively sealing the wood's porous structure. This enhances the overall surface smoothness and fosters a more even and durable paint application, as Hiziroglu (2007) documented.

A key visual component in my assemblage process is capturing the visual essence of the city's non-organic structures. I focused on the layered imagery adorning these structures, characterized by a compelling interplay of non-representational shapes and figurative forms. These visual elements often coexist dynamically, reflecting the history and transitory nature of the urban environment.

To translate this visual complexity into my assemblage, I mirror the layering observed on city walls through a diverse application of painting media and techniques. Just as the built environment exhibits various types of paint accumulating over time, I utilize various artistic materials to create a sense of depth and history within my artworks. This approach fosters a deeper connection between the artwork and the physical spaces it references.



Figure 5. *An assemblage work on the early stages of painting.*

I introduced layers of acrylic and oil paint onto the prepared and shaped wooden surfaces. These applications are executed with deliberate variation in thickness and, at times, subjected to a sanding process. This multi-layered approach

emulates the natural stratification of weathered paint observed on the walls of urban structures (Miniotaite, 2010). In essence, the technique mirrors the passage of time and the environmental factors that contribute to the distinctive visual texture of aged urban surfaces.

I then proceed with techniques that use graphite, acrylic markers, and charcoal to create imagery reminiscent of scribbles and graffiti markings that adorn urban walls. This approach draws inspiration from the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose oeuvre prominently featured glyph-like characters reminiscent of the street art movement (Kaushik, 2011). In essence, I utilize the raw energy and visual vocabulary of graffiti art to imbue my works with a sense of immediacy and dynamism.



Figure 6. *Stencils and aerosol spray cans were used in one of my assemblage works.*

In further enriching the composition, I incorporated stencils and aerosol spray paint. This technique, employing strategically sized stencils with the manipulation of spray paint cans, facilitates the layering of imagery onto the artwork. Using stencils and spray paint finds its roots within street art, which has become a well-established practice for creating bold and graphic elements (Jakob et al., 2008). By embracing this method, I introduced a distinct visual language that resonates with the raw energy and immediacy often associated with urban art forms.

Drawing further upon the visual vocabulary of the urban environment, my artwork features portraits and figurative elements. These are directly inspired by the imagery encountered on advertising materials and election posters that populate the streetscapes of modern cities (Seidman, 2008). This incorporation includes portraits reminiscent of wheat-paste posters, a ubiquitous element within the street art movement (Campbell, 2021).



Figure 7. *One of my works showing multiple layers of images.*

After painting each wood component, the assemblage process begins. This stage involves layering the pre-cut wooden elements to achieve the desired composition. A combination of fastening techniques is employed to ensure a secure and durable construction. Screws and brad nails are utilized for mechanical attachment, while wood glue provides additional reinforcement as an adhesive. This combined approach reflects common practices observed in Philippine house construction, as Malaque III et al. (2015) documented.

The assemblage process itself becomes an act of artistic commentary. This gesture underlines the notion of community and collaboration that is central to the artwork's message. The assembled wood elements, much like the inhabitants of a city, come together to form a cohesive and interdependent whole. The artwork undergoes further refinement through additional drawings and paintings. To ensure their permanence, a fixative spray is applied for elements employing dry media, such as graphite and charcoal. In preparation for the top sealing coat, the entire artwork, including the back panel, receives a coating of lacquer sanding sealer. This application serves a dual purpose: it provides a protective barrier against moisture damage, as documented by Hiziroglu (2007), and fosters a smoother surface for the final paint layers.

To finalize the artwork and enhance its longevity, a coat or two of polyurethane finish is applied via spray (Aristri et al., 2021). This final layer serves a two-fold purpose: it protects the artwork from environmental factors and potential minor scratches and unifies the sheen of the paint.

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