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# Art From a Ballpoint Pen

Indeed, at first glance, they appear to be small drawings in black ink gathered under the simple title, "Ten Thousand Things that Breathe." But a closer view unfailingly reveals in each drawing an unusual and remarkable concentration of creative and mental energy—each work charged with a vitality in the way that the old Asian philosophers believed cosmic energy to pass through the material form of a particular tree trunk or stone, a calligraphic gesture or ink painting.

Are they still-life drawings, as in the sense of the French *nature morte*? Very little of the collection seems to dispute the connotation of beauty captive to mortality that the term implies: before the subjects of these drawings are still, they first of all breathe. They respire with a living and persistent presence, whether as individual figures or in masses, most of them drawn from the organic world. And if they are still, they possess an intense, even fierce, quality of stillness, the silent cry of being.

The drawings, while obviously realist, based

as they are on keen observation, resist facile categorization. For one, while they are highly detailed, they go beyond photographic realism which is based primarily on technical virtuosity in depicting material surfaces that, in the style, acquire a near abstract, formal quality. Neither would they fall under hyperrealism which revels in the sheer cataloguing of the world of objects, for they go beyond the fascination or obsession with material form.

For the artist, Renato Ortega, drawing is his personal vehicle for meditation. His quest for visual form becomes the quest for the inner life of things, and—the artist assuming oneness with nature—it also turns into a process of self-discovery.

Whatever his subject be, an ear of corn or a radish bulb, a bird or a shakuhachi bamboo flute, he probes it patiently, teases and coaxes it gently into life. Thus, his subjects acquire the tones and textures of life, as plants and their roots breathe softly through their pores, as the bamboo flute discloses the hollows within, that can become resonant with sound. Through them, the artist discovers

strength, as in the taut binding fibers of a flute, and fragility, as in the soft inner down of birds. Likewise, the artist discovers isolation as well as the close contiguity of massed figures, as in the

handful of dried fish. Because each drawing is a process of becoming, the temporal element also plays a part as the artist experiences the gradual process of their realization in time. Each draw-

ing thus accomplished attests to the precious moment of *satori*, the enlightened insight into being that is the truth of each subject.

The title "Ten Thousand Things that Breathe" refers to all things in the universe, and, to the artist, all things including stones and bottlecaps, have a life of their own, or their own secret kernel of being, as the symbolist poets believed. The bottlecap or lowly *tansan*, for instance, which bears the mark of human use, has its own tale to tell. Even death itself can come into this context. The figure of the dead bears the appearance of life—physical form is captured by the ink drawing once and for all. But in these drawings, as the artist seems to say, life and death form a continuum. Nature renews itself, and life and death are but its seasons.

These preoccupations of the artist grew out of the influence of Zen thought, as he himself acknowledges. One aspect is his choice of humble subjects often taken for granted. By taking them as subjects, he valorizes the large fund of common experience that binds most people

together. But while they are commonplace, the intense involvement of the artist lifts them from the purely physical plane as they hint at hidden lodes of meaning, moral and spiritual, and pose riddles that elude easy solutions.

The instrument itself of the artist, a ballpoint pen, is a modest one, but he is able to turn its commonness into a virtue. He describes its use: "The ballpoint pen is a unique medium, a thin cylindrical tube filled with greasy ink and tipped with a tiny ball. Ink is released by the movement of the ball over a surface. Examine paper closely and you can see that it is a mesh of fibers. Shading then is a matter of smudging these fibers with that thin layer of grease on the ball point. There are many ways to do this, and as you combine them, slowly the drawing acquires the intensity of color." For Renato Ortega, drawing is an artistic and spiritual practice—his way of perpetually discovering the universe and himself. Through these drawings, he enhances our experience of the "ten thousand things that breathe."

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—Alice Guillermo