



A BALLPOINT INK DRAWING of an ear drawn by Renato Orara on a copy of *A People's History of the United States 1942 to Present* by Howard Zinn (page 530, paperback, published in 2005)

BY SUJATA S. MUKHI

# Between the quiet and the invisible: Renato Orara's *Library Bookworks*

**“N**obody will understand his work here in the Philippines!”

The statement, said with frustration by a relative of New York-based Filipino-American artist Renato Orara, sounds like an indictment of the Filipino's lack of appreciation for aesthetic subtlety.

Or, it could be a gross underestimation of Mr. Orara's insidious genius, reflected in ballpoint drawings that tease the viewer's mind, any viewer's mind, into an astonishingly unexpected altered state.

For two decades now, Mr. Orara has steadfastly and obsessively created and exhibited a body of work known as *Ten Thousand Things that Breathe*. (In 1996 he exhibited under the name Renato Ortega at the Cultural Center of the Philippines. This writer was first introduced to his work in New York in 2002 and has closely followed it since.) On blank sheets of paper he draws what can only be termed as everyday objects: a machine part, a stuffed toy, water-cress, uncooked instant noodles. But as he describes his process: “I find an object and draw it until it breathes... objects are stripped of their context, rendered in thousands of layers of ballpoint ink—their essential energy magnified on paper—until the viewer is left just looking, just breathing, just being... I draw to stop the mind.”

### VANDALISM?

In an upcoming exhibit in the Philippines, that may well be achieved through what some may call an act of benign vandalism: drawings subversively placed not on blank sheets of paper, but this time on pages of published books, now library books.

Opening 2009 with a solo exhibition by Mr. Orara, SLab, the new gallery under the Silverlens umbrella, features the deceptively simple *Library Bookworks* from Jan. 8 to Feb. 14.

The first part of *Library Bookworks* is comprised of drawings hidden in 15 books: Mr. Orara has drawn human ears on the pages of works as diverse as Lewis Carroll's *The Complete Illus-*

*trated Works; Kam and the Platypus—Essays on Language and Cognition* by Umberto Eco; *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* by Peter Carey; *A People's History of the United States 1942 to Present* by Howard Zinn; a BMW booklet; a teacher's notebook of lists of everyday chores. The choice of books is immaterial. What compels is the audacious insertion of an object into someone else's material, with a quiet assertion of “Look at me. [I'm] here.”

Or rather, “I'm ear.”

In fact the figure of the ear elicits a palette of interpretations and questions. Why an ear in a book when it's the eyes that do the reading? Then there's the suggestion of eavesdropping, such as the ear in the teacher's book of lists, making the viewer privy to a private notebook. In some justified mix of metaphors, the ear seems to allow a voyeurism through a peep hole, and indeed, some of the ears are drawn in such a manner as to seemingly bore a hole into a page, drawing the viewer into some other invisible world over, beyond, and right through the book's pages. Funnily, just like the earwig, an insect thought to eat its way through the human brain after entering one ear to emerge out the other. After all, Mr. Orara did say that he draws to stop the mind. But that capacity of the earwig is more urban legend than legendary, in the same manner that no hole is bored in the book. There's only the illusion of it.

Another intriguing aspect is that each ear is drawn with utter respect to its uniqueness, and each one tells its own story (yet another layer over the book's inherent con-

tent). A wrinkle here, a roundedness there, a pointy thrust at the tip fleshes out a synecdoche for a corresponding personality. But of course a “sinister” ear will have nothing to do with the ear's owner, and everything to do with the odd marriage of Mr. Orara's choice of ridiculously simple objects and an overactive, highly opinionated imagination of the viewer that must assign meaning onto everything.

### HIDDEN WORK

If all of this seems terribly indulgent, the second part of *Library Bookworks* widens the stage, ironically by keeping the works hidden.

For now the 15 ear-tagged books have actually been distributed throughout the Philippines, and have found homes in a number of participating public and private libraries in Luzon (the university libraries of Ateneo de Manila, De La Salle University Manila, the Polytechnic University of the Philippines, the University of the Philippines, Diliman and Manila, the University of Sto. Tomas, and the collections of the Cultural Center of the Philippines, the Lopez Memorial Museum, the Ortigas Foundation, and Silverlens Foundation), Visayas (Silliman University), and Mindanao (Ateneo de Zamboanga). These respective libraries have assigned call numbers to the books in their possession, which effectively become the titles of Mr. Orara's works. Thus already lurking amidst shelves in some hallowed library hall somewhere in the country is a copy of Homer's *Odyssey* containing a diaphanous drawing of an object that resembles an ear.

And an odyssey is what Mr. Orara hopes will happen among

those curious enough to go library-hopping to seek out these books. In an age where the library has been usurped by Google and Wikipedia, and the fingering of a book replaced by brusque taps on a keyboard and a tug at a mouse, there is something sweetly nostalgic and real about borrowing a book that will never be yours from the library, and being given the privilege to have and to hold it for a temporary while.

The bonus is an anonymous ear revealing its presence on a random page, a treasure found.

### QUIET, INVISIBLE

So if the bookworks are already hidden in the libraries, what treasures are then to be found at SLab? Every treasure hunt needs a map, and this is where the SLab exhibit comes in. Photographic prints of the library bookworks will be housed at the gallery from Jan. 8. Each print holds the call number of the corresponding bookwork, like a code to be deciphered, indicating in which library the bookwork is to be found. One envisions a huddle of obsessive bookwork enthusiasts evolving into a cult-like following, eagerly setting off on an ear-quest to hunt for hidden ears in obscure books in, well, libraries. Not exactly the usual elements of an adventure. But an unusually amazing, and quiet, race.

Which is almost how Isa Lorenzo, creative

director at Silverlens Gallery, describes Mr. Orara's art.

“His work is anywhere between quiet, and invisible,” she says.

Its simplicity stands out, and yet there are so many layers to the experience of his work, she explains.

“Art should be experiential. We believe in his work, and we are privileged for him to be exhibiting with us.”

Mr. Orara himself admits that *Library Bookworks*, being both hidden and exhibited, is a set-up for a performance, a pilgrimage of sorts. The photographic prints point to drawings in a published book. The call numbers point to the location of the books. An actual visit to these locations, libraries, is required of the viewer in order to view the actual drawings in the actual books. Sounds complicated? Maybe. But the sheer reward of the effort is priceless.

This writer had the privilege of seeing the bookworks before they were shipped off to the libraries. When the drawing of the ear touches the eyes, one is struck dumb by the tender details of the work. The mind stops. And since stopping the mind is the ultimate goal of most spiritual quests, a journey to seek out the bookworks becomes a pilgrimage.

The motto of Gusteau, the whispering ghost mentor of Remy the chef in the animated feature film *Ratatouille*, that paeon to unselfish genius, is “Anyone can cook.” The exhibition at SLab, and library pilgrimage, will probably prove that anyone can be moved by the quiet to invisible world of bookworks by Renato Orara.

*(Library Bookworks by Renato Orara will be on view from Jan. 8 to Feb. 14 at SLab, 2320 Pasong Tamo Ext., Makati. For more information, call 816-0044/0905-265-0873, e-mail manage@silverlensphoto.com or visit www.silverlensphoto.com There will be an opening reception on Jan. 8 at 6 p.m. Mr. Orara will also have an online artist talk on Jan. 17, Saturday at noon.)*

*Drawings are subversively placed not on blank sheets of paper, but this time on pages of published books, now library books.*

AN EAR on the cover of a BMW book

