LOOKING DOWN TO LOOK UP: MINDANAO’S KUBLAI MILLAN

by Myshel Prasad

Stepping outside the terminal at Davao International in Mindanao, even the most jet-lagged visitor will register an enormous egg-shaped sculpture, but I didn’t actually absorb its significance until the return trip to the airport. Curved and dark, it is closed and spiked on one side, and open with ripe seed on the other. It is a Durian fruit. Native to Southeast Asia, in the Philippines most of the Durian orchards are located in Mindanao. The fruit is so abundant in Davao it is, in a way, a symbol of the city and a uniquely Mindanaoan identity. So too is the artist who crafted this sculpture, Kublai Millan, whose equally abundant work can be seen throughout the island.

Born in Cotabato City, Millan’s typically monumental scale cement sculptures silently stake out their own secret landscape, their own language of history, culture, and land in a place where each have been contested. The seeds of his Durian sculpture are human beings, ripe for transformation and rebirth; representing, I later learned, Muslim, Christian, and Indigenous People (IP) or Lumad, all being born together from the same symbolic heart. It is a moving statement about both the native fertility of the land and how deeply interconnected its people are—to it and to each other—in spite of and perhaps in some ways, because of the long years of conflict and displacement.

Millan is also known for his massive sculpture of the great Philippine eagle, which with a seven-foot wingspan is one of the largest of its species on the earth. The Philippine eagle, often depicted in tourist posters throughout the city with wings upraised as the “V” in “Davao,” is critically endangered. It is confined now to its last remaining habitat on Mount Apo, outside Davao, as a result of encroaching deforestation, a phenomena which has threatened Mindanao’s Indigenous Peoples as well. Millan’s eagle sculpture in Davao’s People’s Park brings the two together; showing the raptor perched protectively over a nest of Lumad children.

But Millan’s work is not limited to Davao. His 50-foot “Kampilan,” a traditional sword, stands in the province of Sultan Kudarat, where it is the centerpiece of the municipal park. The local oral tradition is rich with stories of the young Muslim prince Kudarat who became Maguindanao’s seventh Sultan. Kudarat is painful questions, walking among his works at the spectacularly beautiful Overview Nature and Culture Park.

While he speaks without hesitation about his faith in art as a vehicle of peace, Millan tends to avoid directly political or religious language and instead refers to the cultural power of shared symbols, and the importance
of creating a culture of peace within the very landscape itself. The size of the works gives them a mythic power, contradicts the overwhelming presence of conflict with symbols of cohesion, and balances the voids in Mindanao’s history by ensuring its stories are made manifestly present. But his works sometimes too have the effect of a haunting. Will his cement eagle survive longer than the last remaining eagle on Mount Apo? Will his sculptures of Lumad peoples in traditional ritual and relationship outlast the rituals and people themselves? I (as a participant of the 2015 “Challenges to Peacebuilding” course) couldn’t avoid these painful questions, walking among his works at the spectacularly beautiful Overview Nature and Culture Park. The park is in the province of Bukidnon, a plateau and watershed area, found along the national highway between Davao and Cagayan de Oro, Mindanao’s two most populous cities. Budikon is home to seven Lumad tribes, whose unique identities are celebrated annually at the Kaamulan Festival, a notable event in Mindanao, where too often, in spite of landmark legislation such as the 1997 Indigenous People’s Rights Act, the Lumad are left behind.

Millan’s work here is also a celebration, depicting Lumad figures playing traditional instruments, women working with infants strapped to their backs, dancing in ritual costume. His figures are childlike and joyful and fierce, and they seem as if they rose from the ground of their own accord; I frequently had the uneasy feeling that they might be moving, just out of the range of my peripheral vision. They are a reverent but also a ghostly reminder of what has been lost, and what is still being lost, not just in Mindanao but in indigenous lands all over the world.

It was an extremely hot day. I walked alone down the path through the park to its terminal vista. Here Millan has placed a standing figure with his back turned to the approaching visitor, facing out and away in a wide-armed greeting of a panoramic expanse, the sun-soaked mountains and the green valley below. Circling around to the front of the piece, this figure, no longer in traditional dress, seems to be frozen in an act of discovery, a pose of praise and belonging, where limitless space meets what was once limitless land. It is a gesture of embrace but an ambivalent one, tinged with both exaltation and farewell.

Or maybe this figure is just inviting the witness to behold and remember the heaven that the island still can be. Millan is typically circumspect in describing the rationale and purpose of his work. But in an interview with Rappler, a Philippine news website, he offered some clues. Asked why people should visit Mindanao, he answered, “Because it might give you a new and better perspective on life. What I found in Mindanao… In my search for the heavens I have to look down to look up, so down to earth is my way up to heaven, and Mindanao, amongst the islands, is the closest to earth.”