

Velasco's film a true social canvas

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Review of Joey Velasco's short film, 'Canvas of Society':

Part 1- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jD7acjjWRG4>

Part 2- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZN2gKZV-YUs&feature=relmfu>

The 'Canvas of Society' is a short film made by late Filipino businessman turned artist, Joey Velasco, on the 12 street children he painted in 2005. He met these children in Manila and used them as models for his 'Last Supper with Street Children' painting, titled 'Table of Hope'. This painting of Jesus breaking bread with homeless and malnourished children was Velasco's first and most notable work. Velasco started painting to battle depression from a life threatening kidney ailment. His work depicted Jesus in ordinary Filipino life, giving him the label of 'heartist'. Velasco died on 23 July 2010 of kidney failure.

The 'Table of Hope' is a wonderful twist to the original 'Last Supper' painting. Not only does it portray the reality of malnutrition and child labour in the Philippines, it also questions the country's values and ethics. In a country where 90 percent of the population is Christian (largely Roman Catholic), the film underlines that Christ's principles of loving your neighbour, of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and visiting the sick have not prevented over three million child laborers and malnourished children. Why are there no government programmes adequately addressing these issues? Why is society keeping its silence? At the end of the film, Velasco explains Jesus' bowed head as being tired, dismayed: "It's your turn this time. I'm always the one giving my share. Do you expect a 'miracle' again?" Velasco notes that whereas he initially thought that these children must be used to their poverty, in fact, 'It is not that they are used to their poverty, but that we are used to it'.

Velasco's narration is as humble as his work, and the short film is without any sensationalism or drama that is sometimes found in documentaries of such a nature. Velasco honestly questions his life and values, his living, and that of his society. His genuine interest in the children and his perception of their goodness and innocence is touching. "She is more generous, more life-giving than me," he says of Nene. Of the dead in the cemetery where she works: "At least they give her life; how about me, do I give life to others?" In an interview, Velasco noted that he learnt many things from these children, things that he "never learned in school, like the nobility of character, courage and faith in the face of unspeakable poverty".

The inspiration for 'Table of Hope' came from Velasco's four children, who were being picky about their food; "So, I thought of providing them with a visual reminder, strong and challenging, of their blessings of life and to appreciate what was on the table." Velasco went to different squatter areas of Manila to seek his models, where he fed the children noodles and juice, and took their photos unnoticed. When his painting was complete, he hung it on his dining room wall.

Initially, Velasco did not know the stories of his models. When he and his painting gained fame however, Velasco started feeling uncomfortable. "The subjects of my painting were observing me. I could no longer escape them. They became

missionaries to me, and took me on a spiritual journey.”

Velasco retraced his steps using his photos. “I searched for each one of them, and it was only then, when I knew who they were, was I able to find myself and my God. I thought they were the ones who were lost, only to find out I was the one actually lost.” At the end of the film, Velasco reveals that he saw himself reflected on the canvas of society through these children.

Each child is introduced in the film from their portrait at the Table of Hope, which is a nice technique, switching between a painted image and video footage. Each child is shown in their natural environment and with their natural behaviour, and this is used to question Velasco’s own life and actions, as well as serving as an indictment of his society:

While my children swim in a private resort, Michael swims in a mountain of muck of rotten garbage. I am included in the filth of garbage, I am one of the ingredients of this rotten society. Have I done anything to make my society smell good? Or am I just good at complaining?

‘Canvas of Society’ differs from other films not only due to Velasco’s first person narrative style, but also in the heartfelt questions he asks of himself. Listening to Velasco ask such questions inevitably leads viewers to ask them of themselves as well. And the answers will leave most of us uncomfortable and ashamed. “My tummy may be filled with so much food, but is my inner life full also? Is my soul malnourished?”

Apart from the children seated at the table, Velasco’s painting also includes one child scavenging under the table, the inspiration for whom is an award winning photograph by Kevin Carter, of a child from Sudan. The end of the film shows this child, as well as other images depicting Africa’s terrible famines and its toll on both children and adults. In depression, Carter committed suicide after three months of taking the photograph, and Velasco hopes that a similar fate does not await him.

Children are said to be the future. Emong’s comment on seeing Velasco’s painting, “We invited Jesus to eat,” speaks to a wonderful innocence and generosity. If this could indeed become society’s future, the world would be a much better place, and perhaps ills such as child labour and malnutrition would not exist. Unfortunately, these children will most certainly lose their innocence before long, particularly if they remain in their present conditions, amidst drugs, violence and poverty. As Velasco asks of little Itok, “is he the one who will stab a dagger [in] my chest in the future”?

If art is a mirror of reality, an attempt to provoke and inspire change, then Joey Velasco was a true artist. He was surely a true Christian as well. Taking his cue from Jesus, Velasco did his part to paint a better society. Now, it is our turn.

References

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