

Nene Lacson • Magsi Peña • Luci Lizares • Edouard Garcia

ROGUE

LIFESTYLES ON THE EDGE

APRIL 2009

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Blood, Sugar, Sex, Magic

THE
UNTOLD
STORY of
NEGROS

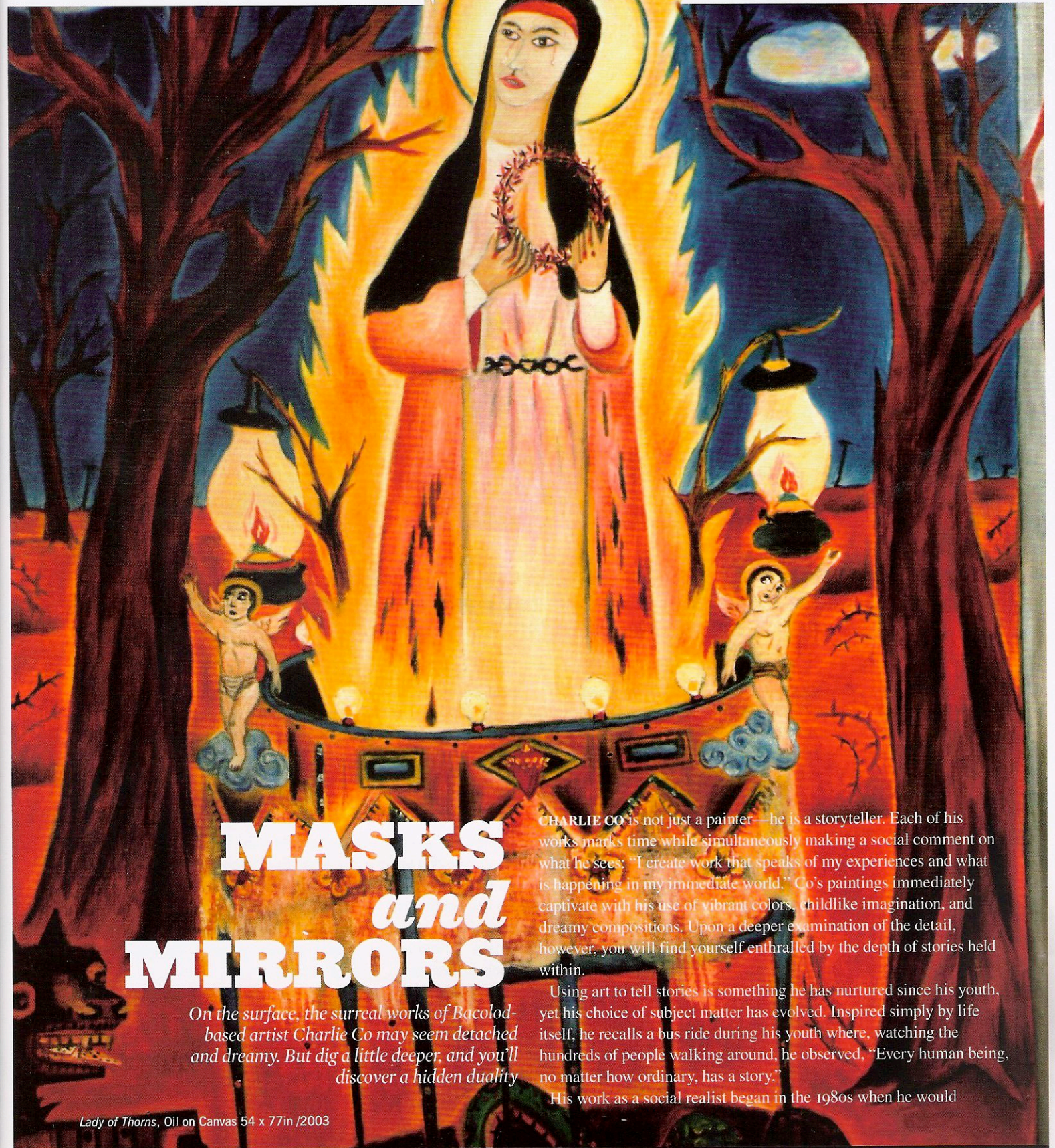
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ROGUE'S

GALLERY

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MASKS and MIRRORS

On the surface, the surreal works of Bacolod-based artist Charlie Co may seem detached and dreamy. But dig a little deeper, and you'll discover a hidden duality

CHARLIE CO is not just a painter—he is a storyteller. Each of his works marks time while simultaneously making a social comment on what he sees: “I create work that speaks of my experiences and what is happening in my immediate world.” Co’s paintings immediately captivate with his use of vibrant colors, childlike imagination, and dreamy compositions. Upon a deeper examination of the detail, however, you will find yourself enthralled by the depth of stories held within.

Using art to tell stories is something he has nurtured since his youth, yet his choice of subject matter has evolved. Inspired simply by life itself, he recalls a bus ride during his youth where, watching the hundreds of people walking around, he observed, “Every human being, no matter how ordinary, has a story.”

His work as a social realist began in the 1980s when he would

Lady of Thorns, Oil on Canvas 54 x 77in /2003

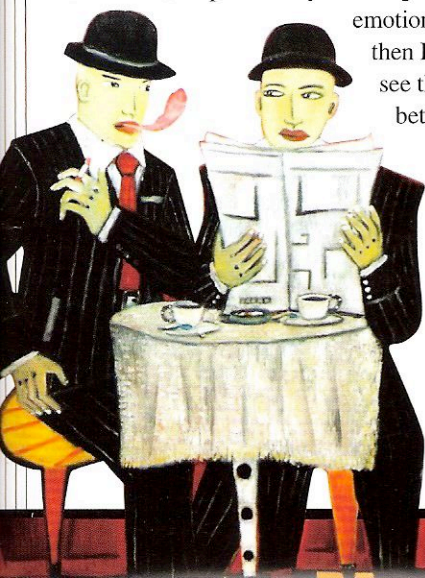


"I asked myself, how can I paint about the stories of others if I don't know my own story? So I painted my own tragedy and emotions, and then I could see the world better."

paint the uncertain political situation in the Philippines that surrounded him. Eventually, he turned inward for inspiration. "I asked myself, how can I paint about the stories of others if I don't know my own story?"

So I painted my own tragedy and emotions, and then I could see the world better."

After time spent



traveling—and with technology making the flow of information faster—his work eventually focused on globally relevant subjects such as injustice, war, death, abuse, exploitation of women, and the environment. "I want them to think," he says, "I want them to ask, 'Why?'"

The influence of Charlie Co's Ilonggo roots is both subtle and direct. As a result of a great ferry tragedy that happened in Bacolod in the 1980s, a group of artists and local politicians came up with the Masskara festival to help the people move on from their pain. "Everyone wears a smiling mask to celebrate despite the hidden mask inside," he says. This yearly exposure to satire led him to create work that, even if sometimes whimsical and colorful on the surface, is characterized by layers of meaning and a hidden duality.

Co's frequent use of symbolism makes you

want to ask what he was really thinking. Sometimes, however, he is merely painting a reminder of home, as was the case with the painted bandstand often found in his early work, representing the plaza in Negros where he hails from.

That each work is given a thought-provoking title helps to solidify the impact of the message. In *Economic Halloween* (2008), the uncertainty of our current economic climate is captured by a group of suited figures in a boat in the middle of the ocean, who are being tossed by huge waves and unsure if they will sink or float.

A painted image of Damien Hirst's Golden Calf and Uncle Sam are also in the boat, with one about to fall over and the other guided by a puppet string to constantly produce money. With money transforming itself into lifesavers, this piece exemplifies a work that provokes

Coffee Break, Oil on Canvas 36 x 44 /2006



MASK OF SORROW

"Everyone wears a smiling mask to celebrate despite the hidden mask inside," says Co, whose works are rife with symbolism. *Opposite page:* The artist in his two-story studio loft in Bacolod City.

both thought and emotional response.

The body of Co's work can be divided into the themes of darkness and light, and he lives and paints both. He explains, "I can be very emotional and I can be very playful, but there is always a message." The message may sometimes just be an expression of an emotion—happiness, sadness, anger—universal to us all. "I could just be happy that day and paint that happiness. The most important thing to me is to paint my truth."

Although he studied fine arts, Co considers himself "self-taught." He credits surrealism "with the weird feelings of his landscapes," and the use of symbols to punctuate the story. His spontaneous creative process, however, is purely expressionist: "I often see images in my head of exactly what I want to paint. I do one quick sketch and then work really fast to translate it to canvas." His "dreamier" works, with lots of blues and flying figures just "floating there in space," have been influenced by Chagall, whereas his darker, more serious pieces are reminiscent of Goya's "black paintings."

Conscious of his own struggle to become an artist, Co set up the Bacolod-based Orange Gallery four years ago. The space offers an affordable way for fresh artists to showcase their work. Having already organized 40 shows, Co says, "If one of 40 artists becomes successful, I would have done my part. I will be happy to have helped someone realize their dream."

With 25 years of solid work consisting of paintings, sculptures, mixed media, and black-and-white drawings, Co is currently working on a mid-career retrospective. "It's always been my dream. I wanted to see how I have developed in my lifetime, professionally and personally. My work, you see, is my diary."

SUNSHINE LICHAUGO DE LEON

Death Trap, Oil on Canvas 43 in x 70 in /2005