

LOOKING at MICHELLE RAMOS' painting is like entering a familiar place, face to face with a familiar face and familiar scene but very much aware that it is not real.

So realistic and yet so unreal, this is Michelle's art.

Michelle, 28, is an emerging self-taught artist in the community and in the Toronto art scene.

Three of her pieces are on display at the Gallery 402 in King St. East and one at The Hermit's Lamp gallery for The Art of Tarot that runs until November 30.

"My work is mostly symbolic because I believe that art, to be a true gateway of expression, must in some way or form, invoke in the viewer a sense of wonder, as if they have been transported to another world," Michelle says.

"This world is both strange yet familiar due to the presence of ubiquitous symbols commonly ingrained in many cultures representing people's core values, fears and aspirations," she adds, as she brushes yellow paint on her canvas during the Nuit Blanche.

Nuit Blanche is Toronto's homage to its artists, when downtown Toronto is transformed into a gallery for a night in September.

Turn the Tide, Michelle's creation for Nuit Blanche, shows a dancing woman on a swirling blue and magenta tide.

Michelle explains that her painting speaks of courage to turn the tide on one's favour from time to time because "we often wait for what we want instead of going after them."

She is among 12 artists posted on the basement of 401 Richmond St. West for Nuit Blanche. With canvases on walls and paints and brushes on floors, they created masterpieces from sunset to sunrise.

Her works, always portraying fantasy and symbolism, draw inspiration from her multicultural heritage.

Michelle was born in the Philippines. The family moved to the United Arab Emirates when she was three years old, and on to Toronto ten years later.

As a young girl, she was mesmerized by the stories of *encantos at encantadas* (supernatural beings) of Philippine folklore.

She was also fascinated by the dances and colours of her Spanish roots.

Later, she was greatly influenced by the dances of the Middle East, where she spent her growing years.

Her heritage and experiences are evident in her paintings.

Michelle says: "As a mythology geek, Filipino folklore continues to fascinate me as much as it did when I was growing up learning about local folktales."

"We have such a rich heritage of legends, superstitions and stories of mythical beings that, whether people realize it or not, still influence many Filipinos' lives.

"I loved going to my pater-

MICHELLE RAMOS creates magical pieces a canvas at a time

ANALYN ARYO



"...it's not your ethnicity that matters when people look at your work."



nal grandparents' house in the country where you're so close to the ocean and the trees that the ancient pre-Christian nature spirits our ancestors believed in still seem very present in some secluded areas."

"Plus, we have the craziest original Filipino monsters! If the only way to escape from a haunted house was either through a door guarded by a western vampire or a door guarded by a *manananggal*, I'd choose the vampire any day. I'd rather struggle wrestling against a dead guy with fangs who otherwise looks human, than stomach the sight and stench of a flying *manananggal* with their guts and their last night's human liver dinner spilling out. At least the vampire wouldn't make me die of puking."

Entering the Toronto scene was no laughing matter for Michelle, though.

She will not say it had been difficult, but it took her time when she went out and did research.

Being a newcomer made it harder for her, mainly because she was unfamiliar with the area.

She shared with other artists that initial struggle to get past the industry's subtle snobbery.

"Some galleries wouldn't look at you unless you're a fine arts graduate. And when you're young, you're also subjected to a bit of ageism," she recalls.

"The usual first question is 'Where did you study art?' They wouldn't take you if you didn't have an artist's resume listing your

education or past exhibitions. And you couldn't exhibit unless you had a fine arts diploma."

Thus, Michelle tried an experiment: To avoid being asked her age or academic credentials and be discriminated against even before she could show them anything, she showed them her work first.

Once they said they loved it and would love to hang that type of art on their walls, she'd tell them then that she created those pieces. That way, they couldn't backtrack and would tell her the art did not meet their standards.

Michelle believes that if one looks around, there is a market out there for almost anything.

The matter of finding the right people and being in the right places with them at the right time and figuring how to work that out is what takes time and practice.

Does she think there is Filipino presence in Toronto or Canada?

Michelle acknowledges: "We definitely are out there in various channels of the art world, from visual arts to performing arts and all other creative avenues in between. I just suppose that in a country as multiculturally diverse as Canada, we, along with other ethnic groups, just seem to blend into this whole cultural mosaic that for the most part, it's not your ethnicity that matters when people look at your work."

"Most people don't look at your work and say 'Hey! That's by a Filipino artist!' It seems like unless they're from the community, your

background has no real weight on their appreciation of your work - which is great in a way because art is universal. Always has been."

"Stylistically though, I don't know how many Filipino artists paint in a style that's purely 'Filipino' in the same sense that we identify impressionism with the French or ink brush paintings with the Japanese and Chinese."

"So if you're asking about whether or not we have a presence here style-wise, I'm not too sure about that. But if you're talking in terms of the number of individual Filipino artists, we're definitely out there, but unfortunately not enough are in the mainstream public eye - yet."

Michelle started painting as young as she can remember.

She first played with watercolours and later moved to cartoons.

Her dream job was to be a cartoonist. She achieved it when she became a cartoonist of the *Junior News* in UAE-Gulf region.

"But when I tried realistic portraits as an experiment to try something different, the challenge of capturing likeness and creating portraits and getting people's instant feedback on it became addictive," she relates.

Her first solo exhibit was displayed at the Public Library in Don Mills in June, 2005.

Michelle graduated with honours in New Media Design from Centennial College, Centre for Creative Communications. **analynaryo@yahoo.ca**