

## The Invention of Being Human

In his latest suite of works, *Animals Moved by Music*, Rodel Tapaya plumbs the fault lines through which the terrain of the everyday slid, shifted, and reconfigured. While the context may evidently be the pandemic—which is over or still raging, depending on who you ask—these works orbit around mundane transformations centred on private life and its never-ending negotiations with the outside world and its looming threat of contamination as well as its irresistible offer of self-actualisation.

As one who activates the illustrative potential of stories, the artist gestures at Franz Kafka's masterpiece of a novella, *Metamorphosis*. However, the exhibition, whose title takes after a reference to Gregor Samsa who, even transforming into a "monstrous vermin," remains vulnerable to the seduction of music played by his sister Grete, is not a direct translation of the story, but a springboard to an examination of our contemporary predicament: the maladies of isolation, the terror of venturing out of the domestic space, the restoration of the old familiars.

Working at the fraught intersection of iconography and narrative (perhaps "iconarratives" may be a fitting coinage to refer to some of these works), Tapaya at once particularizes and universalizes what we have gone through in the last two years, looking at the subtle, almost unnoticeable changes in our psyche prompted by the collective trauma of the pandemic, certainly, but also by the personal and minute decisions taken during the long months of quarantine.

These instances of metamorphosis are conveyed by the protagonists who dominate the hierarchical scale of the paintings, around whom images of descriptive and symbolic import constellate. (The apple, for instance, is a recurring image: the Biblical reminder of humanity's downfall and, simultaneously, a reference to the fruit hurled by Samsa's father at his parasitic son, causing the latter's decline.) The paranoia conveyed by a shifty pair of eyes, the helplessness against a microscopic enemy, the shedding-off of carapace of old habits: these are all embodied by these characters who mirror us in uncompromising terms.

Shoved into what Freud called as the "uncanny," or the dread one feels that childhood fantasy has a much stronger pull than adult reality, the figures inhabit an in-between space that blurs not only the outside and the inside, but also the organic and the architectural, the supernatural and the actual. Just like Tapaya's protagonists, we are gripped by fears that fester in more ways than one, driving us to make cautious choices even within the so-called safety of our homes and striking a sense of hypervigilance as we venture out into the world that is now radically different but somehow still miraculously the same.

*Animals Moved by Music* flirts with the parameters of a parable, but offers a direct, undeniable link to our present-day conditions where we continue to reckon with what we have lost and what we have gained. The world-building in Tapaya's paintings, with their grids and configurations, is one of perpetual reconstruction, as if to say that the invention of being human is never finished but constitutes a series of constant adjustments to an indifferent universe that, occasionally, gives rise to momentary sparks of revelation.

- Carlomar Arcangel Daoana