

Bondage Queens and Aerial Dreams: Kinbaku, Art, and the Dance of Controversy
by Oz Mendoza

When you see the flashy marquee of “Bottoms” and the leggy girls strutting the street in barely-there miniskirts, you know you're on P. Burgos Street.

Welcome to Manila's own little Patpong. Burgos Street is Makati's alleyway of sleaze. Middle-aged Joes, sweating in the heat of the night, loiter about ogling the nubile *chicas*. The garish signs of the nightclubs blur into a frenzy of neon come-ons.

I'm in the area looking to see a little bondage. Not that I'll be stopping at Burgos Street. I'm on my way to a different neighborhood, one with a touch more class....

The hushed residential environs of R. Palma feels like a universe away from the ribaldry. I'm walking into a block of stately, clean, well-lighted houses. Standing out from the pack, the facade of Pineapple Lab gleams in the moonlight. I stride through its doors into a world of white.

A small crowd is lounging about, drinks in their hands. Photographic art lines the walls—Pineapple Lab is a gallery—and a couple of people are even giving the works an extended glance. Nothing about the visitors would suggest that they're here, like me, to witness a bondage show.

Along with other guests, I am invited into an inner sanctum, where we gather in a large circle. In its center struts the kinbaku artist Joyen Santos. She is clad in skintight black. To one side lies an unrolled mat with an array of slender ropes. A female model in a kimono is waiting for Joyen to begin. We in the circle of watchers wait along with her.

The room darkens. One scarlet-hued spotlight gives off the only illumination. A blood-red glow bathes the two female figures. Joyen takes up a coil of rope and deftly, meditatively, winds its strands around the model's torso, until her back becomes crisscrossed with a decorative weave of knots. Joyen binds the model's hands, then her legs, then expertly hoists her captive inches from the floor. Tied up, trussed, suspended, transfixed, the bound girl is completely at the rope artist's mercy.

With a cursory gesture, Joyen flings the girl into motion. Back and forth she swings, a woman pendulum—and in that moment the spectacle is transformed into a strange, hypnotic, gyrating effigy of a dance.

When you imagine a dance, your mind calls forth images of vivid exuberance and agile freedom. The constraint of a submissive within tightly-drawn bonds, helplessly immobile, left to hang in mid-air, that might at first appear to be the very antithesis of dance. Yet upon seeing the rope bondage display, my mind flitted back to none other than a contemporary dance act I witnessed almost a decade ago....

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It was the third day of the Bumbershoot Festival in Seattle, September 2005. I approached the stage where STREB was set to perform with little idea of what to expect. The program was entitled "Flight." Elizabeth Streb's company of dancers leapt and tumbled onto the stage, and we burst into applause. Cannonballing on trampolines, soaring on a harness above the audience's heads, the gymnast-dancers embodied the freewheeling joy of being able to escape gravity... if only momentarily.

Yet I found the most powerful part of the program to be a set I can only describe as intensely downbeat—and profoundly moving. An act that underscored the implacable snare of that tyrant, gravity. As a performance, it was deceptively simple: Each dancer in turn clambered aboard an upraised platform which got cranked higher with every performer. The dancer would stand upright for one heart-stopping second—then totter over and fall, deadman-fashion, all the way to the ground.

It was shocking. It was disquieting. It left a lump in my throat. The deadfall act was sheer testament to our mortal frailty... yet at the same time, a bracing display of human fortitude and bravura.

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Watching the bondage performance has spun me into sympathetic swirls of reflection. This is beauty, I think, and it is wonderful and terrible. I am feeling shaken. I am experiencing, again, that strange stab of enrapturement and terror that I'd first felt when I was in my teens—trawling the wilds of the Internet, stumbling across a picture of a naked Japanese woman hog-tied and suspended in mid-air. I'd hurriedly closed the page, but that image would prey on my mind for a long, long time. I've seen crazier things since, but the memory of that one wild glimpse never fails to make me shudder—in distaste or pleasure, I never can say.

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After the show, the audience begins to shuffle off. I wonder where they'll go—to the comfort of home, or to the blithe gaiety of a discotheque? Will they escape to a Burgos Street nightclub to watch another young woman gyrate beneath the spotlight? Will they pass a church and remember a man bound to a cross, and grin sardonically, and stifle a blasphemous thought?

I fall into conversation with a few of the stragglers. One guy talks about the way Joyen had upended his expectations—he'd found the bondage act far from erotic or exploitative, but rather, quite tender and moving. He tells me how much he admires the symbiotic connection Joyen evinced with the model, whom she'd quietly reassured throughout the ordeal.

I find myself pondering the suggestive parallels between Joyen's art and Philippine culture. This is a society where the great majority of people have given themselves submissively to the power of God and fate. Who whispers reassuring words in their ear? Who listens to them, alert to the safeword that ensures an end to their suffering? Who offers them firm guidance that leads to the attainment of one sublime feat?

Am I reading too much into the performance? I don't know. I do know that I'm glad for meaningfully provocative art, whatever form it may take. I live in a culture where one does not lightly ruffle the social fabric. Here is spectacle with the effrontery to take us to a discomfiting realm—and make the experience beautiful. I must say I'm deeply thankful that here, in the conservative world of Manila, yet thrives a smattering of wild spaces which shelter a vibrantly transgressive spirit.

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