

## **FSA Open Studio: Norberto Roldan**

### THE CHARLESTON SHRINES

Norberto Roldan (b. 1953), who was invited to participate in FSA's spring residency, is widely considered to be among the foremost artists currently working in the Philippines. Throughout his career, Roldan (Philippines, b. 1953) has fashioned artworks through a process of collage and assemblage, creating new and evocative meanings through layering and juxtaposing texts, images, and objects. In 2014 he began producing a series of sculptural assemblages that resemble altars. The early works comprised various objects purposefully arranged within long open-sided wooden boxes. The boxes were stacked in a stepped pyramidal shape intended to recall the sacred ziggurat monuments of ancient Mesopotamia. The form of these altars, and their constitutive nature, were an homage to Philippine conceptual artist Roberto Chabet (1937–2013) who created a body of paintings and collages featuring the ziggurat. In bringing scale and three-dimensionality to the altars, and populating them with the detritus of his rapidly-developing Manila neighborhood, Roldan imbued them with a sense of personal, communal, and national histories, ones that also resonated globally.

The forms of Roldan's altars have since become quite varied—employing found furniture for their structure, for instance. Yet the artist continues to ground them within a philosophy of spiritual aspiration, a reaching toward the divine that was once exemplified in the towering monuments of the world's earliest civilizations. Against such aspirations, Roldan presents the complex realities of contemporary lived existence. The disparate objects on his altars, many of them found or discarded, have included architectural debris, furnishings, textiles, photographs, postcards, religious icons, ritual vessels, decorative items, and utilitarian wares. Through their careful selection and placement, these objects become queries: What do we hold as sacred and what do we consider profane? What constitutes identity, family, community, nation? What beliefs do we carry with us? How do we remember? In the Philippines, which was colonized by Spain in the sixteenth century and is now majority Catholic, the objects on Roldan's altars speak especially to postcolonial power structures and the persistence of indigenous beliefs.

The Charleston Shrines, on view in the artist's studio, mark the first time Roldan has created his altars outside of Southeast Asia—and the first to incorporate object offerings. More than 60 individuals, including artists and members of diverse faith communities, have contributed objects they personally consider sacred—whether rooted in spiritual practice, cultural tradition, or family heritage—either by donation or on loan. The project originated in Roldan's pre-residency research, during which he learned of Charleston's designation as the "Holy City." Expecting a cityscape largely defined by Christian

churches, he initially envisioned a single altar reflecting his own pilgrimage to Charleston, with plans to develop two more during his stay. The resulting installation is expansive in scope and layered in cartographies, tracing Roldan's journey to the Lowcountry and his immersion in a community whose collective identity continues to be shaped by histories of migration—both past and present.

Please refer to the list of works for details on the objects and individuals who contributed to the shrines on view in the studio.

### **About the artist:**

Roldan graduated with a BA in Philosophy from St. Pius X Seminary, Roxas City, and received his BFA in Visual Communication from the University of Santo Tomas, Manila. He founded Black Artists in Asia, a Philippines-based group focused on socially and politically progressive practice, and VIVA EXCON (Visayas Islands Visual Arts Exhibition and Conference), the region's longest-running biennale. Presently, he is the Artistic Director of Green Papaya Art Projects, an independent archive and alternative art space that he co-founded in 2000. Roldan has participated in several landmark surveys, including New Art from Southeast Asia (Fukuoka Art Museum, Japan, 1992); No Country: Contemporary Art for South/Southeast Asia (Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2013); Between Declarations & Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia Since the 19th Century (National Gallery Singapore, 2015); SUNSHOWER: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now (National Art Centre, Tokyo, 2017); and Passion and Procession: Art of the Philippines (Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2017).

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### LIST OF ARTWORKS:

North wall, left to right:

*Holy Blanket, 2025*

*Installation with airline blanket, objects, and old furniture*

*Objects: artist's Qatar Airways blanket (embroidered); artist's used airline boarding passes from Manila to Charleston; artist's passport; artist's travelling shawl; artist's laptop and iphone; artist's assorted balms; inlaid wooden tray, from the Philippines, from Ramona Benitez McClelland; vintage globe purchased from Warehouse 61; discarded furniture found on Wentworth Street, vintage furniture from Tyler Rollins*

Roldan describes his grueling journey from Roxas City, in the Philippines, to Charleston—which was longer than 24 hours—as a ‘pilgrimage’ to the ‘Holy City.’ The exact details of his itinerary are embroidered on the same Qatar Airways blanket that comforted him during his travels. On the table are the modern pilgrim’s essentials—identity documents; devices for communication, work and/or entertainment, and soothing balms. The Philippine tray, a memento of home, is also a commentary on the global migration of objects.

*Holy Tree, 2025*

*Installation with video, object, sound, and dried leaves*

*Components: projection of an image of a “tree painting” in Middleton marsh by Jonathan Green; constructed object by Nyugen E. Smith; sound score by John-Anthony Thevos; vintage pedestal from Tyler Rollins; dried leaves and palms from FSA garden*

In this altar, Roldan brings art and sound together in a meditation on the fragility and ephemerality of nature, art, and the human body. Visible through a gothic-style arch which appears to demarcate a sacred space, is a projection of a tree at Middleton Marsh that was painted during the pandemic by Charleston artist Jonathon Green. Green’s intervention, in which he painted several trees with geometric designs recalling African patterns, was a tribute to the enslaved populations on which Charleston’s wealth was built. On a nearby pedestal, a sculpture by Nyugen E. Smith, adds poignant commentary. Based on a boot made to protect the hoof of a mule that he saw at the Charleston Museum, Smith’s work highlights the mistreatment of slaves and, in the present day, of those who are poor or displaced.

## East wall:

### *Holy Chair, 2025*

*Installation with found furniture and objects*

*Objects: antique chair, table, column capitals, and Quran from Tyler Rollins; chasuble and stole (Catholic vestment) from Jovi Roldan; book stand from Shaila Shroff; two bricks, from 1891 building at Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, from Lee*

*Bennett; second-hand globe and vintage wrought iron candle holder purchased from Consign Charleston; dried palms from the FSA garden*

Having spent his formative years training to be a priest in a Catholic seminary, Roldan often works with objects referencing the church's role in Philippine history and society. Upon his arrival in Charleston, he became fascinated by a wooden chair in the FSA studio that appeared to him like a bishop's seat. Framed by a Catholic vestment, the chair here becomes a seat for a bookstand holding a Quran. The altar addresses the practice of Islam in the Mindanao area of the southern Philippines, and situates the tolerance of the nation, which is majority Catholic, within a global frame of reference. Palm fronds invite reflection on the different symbolic meanings that accrue to the same object across cultures. Bricks from the 1891 construction of Mother Emanuel AMEC set atop wooden capitals suggest the architecture—structural, institutional, and theological-- that sustains religious communities.

## South wall, left to right:

### *Holy Buddha, 2025*

*Installation with found furniture and objects*

*Objects: Buddha figurine from Arahmaiani; palmetto roses/crucifix by Corey Alston; handwoven cloth basket by Torrea Washington; antique table, mini étagère, and metal candle holders from Tyler Rollins; sweet grass for burning purchased from Middleton Market shop; ayurvedic balm (sahasra dhauta ghrta) made by Megha Ralapati; Tibetan singing bowl from Michael Dryden, bamboo hair comb and wooden leaf tray from Ramona Benitez McClelland; leaf from Precious Jennings; incense from Nyugen E. Smith, perfume bottle from Leeza Ahmady, incense-holder and carved elephants from Shaila Shroff; vigil candle purchased from Pottery Barn; hand-dyed indigo textile produced by the artist under the guidance of Arianne King Comer*

Placed atop the central wood stand in this installation is a Buddha statuette that was left in Roldan's Charleston bedroom by Arahmaiani, the Indonesian artist who was FSA's first resident. As such, it inspired several additional collaborations that helped to shape *The Charleston Altars*. The offerings here include objects given, crafted by, or produced with the assistance of Charleston artists. In its particular arrangement and selection of items, this altar, along with *Holy Anito* (at far right) recalls rural Filipino altars attended by spirit mediators known as *babaylans*.

### *Holy People, 2025*

*Installation with cabinet, dried palm leaves, and various objects*

*Lenders and contributors: Michael Dryden, Shaila Shroff, Genny Benitez, Neil McHugh, Ramona Benitez McClelland, Angela Smith, Emily Manalo, Neda and Alan Nussbaum, Sandra Brett, John Silvis, Martin Bauer, Leeza Ahmady, students from Charleston College*

Roldan designed this shrine as a testament to, and celebration of, the diverse religious and spiritual communities he encountered in Charleston. It includes objects, prayer books, devotional figurines, ritual, and other items given to him by members of Hindu, Jewish, Christian, and Bahai traditions. It also includes objects perceived as personally significant by their various donors. As a collection, the cabinet speaks to the manner in which communities sustain meaningful practices, whether these are inherited, adopted, or transplanted from distant places and pasts.

*Holy Anito, 2025*

*Installation with found furniture and objects*

*Objects: feather work by Austin Manchester; palmetto rose/crucifix by Corey Alston; Philippine anito figurine, betel nut container, and indigenous textile from Ramona Benitez McClelland; Philippine wood figuring from Che Vejerano; carabao horn salt/pepper shakers and wooden rice bowl from Chiara Cox; serving utensils of Philippine bamboo and carabao horn utensils from Anya Benitez; Haitian wood figurine purchased from Charleston Market; egg offering from Cathryn the Grateful, taken from bamboo temple at Emergence burn; vintage cookware purchased from Consign Charleston; mini étagère and antique table from Tyler Rollins; vigil candles purchased from Pottery Barn; hand-dyed indigo textile produced by the artist under the guidance of Arianne King Comer*

The title of this altar comes from the indigenous Philippine veneration of *anito*, supernatural beings encompassing deities, ancestors, and nature spirits. One such spirit is the rice god, *bulul*, who is depicted in the sculpture atop the central stand. Various objects given by artists and faith communities—a sculptural assemblage of sponge and feathers, palmetto flowers, a dyed egg—similarly evoke a deep and abiding relationship with the natural world. The altar, like *Holy Buddha* (at far left), recalls indigenous Philippine altars tended by *babaylans* (spirit mediators) that would have included a similar array of offerings. By including several objects of Philippine manufacture, Roldan’s altar documents his interactions with a local expatriate community for whom these items have provided a sense of identity and origin. The indigo resist-dyed cloth and vintage rice pot reference the Lowcountry’s own history, as the cultivation of both crops relied on the labor and knowledge of enslaved populations. The pot—long ago made in the U.S.A—also provides commentary on an increasingly globalized world.