

Call me ELEcTRA. Today an extra. Tomorrow a Superstar!

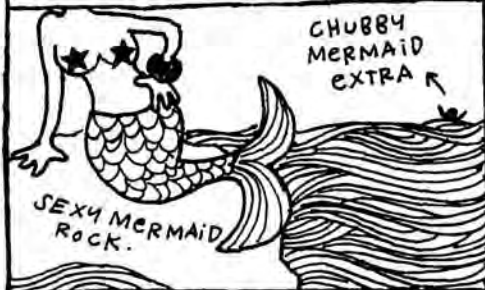
By
Lyra Abueg
Garcellano

When I was young I knew I was going to be the greatest artist the movie industry has ever known.

But I knew such dreams don't happen overnight. Crucial steps must be taken to ensure my path to stardom.



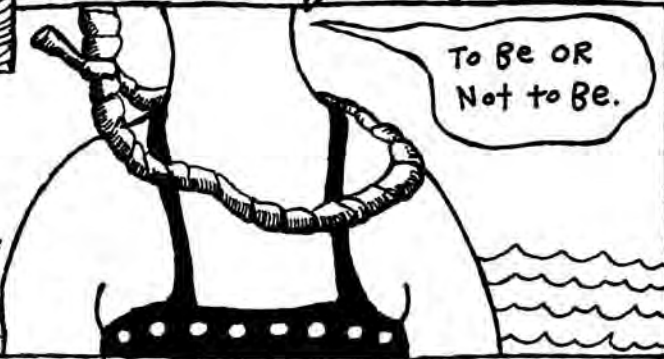
Being swollen had its advantages. As I lay in pain I was cast as a chubby mermaid extra.



But even when the swelling subsided I remained a chubby mermaid extra. This upset me. Was it because I'm fat??!



I became depressed, almost suicidal. But I was told this was a good thing because the pain would give me depth of character! And this depth would show in my art!





Catching up with Lyra Garcellano

Lyra Garcellano, creator of the *Atomo and Weboy* comics published in the Philippines, began illustrating for magazines and books during her college years. Yet, the graduate in Fine Arts (Major in Studio Arts from the University of the Philippines, Diliman), only became a comics artist/writer by "accident". She explains how in the following interview with **Soh Lai Yee**, whom Lyra first met at the pilot edition of the Asia-Europe Comics Project (Asia-Europe Foundation) last year. Lyra is also a contemporary arts practitioner, having held her own exhibitions, and participated in shows in various countries, including Indonesia, USA, Korea, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand.

Lai Yee: How did you become a comics artist, Lyra?

Lyra: I stumbled onto this field. I didn't plan to be doing this but it's not as if I didn't want to be here either. So, it was actually quite serendipitous.

When I was in art school I was bent on creating studio-based works such as painting and installation art, which are activities I still engaged in – they are a significant part of my life. But prior to going to art school, I've been doing illustrations for magazines, coffee-table books, and children's books.

It was while in school when I was assigned work on the activity pages for a children's section of the Philippine Daily Inquirer. A few years later, the comics section editor asked me to try my hand at comics.

Drawing/making comics was entirely new to me. I knew that a sequential format of illustrating with a story in 3-4 frames was going to be difficult. So I just kept on studying, reading and exploring all sorts of comics. It was as if a whole new world opened up to me. And honestly, it has been an interesting ride ever since.

Initially, I was told that my target audience was children. But when I started making *Atomo and Weboy*, I didn't want it to have the usual simplistic humour. My fear was that I would have a very limited audience. I persisted with the kind of style and dialogue I wanted. Soon, I got word that although my comics did not capture the kids market, it attracted a different set of crowd. Ever since then, I've gotten feedback from the coffee-drinking crowd, consisting of college students and professionals, telling me that they enjoy reading my comics.

Lai Yee: I am really happy to hear that you are collaborating with Tomas Kucerovsky, who was also a participant at the Asia-Europe Comics Project. What is your contribution to the 10-page comics for *Aargh!*?

Lyra: The great thing about the comics project in Singapore is that the participants enjoyed one another's company enough to want to work together on other projects. Tomas (Czech comics artist and editor of the Czech-based comics magazine *Aargh!*) sent me copies of *Aargh!*, and came up with the idea of having all 12 comics artists involved in the Asia-Europe Comics Project to do something for his magazine.

So when he emailed me and asked if I was interested, I immediately said yes. At that time, I was already working on the storyline for "And Suddenly She was 34..." Luckily, when I pitched the idea to him, he said the plot will fit perfectly for *Aargh!*

ATOMO & WEBOY by Lyra Garcellano



"And Suddenly She was 34..." came to me when I found myself once again mulling existentialist questions while drinking a milkshake (while some people work up angst over alcohol, I get the same feeling over sugar-overload). The story's about a girl who went through life doing the same thing over and over again, and before she knew it, she was 34 years old. I suppose it's a story about the feeling of how life tends to pass us by.

Is it autobiographical? Not really. I may get snippets of my life in the story but it will not be entirely about me. Like all things, it's still a work in progress. But whether or not it does see print, I'm hoping I'll be able to buckle down and finish the work.

Lai Yee: You once remarked that you wanted to do more for the female comics artists in the Philippines. Can you elaborate, and how is the Filipino comics scene today?

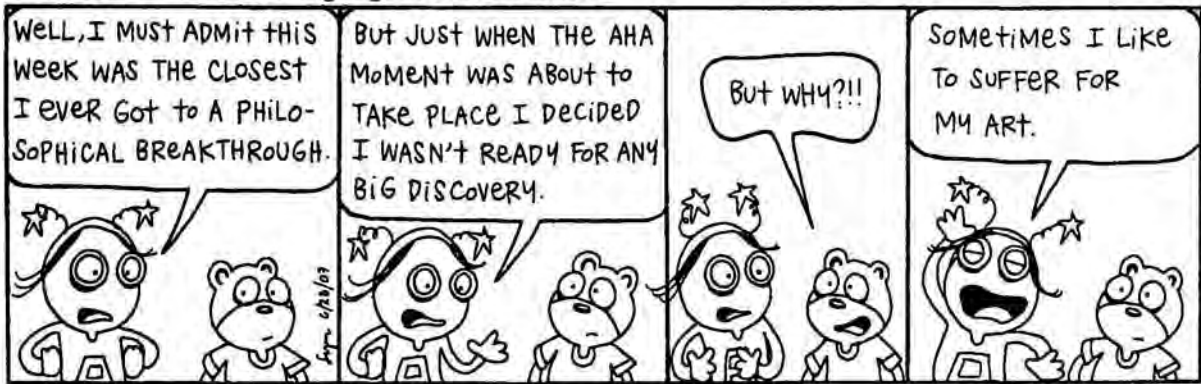
Lyra: Based on my observations of the scene right now, it seems to be “there but not quite there”, although there have been attempts by small-time publishers to create new markets by producing new comics anthologies. I don’t know if such anthologies made a huge impact. Maybe they made an impression but I don’t believe they were commercial success. The one I used to contribute to closed down after 5-6 issues. I was told they would publish the series again in the near future but it’s been a year since I last spoke to them.

There are people, however, who still produce locally made graphic novels, and I suppose that’s a good thing. But again, the market is still generally small or too specific.

Most comics enthusiasts here are still most likely to pick up a copy of *Marvel*, *Vertigo*, *Gaiman*, *Anime* or any foreign artist’s book, for that matter.

On the comics bookshelf in bookstores are rows upon rows of foreign comics. On one tiny/short row, there may be the locally produced graphic novels.

ATOMO & WEBOY By Lyra Garcellano



But that isn’t just the problem of the comics industry. I think that’s the problem of the entire local book publishing industry. Foreign books get all the rows and shelves. Whereas locally published books warrant only a mere fraction of the space bookstore owners offer to foreign titles.

I must, however, emphasize that the scene is “thriving” in the sense that there are publishers willing to give local comics artists a chance. At the same time, there are also courageous self-publishing comics artists.

Lai Yee: How would a female artist be placed in this scenario?

Lyra: If I go to a local bookstore, it won't be easy to find a comic book solely done by female artists. Those who are published right now are mostly males. If and when there are female artists involved, they are generally in the peripheries of the book production.

Interestingly, the first-prized winners of the Neil Gaiman graphic novel contest held in the Philippines in 2006 were a pair of sisters; one wrote the story and the other sister did the illustration. A few female artists have done comics for national dailies.

I attended a comic convention last year, and saw a lot of female artists there but they were mainly engaged in producing DIY mini-comics. Well, I suppose mini-comics should not be disparaged against, yet they cannot compete with the comics in nationally-circulated publications.

But I don't think there really is a blatant effort to keep females out of the comics industry here. It's just that, sadly, there is a dearth of female artists who have made a dent at all. I believe people will agree with me when I say the scene is quite male-dominated, and at the same time cliquish.

Lai Yee: Was there a time when you consider dropping what you do, and move on to something else?

Lyra: I do remember having a "crisis" of sorts around 2002 when I was under an artist-in-residency grant (UNESCO-Ashberg Bursaries for Artists) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, studying contemporary art, and at the same time contributing comics to a national daily. I started to ask myself "what is it that I want to be?" I think I was trying to reconcile in my head all the different things that I did. Until I met this Australian curator who helped me to realise that there really shouldn't be a crisis of identity in the first place, and that I should accept and enjoy what I do – both contemporary art and comics.

Sometimes, both fields seem to converge. Lately, I've been doing my comics-like illustrations in my installation art, and I like to use contemporary art as a theme for my comics. Well, that sounds too simplistic but from time to time I do find that both fields can intersect.

Just a few months ago, I was asked to do a mini lecture of my studio-based works at the University of the Philippines. I included samples of my comics along with the pictures of the installation art I've made. Interestingly, the



group of professors and students who listened to me were very familiar with the comics I've done.

Lai Yee: Good that you stuck to comics creation among other artistic pursuits. I thoroughly enjoy *Atomo and Weboy's* antics. What is your inspiration for the creation of *Atomo and Weboy*?

Lyra: I am tempted to say *Atomo and Weboy* is an autobiographical form of comics but given the outrageous plots that I frequently use, it's going to be strange to just call it that. People who know me say that whenever they read my comics, they can't help but think that whatever it is that *Atomo* is going through, I must be going through something similar in real life. I had a week's worth of comic strips about *Atomo* going through some weight-gain changes of sorts, and next thing I know, people started asking me about my weight problems. At that time I hadn't gained weight. But now I have, so I suppose the comic strip was prophetic. Ha-ha!

What I like about that subplot was that *Atomo* couldn't wait to get fat. So, she worked on having flabby arms and getting double chin implants. The character *Atomo*, to some degree, is something of an alter-ego while *Weboy*, her best bear friend, is based on the teddy bear my parents gave me when I was 6 months old. I still have the bear with me, and I'm in my 30s now. *Weboy* in my family's eyes remains 6-7 years old. When it comes to my beloved toys, we like to think time is suspended.

I try to find storylines from my experiences because I think real experiences are the best sources for creating interesting plots. But of course, imagination has to work double time when there's just nothing great happening in my life. And my life can be tremendously boring at times. There are days when I'll just wake up, scratch my tummy and putter around the house the entire day in my pajamas. It's *Atomo and Weboy* who get all the adventures, like meeting a genie; owning a talking pet rock; and learning to levitate.

LaiYee: Other than contributing *Atomo* and *Weboy* to the daily paper, what else is up your sleeves, Lyra?

Lyra: I'm a little overwhelmed with what I want or can do. Last year's experience at the Asia-Europe Comics Project proved to be very enlightening. Just being able to actually have access to the books, projects, and ideas of other artists from different countries was an eye-opener. The only problem now is the momentum. Sometimes when I get so overwhelmed, I feel lost in inertia because of the so many things/ideas happening in my head.

But once I got back home from that workshop, I did round up female contemporary artists and asked them if they wanted to do an anthology of comics. All four said yes. It's just a matter of buckling down to work and jumpstarting the project, and seeing it done to the end.



I've also been working on my own stories, and trying to get stuff done; at the same time putting together a compilation of *Atomo* and *Weboy* for publication.

It's important that the anthologies by female artists are out before the year ends. I think the local scene needs some other perspective other than anime-inspired iconography. I think that's why I'm not so keen on the stuff that comes out here. I do support them in some sense but I'm tired of the usual superhero/heroine, big-breasted and small-waist female characters that a majority of local comics artists generally churn out. *Anime* is Japanese, not Filipino. We can't all want to be *otakus* out there. I believe there's got to be another perspective made available to the readers.

I haven't been able to do comics as much as I would have wanted to; although I'm trying to produce the 10-page comics for Tomas' *Aargh!*

I have been involved in some exhibitions, and as I was fortunate to be one of the recipients of 'The 13 Artists Awards' in the Philippines last year, I was busy with work related to the awards.

Other than that, I've been working on some storylines for a 2-page comics which I'm hoping a friend of mine will upload soon on his Pinoy Webcomics sites.

Lai Yee: Do you have any rules of thumb to share with aspiring artists?

Lyra: It's hard to give advice because, sometimes, even if I nailed the advice down but I still don't end up following it myself. Har!

Maybe the best would be to keep on reading. There are just so many books published by big or even small presses that are outstanding. Where else can one get ideas if not through reading?

Comics always start with the idea and the content. One may have fantastic drawings but if it's linked together by a lousy storyline, then the comics will fail. Well, sometimes, impressive drawings can be a boost. But it's still best to put a great deal of effort on the storyline. It is the story/good writing that sustains everything.

A friend of mine who's very much into the scene (he does comics reviews, webcomics, etc.) also told me that he often encounters wide-eyed students who want to "hit it big too fast, too soon", so to speak. So they end up copying whatever style is out there.

I've no problem having a certain style inspiring an artist, but when an artist becomes so stuck in one style that the work he/she makes doesn't seem to evolve anymore, then it will leave much to be desired.

So, it's really best to do research and keep on learning. My world became much wider when I actively sought out the different comics available everywhere. There is an amazing (along with the not so amazing) selection out there.

The 1st Asia-Europe Comics Project was organised in 2006, and a publication with the 12 artists' comics is being produced. The 2nd Asia-Europe Comics Project – "Lingua Comica" – will take place in London.

For further information, please visit www.asef.org

Soh Lai Yee (laiyee@asef.org) is the Project Manager (Public Affairs) of Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). She organised the first Asia-Europe Comics Project in 2006 (Singapore), and is a member of the advisory committee for the Youth Expedition Programme (National Youth Council of Singapore). Lai Yee also keeps herself busy by volunteering for arts and community projects outside of her professional engagement.