



### **Asian Daddy Says Night Knight:**

**a response to Frank Del Rosario's *Asian Batman Saves Wellington***

by Joseph Trinidad

White Batman is a seriously disturbed, deeply traumatised billionaire who adopts an equally deranged alter ego that is a nightmare synthesis of ninja, bat, and cop. He protects Gotham City through military-grade weapons, antisocial, often violent, behaviour towards the financially disadvantaged and mentally ill, and cynical renderings of a bogus philosophy stolen and misappropriated from a rudimentary understanding of East Asian religions. Often detractors cite that being a billionaire is Batman's *only* true superpower, the source of which has always been a bit shady: by day, WayneCorp is a run of the mill Wall Street company, here to start some hedge funds and steal your

pension, but by night, WayneCorp is a weapons manufacturer, headed by Batman's very own weapons supplier, Lucius Fox. Being a billionaire is also Batman's appeal. Take his habit of adopting wayward orphans with their own troubled pasts. Would Robin and Batgirl go into a rando's bat cave if he was just *some guy*? Of course not, they trust him because he can afford to buy toys of mass destruction. Perhaps, being a billionaire is not Batman's superpower, but the *source* of his power. Batman draws power from his wallet the way Superman draws power from the sun. Without his money, there would be no Batsuit, no Batmobile, no BatCave. No Robin, no Batgirl. No White Batman.

Frank Del Rosario says, *That's not my Batman*.

Del Rosario's play\_station show is called *Asian Batman Saves Wellington*. The title might seem labored at first, but in the end, you'll understand it as a promise. True to the maximalist approach of comic books, there are no disaffected half-attempts here, just a bazooka-launching, clip-emptying, assertive display of scorched-earth sensibilities. Del Rosario walks where Tim Burton and Christopher Nolan walked before—Important White Men who helmed The Caped Crusader's Important White Adventures on the big screen. Lucky for us, Del Rosario has a lot in his utility belt, projecting new, imaginative ways to tackle Batman's canon and iconography. The result: a show filled with backbreaking gravitas and pizazz, and the intrinsic grace of being tucked in bed by BatDaddy.

We're introduced to Asian Batman. He lives in a BatCave somewhere in Wellington with his precocious and seemingly lonely son, Robin. In conversation, Del Rosario was quick to clarify that his Robin is Talia Al-Ghul and Bruce Wayne's love-child, Damian Wayne. I use love-child here very

loosely as according to the lore Damian was conceived without Bruce's knowledge, Al-Ghul stole his sperm and raised Baby Damien in secret with the League of Assassins. Some fine details that went over my head as a child watching afternoon reruns of *Batman: The Animated Series*. In Del Rosario's *Batman*, the estranged son is reunited with his deranged dad.



Del Rosario's BatCave is jam-packed with recognisable Batman touchstones. There's the BatComputer, a workstation that includes pulleys, levers, keys built using scavenged materials and a glue gun, and a 70-inch screen, projected into the bricky white walls of play\_station where we can see how a typical night unfolds for the World's Greatest Detective. Considering how many tabs Asian Batman has open, he is also likely in the throes of a busy crime-fighting spree, maybe even a little behind and doing some late night cramming. There is a live transmission of his ongoing cases: an interrogation

video of the Joker, the last-known videos of a missing daughter, the mayor's account hacked by incels to name a few. Del Rosario has loaded these little asides with well-produced and often very funny sketches, brought to life by recent Toi Whakaari graduates fully committed in their full *Detective Comics* drag. Like the show itself, the harder you look at the BatComputer, the more you find.

Del Rosario recontextualises superhero culture and brings it down to earth, mainly landing squarely into our city, Wellington. This is where the *Saves Wellington* of the title manifests itself. The BatCave has seen better days. Nothing in it is new. Asian Batman is living in the same economic and systematic shit-show as we are. Even Batman feels the cost of living crisis. Asian Batman is not a billionaire, if so he would've bought better computer screens or, at least, have a BatComputer operating system that doesn't look like it was stolen from PS1 *Crash Bandicoot*. How do you defend a city with hand-me-down furniture, a bunch of rotting plywood, dollar-store super glue, and a mouldy cave? How do you raise a child with that?

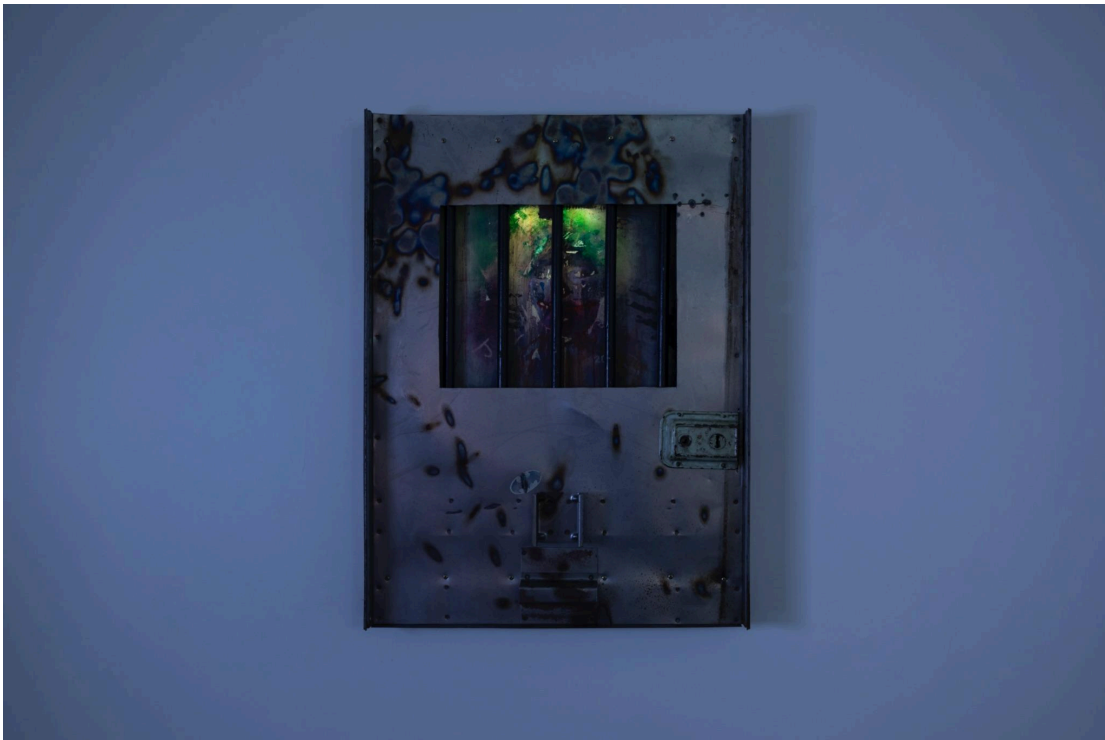
There's also the RobinComputer, baby Robin's own workstation, slightly closer to the ground, complete with a lego set, a soiled playmat, dinosaur toys, and a Nintendo DS Lite with *Lego Batman* (!!) loaded in. At this point, if I don't have to see another junkyard TV set in an art installation I'd be fine with that, but Del Rosario keeps things fresh by having it display *BatShark Do Do Do*, an inspired choice for characterisation. Immediately, we know Asian Batman is a dad, a caring and present one at that, to a toddler Robin. Batman feeding Batman media to Robin. Hilarious, ridiculous, sad, and a little concerning. What does this say about Asian Batman? In touch with his inner child?

Perhaps, a sensitive soul? May even suggest arrested development or a self-serving streak.



But the piece that's most likely to tug your cold, dark Batheart is a portrait of Batman and Robin drawn directly onto the play\_station wall with red crayons. It is a playful but carefully considered drawing of Robin and his Asian Batman Daddy holding hands. Daddy is drawn with cartoonish proportions, a grown man from a child's perspective, all legs and a face as big as the moon. Interestingly, Robin chooses to draw his father without a mask, perhaps because Robin sees through it. The post-it note says, 'Please don't draw on the walls, Robin. This is not our cave.' Maybe, Asian Batman answers to a landlord. Even then, the graffiti, the closest thing the BatCave has for a family portrait, remains unscrubbed, unpunished, treasured.

Other Asian BatCave essentials include a surveillance station complete with live CCTV footage of cameras around the city, a huge flat screen TV playing Catwoman YouTube videos doing her best Mr. Beast impression (for Baby Robin, a likely product of the iPad generation), and a stand-in for the BatCave Trophy Room, a deranged portrait of Asian Batman's greatest foe, The Joker—still white, in case you're wondering.



Del Rosario was inspired by theme park rides and Tom Sachs, especially by his exhibition where he built the NASA Space Station using spare parts. Like Sach's, Del Rosario's work uses trash as medium, experience, and toy. I say *toy* because the pieces have a tactile quality to them, built to be interactive, immersive. They are also staged to showcase Asian Batman and Robin's character and process—we just caught them in the middle of their work night; a podcast is blasting, dinosaur toys are scattered mid-playtime. What rescues *Asian Batman Saves Wellington* from being a B-grade Warner Brothers ride is its

commitment to specificity. Asian Batman is ... well, Asian. Mass appeal, be damned. The work wrestles with the abstractions of being Asian Batman, Asian (working-class, unseen, compliant) and Batman (billionaire, icon, vigilante). Beneath the conceptual delicacy that addresses profound issues, Del Rosario expresses them in strictly personal and physical terms. Literalism and story converge in the pieces: father and son side-by-side workstations, forbidden drawings on the cave walls proudly shown like art on a fridge, borrowed copyrighted material recreated through secondhand trash. An exactitude, like lego blocks fitting. Each piece rhymes and has a sense of purpose that announces itself. It is not subtle or minimalist. Del Rosario channels his inner-child for serious art adults. It is a melodrama, a live-action Filipino telenovela.

Asian Batman's BatCave is the quintessential Filipino bedroom, a BoyCave — furniture long past their half-life repurposed, a potent feel for the Pinoy sycophantic worship of pop culture, and an overgrown (near-hyperactive) sense of fun and pride. I lived in a Filipino BoyCave, and so did Del Rosario. As a kid, Del Rosario didn't want to be just Batman, he wanted Batman to reflect his reality, his childhood, his city. Like me, Del Rosario didn't want to be White Batman; he wanted a loving, diasporic, Brown Asian Batman.

As far as I can tell (and I'd be glad to be proven wrong on this one), Frank Del Rosario is [play\\_station](#)'s first Filipino artist. How exciting, how sad, how fucking cool is that? While this significant cultural marker is empty of systemic change without the true investment of the powers that be, I am still delighted (and a little teary) to finally see Filipino works recognised and given a platform. As regressive politics make a comeback like a bad 90s trend, dragging with it gender essentialism, racist rhetoric, and deathly fad diets,

how cool is it to see a queer Filipino artist like Del Rosario flex his artistic powers while centering his homegrown references and drawing from the southeast Asian New Zealand he knows deeply? I asked Del Rosario, other than Marco Conaco (another Filipinx artist), how often do you see Pinoy artists open art shows? and he answered, 'Rarely ever.'

*Asian Batman Saves Wellington* is an ooey-gooey superhero father-and-son love story while remaining a deeply personal, yet exuberant, exploration of meaty social and political issues—namely questions of originality and commodification. The show has the fire-in-your-mind, batshit approach the well-trodden material calls for. It is Frank Del Rosario's first solo show and it's not going to be his last. Now he's done with the Asian BatCave, I want him to build a functioning Asian Batmobile. I imagine it's a tuk tuk or a jeepney. I can't wait to see, feel, live what he'll dream of next, the highest praise I can give to someone with as much imagination as Del Rosario—an artist I'm so lucky to find in first edition. *Asian Batman Saves Wellington* is a rare collectible, a gem.

**Joseph Trinidad** is a Filipino writer who lives in Te-Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. He is the winner of the 2023 Adam Foundation Prize from the International Institute of Modern Letters. His work has been featured in North & South, The Spinoff, Landfall, Kapohau | Turbine, Te Papa, and Migrant Zine Collective.