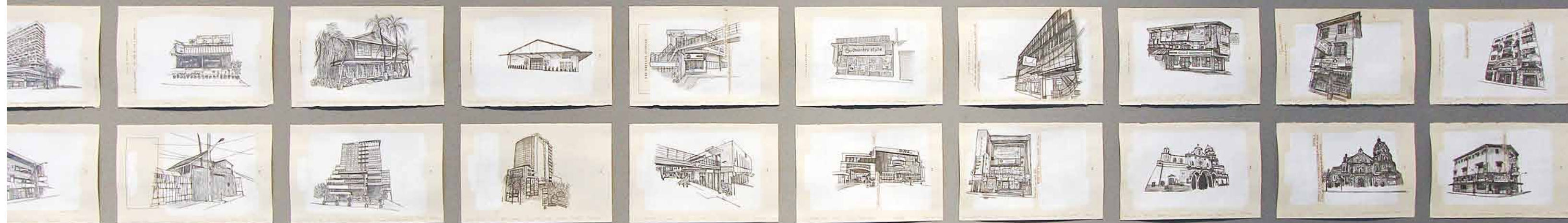


# Drawing Buildings, Testaments of Time

Artist Charles LaBelle records his travels around the world through city buildings

Text by Astra C. Alegre



"Starting in 1997, I started to document every building I physically entered," says artist Charles LaBelle. *The Dwelling Archive* is an ongoing project in which he has been documenting the various buildings in places he had visited around the world.

A recent exhibit at the Galleria Duemila in Pasay City featured selected drawings from his *Cities of the Red Night*, an album of 1,255 drawings of buildings he entered between January 2011 and February 2012. During this period, he traveled extensively in Asia, visiting cities including Hong Kong, Manila,

Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh (Saigon), Phnom Penh, Nanjing, Taipei, Vientiane and Georgetown.

LaBelle first visited Manila in August 2011. Buildings such as the Ninoy Aquino International Airport, the Cultural Center of the Philippines, an old bar/hotel in Malate called Amazonia, Sohotel, Robinsons Mall, Binondo Church, Malate Church, a 7-Eleven, and Galleria Duemila were included in the exhibit.

Curiosity brought him to Manila, he says. He had heard of Manila while living in Los Angeles where he had some Filipino

friends. "I had an impression that it's a little bit different," he says, "and I was right. It doesn't feel like any place in Asia."

Since that first visit, he has been back to Manila a number of times.

"They were short trips," he says, "anywhere from five days to one week." This time, on his fourth visit, he stayed three weeks. It was the first time he exhibited here. "The show was finished before I came, but I wanted to take the opportunity to stay longer in Manila and experience living here."

"To be honest, I don't live anywhere," LaBelle says. He lives and works "itinerantly," his CV states. "I no longer keep an apartment as of a year and a half ago. I have no home. For the last year and a half, I just spent one month here, a few weeks there. I was two months in Berlin this summer. That was the longest time in the past year and a half that I've been in one place. It's really fascinating. It's perfect for me. I enjoy it. It doesn't bother me. I feel comfortable anywhere."

"Just give me a small table. I can work in coffee shops; while waiting for my flight in the airport; anywhere," he says. "It's a rhythm. It has become a very strange rhythm. Half the time, I spend out in the world, experiencing new cities, new buildings. And the other half, I may be in a room drawing buildings I visited 10 years ago, in a whole different place, in a whole different life."

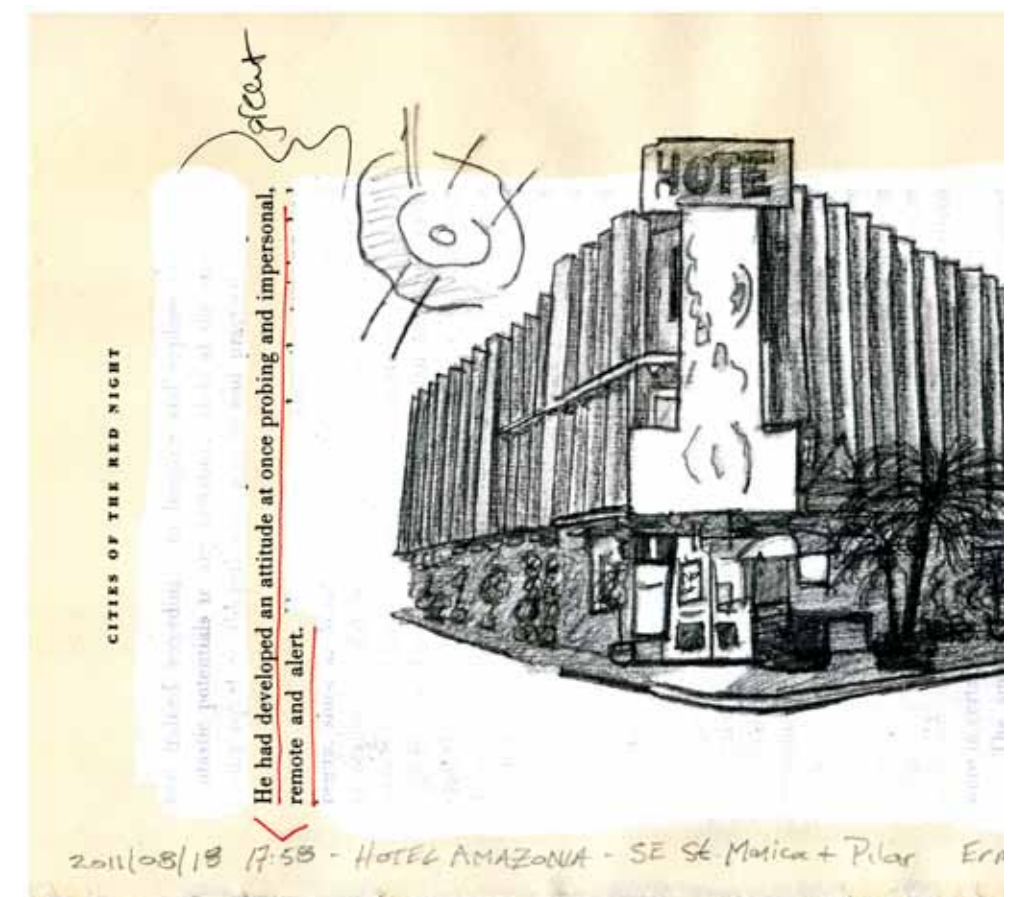
He used to live in New York. He did photography, video, sculpture. "I had a studio. I enjoyed being a real artist," LaBelle recalls. "I was unhappy with both my life and with my career. I had to ask myself at that point, how do I want to live. In everything I have been doing, what has real meaning? I decided I wanted to get rid of everything; to travel," he says. "This project is the one project I can take with me everywhere, so I decided to only do this project. Since 2007, I have stopped doing any other kind of work."

LaBelle explains the process of documenting buildings through his art. Right before he enters the building, he takes a picture. "The drawings are made from pictures," he explains, "but I never exhibit the photographs. I always do the drawings on the pages of books. I almost always use a No. 2 pencil." He takes note of the location of the building, the date and time. "That information goes into this big list, a catalog. So it's like an ongoing diary, an archive."

"I take a moment before going in the building, to stand across the street, look at the building, study the architecture, and think about where I am," he remarks. "And often, I think about how I am. The question of how we exist in the world is what really interests me. So there's a mixture of thinking of issues of time and space. I record the date and time that I entered every building, the ticking of the clock, the passing of time."

"That one frozen instant is very important, as much as space," LaBelle says, "Because it is a lie that gives us hope. Because we don't exist in any instant. We exist in a continuum, a constant flow. And I think as a human being, that flow both defines us and also frustrates us."

He adds, "We can't stop time. We all know where we are all going to end. But we want to stop time so we can see things more clearly. For me, that is a lot of what the project is. This whole project is about freezing time and looking for a moment but like I said, it is false." □



(clockwise) The first drawing LaBelle made for the *Cities of the Red Night* series, Three Exchange Square in Hong Kong; LaBelle visited the Hotel Amazonia in Ermita, Malate the very first day he was in Manila in August 2011; One of the more ordinary buildings in the series, a Mini Stop in Mabini, Malate; Galleria Duemila owner Silvana Diaz and artist Charles LaBelle

