

PLUS



Painting the opaque,
rendering desire

MAIA CRUZ PALILEO

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MAIA CRUZ PALILEO

Looking at Maia Cruz Palileo's work, we are immediately immersed in the fictional narratives in which the artist frees their characters. The oral and visual memories of their Filipino family, together with the elements of photographs found in archival research, are re-combined into new dense compositions in which the controlling gaze of empire is finally left behind, welcoming, brushwork after brushwork, new stories of hope and desire painted on the canvas.



*"Dear Maia,
It is hard to imagine how much work you have to do to duplicate our past.
I think you are starting well.
This is the beginning of my "kwento" (story)."*

Letter from Lola Edna V. Palileo, Kettering, OH
to Maia Cruz Palileo, Brooklyn, NY, December 10, 2006

PROFILES

In the Filipino language, the word *kwento* refers to "story" or "telling a story." Maia Cruz Palileo uses their canvases to tell the stories of their personal relationship with the Philippines, whether by painting close relatives or by reworking the characters of the photographs collected during archival research.

We met Palileo in their Brooklyn studio, where they were working on new bodies of work. "This residency came at the right time," tells Palileo, "the windows create an amazing light, and the space is giving me a chance to work on a larger scale." The studio is indeed surrounded by grandiose-scale paintings, in which the figures are surrounded by intricate configurations recalling the natural environments of the Philippines. The composition is dense, but looser than their previous works. It is an evolution that mirrors Palileo's current approach to painting, born out of a progression in how the artist perceives their own relationship with

practice is the use of collage, a technique through which the artist is able to manipulate the collected archival pictures in new compositions, freeing them from a gaze that froze them in colonial narratives. This practice is deeply informed by what Eve Tuck refers to as shifting from damage-centered research to a desire-based one. In Palileo's composition, there is, of course, an account of a complicated past related to empire, but also the generative process of imagining new stories, possibilities, and hope.

"I was drawn to the people in the pictures and felt the impulse to remove them from this historical framework. I drew figures, plants, and other elements from the archive. Then, I cut out each drawing, creating a new library of cutouts: people, animals, foliage, moons, and mountains. The pieces were then placed in various arrangements and recorded via graphite rubbings. This process allowed for the cutouts to be combined into potentially infinite visual narra-

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the roots of their individual heritage and collective past.

"In the beginning, I was working with a feeling of vengeance, you could see that in the expressions of my characters, I felt like I needed to take care of them. But now there's an evolution. My work is less tied to trying to change the narrative. I rather use the material I have to find different meanings to rework linearity in favor of complexity. I wonder what their message would be to us?"

This newfound energy is rendered on the canvas with a more expansive and gestural painting: if before brushstrokes were dictated by anger, generating a tightness in the painting themselves, now the artist has managed to let go, moving towards expansive brushwork, which is also looser, and more cohesive. "There is also a lot of touching," adds Palileo, "it represents a physical connection with the canvas sustained over time."

Another important element of Palileo's

practices and led to the generation of full-color oil paintings."

While being endlessly transformative, Palileo's body of work always remains in touch with the complex framework within which they operate: when someone researches the roots of a past linked to colonialism, there is an inevitable confrontation with the empire. "Being confronted with those collections meant being in the center of the empire, I was trying to process all those embodied emotions and information," says Palileo while recalling their recent visit to the University of Michigan's Philippines Archive. "When I look at archival imagery, the feeling is both generative and disruptive."

The confrontation with imperial dynamics is evident in the gazes through which the photographs have been created, embodying all the paradigms of otherisation, fascination, and fetishism typical of the Western colonial gaze. However, Palileo is able to





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Days Later, Down River, 2023.
Flash and oil on canvas, 84 x 108 inches.

restore agency in the same characters that were once frozen in a coded reading of Western imperialism, letting them become guardians, as well as guards, of a portal to other chances and futures, never too defined, but open to being written.

"I have those images that are constantly perpetuated into my work. I think about the question of the gaze and of who took these pictures, I look at my personal archive and the archive of friends, and I think about past temporalities, those experiences, and their perception over time, there's something that changes into the works."

Recent paintings such as *Prólogo* (2022), the title referring to the beginning of a novel, embody this narrative of desire and the act of re-working the meanings of old photographs. In the work, two figures play guitars behind a table heaped with flowers. They are surrounded by an entangled mess of liana plants, which envelop the entire painting. The figures have been extrapolated from a

different." In Palileo's oeuvre, we perceive an invitation to walk an endless path of discovery and rediscovery of identity, belonging, and land. This develops into a process of embodiment and transfers but also unfolds in newfound ways of interpretation; where the agency is taken from the gaze of others and restituted to the photographed subjects.

In works such as *Abaniko* (2022), where a female figure is both emerging and receding into dense foliage, located "in a realm where simultaneous possibilities exist yet remain slippery and coded," or *Sabay Sabay* (2022), where fans are able to both conceal, and reveal, there is an acknowledgment from the artist that "things can stay concealed, and it's okay." Leaving the images on the canvas not as clearly rendered, but letting the paint express itself represents a shift from being absorbed in the urgency of expressing conceptual ideas, to freely relying on intuition and composition, being able to let the paint transform itself. *Sabay Sabay* in Ta-

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postcard manufactured by Americans during the early days of the American colonial period in the Philippines. The postcard's original caption was "Burying the Dead," and depicted a baby's funeral, with three women lamenting and holding their guitar, part of "those casual updates scrawled on the back of postcards emphasizing the strange customs, people, and lands of the Filipinos," writes Palileo. In this case, the artist reconfigures the whole narrative to make it a prologue of possibilities entangled between celebration and loss, letting the viewer question what could be the story of those two women beyond any unilateral reading.

Édouard Glissant wrote about the possibilities of remaining "opaque," refusing the fixity of the meanings attributed to us by others in precise space-time frameworks. "There is something about the desire to stay true to the reference I am using, but also to give the opening to change from the referent, and let the painting become something

galog translates to something like moving together, like a dance. Paintings are a space for activation, motion, gathering, and fluctuation. They contain multiple spaces moving together".

If we accept our past, present, and future stories as opaque, fluid, and organic, if we look at them as being non-fixed and non-reductive, but rather complex and entangled in many possibilities and temporalities, then we can enter the realm of Palileo's opus, take their characters' hands, and walk along them, guided, towards new openings.

Always conscious of the weight of the past, subject to the responsibility of our heritage and the imperative of never letting oblivion prevail, we move forward to reshape the past guided by desire. Perhaps it is now possible to represent the unrepresentable: all the stories blocked in the fixity of an altering gaze can be liberated by a newfound generative imagination. Palileo's work, in this sense, is an eye-opener.

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Prólogo, 2022.
Flashe, watercolor, and oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches.

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