

# FRIEZE

## Work in Progress: Maia Cruz Palileo

The Filipinx American artist describes the 'deep cellular shift' they experienced while researching their new paintings for Frieze Los Angeles

BY MAIA CRUZ PALILEO AND LIVIA RUSSELL IN FRIEZE LOS ANGELES, INTERVIEWS | 11 FEB 25



*Maia Cruz Palileo works within the 'darkness' of American governmental archives of photographs, postcards, botanical drawings and artefacts. Created in their Brooklyn studio, Palileo's paintings and sculptures reflect the landscape of the Philippines, their family's migration to the US from Manila and the colonial relationship between the two countries.*

*Ahead of their solo show with David Kordansky Gallery at Frieze Los Angeles, Palileo discusses their recent transformational visit to the Philippines, the 'liberation' they find through collage and how their 'favourite painting is the next painting.'*

**Livia Russell** Can you talk about your new work for Frieze Los Angeles?

**Maia Cruz Palileo** All the new work is going to be paintings. This body of work kicked off around this time [January] last year, when I was in the Philippines. It was a different kind of trip for me because I wasn't just tagging along with my family, which is what I would normally do. My cousin and I were both really interested in visiting the town that my family is from, and I had other interests in this region that is known for some inactive volcanos and spiritual pilgrimages.

I was born in the US, and my parents are from the Philippines, so I've always been connected to it, but I've never lived there. It's different looking



Maia Cruz Palileo in their studio. Courtesy: the artist

at it from over here [the US], through oral histories. All my life, I feel like I've imagined this place, but then on this trip I didn't have to imagine. This is the river they talked about; that's the street my grandma lived on; people know us. I felt like I went into this rabbit hole, and I came out the other side.

## **Imagination, for me, is the thing that fills in all the gaps.**

MAIA CRUZ PALILEO

The places themselves are very lush. As an artist I used to struggle with this, being like, *it's too much, there's too much in it, it's too dense*. It's a double-edged sword: it's lush, but it's also parasitic. The lianas that grow are beautiful, but they're actually killing the trees, or there's crazy overgrowth that feels suffocating. In the work, for me, compositionally, there's something about that constant movement that helps to keep it moving in the space.

**LR** How is your work currently evolving?

**MCP** The figures in my work have slowly started to meld into the landscapes. This seamlessness happened somewhat as a mistake.



Maia Cruz Palileo, *Before The Sun And The Birds*, 2024. Oil on linen, 122 × 152 × 3 cm. Photo: Adam Reich. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery

I start with collage. I have a bin that all the scraps go into. If I see a figure, I'll cut it out, and then I throw it in the bin. When you look inside the bin, it's almost like all those empty spaces get filled up with whatever's underneath it, like vines or water. I started playing around with taking the same image and duplicating it, scrambling the figure with the environment. There's a lot of doubling, echoing and mirroring in the work.

Another line of research has been about the Hudson River School painters and their techniques to dramatize space, showing scale by using a tiny figure and utilizing the Indigenous people of those places. They would even make them up – maybe they didn't even wear those clothes or didn't wear clothes at all. I try to counter that and not have the typical tools to make landscape. It might not have a clear-cut horizon, sky and land. For some of these paintings, you're inside it, instead of looking back at it.

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Maia Cruz Palileo's scrap bin in their studio. Courtesy: the artist

**LR** Are there other sources of inspiration in your new work?

**MCP** The resources that I have been using for this new body of work are a combination of historical archival material – American governmental archive photographs of the colonial period from 1905 to 1920 and images from a botanic school that was established by the US – and my own personal pictures from when I was in the Philippines.

I spent time in the archives at the University of Michigan doing this research. The postcards and most of the materials that come from the archive are very flat and lifeless. It's distressing to be around them. I had a deep cellular shift just from being there in that space for two weeks. The immensity of it is heartbreaking. They even have human remains there.

I've been working with them for so many years that I feel like I've ingested it all. When I'm in the work, it comes out in this way that has been masti-



Collage in Maia Cruz Palileo's studio. Courtesy: the artist

cated and processed. That's what that process feels like. The way that the archive material is amassed is so dark, so there's a darkness to the work.

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MAIA CRUZ PALILEO

The first time I started cutting things out, it felt really liberating. There was a very distinct agenda and narrative to these images. I thought, *well, I'm just literally going to chop this up and rearrange it*. I could move one thing one centimetre, and it was different. It brought in multiplicity, as opposed to the static sense of those archival works.



Collage in Maia Cruz Palileo's studio. Courtesy: the artist

**LR** How does your imagination connect with reality and memory?

**MCP** When I'm in the archives, it's really hard to have imagination because everything's already there for you. The objects in the collection retain an opacity, although you can read between the lines.

In the beginning, I was committed to portraiture as a way to go against what I saw in the archives. I was seeing these anthropological photographs that were really dehumanizing. My reaction to that was noticing that sometimes the people were staring back in this way that was very intense. They had agency. I would pick those people out, and I would paint them. It involves a lot of care to render a person in this way, to pull them out and bring them in.

Imagination, for me, is the thing that fills in all the gaps. Even as a young kid, when I would ask my grandma to tell me stories, she would tell me the same exact stories. Then, when I got older, I was like, what is she not telling me? What's in that empty space that's not being told? Or I would look at old pictures where someone had their finger over the flash, and it's just this big dark spot, and think, what's that? Imagination and memory would fill that in. This still functions in my paintings. Coming from collage into



Maia Cruz Palileo working in their studio. Courtesy: the artist

painting, that's what brings the work to life.

**LR** What's next for you in 2025?

**MCP** A month after Frieze Los Angeles, I have a solo show at David Kor-dansky. I've been making one gigantic body of work this year, and in the show there will be sculptures and ceramics related to the paintings and featuring lots of animals.

I've been invited to collaborate on a project with a scientist at the University of Michigan. She's researching the effects of pesticides in banana plantations in the South of the Philippines. The show will be about fungus; about how fungus is like anarchy. With these pesticides, they're trying to fight two fungi that are killing their crops, meanwhile, by spraying them, they're making everyone around there sick. I'm learning about the colonialism that's happening in these plantations right now. The way that art can open a different channel of research, or bring visibility to this issue, is exciting to me.

**LR** What does time in the studio mean to you?

**MCP** I'm like an office worker; I work nine to five. What I like about painting is that it happens over a long time. The challenge is re-entering it and seeing it through. It goes through all the different phases: it's ugly, it's not



Works in progress in Maia Cruz Palileo's Studio. Courtesy: the artist

working out, it's my problem child, all that stuff. It unfolds in a way that's so addictive. My favourite painting is the next painting. My studio is in the Brooklyn Army Terminal. I've been here since 2012 and I've moved around the building: it's like three blocks long. It feels like home. One day I came in here and the whole studio was hot pink – it's not called Sunset Park for nothing!

*Maia Cruz Palileo is presented by David Kordansky Gallery at Frieze Los Angeles 2025.*



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Maia Cruz Palileo in their studio. Courtesy: the artist