

Maia Cruz Palileo's solo show weaves personal background with colonial history of Philippines

Letha Ch'ien | September 23, 2021 Updated: September 23, 2021, 2:36 pm



Filipino American artist Maia Cruz Palileo
Photo: Ligaiya Romero

The personal is political. But it's still personal.

In "Maia Cruz Palileo: Long Kwento," the New York Filipino American multidisciplinary artist layers family oral histories with archival research on the colonial history of the Philippines. It invites the visitor to explore alongside Palileo the question of what we remember and what we can't — the paradoxical memory of remembering what we don't remember.

The exhibit at the CCA Wattis Institute in San Francisco, curated by Kim Nguyen, is Palileo's first West Coast solo show. On view through Dec. 4, all 11 gouache and oil paintings, five graphite rubbings, and three painted sculptures were created for this show.

The Wattis Institute, a nonprofit contemporary art center, invites artists to imagine work outside the constraints of a commercial gallery setting. Working a year longer than expected due to pandemic delays, Palileo, who uses gender-neutral pronouns, took the opportunity to create larger-scale sculpture and to loosen their brushwork into lush, high-keyed dancing colors. The artwork revisits themes of cultural memory complicated by time, distance and politics, but with new ease and comfort with ambiguity.



Maia Cruz Palileo, "Long Kwento," 2021; installation view, CCA Wattis Institute.

Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery Photo: Impart Photography / Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery Photo: Impart Photography

"Long Kwento," which means "long story" in Tagalog, is inspired by Palileo's grandmother, who would use the phrase to stop herself from going on too long about her stories of the Philippines.

"There was always this tension between me wanting more and her cutting herself off," Palileo, who was born in the United States in 1979, tells *The Chronicle*.

The artworks in the show grow out of Palileo's hunt for those stories. "Big Lolo, Little Lolo," a sculpture of two stacked heads perched on a wicker stool, holds family relics inside. Pop off the top head and discover where Palileo houses the vial their grandmother used to hold her children's umbilical cords.

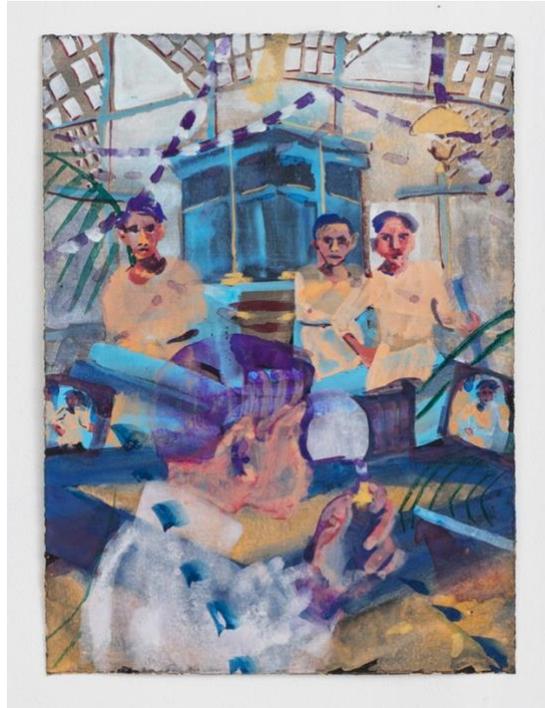
Other figures derive from research Palileo conducted in 2017 at the Newberry Library in Chicago, where several important Filipiniana collections are housed. Palileo found the historical documents "explained everything my family said."

In previous work, Palileo attended to figures found in the archive with fastidious specificity, paying honor with detailed renditions. In the Wattis show, some of the same figures appear in brushwork the artist says is "moving towards a looser, more fluid relationship" with memory and historical stories. Palileo even hides some figures completely under layers of paint, akin to those unnamed and invisible in archives assembled by colonizers rather than the colonized.

In “Isa, Dalawa, Tatlo (1, 2, 3),” a small gouache on paper, archival figures from Palileo’s earlier work reappear. “They’ve become part of my own memory now; they’re embodied,” the artist says. But in these new works, the figures are looser, less distinct, more ambiguous in the haze of memory.



“Big Lolo, Little Lolo,” a sculpture of two stacked heads perched on a wicker stool, with family relics inside, by Maia Cruz Palileo.
Photo: Letha Ch



Maia Cruz Palileo’s “Isa, Dalawa, Tatlo (One, Two, Three),” 2021. Gouache on paper.
Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery

Nguyen sees the power of this show as allowing that irresolution.

“The colonial histories are also personal histories — they intersect,” she says. “This is where this work exists in this intersection. It makes visible those connections; they’re not separate.”

In colonial erasure lies a loss of definition and an instability of surety. Palileo invites the visitor into that space with two larger sculptures. Set in the middle of the gallery facing the hung art, the figures of “Afterward” and “The Love Letter” bear a blank page and open book, respectively. Palileo describes the two figures as surrounded by paintings that possibly “are what they are thinking about or housing some of the stories they’re reading or about to write.”



Maia Cruz Palileo, "Long Kwento," 2021; installation view, CCA Wattis Institute. Foreground sculpture titled "The Love Letter."
Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery

Identity and relationship to the past are left unresolved in Palileo's work, as they are with colonial and diasporic histories. Coming to terms with what Palileo calls "that fractured feeling" can be gloomy, but with warm marigold and papaya walls, artist and curator welcome us into a joyful reclamation and discovery.

Many Americans didn't hear much — if anything — about the Philippine-American War and subsequent U.S. occupation in school, but in "Maia Cruz Palileo: Long Kwento," we can settle in for the open-ended process of learning how to relate to what is both a personal and a shared history.

"Maia Cruz Palileo: Long Kwento": Sculpture, works on paper, paintings. Noon-6 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday. Through Dec. 4. Free. CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 360 Kansas St., S.F. 415-355-9670. wattis.org