Maia Cruz Palileo: Long Kwento
Curated by Kim Nguyen
Organized by Diego Villalobos
CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art
September 14 - December 4, 2021

Maia Cruz Palileo, “Bulaklak (flower),” 2021;
Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery.

Pre-Visit Packet
(High School)
Maia Cruz Palileo is an artist who works in multiple disciplines and media, including paintings, installations, sculptures, and drawings. They are based in Brooklyn, New York. Maia’s family migrated to the US from the Philippines. Themes in Maia's work are migration and the changeable concept of home.

The troubling colonial history between the Philippines and the US appears in Maia’s work. So do the stories they heard from their family about migrating to the US from the Philippines. History and family stories are two forms of narrative. Maia infuses these narratives using both memory and imagination. When stories and memories are subjected to time and constant retelling, the narratives become questionable, bordering the line between fact and fiction.

→ About the history of the Philippines

The history of the American colonization of the Philippines is troubling, complicated, and ongoing. Multiple social and political groups flourished from the 1st millennium in the region that is today the Philippine Republic, across the three major island groups of Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. The first colonial political structure in the region was imposed by the Spanish and lasted from 1565–1898. In 1898 Spain was defeated in the Spanish-American War and the Spain ceded control of the Philippines to the United States, over and against Filipino calls for independence. The United States also used force to maintain control and suppress uprising and attempted revolution. Japan occupied the Philippines from 1942–1945, during World War II. The US Military took power again at this point. In 1946, the Philippines gained formal political independence from the United States via treaty.
However, ongoing repression by the United States is still exercised through economic, political, and cultural means (neocolonialism).

→ View the educational video

→ Artist Statement on Long Kwento

Influenced by the oral history of my family’s arrival in the United States from the Philippines, as well as the colonial relationship between the two countries, my paintings infuse these narratives with memory and care. Figures appear and disappear in lush landscapes, domestic interiors, and colonial structures. Deep blues and reds suggest dark realms where superstition, myth, and history blur. Evoking a hybrid sense of place, they serve as metaphors for migration and assimilation.

In 2017, at Chicago’s Newberry Library, I researched Damián Domingo’s watercolor album, Isabelo De los Reyes’ El Folk-lore Filipino, and the Dean C. Worcester photographic archive. The Worcester archive was commissioned by the US government to document the imperialist project of William McKinley’s “Benevolent Assimilation” and Rudyard Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden.” Together, these sources presented an image of Filipinos constructed through native eyes and through the eyes of the other.

I was drawn to the people in the pictures and felt the impulse to remove them from this historical framework. With the detailed and loving care of Domingo’s watercolors in mind, 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 narratives and led to the generation of full color oil paintings.

Improvisation through color and composition mimic the spontaneous manner in which oral histories are recounted. Figures mingle with specters with defiance and gentleness. In contrast to the heavily captioned US photographic archive in which a westerner claims a singular narrative about a group of people, these paintings seek to resist such categorization, with agency, without explanations or captions.

→ What is an archive?

An archive is a collection of documents or records. Formally, these are usually historical documents or records providing information about a place, institution, or group of people. Often archives are also defined as public collections. Examples of this type of archive are Damián Domingo’s (known as the “father of Philippine painting”) album of watercolor paintings and the collection of photographs by Dean C. Worcester (U.S. Secretary of the Interior during the American colonization of the Philippines) that Maia studied in a public library in Chicago, and drew from to create the
works in the current exhibition at the Wattis. For more examples of public archives, you might look at all of the different kinds just in the state of California that are represented by the website Online Archive of California. Family photo albums, boxes of old letters kept in a box in the closet, or notes and plans saved by members of a club or organization are also examples of archives, but these may be private.
Discussion Questions

Before you visit…
1. Have you ever visited a public archive? What kind of collections or private archives do you or your friends and family keep?

2. Have histories of migration and/or colonialism played a role in your own life or that of your family? If not, why not?

During your visit…
3. What is the experience of the show like for you? What do you notice, feel drawn to, what questions arise?

4. What do you notice about the treatment of figures/subjects/environment in the works?

5. What do you feel? Can you identify elements of the show in general, or of specific works, that make you feel this way?

After your visit…
6. If you were asked to make a work of art in response to research in an archive, where would you begin? What archive would you choose? What about if you were asked to make a work that is an archive?

7. What histories do you carry within you? These can be personal, familial, political, or something else. Do these histories feel complicated and entwined, or clear and resolved?