The United States is commonly thought of as a nation of immigrants, but it’s also a nation of colonizers. Brooklyn-based artist, Maia Cruz Palileo, explores this tension in *Long Kwento*, a haunting exhibition of paintings and sculptures at the California College of the Arts’ Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art. Palileo’s focus is on American colonization of the Philippines, which lasted from 1898 to 1946, and the intergenerational ramifications.

Palileo introduces viewers to her themes and styles with an assortment of 11 small paintings and drawings. *Amerikans*, 2017 looks like the kind of graphite rubbing one performs over a coin, the figures vaguely discernable as they emerge from the white paper. The ghost-like presence of colonizers speaks to their presence in Pilipino history; a haunting memory of the past.
Palileo’s largest paintings are multi-panel meditations. They demand that the viewer stop and observe closely. Rendered in a pallet that’s at once explosive and layered, each canvas vibrates with life; scenes of lush vegetation populated with people and animals. Some figures are immediately apparent: others only become visible the longer one looks, like specters surfacing from beneath the depths of heavy brushstrokes or floating on the surface like slick oil.

*Wind Water Stone*, 2020, is exemplary of this style. Figures crouch and stand in the foreground; others flit through the jungle scene behind them. Are these spirits ancestral memories, the victims of colonization fading into the past before their time, or both? The title *Long Kwento* translates roughly to “long story” and Palileo’s work demands the lingering engagement required to unpack a narrative that is, like her paintings, several layers deep.

There are the single-panel scenes of figures in motion. *Sayaw*, 2020, the most exciting, shows two men engaged in what looks like a duel or dance. The title word often refers to a demonstration of weapon proficiency in Filipino martial arts. Here, motion is as arresting as the stillness in Palileo’s other paintings, the juxtaposition orchestrating a dynamic viewing experience.

The sculptures introduce yet another dynamic. Carved from wood and colored with milk paint, their presence is a counterweight to the spectral figures in the paintings; their stillness an anchor to the motion. The two larger characters are roughly life-sized, with slightly exaggerated proportions giving them a folksy quality. One is a young man reading a book, looking cautiously to one side; the other a woman writing or drawing on a piece of paper, staring straight ahead sternly. The sculptures’ placement in the open gallery and the direction of their gazes introduce another dynamic quality to the exhibition. The third and smallest statue is a riff on the bust, in which a second head emerges from the subject’s head, tugging at themes of ancestry and cerebral colonization.

In a poetic essay, the show’s curator, Kim Nguyen, writes, “So much of the diasporic existence is cobbling together a sense of self ... Erasure occurs through submersion, when the ocean of dominant histories and narratives swallows those of our skin.”
Palileo reverses this process of submersion. By building layers of oil paint through which figures from the past slowly emerge, rather than vanish, and by using sculptures to hold definitive space, Palileo forces a reckoning with history that’s dynamic, depending on where, and how, you look at it.

Long Kwento is on view Wednesday through Saturday, noon to 6 p.m., through December 4. Proof of vaccination is required.

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Last month, roughly 60 members of the San Francisco Southeast Alliance (SFSEA)

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The San Francisco County Transportation Authority (SFCTA) has extended its timeline to

Dogpatch Neighborhood Association to Elect Officers
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