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By

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B.F.A., Northern Illinois University, 1988

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the Graduate
School of the University of Colorado in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Department of Fine Arts, Creative Art

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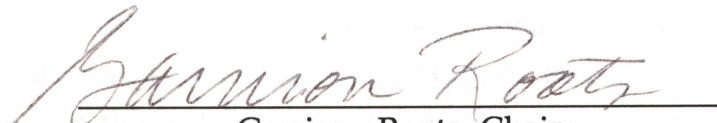
This Thesis for the Master of Fine Arts Degree by

Eric Guzman Manabat

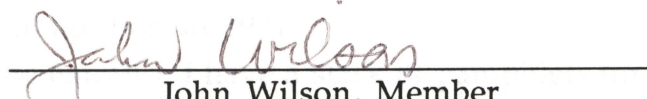
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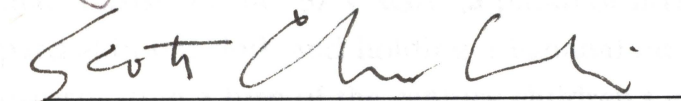
Department of Fine Arts

by


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John Wilson, Member


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Date _____

I've discovered that my own personal experience is the richest source for my art and politics. After years of uncritically digesting convoluted high art theory it's turned out that the basis has been with me all the time, if only I paid attention to it. Part of my willingness finally to accept myself is due in part to the recognition and validation of women artists and artists of color. It's given me the confidence and courage to explore that part of me which I've denied since immigrating to the USA. I also owe my strategy of art making to the pioneering efforts of feminist art practice--deconstructing "the self" to reveal the cultural and historical forces that shape us, with the intention to raise consciousness, empower and get people to think and act. This is the goal of my art--to create an understandable and effective political art grounded in personal experience.

My thesis exhibit, entitled FOB, is the beginning of this process. In this autobiographical work I use my experience as a Filipino immigrant in the USA to talk about issues of duality and displacement, imperialism and nationalism, and struggle and justice. The installation consists of an entrance and four different sections set up chronologically, beginning with my family's immigration in 1971.

In the entrance I have a stack of pamphlets for the viewer to take that consists of the "SAVAGE" (a photo of myself dressed in a leopard-skin loincloth and holding a banana) on one side and an excerpt from a turn of the century children's geography book which describes Filipinos as "savages" and "unambitious" on the other side. I felt this to be an appropriate introduction to the show since it was written during the time of the American conquest. It is an example of the American world-view at the time and it ties in nicely with the first section.

The first section is an abstract representation of the inside of an airplane. People also experience it as a rib cage, the inside of an animal. It implies that one is going to the gut. The hallway is cylindrical, composed of white circular stripes over a black ground, and is intended to disorient the viewer by its visual vibration. This perceptual gimmick references my immigrant experience of riding on an airplane and puking, then landing in a foreign country in the 70's. I have lately tried to make my art goofy and fun for the viewer in order to overcome art's intimidating and elitist nature. I want people to laugh and let down their guard, so I can get my message across without people discounting me as a Communist. This section juxtaposes two sets of photo-murals. On one side is my family (Mom, Vicki, Ditas, Ike and I) taken from our passports and on the other side directly facing us are US military heroes (Theodore Roosevelt, a Kansas cavalry soldier, Frederick Funston, Douglas MacArthur and Ronald Reagan) from the Philippine-American War, World War II and the "covert war". My intention in this room is to present equally the American and Filipino cultural influences in my life. Thus the two sets of photo-murals are presented in the same scale with the same impact, despite their obvious differences in "rank." It is also intended to portray the dual nature of the Filipino consciousness, a consciousness that always has the American culture in the background like a hangover. The audio tape loop "How to Speak Tagalog" which plays in the hallway also adds to the atmosphere of intrusive America. Such nonsensical statements in this language tape like "Where is the baseball park?" and "I want to buy an apple" further comments on our lack of understanding of different cultures. The tape has another significance for me. I am currently trying to relearn Tagalog. I understand it but I don't speak it. After 20 years of refusing to speak like a foreigner I find it ironic that the tape I am learning from was developed for US government personnel going to the Philippines.

The second section is my 1970's culture shock room. Here a 10' Ronald McDonald surrounded by "Dating Game" oversized

bathtub flowers greets you as you enter America. Push his button to turn him on and he patronizingly says that if you speak with an accent he can help you, which implies that if you speak with an accent you're just an ignorant immigrant. I felt that way growing up in virtually all-white Green Bay, WI. I wanted to be more American than the Americans. Any kind of difference was quickly eliminated. As a result of my desire to discard my Filipino identity I arrogantly believed my family was backward. I was ashamed to bring my parents to PTA meetings because of the way they spoke and was embarrassed whenever they spoke Tagalog in restaurants or bowling alleys. No one ever directly said anything to us if we spoke our language, they just gave us dirty looks.

The third section is a replica of the "traditional" Filipino home in the United States. It is a personal celebration of the immigrant home that mismatched everything. Growing up in a home that tried to "correctly" combine American and Filipino kitsch was bizarre, and you sure as hell didn't want your friends to come over. You could say "bad taste" was a thing of the 70's, but today's Filipino immigrant homes are just as gaudy...and just as wonderful. This room provides the context for the screening of my video which addresses through parody and satire Asian and Third World stereotypes such as the "savage", the "martial arts mystic", and the "subservient ricksha puller." It also further articulates the imperialist nature of Philippine-American relations by integrating historical footage of US political and military intervention. The video has a purposely goofy nature to it. It is my way of playing up to the notion of "Third World primitive artist."

The fourth and final room is the "jungle room", composed of camouflage painted on the walls, burlap and shipping pallets for the floor. The environment is treacherous. You have to watch your step. You have to crouch and zig zag your way through as if you were in a jungle. This section is the political component of the exhibit and represents the present situation in my life. It also makes a connection to the first room

by restating in contemporary terms the historical and perpetual US military presence in the Philippines. In this room I present an emotional argument drawn from personal experience against US military intervention in the Philippines.

As you walk through you first encounter a stereotypical photo of the "COMMIE" (myself dressed up in camouflage uniform, arrogantly brandishing a machine gun and smoking a "Cuban" cigar). The next photo you encounter is an image of Kansas volunteers in a trench fighting in the Philippine-American War. Above the photo is text which reads: "It's called Smiles. For every guy there's a woman under the table." The next object you encounter is a 13' Uncle Sam on stilts (derived from my childhood wonder at these elongated figures in Fourth of July parades) holding a bunch of bananas. The bananas reference the term "Banana Republic" and its implication--"piss-poor Third World country that's too backward to govern itself", and it also ties into my video in the previous room. In the video a caveman originally has the bananas but he loses them as you hear a voice-over which comments on American benevolence in the Philippines. Later you see "the ricksha" running with them in a shopping cart, as if they had been passed to him and he's trying to get away. In the jungle room Uncle Sam ends up with them, as if he grabbed them and is now pointing "We're Number One!"

On either side of Uncle Sam are two photo-murals of my sisters Vicki and Ditas with the words "GOOK" and "SLOPE" sprayed over their faces. This part has to do with an experience I had with a friend who joined the Marines and was stationed in the Philippines. The text above Ditas reads: "Right after high school my friend Bill joined the Marines. He ended up stationed at Subic Bay Naval Base in the Philippines." The text above Vicki reads: "After two years he came home. All he talked about was how much pussy he got." This episode in my life hurt me. As Bill talked about his "girlfriends" I knew that he was talking about Filipinos as a people. We were gooks and slopes, nothing more. These women he bragged about were my sisters. For this

section I wanted my audience to experience that same feeling of debasement. In the first "airplane" room I introduced my sisters so we first got to know them as people with names and birth dates. Then in this room they're scarred with derogatory names and dehumanized. I wanted to show that the "entertainment industry" which serves the bases involves real human beings with families, histories and souls.

Turning the corner the next photograph we see depicts a man wearing a skull mask and holding up a sign that reads "Dismantle US Military Bases!" Under the photograph the text reads: "The first guy who smiles has to buy the table a drink," which completes the previous statement that was started above the photo-mural of Kansas soldiers. The act of selling one's body functions here as the overall metaphor for the relationship between the First and the Third World, where the exploitation of one's land and resources inevitably leads to the rape of one's humanity. Following this image is a photo-mural of a boy who was tortured and killed by military intelligence units. Stenciled obscurely over this image are the words "CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY."

The final part of this room is a hallway which consists of four photo-murals of first and second generation Filipino-Americans. Accompanying the photos are excerpts from interviews that I conducted with them last summer in Chicago. It turns out that these interviews are the most important process in making my art. Through them I have been able to connect with members of the Filipino-American community and serve as a channel for their experiences. Listening to them is an act of affirmation for my culture.

The first photo you encounter is of the youth group at the Philippine United Church of Christ. They explain that a "fob" is a Filipino "fresh off the boat" that speaks with an accent and acts weird. I find it funny that these children think they're better than their brothers and sisters from the Philippines. It's ironic that they perceive fobs as Filipinos who foolishly try too hard to

act like Americans. They themselves try as hard if not harder to act like "Americans."

The second photo is of my sister Ditas and her son Christopher. She talks about raising her children in two different cultures--how she tries to preserve our Filipino culture at the same time that she tries to make it known to her children that they are also American. The thing that struck me about her testimony was that she was not afraid of discrimination or racism for her children growing up in homogeneous suburban America. She comments with much enthusiasm about the changing demographics of the country, "We have lots of Filipino neighbors. There's lots of Filipinos here. They're everywhere."

The third photo is of Evelyn and Ernie Silverio. Here they represent the pro-bases position which is also the majority opinion among Filipinos in the States. I see myself a few years back in the Silverios as I listen to them. They feel a great deal of gratitude and indebtedness to the US. No matter what the US does it can't be criticized. The Silverio's viewpoint is understandable, but it also is an example of our "colonial hangover." We believe that we can't survive without the US. We're content with our second class status because without the United States' help we would be in a worse position, so it's better to remain faithful and obedient and not make waves.

The fourth photo is of my Uncle Mariano who is also a human rights activist. I only found out that he was an activist after interviewing other like-minded people who referred me to him. For the past twenty years I had no idea what he did, even though he only lived twenty minutes from me. Anong, as he is called, represents the anti-bases position. In his argument he draws a comparison between the Philippines and a child who has to cut the ties to its parents in order to grow up and become self-sufficient and independent. He says that if we don't let go of our American parents we will never mature and trust ourselves and our potential. He believes the retention of the bases are an

excuse for us to hang onto our colonial past, that we are afraid to grow up.

The last part of the show is a book which summarizes the whole theme of the show. In it I juxtapose events in my life with historical events of US military intervention starting with the Philippine-American War of 1898-1901 to the current US supported counter-insurgency war in the Philippine countryside. The first page of the book is a news photo of protesters being gassed at an anti-bases demonstration in the Philippines. In the background is Ronald McDonald, smiling and waving "Hi!" Ronald is the symbol that represents my transformation from assimilation to disillusionment.

I wanted to direct my work to the emotions, not the intellect. I've discovered that citing facts and statistics will turn people off pretty quickly. Changing the heart will result in a better activist. You need compassion first, then intellectual arguments second. I also wanted to end the exhibit in a hopeful way. I didn't want Filipinos to be pitied. There are millions of them who courageously struggle day to day at the grass roots.

This exhibit was intended to convey confusion and conflicting loyalties. Part of it was accomplished through the various elements of presentation--exaggerated perspectives, unstable floors, dark humor and cartoon environments. Many of the images come from my childhood experiences in the US (huge and scary Ronald McDonalds and Uncle Sams commanded awe and respect). I grew up believing in the ideals of this country but discovered that many of them were ignored when it came to the interests of "national security." This installation portrayed an immigrant experience of indoctrination-assimilation-internalization, which evolved into disillusionment-political awareness-empowerment. Its purpose was to reveal the effects of colonialism and imperialism on the consciousness of both the colonizer and the colonized. In this way I hoped to facilitate understanding of "Third World" nations and cultures both here and abroad.

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

Eric Guzman Manabat

has submitted this written thesis
as a supplement to the creative thesis

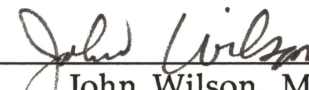
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which are in the permanent possession of the
University of Colorado and recorded with the

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