

artasiapacific |

YEEI-LANN · HUANG YONG PING · SINGAPORE BIENNALE
SEAN RASPET · ZHANG PEILI

ISSUE 117 MAR/APR 2020





Martha Atienza *Equation of State*

Known for its white-sand beaches and marine life, Bantayan Island in Cebu, like many coastal settlements, has borne the brunt of the global climate crisis. Rising sea levels have led to significant coastal land erosion, while warmer sea-surface temperatures contribute to increasingly destructive storms such as Typhoon Yolanda, which battered Bantayan in 2013. “Equation of State,” Martha Atienza’s third solo exhibition at Silverlens, revolved around Bantayan, documenting the impact of climate change on her hometown through video works and kinetic installations.

At the center of the first exhibition space was *Equation of State II – Rhizophora stylosa* (all works 2019), an installation of 24 mangrove shrubs tied to a mechanized pulley system that lifts the plants in and out of a steel-and-plywood trough, mimicking the rhythm of the tide. Common in the Philippines, mangroves have been reintroduced to coastal areas as a natural means to absorb greenhouse gases, protect against floods, and provide habitats for aquatic animals. Atienza’s intricate installation features natural elements including water, aquatic plants, and a variety of live fish, but also utilizes human-made materials to generate the mangrove’s artificial movement, such as microcontrollers, water pumps, and filters, signifying human interference into organic processes.

The coastal plant was also the inspiration for *Equation*

of State I – Rhizophora stylosa. In a separate, dimly lit room, a single, spotlit mangrove shrub hung above a rectangular pool of water. As the light hit the water’s surface, it reflected onto the gallery wall the ripples produced by water droplets from the mangrove’s stalk. Like a holy icon, the plant was positioned high above one’s natural gaze, while the rhythmic reverberations of dripping water created a mesmerizing atmosphere. However, the extended caption on the wall belied the elevated stature of the mangrove as implied in the work—the species displayed is not appropriate for planting in certain habitats, especially those with sea grass. The installation thus points to the limits of environmental management, which may have unintended detrimental ripple effects.

“Equation of State” closed with two video installations foregrounding humanity’s struggle against climate change. The 79-minute, three-channel *Tarong 11°16’12.0”N 123°45’23.4”E 2019-08-06 Tue 2:27 PM PST 1.50 Meters High Tide, Kaongkod 11°16’12.0”N 123°45’23.4”E 2019-08-03 Sat 12:14 PM PST 2.03 Meters High Tide* shows three fishermen bobbing in the undulating sea, alternately sinking and rising above water. The camera mirrors their movements above and below the surface, the shot oscillating between sink or swim. This work alludes to the difficulties faced by these coastal-dwelling fisherfolk, whose livelihoods—and lives—are threatened by flooding

and changes to the marine ecology. Yet the work also connotes human stoicism in the face of environmental crisis and existential threat.

In the adjacent room nearest to the gallery’s exit, Atienza’s *Panangatan 11°09’53.3”N 123°42’40.5”E, 2019-10-24 Thu 6:42 AM PST 1.29 Meters High Tide, 2019-10-12 Sat 10:26 AM PST 1.40 Meters High Tide* was projected on a large wall. At 307 minutes long, the video consists of a black-and-white, horizontal tracking shot of the island’s coast. Traversing the physical line where human and ocean meet, the artwork records sea walls, houses, churches, and other infrastructure in various states of abandonment and decay, and the sea water closing in on land. Rendering the boundary between land and sea in black and white, the video heightens the sense of proximity and contrast between human and nature.

Atienza’s documentation of Bantayan revealed more than just the visible effects of climate change on an island. A personal and poetic endeavor, “Equation of State” also probed universal themes of human resilience and ingenuity, and provided insight into how humans and the environment adjust to one another. The continuous juxtaposition of artificial and natural elements in the show inspired viewers to think about the inextricable connection between humanity and the fragile planet we call home: we have to make do with what we have.

JOHN ALEXIS BALAGUER

MARTHA ATIENZA, *Tarong*
11°16’12.0”N 123°45’23.4”E 2019-08-06 Tue 2:27 PM PST 1.50 Meters High Tide, Kaongkod 11°16’12.0”N 123°45’23.4”E 2019-08-03 Sat 12:14 PM PST 2.03 Meters High Tide, 2019, still from three-channel HD video installation: 79 min. Courtesy the artist and Silverlens Gallery, Manila.