

Notes

Cultural heritage is inextricably linked to historical narratives. Our shared stories of the experience of life can either instill conflict and discrimination, or serve as impetus for peace, social justice, and equal rights among various sectors of society. History thus is not only a series of records that affirms the experiences and conditions of the truths of events—it is also an endless assessment of the memorialization of a human archetypal narrative.

A significant concern in the reconstruction of a record of human actions is the practical application of historiography in contemporary life. Recently, there has been public interest over contested historical narratives around the world, initiating polarizing discourses on unresolved issues such including colonialism, human rights abuses, harassment of indigenous communities, environmental protection, and attacks on minorities. Through these chronicles of communal pain, communities might learn to recognize and combat the warning signs. In reality, contentious histories are not separate from tragic events, therefore preserving the memory of a community's darkest moments has universal resonance as they concern and affect the human condition.

In 2021, the Museum Collective in Manila, in collaboration with Load na Dito Projects, Sa Sa Art Projects in Phnom Penh, and curatorial collaborator Gerome Soriano, invited contemporary artists from the Philippines and Cambodia to respond to the ever-present discussion on collective historiography and memorialization of tragic histories in both countries. In an exhibition in Phnom Penh spanning over thirty multimedia works, photographs, prints, installation, video, and organizational and archival material, Filipino artists Jo Tanierla, Eunice Sanchez, and Jel Suarez, all born after Martial Law and EDSA Revolution, and Cambodian artists Choulay Mech, Kanha Hul, and Song Seakleng, all born after the Khmer Rouge, present contemporary artistic visualizations following their collaborative explorations and negotiations towards understanding and responding to traumatic histories.

By listening to the voices on the peripheries, stories of the lost, mistreated, and abused begin to surface as everyday occurrences. Tanierla's drawings of items from a fictitious museum reclaim imagination as artifact, their alleged legacies laden with human action. Imagination and material evidence begin to affirm one other, however, as photo-documentations of labor movements from the 1980s to the 2010s from the Philippine Labor Movement Archive (PLMA), as well as a banner from labor protests, are displayed as both immediate and archival material, representing the exhibition space as an active force. Mech's photographic images of a surreal entity over the fields of Cambodia's Mondulkiri province pays tribute to the unnamed and persecuted. The dark essence makes itself known over the hallowed land, a site of folk spirituality, yet marred by land dispute concerns, maltreatment of indigenous populations, war, and genocide.

In the face of contested histories, one is asked to find groundedness and locate oneself among the multitude of truths and untruths. Sanchez's cyanotype prints on flour sacks and paper depicting the outlines of foraged natural elements evoke an attempt at preserving the ephemeral

and safeguarding the fragile. Informed by the artist's questioning of truths in the history taught vis-a-vis the history learned, Sanchez carefully reconciles her own origins of birth—an Ilocano born on the anniversary of the declaration of Martial Law—and her inescapable associations with contested histories. In this ambiguity of identity, nostalgic images of children at play, and the careful threading of cloth as albums become modes of exercising sensitivity. Similarly, Hul's works demonstrate a conscientious gesture in a series of mixed media paintings on fabrics and paper utilizing portrait images of Cambodian voter IDs from 1993--the year the UN attempted to rehabilitate the war-torn country by holding free and fair elections that led to a new constitution. The artist's careful invocation of identities from this critical time connotes a personal tribute to its modern reformers.

History permeates the present moment and manifests as causes and conditions of daily life. Suarez and Song's split-screen video shows a collection of public market scenes from Suarez's local market in Bacolod city and Song's images of Phnom Penh Central Market, reflecting the inherent commonalities of quotidian life despite being from two completely different countries. The remarkable similarity in sights, sounds, and energies in each center of economy and survival evokes a poetic sensibility about the shared everyday, everywhere. The artists' diligent communication of their personal daily life events, as well as documentation and presentation, become an act of participation in the active production of a personal history that transcends time and geography.

By revitalizing the exhibition with newer works, and re-presenting it in the NCCA Gallery, the site becomes a potential space for the resolution of tragic histories, all while sharing the wisdom of the past and its present reverberations. **Visualizing Histories** highlights an opportunity for contemporary art to inform the current conversation in Southeast Asia on traumatic memories, contested histories, and historiography. Offering a critical moment for discourse on the issues that define or divide a society, the exhibition, its artists, collaborators, and the community they represent, raise recommendations for the archetypal human narrative. When we accept the unresolved issues from the past, we become one step closer to a reconciled future.

John Alexis Balaguer, July 2023

Notes

The essay below was first published in 2021 for the exhibition catalogue of Visualizing Histories as initially exhibited at SaSa Art Projects in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

The Museum Collective's dedicated exploits in the project Visualizing Histories is defined by several materialized motivations. Inspired to explore the complexities of history which demonstrate itself in persistent socio-political, cultural, and economic contexts in contemporary Philippines and Cambodia, museum and cultural workers Ana Tamula and Sofia Santiago through a grant by the Asian Cultural Council, acceded to the daunting task of gathering emerging visual and multi-disciplinary artists to construe the syntaxes of memory, trauma, and Southeast Asia.

The project, which was fleshed out organically and intuitively in the span of months of distant communications and collaborations with the artists, consultants, and institutions including Manila-based Load na Dito and Sa Sa Art Projects in Phnom Penh, in the pandemic reality of both sites, explored how art and history museums and institutions record and represent difficult moments including historical wars, genocides, and inter-generational traumas in national-historical contexts, and how artists from the region might reflect on their consciousness of these events.

Artists from the Philippines Jo Tanierla, Eunice Sanchez, and Jel Suarez, and Khmer artists Choulay Mech, Kanha Hul, and Seakleng Song each addressed their shared realities with the disposition of forthrightness, much that the values of listening to the community, reflecting and responding, and finding where individual lives inter-weave became authentic modes of artistic production, research, and creative engagement, but also of sympathetic understanding and empowered action--that in contemporary art making, one might not only recollect but respond courageously to stories of the past whose holds are yet firm in the present.

One of the greater tasks of safe-keeping historical, cultural, and social consciousness in the modalities of art making and artistic organization involves a potential for more compassionate outlooks that extend the demands of art managerial, aesthetic, or curatorial practice to the realm of possibility and care. The response of Visualizing Histories to this call in the contemporary moment opens new visions, not only in ways of seeing what we should not forget, but in imagining a future one hopes could be remembered.

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