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The New York Times

What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries Right Now

by Aruna D'Souza | February 24,2022

Want to see new art this weekend? Start in Chinatown with Rafael Sánchez and Kathleen White's found materials from the AIDS crisis to Sept. 11. Then head to Chelsea to check out the Kitchen's four-artist exhibition, which takes up its hallways, offices and exhibition spaces. And don't miss Stephanie Syjuco's haunting manipulations of archival photos.

CHELSEA

Stephanie Syjuco

Through March 12. Ryan Lee Gallery, 515 West 26th Street, Manhattan. 212-397-0742; ryanleegallery.com.



A view of "Stephanie Syjuco: Latent Images," which emerged from the artist's research stint at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. Courtesy of Ryan Lee Gallery, New York

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Syjuco's "Better America ..." A gloved hand holds a slide, labeled to indicate that it was part of a mass-produced teaching curriculum from the 1920s and '30s.
Stephanie Syjuco and Ryan Lee Gallery

While the country debates what histories are taught in schools and how, the Oakland-based artist Stephanie Syjuco dives into the archives to reveal how history is made in the first place. Her current exhibition, "Latent Images," emerged from a research stint at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. There she rooted through boxes and files, taking pictures of documents and photographs that someone, at some point, believed were important enough to keep in a national repository. She blew up her snapshots, printed them out in segments on letter-size paper, reassembled them, rephotographed the stitched-together image, and then reprinted them at a high quality. We can see Syjuco's manipulations clearly in the final photographs — the tape that holds the parts together, the artist's gloved hand as she moves a paper around on her desk.

Some of these are presented on a low table in "Partial Anachival Index (Working Platform)," from 2021. Here, the viewer can, at a remove, experience this sifting through the past. Others, like "Better America" (2021) are framed on the wall. Here we see a gloved hand holding a slide, labeled to indicate that it was part of a mass-produced teaching curriculum from the 1920s and 1930s, meant to instill in students nationalist and anti-socialist values. The film itself has become illegible over time — an abstraction of colored stripes. The metaphor is perfect: History is, far from being a given, a messy process of creating a whole from the fragmentary and sometimes unreadable past.

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OCULA

Stephanie Syjuco on Rendering the Nation

by Stephanie Bailey | January 12, 2022

For Stephanie Syjuco, the politics of an image lies in its rendering. Whether in a studio, via computer effects, or through the gesture of an artist's framing.

This politics is brought into focus in Syjuco's site-specific installation at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, *Double Vision* (15 January–December 2022), which takes up the 50-foot-wide and 15-foot-tall walls that form the entrance to the institution's 19th-century collection of American art.



Stephanie Syjuco. Courtesy the artist.



Work in progress by Stephanie Syjuco (2021) (detail). Vinyl with dye sublimation prints on aluminium. Courtesy the artist.

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Critically engaging with the mythologies surrounding the American West expressed in the museum's collection, Syjuco has digitally altered landscapes by Albert Bierstadt and printed them on vinyl wall panels and fabrics. One landscape, printed with mirrored sections of Bierstadt's chromolithograph print *The Storm in the Rocky Mountains* (ca. 1868), is dotted with square images of hands photographed from paintings in the museum.



Work in progress by Stephanie Syjuco (2021) (detail). Vinyl with dye sublimation prints on aluminium. Courtesy the artist.

Bierstadt's *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* (1869) was printed on green panels for the second mural, which acts as the mount for studio photographs of bronze sculptures by Frederic Remington with the tools of their capture—colour correction cards, identification tags, measuring devices, even a museum worker's hand—in full view. The exposure of studio techniques is central to Syjuco's practice, which explores the construction of images—and in turn, identity—through a critique of historical representation.



Stephanie Syjuco, *Set-up (The Broncho Buster)* (2021). Inkjet print. Courtesy the artist, Ryan Lee Gallery, and Catharine Clark Gallery.

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Taking centre stage in *The Visible Invisible*, the artist's recent solo exhibition at the Blaffer Art Museum (17 October 2020–10 January 2021), were large room-scale 'still life' installations arranged on platforms.

Neutral Calibration Studies (Ornament + Crime) (2016) is a striking amalgam of objects and images, including an image of a Swedish Playboy model used to engineer the JPEG and a picture of Black Panther Huey P. Newton in a traditional Filipino rattan chair.



Stephanie Syjuco, *Neutral Calibration Studies (Ornament + Crime)* (2016) (detail). Wooden platform, neutral grey seamless backdrop paper, digital adhesive prints on lasercut wooden props, dye-sublimation digital prints on fabric, items purchased on eBay and craigslist, photographic prints, artificial plants, live plants, neutral calibrated grey paint. 25.4 x 50.8 x 20.32 cm. Courtesy the artist.

Likewise, *Dodge and Burn (Visible Storage)* (2019) brings together images referencing America's colonialist expansion in the Philippines with those of contemporary racial politics. Amid enlarged stock photos of tropical fruits, printouts of Philippine antiquities from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's online database, and a photograph of Japanese American women in a WWII internment camp, is an enlarged inverted colour calibration chart.

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As with the installation's title, which refers to Photoshop functions for lightening or darkening images, the colour chart's presence, used to ensure monitors are displaying colour correctly, extends Syjuco's reading of empire's colour-coded narrative.



Stephanie Syjuco, *Dodge and Burn (Visible Storage)* (2019) (detail). Wooden platform, seamless paper, digital adhesive prints on wood, dye-sublimation prints on fabric, mixed media. Exhibition view: Rogue States, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (6 September–29 December 2019). Courtesy Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. Photo: Dusty Kessler.

Syjuco hand-stitched the 19th-century colonial-era American dress and traditional 19th-century Filipinx 'terno' dress worn by the mannequins constructed from the same fabrics used for the backdrop of AV production. The former with green screen fabric used to create visual effects in film post-production, and the latter with the grey-and-white chequered pattern indicating a transparent layer in Photoshop.

Both materials appear throughout Syjuco's work, including the 'Chromakey Aftermath' series (2017): monochromatic photographic studio compositions presenting props of protest constructed from green fabric.

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Stephanie Syjuco, *Chromakey Aftermath 1 (Flags, Sticks, and Barriers)* (2017). 60.96 x 91.44 cm. Archival pigment print, framed. Courtesy the artist.

In *Chromakey Aftermath (Standard Bearers)* (2019), two people in a green room cloaked in green fabric sit with their backs to the camera, each wielding a green flag. The image was among Syjuco's works shown on rotation in Low Visibility at Walker Art Center (5 February–21 November 2021), a group show confronting an era of surveillance with artists like Hito Steyerl and Walid Raad.

Also shown was the archival pigment print *Total Transparency Filter (Portrait of N)* (2017). A college-educated 'Dreamer'—an individual protected by DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), an immigration policy repeatedly threatened under the Trump administration—sits shrouded in sheer fabric printed in grey-and-white check.



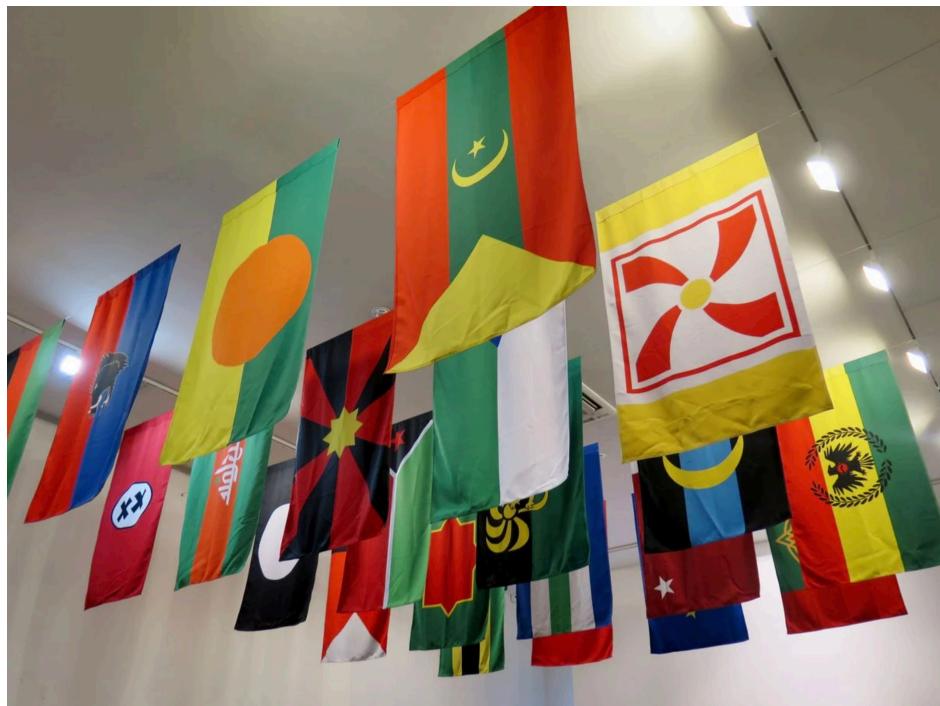
Stephanie Syjuco, *Total Transparency Filter (Portrait of N)* (2017). Archival pigment print. 101.6 x 76.2 cm framed. Courtesy the artist.

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Total Transparency Filter (Portrait of N) was first exhibited in *CITIZENS*, a 2017 solo at RYAN LEE Gallery, where Syjuco will open a solo exhibition on 6 January 2021, alongside a black curtain printed with 'I AM AN AMERICAN'. The statement references the sign a Japanese shopkeeper hung outside his Oakland store before forcible internment in the U.S. after the bombing of Pearl Harbour in December 1941.

Stories like these drive Syjuco's conflation of rendering and representation with the nature of national identity as a construction. A mix of reality and fiction that Syjuco pointed to in *Rogue States*, an installation of 22 flags hung from the ceiling of the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis in 2019, the majority based on those seen in Hollywood movies like *Die Hard 2* (1990), to represent fictional, non-Western enemy states.



Stephanie Syjuco, *Chromakey Aftermath 1 (Flags, Sticks, and Barriers)* (2017). 60.96 x 91.44 cm. Archival pigment print, framed. Courtesy the artist.

What is often omitted in such narratives are the colonial entanglements that define the United States, which drives the references to the Philippines in Syjuco's work more than her Philippine heritage.

In this conversation, Syjuco walks us through her latest installation, and reflects on how her practice has evolved in recent years to focus on the lived implications of nationalism in America.

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Stephanie Syjuco, *Neutral Calibration Studies (Ornament + Crime)* (2016) (detail). Wooden platform, neutral grey seamless backdrop paper, digital adhesive prints on lasercut wooden props, dye-sublimation digital prints on fabric, items purchased on eBay and craigslist, photographic prints, artificial plants, live plants, neutral calibrated grey paint. 25.4 x 50.8 x 20.32 cm. Courtesy the artist.

SB: For your installation at the Amon Carter, you engaged with the museum's collection to create two digitally altered landscapes. That must have been an interesting space to enter, given the museum's collection and the invitation to reflect on it critically.

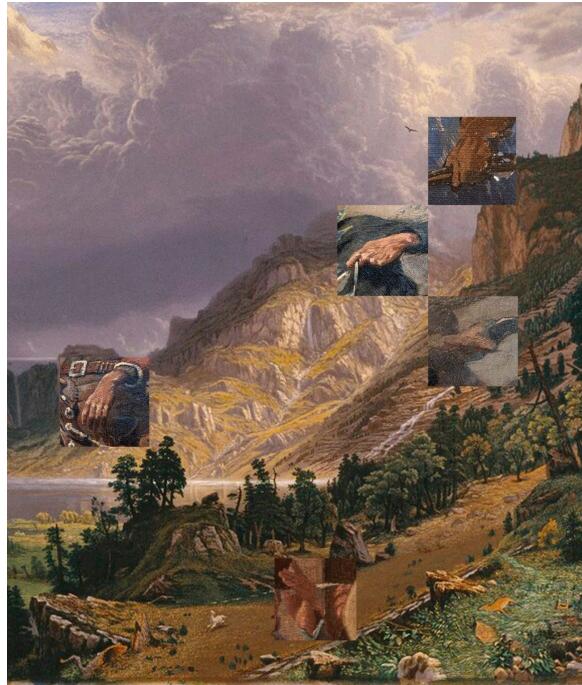
SS: I was very excited to do a project in Texas at the museum, because unlike an invitation from the Smithsonian or a larger national museum, the Amon Carter is regional and has quite a specific focus in its collection. It is a museum of American art from a Texas perspective.

Then, there was the fact that they invited an Asian-American artist based in the West Coast to come and respond to their collection.

The Carter is so an interesting because it is in many ways a direct reflection of the original donor who started the museum with their selection of American paintings and sculptures focusing on notions of the American West.

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Work in progress by Stephanie Syjuco (2021) (detail). Vinyl with dye sublimation prints on aluminium. Courtesy the artist.

Many of the works express ideas of moving westward, expansionism, and manifest destiny from the perspective of settlers and European migrants. Its founding core collection is very ‘cowboys and Indians’.

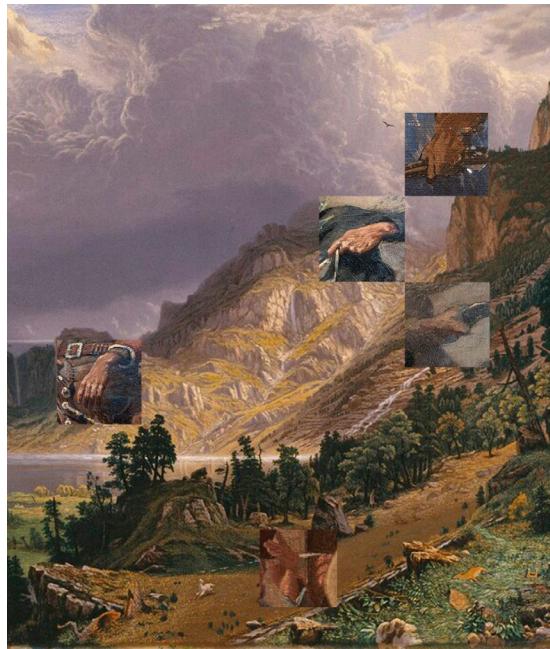
I was invited by the museum’s photo curator Kristen Gaylord to see what resonated with me from the collection. We originally thought I could respond to issues of immigration or colonialism in similar ways that I’ve worked with the Smithsonian’s collection in the past, which is to mine their national archives and photographs.

“As an artist, part of the challenge of working on new commissions is also about understanding the limits of an institution.”

When I got to the Carter, I became fascinated by their construction of American history by using artworks that romanticise the West, particularly paintings and sculptures by Frederic Remington and Albert Bierstadt. I chose them because of their pivotal position in American art history and how their works have become almost ubiquitous in the dominant visual narrative of ‘the West’.

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Work in progress by Stephanie Syjuco (2021) (detail). Vinyl with dye sublimation prints on aluminium. Courtesy the artist.

SBCould you walk us through the installation?

SS: The installation will be on display for one year in the main entryway that connects two of the major museum wings. It's the passage you first walk through to get to the main historical collection. For me, the project is an entry point to start a conversation that could tweak the way a visitor would see the rest of the museum.

There are two walls that face each other, each covered with large-scale digital wall vinyl murals of altered landscapes, to form a type of 'backdrop' for sets of photographs placed on top of them.

One wall reproduces a landscape in a chroma key green hue, and the other is a full-colour landscape with image panels of men's hands excerpted from paintings within the Carter's American West collection. The whole project is meant to reframe existing artworks in the Amon Carter through the critical lens of staging and construction.



Stephanie Syjuco, *Manhandled 14* (2021).
Dye sublimation print on aluminium.
Courtesy the artist, Ryan Lee Gallery, and
Catharine Clark Gallery.

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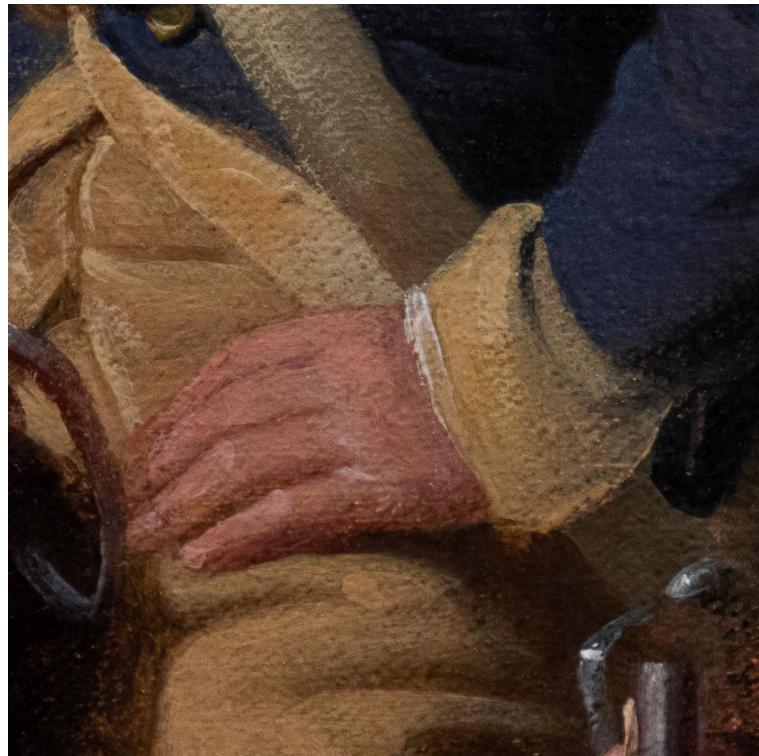
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The landscapes included as the backdrop in each mural are by Alfred Bierstadt, a German immigrant whose landscape paintings influenced the way the rest of the United States viewed the West.

One thing I struggled with was how to utilise and work with images from the museum collection that depicted Native Americans. I needed to figure out how to critically reframe their depictions, and differently from how Bierstadt did, which was as part of an idyllic, stylised landscape, like non-actors in the construction of the country.

Rather than erasing or removing their presence, I decided to heavily pixelate the original images so that the figures are difficult to identify, like what you'd see in contemporary anti-surveillance images—a kind of deflection of the gaze.

I wanted to frustrate the ability for an audience to consume the images as they were originally shown because the way these people were depicted was inaccurate and heavily constructed from a settler perspective.



Stephanie Syjuco, *Manhandled 15* (2021). Dye sublimation print on aluminium.
Courtesy the artist, Ryan Lee Gallery, and Catharine Clark Gallery.

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SB: That idea of deflection recalls the 'Applicant Photos (Migrants)' series (2013–2017): passport-style black and white images in which heads are covered in patterned fabrics.

While one could construe these to be tribal patterns, they also look like the razzle-dazzle camouflage on World War II war ships. It's a kind of warding off through confusion; like anti-facial recognition technology.

SS: It's also a lot like an earlier work I made this year, Headshots (Witnesses) (2021), which heavily pixelates faces of Filipinos on display at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis. It was a different way of shielding, without the hands.

By using contemporary digital pixelation, I wanted to bring forward a contemporary criticality, and not relegate these images to an ethnographic, white historical gaze.

History museums in particular tend to frame things as being resolutely in the past, which suggests that we have either learned from it, or we have moved beyond it. I wanted to introduce a level of contemporary obfuscation to bring these problematic histories of vision and depiction into the present.

SB: The idea of bringing history into the present comes through in the mural where you have a landscape printed on chroma key fabric.

That green-screen colour speaks to this act of rendering, which is amplified in the augmented landscape covered in men's hands that extends the metaphor. You've turned classic landscapes into a Photoshop interface.

SS: Yes, the 'man hands' come directly from the historical painting and sculpture collection on display, which falls directly into the timeframe of an overt Manifest Destiny in the United States. I walked through the galleries with my camera focusing on the hands specifically as a kind of metaphor for manipulation and action.

There's a mix of hands performing different actions, like holding onto reins or grabbing things; pulling, pointing, or signing. It's also not lost on me that these are men's hands in the paintings, and the men are the focus of how the land and peoples are 'tamed.'

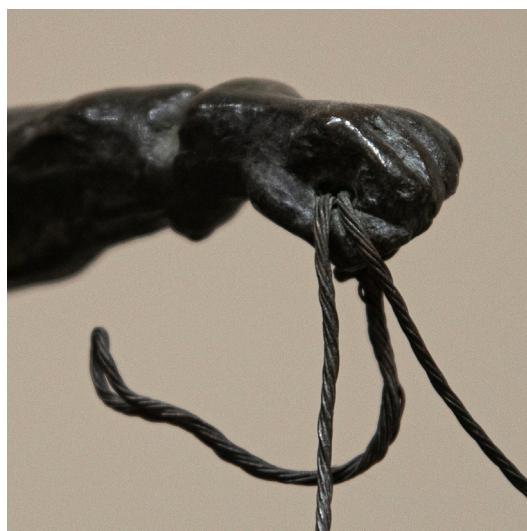


Stephanie Syjuco, *Manhandled 14* (2021).
Dye sublimation print on aluminium.
Courtesy the artist, Ryan Lee Gallery, and
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I was also thinking about not only the physical aspects of this taming of the West through brute force or overwhelming strength, but also governmental and institutional legislation. Documents, contracts, and laws determine who this land belongs to, which nullifies the rights of indigenous peoples inhabiting it.



Stephanie Syjuco, *Manhandled 21* (2021). Dye sublimation print on aluminium.
Courtesy the artist, Ryan Lee Gallery, and Catharine Clark Gallery.

SB: The images framed by the green mural are of bronze sculptures by Remington, which you staged and photographed, right?

SS: There are four large-scale photographs of bronze Remington sculptures that feature hands coming into the frame, and these were carefully arranged and 'stage managed' to get the final images.

For me they are a way to challenge the iconography of the cowboy as a heroic figure that tamed the West, which is full of so many romantic notions, not just in Texas but across the United States.

SB: Which is so problematic, isn't it? I once reviewed a show pinned to the movie *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), a classic Western, and the basic premise was the question of whether America was built by the criminal or the lawmaker.

It seems a paradox or a self-fulfilling prophecy that the cowboy, who represents this rebellious lone wolf, becomes the embodiment of the nation, which presupposes this idea of rebelling against the state, the law, or acting in a way that does not conform to it.

SS: That sounds about right!

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Stephanie Syjuco, *Set-up (The Broncho Buster)* (2021). Inkjet print. Courtesy the artist, Ryan Lee Gallery, and Catharine Clark Gallery.

SB: With that in mind, I look at your pictures of the hands grasping Remington's sculptures, and it makes me think about colonial theft.

SS: Well maybe in a reverse sense, because all the hands coming in belong to museum staff. The one with the green gloves is a professional museum preparator's.

I was using the tools and apparatus of the museum, as well as working with the staff, to pose with these objects, because I wanted to show the very human stage management and care that happens in the construction of the story of the American West.

When you go into the museum's vaults and see the artworks and how they're stored, protected, and cared for, I see that care as a metaphor for the stewardship of the narrative of the founding of America.

The 'story' as told through these artworks and exhibition displays is completely cared for and managed. And that storyline is problematic as well as potentially promising if critically examined and challenged.

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Stephanie Syjuco, *Neutral Calibration Studies (Ornament + Crime)* (2016) (detail). Wooden platform, neutral grey seamless backdrop paper, digital adhesive prints on laser-cut wooden props, dye-sublimation digital prints on fabric, items purchased on eBay and craigslist, photographic prints, artificial plants, live plants, neutral calibrated grey paint. 25.4 x 50.8 x 20.32 cm.

Courtesy the artist.

In contrast, I have experience working with other museums and organisations for whom compromise or rapid conceptual pivoting had to take place for things to move forward. There are indeed many hands needed to make a new body of work about—and within—an institution, and they are all important in the process.

SB: I love how you extend the past into the present through idea of tactility and ambiguous acts of care. Could talk about how you worked with staff and how they felt about being involved in the stagings you set up? It feels like you were workshopping with the museum itself.

SS: I feel really lucky because it takes a certain kind of curator to work with an artist to produce a new body of work based on a museum's existing collection. It's different from just pulling in or curating an existing artwork.

You have to be flexible and able to negotiate together. Working with the staff and curator at the Amon Carter was really wonderful and I felt really supported in trying out ideas and brainstorming possibilities.

They were really open, and I feel honoured to have been invited to do so. We could have chosen several different pathways and themes for the exhibition, and it was an exciting and productive way to work.

As an artist, part of the challenge of working on new commissions is also about understanding the limits of an institution. The Amon Carter is aware of how its initial collection reflects its founder's perspective, but is open to critical engagement with it. I don't think they would have invited me to work with them if they weren't open.

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SB: That makes me think about Langston Hughes's poem 'Freedom's Plow', in which he talks about all the hands that made America.

By bringing the staff into the frame, you bring up their assumed role as instruments of an institution: individuals who often get pulled into a macro-critique of nationalism or state power that they may or may not align with.

SS: Yes, they also have to wrestle with the legacy of what they were given. The things we inherit are still things we can choose to engage with or accept. I like to be optimistic in thinking that even an institution devoted to a very particular story has the capacity and willingness to shift perspective.

SB: With that in mind, the presence of hands in this installation connects with the images you created for *Block Out the Sun* (2021). For this project, you spent time in the archives of the Missouri Historical Society and the St. Louis Public Library ahead of your exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis.

You photographed archival images of the notorious Philippine Exhibit at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, which presented a human exhibit of over 1,000 Filipinos from at least ten different ethnic groups from the Philippines, with your hand covering each figure.

SS: That's a really good connection, because to work on-site, whether it is with the archives at the Smithsonian or at the Amon Carter, you're confronted with historical images that are unchangeable.

You literally cannot remove anything from the archive no matter how problematic it is, because the whole point of it is to provide a record, a stewardship of knowledge at that time, and from that particular perspective.

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Given the fact that these archival ethnographic photographs are unmoveable, how can you speak back? I was really struggling with what's possible, and the only thing I could think of was something quite personal, which was touching the photos, which is really kind of bad.

The work was at once a protective gesture, an attempt to connect a hundred years later. By physically blocking the gaze with my hands, which is a pretty blunt instrument. I am blocking the consumption of images of Filipinx being posed in ways meant to be 'instructive' to the white American audience.

Their display really was less about educating the public and more about constructing a mythology of progress and evolution, with the photo's brown subjects obviously inhabiting the lower end of that spectrum, and the colonial American forces on the higher end.

SB: It's interesting you say it's bad to touch the photographs. It reminded me of Renzo Martens' film *White Cube* (2020), when Matthieu Kassaiama visited New York for an exhibition at the SculptureCenter.

While on a tour of the Met, he came across artefacts stolen from the Congo, and he began speaking to them and gesturing towards touching them. While he knew he couldn't touch these objects, he was also claiming his right to touch them.

SS: In my case, the photographs I was touching weren't considered important enough to wrap up since they were copies of the originals. They were just all there in the file folders, so I just kind of did it.

Then again, I've been thinking a lot about the claim to ownership of images and their appropriation, which speaks to the gesture of directly touching the photographs.



Stephanie Syjuco, *Block Out the Sun* (2019). Photographic intervention in the archives of the Missouri Historical Society. Thirty pigment prints mounted on aluminium. 20.32 x 25.4 cm. Courtesy the artist.

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Stephanie Syjuco, *Block Out the Sun* (2019). Photographic intervention in the archives of the Missouri Historical Society. Thirty pigment prints mounted on aluminium. 20.32 x 25.4 cm. Courtesy the artist.

In terms of my Amon Carter show, I would say 80 to 90 percent of what I've produced is a form of critical appropriation and repositioning. There are a couple interventions that include my hands or other people's hands, but ultimately, I'm excerpting and layering. I'm trying to use what is there to re-represent an institutionalised story of America and show how vastly constructed it's been.

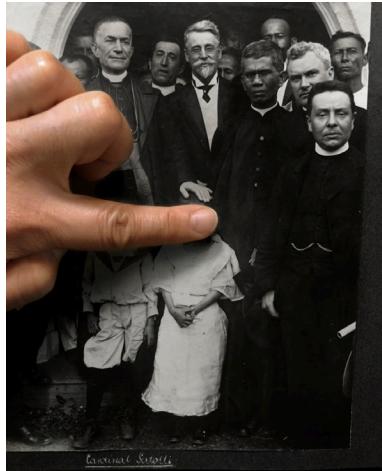
"I like to be optimistic in thinking that even an institution devoted to a very particular story has the capacity and willingness to shift perspective."

The framing of this story is supposed to be viewed in one way, but if you spin it, you can look at it through the lens of those who did not create the narrative. Then you get a completely different story, which is less about heroism and triumphant expansion, but of the stage managing and construction of empire.

That fascinates me so much as an immigrant American, because to a certain extent, I love the scripted promise of America. But like everyone else, I also inherit its failings and I'm constantly amazed at how excluded I am from its discourse and idea of itself.

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Stephanie Syjuco, *Block Out the Sun* (2019). Photographic intervention in the archives of the Missouri Historical Society. Thirty pigment prints mounted on aluminium. 20.32 x 25.4 cm.¹

Courtesy the artist.



Stephanie Syjuco, *CITIZEN (Portrait of B)* (2017). Archival digital print. 76.2 x 101.6. Courtesy the artist.

SB: By entering the museum's collection and unfolding it, you also insert yourself into the constructions they represent, including the story of America, as you say.

SS: The story of America has always interested me because it's one of self-invention, and I don't mean that in a positive way. I mean the entire narrative is constructed in a very exclusionary way as to who founded the country, who makes up the country, and who's an ideal citizen.

I'm from California, which is where I grew up, though I'm originally from the Philippines and my family migrated here. I went through the whole naturalisation and citizenship process to become a U.S. citizen.

Interestingly, there's also a long history between the Philippines and the United States in terms of empire, colonialism, and economics, so these two countries have been linked for much longer than most people realise.

This history is such an unknown part of the American imagination, it's been completely forgotten. I look at this wilful forgetfulness as an extension of American manifest destiny.

Beyond westward expansion, the United States subscribed to the notion that it could keep expanding overseas, which then fed into its foray with Philippine colonialism and becoming an American empire. It was like, 'We can do this, we did this already with North America, and it makes perfect sense.'

I also know historically there was a lot of pushback, so it wasn't necessarily a done deal in terms of American politics to expand globally, but it was the logic of manifest destiny that justified U.S. expansion into Hawaii, the Philippines, Cuba, and the many other places we euphemistically called and still call 'territories' or 'protectorates'.

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These events of early American Manifest Destiny and then overseas expansion are linked, but what's interesting is that in the American imagination, they are seen as very separate moments.

"The framing of this story is supposed to be viewed in one way, but if you spin it, you can look at it through the lens of those who did not create the narrative."

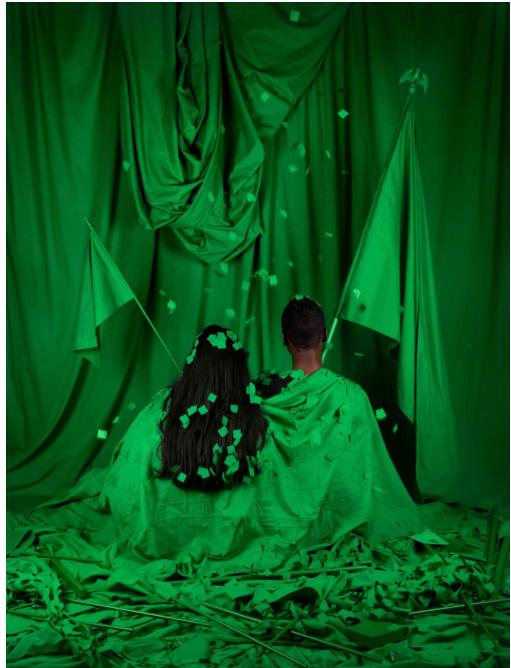
At the Amon Carter, I think a big question in the back of some people's minds must be, 'how do all these cowboy paintings and sculptures relate to a female Asian-American artist who hails from the Philippines?' And my answer is that, in many ways, it's a direct line and legacy as to why I am here as a colonial descendant. I really want to challenge the siloing of concerns and foreground the history of U.S. imperialism.

SB: What comes to mind is A. Sivanandan's famous response to racism in Britain: 'We're here because you were there.'

SS: I think that's the point of Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny never denied it was doing what it was doing. In my understanding, it was conceived almost as a divine right.

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Stephanie Syjuco, *Chromakey Aftermath (Standard Bearers)* (2017). Archival pigment print, framed.
101.6c x 76.2 cm. Courtesy the artist.

SB: Bringing back these histories of U.S. imperialism returns to the point you made about how you are an American citizen and a part of you believes in that promise. And yet that question of citizenship—who is an American—is so contested.

It goes back to that Langston Hughes poem, if all these hands made America, then why can't all these hands be it?

SS: I think that's a beautiful thing to pull in, because to tell you the truth, I'm not sure how much the average viewer thinks about that idea, of what America is and what it can be, and it would be nice to keep putting in this notion of possibility, and not just indictment in those discussions.

It's really difficult to encourage people to feel like there's still a way out of where the country finds itself now.



Stephanie Syjuco, *Chromakey Aftermath 2 (Flags, Sticks, and Barriers)* (2017).
Archival pigment print, framed. 60.96 x 91.44 cm. Courtesy the artist.

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Of course, these ideas of nationhood are really complicated, and people have really different perspectives about history and how we should move forward. That's why I'm curious about the reception, or rather its multiple perceptions, of my work at the Amon Carter.

Texas has recently enacted some of the most restrictive anti-abortion laws in the country, as well as laws governing how history and race is taught in its schools. The title of one of my works—a landscape mural covered in hands—is called Manhandled, which relates it directly to a patriarchal system that was set up along with white supremacy.

I'm curious how different viewers are going to think about the work or even how people will phrase or not phrase certain things. I think the exhibition title Double Vision is really apt, as it hints at both complexity and also the potential for obfuscation or shifting perspective.



Stephanie Syjuco, *Chromakey Aftermath 1 & 2 (Flags, Sticks, and Barriers)* (2017). Archival pigment print, framed. 60.96 x 91.44 cm each. Exhibition view: Illingworth Kerr Gallery, Calgary (16 September–20 November 2021). Photo: Chelsea Yang-Smith.

SB: That relates to the way speech is policed and controlled and the assumptions often made in liberal democracies that restrictions on speech only happen elsewhere.

SS: I hadn't thought about that in the larger global context, but it makes perfect sense because if you're not a part of an originating power structure—which here in the U.S. is essentially white supremacy and patriarchy—you will get further if you use metaphor.

"Given the fact that these archival ethnographic photographs are unmovable, how can you speak back?"

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But I would also say that this way of speaking around a subject has been the case for artists of colour in the United States for a very long time, especially if you want to get into places that have traditionally excluded you. You have to be a little shady in terms of how you position things.

That said, I have noticed in the last five years in the United States, as an artist and academic, there is more freedom now to use terms like white supremacy outright. That's actually really new. Ten years ago, you wouldn't be able to say that phrase so openly, like somehow it didn't exist.



Stephanie Syjuco, 'Become...' and 'Chromakey Aftermath' series (2021). Exhibition view: Illingworth Kerr Gallery, Calgary (16 September–20 November 2021). Photo: Chelsea Yang-Smith.

SB: I suppose this also feeds into your curiosity about how your work will be received in Texas, given the legacy of that state and the work you do around white supremacy?

SS: It's fascinating, right? I hope we won't have to use euphemisms when discussing this work and that it can be visually critical on multiple levels.

SB: But does that also create a discursive framework around the project, in that it becomes open to interpretation?

SS: Hopefully, which is interesting too. I wonder what it will be like for those who aren't familiar with the rest of my work or previous projects, if those hidden things that could inform a reading of this installation—like a knowledge of how I use sampling or obfuscation in my work—might come through.

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Left to right: Stephanie Syjuco, 'Become...' and 'Chromakey Aftermath' series (2021). Exhibition view: Illingworth Kerr Gallery, Calgary (16 September–20 November 2021). Photo: Chelsea Yang-Smith.

SB: I wonder if you could answer that. Where would you place this project in the trajectory of your practice and what has it revealed to you?

SS: It's a good question. About four years ago, after the previous presidential election in the United States, I really pivoted my work. Prior to that I was dealing a lot with general issues of culture and globalisation, really broad notions of East and West.

Then, it shifted. I realised that I had neglected to interrogate my own spaces, my own realities of—say being an American and what it means to be an American at this very point in time—and the ways I had been indoctrinated by certain institutional narratives.

I'm implicated in the construction of these narratives as much as they have shaped me, and though I can attempt to critique them I have also, to a certain extent, normalised their power structures.

I think my Amon Carter show ties directly with a previous project called *The Visible Invisible*, which I did in 2018. I made a set of green chroma key dresses in the style of historical American garments using the same fabric used for backdrops in AV production.

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Stephanie Syjuco, *The Visible Invisible* (2018) (detail). Exhibition view: *Disrupting Craft: 2018 Renwick Invitational*, Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington D.C. (9 November 2018–5 May 2019). Courtesy the artist.

I learned 19th-century sewing techniques to hand sew these dresses and went through the whole complicated process of making these garments from scratch because I wanted to be implicated in the literal construction of this American iconography.

It all relates to this focus I have on looking at the construction of the United States and the construction of America's identity of itself, which includes its colonial histories that are so often ignored.



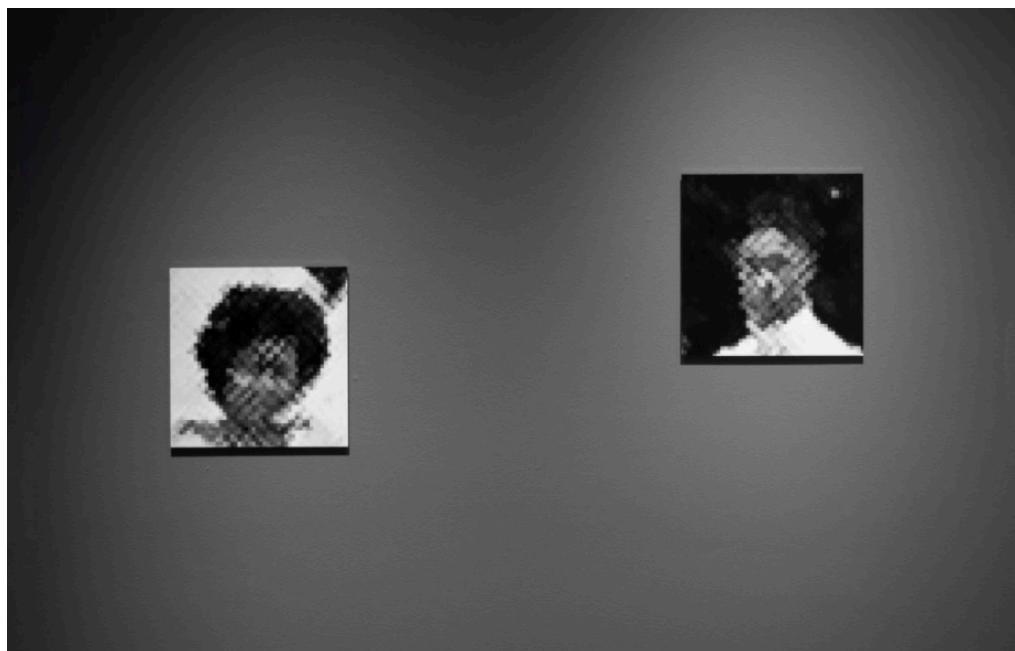
Stephanie Syjuco, *The Visible Invisible* (2018) (detail). Exhibition view: *Disrupting Craft: 2018 Renwick Invitational*, Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington D.C. (9 November 2018–5 May 2019). Courtesy the artist.

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SB: In *Dodge and Burn* that really comes through, because you have those dresses staged in a studio set, with the grey and white chequered Adobe filter backdrop and chromakey fabric, which circles back to the Carter installation as a rendering of a country.

SS: Exactly. It's about manipulation—whether of the image or the people, which is what produces a history or a story. But unfortunately, I think that in the United States, there's a very limited space for how artists of colour are allowed to make work with these concerns in mind.



Stephanie Syjuco, *Headshots (Witnesses)* (2021). Exhibition view: Native Resolution, Catherine Clark Gallery, San Francisco (6 March–10 April 2021). Courtesy the artist. Photo: Torin Stephens.

SB: Like the classic problem that artists who are non-white aren't able to speak to the universal.

SS: Exactly. A lot of people expect me to make work about my Filipino identity. But what is interesting is that with projects like *Block Out The Sun* and the work I've done at the Smithsonian, where I specifically hunted for evidence of Filipinos and Filipino Americans in the archive, audiences in the United States assume that the work represents a search for my heritage or identity

But it is absolutely not about that. It's actually about how the empire views its colony through its archive. And that's a totally different from wanting to excavate anything about my personal heritage.

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Stephanie Syjuco, *Professional Rejects* (film box from the studio of H.C. Anderson, circa 1970, National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2007.1.30.6) (2021). Archival pigment inkjet. 106.7 cm x 142.2 cm. Courtesy the artist and Ryan Lee Gallery.

SB: Keeping it to a narrative of your heritage denies the broader story of America that you are confronting. On that note, you have an exhibition at RYAN LEE Gallery, and also mentioned you were participating in an exhibition at the Singapore Art Museum. Could you introduce what you will be showing and how they extend the themes in your work?

SS: My solo show *Latent Images* opened at RYAN LEE Gallery in New York earlier this month and features photos and an installation developed over the course of two years. Both the Amon Carter and RYAN LEE shows deal with museum collections, but quite differently.

For *Latent Images*, I photographed and reprinted documents and images in the archives of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History and am presenting them as large-scale blow-ups that show a fragmented and incomplete story.

In some cases, I print my images as crappy laserjet prints, then tape and tile them together before rephotographing them again at high resolution. So there's this shift in resolution from down to up, up to down, and then back again, in order to point towards how the meaning of an archive is also told, retold, mediated, embellished, and interpreted.

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Stephanie Syjuco, *Professional Rejects* (film box from the studio of H.C. Anderson, circa 1970, National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2007.1.30.6) (2021). Archival pigment inkjet. 106.7 cm x 142.2 cm. Courtesy the artist and Ryan Lee Gallery.

And then in the centre of the gallery is a large platform-based work with loose prints arranged on them like a working table of sorts—a visual display akin to an index of an archive.

I'm also 'bleeding' into the archive as well, and you can see in my prints that my shadow is overlapping some of the documents I'm shooting, and you can see my hand poking around like an interrogator. It reminds me a bit of a forensic activity.

What I've learned from working on both shows is I really love diving deep into institutional collections, rummaging around, and pulling forward alternative readings. It's all so rich and waiting for a re-telling! It feels endless.

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Exhibition view: Stephanie Syjuco, *Latent Images*, RYAN LEE Gallery, New York
(13 January–26 February 2022). Courtesy RYAN LEE Gallery.



Stephanie Syjuco, *Better America (Poverty Lecture, Hillis Better America Lecture Service Lantern Slides, circa 1920s, Division of Cultural History Lantern Slides and Stereographs, National Museum of American History, Archives Center, NMAH.AC.0945)* (2021). Archival pigment inkjet. 119.4 cm x 142.2 cm. Courtesy the artist and Ryan Lee Gallery.

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In Singapore, I'm in conversation with the Singapore Art Museum to participate in a larger exhibition on Southeast Asia photography that is both historical and contemporary.

I really appreciate that as an artist of the Filipinx diaspora, there can be an extension of inclusion in terms of who constitutes Southeast Asia—that because of migration complexities and opportunities, many folks reside outside of its regional boundaries but still have ties that can be traced and connected: the global and the local collapsed by economic and cultural reality.

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ARTFORUM

Stephanie Syjuco

by Jessica Baran

November, 2019

OPENINGS

STEPHANIE SYJUCO

JESSICA BARAN



Opposite page, bottom left:
Stephanie Syjuco, *Rogue States*,
2018, twenty-two dye-sublimation
prints on fabric. Installation view,
Contemporary Art Museum St.
Louis, 2019. Photo: Dusty Kessler.

Opposite page, bottom right:
Stephanie Syjuco, *To the Person*
citing *In Durrow*, 2013,
dye-sublimation print on fabric.
Installation view, Contemporary
Art Museum St. Louis. Photo:
Dusty Kessler.

Below: Stephanie Syjuco, *Block*
Out the Sun (detail), 2019, thirty
ink-jet prints mounted on aluminum,
wooden frames, display case,
each print 8 x 10", overall work
90 x 48 x 36".

Opposite page, top left: Stephanie
Syjuco, *Dodge and Burn (Value*
Storage), 2019, wooden platform,
seamless paper, digital adhesive
prints on wood, dye sublimation
prints on fabric, mixed media.
Installation view, Contemporary
Art Museum St. Louis. Photo:
Dusty Kessler.

Opposite page, top right: Stephanie
Syjuco, *Neutral Calibration Studies*
(*Ornament + Crime*) (detail), 2016,
wooden platform, seamless
paper, digital adhesive prints on
wood, dye sublimation prints on
fabric, items purchased on eBay
and Craigslist, ink-jet prints,
mixed media, found objects, paint.
Installation view, Contemporary
Art Museum St. Louis, 2019.
Photo: Dusty Kessler.

THE 2016 United States presidential election coincided with a surge in threats against vulnerable communities—an FBI report cited a nearly 20 percent increase in hate crimes the following year. The sharpest increases were in incidents related to race, ethnicity, and sexuality. One dominant explanation has narrativized a comfortable, fictional “before” and “after,” a troubling, liberal iteration of “make America great again.” But an alternative analysis is far more convincing: The events of the past few years did not represent a startling shift but rather a doubling down on that Western bedrock: white supremacy.

The San Francisco-based artist Stephanie Syjuco has been setting the stage for the latter argument for more than two decades, tracking the indissociable effects of empire and capitalism with particular attention to the violence underpinning who does and doesn’t get counted as a citizen. “Rogue States,” the largest presentation of her work to date, is currently on view at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. The city’s proximity to Ferguson, Missouri—the site of the 2014 murder of Michael Brown, which catalyzed the Black Lives Matter movement—has ushered in an especially acute reflection on the role of institutions in perpetuating racist ideologies. (The museum itself has been forced to reconsider its position in the wake of protests related to its 2016 Kelley Walker exhibition, which was deemed offensive to the black community.)

In preparation for the show, Syjuco spent two weeks at the Missouri Historical Society researching the 1904 World’s Fair, specifically material related to the Philippine Village, one of the exposition’s “human zoos.” The result is *Block Out the Sun*, 2019, a vitrine containing snapshots of the artist’s hands covering the Filipino subjects in the archival photos. The photos themselves are artlessly earnest and were printed,

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mounted, and displayed flat, occasionally overlapping with other pictures. The presence of Syjucos hands makes the pictures seem tender while also complicating them, not only suggesting an effort to protect the photographed subjects from an external gaze and to disrupt the continued circulation and reproduction of problematic imagery, but also asserting the artist's subjectivity. When Syjucos just three years old, she and her mother emigrated from Manila to the United States, and at age twenty-six she became an American citizen. Her roots are deeply bound up with the complex social relations represented in the archives, and the entanglement helps her bridge the historical divide between her present and the archive's past while destabilizing the objectification of the photographs' subjects.

Other works in the exhibition retain a regional resonance while speaking to larger, national narratives, including that of the United States' involvement with the Philippines. *To the Person Sitting in Darkness*, 2019, takes as its starting point a 1901 essay by Mark Twain, a Saint Louis darling, in which he satirizes the missionary zeal behind the American occupation of the Philippines and proposes a new American flag in which the stars are replaced by crossbones and the white stripes are made black. Syjucos oversize rendering of this flag hangs on a pole in the museum's courtyard. When slack, it feels less irreverent than mournful. One hundred years after Twain's critique, colonial subjugation remains the norm.

Visible from the courtyard where Twain's flag waves is the exhibition's titular work, *Rogue States*,

2018, an assemblage of twenty-two flags hung vertically, United Nations style, from the ceiling of the museum. Their designs are copied from flags in blockbuster American and European movies such as *Die Hard 2* (1990), *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), and *Coming to America* (1988), in which they represent fictional "enemy nations"—i.e., non-Western countries—that threaten or trouble the Western heroes. Although the show's title refers to these imagined nations, Syjucos primary assertion is that the United States itself is a rogue state, buoyed by myths of itself as, for example, a benevolent melting pot, creating equality while boiling away difference. As Syjucos attempts to uncover the pervasiveness of American neocolonialism and to recover the suppressed histories of disempowered others, she also suggests that



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postmodern imagery—which, in its mass proliferation, has supposedly desensitized us to the specific meanings of images and rendered them all equally, emptily significant—can in fact reinforce oppressive narratives. Walker's exhibition at the museum was premised on the image's disconnect from significance or reality, but his work had disturbing and specific meaning for local audiences. Syjuco's work suggests that the postmodernists were gravely wrong (or perhaps that their theses were clouded by a white-supremacist lens): Images can still have a profound impact, not only offending but also endangering certain populations.

The main gallery is consumed by two large-scale works on stagelike wooden platforms. *Dodge and Burn (Visible Storage)*, 2019, and *Neutral Calibration Studies (Ornament + Crime)*, 2016, contain hundreds of objects and printed images thereof, sourced from the internet and turned into props, their backs spray-painted “neutral” gray, laying bare their artificiality. They range from ads for balaclavas to a chair from Sigmund Freud's Vienna study to one of the most common images (of a Swedish model named Lena Söderberg) used to test resolution in the JPEG format, alongside emoji, hand-stitched historical-reenactment costumes, a picture of Black Panther Huey Newton in a traditional Filipino rattan chair, and MAGA-style ball caps. Together, these disparate images and objects form a darkly absurd still life of our culture's psycho-political unconscious, in which riot gear, historic ephemera, and assorted “exotica” can overlap and be

recombined ad infinitum to serve any meme or dominant narrative. The phrase *neutral calibration studies* is from the title of modernist architect Adolf Loos's 1910 screed against “ornamentation” in functional objects; he ties the decorative impulse to a kind of primitivism and “uncivilized” immorality. His examples include Papuan tattoos. “No ornament can any longer be made today by anyone who lives on our cultural level,” he writes. “Freedom from ornament is a sign of spiritual strength.” The maximalist decorative impulse of Syjuco's installations therefore heightens the critique of Western ideologies that the images themselves suggest.

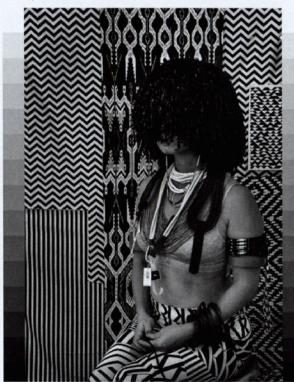
Syjuco wrests deep political resonances from these sources. Photoshop is prevalent—the software's gray-checkered “transparency” layer, color-correction charts, and “dodge and burn” tools make appearances, inserted or applied to underscore the affected object or imagery's artificiality. She reminds us that the digital is *not* intangible but is highly capable of inflicting violence. Protesters or undocumented persons can be identified in widely circulated photographs. Police can digitally remove a suspect's tattoos for a lineup. Syjuco's deft play with such tools is perhaps most successful in her employment of chroma-key green, a color typically used in film and television as a background to be substituted with other imagery, rendering certain objects “invisible” or secondary to an overlaid image. In Syjuco's work, both the Photoshop transparency layer and the chroma-key green function as metaphors for white supremacy, an

Syjuco's disparate images and objects form a darkly absurd still life of our culture's psycho-political unconscious.



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Opposite page, top, From left:
Stephanie Syjuco, *Cargo Cults: Basket Woman*, 2016, ink-jet print, 40 x 30"; *Cargo Cults: Cover-Up*, 2016, ink-jet print, 20 x 16"; *Cargo Cults: Neutral Orchids*, 2016, ink-jet print, 40 x 30". All from the series "Cargo Cults," 2016.

Opposite page, bottom:
Stephanie Syjuco, *Neutral Orchids (Phalaenopsis + Dracena sanderiana)*, 2016, ink-jet print, 32 x 24". From the series "Neutral Orchids," 2016.

Left: Stephanie Syjuco, *Java Bunny*, 2016, ink-jet print, 40 x 30". From the series "Cargo Cults," 2016.

Right: Stephanie Syjuco, *Applicant Photos (Migrants #3) (detail)*, 2013-17, ink-jet print, 20 x 16". From the series "Applicant Photos (Migrants)," 2013-17.

Below: Stephanie Syjuco, *Total Transparency Filter (Portrait of N)*, 2017, ink-jet print, 40 x 30".



"invisible" force that erases or overwhelms aspects of culture by superimposition.

Three photographic series further extend her use of "neutralizing" gray and mechanisms of invisibility. "Cargo Cults" and "Neutral Orchids," both 2016, and "Applicant Photos (Migrants)," 2013-17, are displayed in the gallery adjacent to her large-scale still lifes. In "Cargo Cults," the artist is portrayed dressed in "ethnic" clothing culled from popular franchises such as H&M and Forever 21; razzle-dazzle fabrics form a backdrop of similar patterns into which Syjuco further disappears. These portraits are formally staged to resemble nineteenth-century ethnographic photographs, thereby calling out (and also, arguably, perpetuating) the racism of both the designs and this documentary trope. In the artist's pictures, price tags for the clothing are visible and the images digitally overlaid with gray-scale color charts; both elements challenge viewers who initially read the images as "authentic," i.e., belonging to a certain time, place, and ideological position. "Neutral Orchids" depicts orchids covered in gray paint against a gray background. The paint will eventually kill the orchids; the series functions as an allegory for the violent erasures endemic to cultural assimilation. "Applicant Photos (Migrants)" consists of grids of passport-style black-and-white portraits in which the subject's face is wrapped in the same types of cloth that appear in "Cargo Cults," here forming a disguise that negates the usual identifying function of such images.

A stand-alone piece at one of the exhibition's exit points, *Total Transparency Filter (Portrait of N)*, 2017,

depicts a figure draped in a cloth printed in the Photoshop transparency layer's gray-checkered pattern. The sitter whose identity is obscured is in fact one of Syjuco's former students, an undocumented person whose college education had been funded by the government's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program but whose citizenship is now precarious. The photograph was previously exhibited alongside a larger body of work titled "CITIZENS," 2017, which included additional pictures of individuals from at-risk populations, namely immigrants, refugees, people of color, and LGBTQ persons—all shrouded by the same cloak of white supremacy. Integral to "CITIZENS," but not included in the CAM exhibition, is a twenty-foot black banner with white letters spelling out I AM AN AMERICAN; the banner is gathered at the end to obscure the word *American*. The work was inspired by a 1942 Dorothea Lange photograph that depicts the facade of a business owned by a Japanese American named Tatsuro Matsuda in Oakland, California. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor during World War II, he draped a banner emblazoned with this phrase over his storefront. He was ultimately taken to an internment camp.

Drapery has long figured in classical painting as a means of demonstrating an artist's technical skills and as a marker of a sitter's wealth and importance. Here, in a perverse adaptation of this tradition, Syjuco uses the same device—the cloak, the covering—to honor her subjects, without pretending that her pictorial attention will protect them. Behind the drapery and

filtering masks, the same loaded cultural objects and vilified people remain, stuck in the liminal space of a vitrine, a stage set, a storefront, a "living exhibit." The violence of this precarity is overwhelming. □

"Stephanie Syjuco: Rogue States" is on view at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis through December 29.

JESSICA BARAN IS A WRITER AND THE DIRECTOR OF CURATORIAL AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AT BARRETT BARRERA PROJECTS IN SAINT LOUIS. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)





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SAN FRANCISCO

This haunting virtual trip down Market Street questions our relationship with tech

Stephanie Syjuco's Spectral City "is meant to cast a critical lens on our own lenses"

by Diana Budds

April 12, 2019

To artist Stephanie Syjuco, Market Street is fractured and splintered, jarring and dizzying, disturbing and riveting—physically and metaphorically.

Like many longtime Bay Area residents, Syjuco has witnessed Market Street's ups and downs over the decades. The artist and her family relocated from the Philippines, where she was born, to San Francisco in the late 1970s when she was still a small child. Since then, she's seen a gritty, but culturally vibrant street morph into a dystopia of inequality. Gone are many of the Filipino-Americans who lived in SoMa and the artistic community she once knew. In their place? Tech wealth and abject poverty.

"Market Street has always been this space of flux," Syjuco tells Curbed. "But if you go down it today, it's a total clash of economies to the point where it's more jarring than it has been in previous decades."

Her 13-minute video *Spectral City (A Trip Down Market Street 1906/2018)* channels that perspective, as it guides viewers along Market Street through the lens of Google Earth. In slow motion, you travel down the center of the city's main strip. It's an eerie computer rendering of the city's main artery, with random glitches that show up on screen as ribbons of street that unravel through the frame, hovering amorphous masses, and apparitions of buildings.

"I was trying to figure out a way to show that un-reality," says Syjuco.



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In 1906, the Miles Brothers hitched a black-and-white film camera—cutting edge tech at the time—to a moving cable car on Market Street and started recording. Their 13-minute documentary went on to become one of the most famous films of the early 20th century. It's an invaluable record historians used to understand the architecture, economy, and street life of the mid-aughts and what San Francisco looked like before the Great Quake and fire destroyed much of the city. It's also a tool today's transit advocates use to illustrate what vibrant and safer streets could look like.

Syjuco was struck by the romance and nostalgia for the 1906 film and how different Market Street is now. Riffing on the Miles Brothers' process and sentiment, Syjuco retraced the exact route down Market using what she considers to be one of today's most sophisticated imaging technologies: Google Earth, which uses satellite imagery and computer vision to create a 3D model of the planet.

"I wanted to take the perspective of what technology was seeing," says Syjuco. "This particular piece is meant to cast a critical lens on our own lenses."

She recorded what appeared on her screen and did very little post-production (she used Google Earth Pro v. 7.3.2 and made the film in 2018): A glitchy, distorted, fractured streetscape with random floating masses strewn about. It's like Google Earth captured an image mid-explosion. But most notably to Syjuco, there are no humans, which is a byproduct of Google Earth's imaging algorithm.

"That struck me as a powerful metaphor for how technology can function as a form of erasure of entire groups of people, of communities who inhabit the space," says Syjuco. You kind of create a landscape using the technology—which is useful in many ways—but it has erased the local population. To be blunt about it, I think that's actually how the city is viewed by some of the tech companies and developers—as a kind of palette, an open landscape for putting things upon. It sounds dystopian in certain ways, but as a native and as a local, I don't think it's actually overstating it."

Syjuco's film was part of "Refiguring the Future," a recent exhibition curated by Heather Dewey-Hagborg and Dorothy R. Santos, members of Refresh, a collective of politically engaged artists. Frustrated with visions of the future—in science fiction and real-life technology—that recapitulate dominant culture, economic systems, and social structures, Dewey-Hagborg and Santos assembled works by feminist, queer, de-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-ableist artists that reflect upon today's visions of the future propose more inclusive ones going forward.

"The artists we featured want people to think differently about the infrastructure and systems that a part of every day lives," Santos tells Curbed.

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Today, tech companies are the entities shaping our future and their methods and visions are coming under scrutiny, as their products become more deeply entrenched in society. Congress held hearings on the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Researchers are investigating how tech fuels housing discrimination. *The New York Times* has a new section dedicated to privacy in the digital age. At the root of many of these conversations and inquiries are the dense and thorny issues of ethics, bias, and inequality wrought by tech companies. They're conversations that have a high barrier of entry—even our elected representatives struggle to understand the internet at a basic level—and are difficult to grasp. But Syjuco's film addresses them in an accessible way simply because art often invites questions of, "What the heck is going on?"

"Art has the opportunity to be arresting visually, emotionally, and sonically in a way that books or the media or articles aren't," says Santos. "It's important beyond an emotional and intellectual exercise; art enables a conversation to happen...Stephanie's piece affords us the opportunity to think about our environment."

Syjuco views her video as a reflection and a tool for reflection, and doesn't presuppose any conclusions.

"The hope for the work is to have created these two bookends for Market Street," she says. "If the first one is 1906 and now we're at 2019, and this is what a city looks like, how does that reflect our values? And our vision of what we want in a city?"



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HYPERALLERGIC

Women and Minority Artists Flourish Amid Elite Indulgence at the 2019 Armory Show

Progress is incremental, and art fairs are still hellacious places to appreciate art.

by Zachary Small

March 7, 2019

About halfway through my tour of Armory Show 2019, I encountered the gigantesque and hollowed-out sculpture “Plastic Bags” (2019) by Cameroonian artist Pascale Marthine Tayou. Nearby, an overeager gallery attendant explained to a small crowd of glittering culturati how this work speaks to the pollution seen in developing countries. With the exactitude of the artist’s Wikipedia page, she informed her high-net-worth listeners that Tayou wants to “redefine postcolonial culture and raise questions about globalization and modernity” with his work. It also looks really cool from the inside. Cut to the next scene: a woman shoves her french bulldog underneath the sculpture for the perfect Instagram photo as another woman in leopard print edges into the frame.

Let’s get one thing straight: art fairs are hellacious places to appreciate art. Here, contemporary culture rends artists of their political pretense and unmasks itself as a collection of shiny baubles for the rich, whom galleries pad with puffery and champagne. White carpeting, white walls, white artists, white gallerists, and white collectors: the homogeneity of these annual events is stifling when considering the great artistic potential of amassing hundreds of artworks under one roof. But for the many galleries that depend on art fairs for exposure and sales, fighting against these prevailing market forces is like spitting into the wind: it’s going to hit you smack in the face.

Those criticisms only partially apply to this year’s Armory Show, which feels like an earnest attempt to nudge the market toward diversity. Despite getting off to a rocky start, the fair’s 25th edition hosts an observable uptick in artworks by women and people of color when compared to past years.

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Stephanie Syjuco, "Total Transparency Filter (Portrait of N)" (2017), archival pigment inkjet



Stephanie Syjuco, "Color Checker (Pileup)" (2019), archival pigment print

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Artist Stephanie Syjuco was an easy favorite of the press preview and VIP crowd. Ryan Lee gallery is showing a carefully curated selection of her probing photographs, which riff upon clashing concepts of America and current events. The San Francisco-based Filipino artist specializes in finding the artifice of everyday life and then making that the focus of her work. In her images, couples face their back to the camera, cloaked in green screen outfits. She creates applicant photos with migrants who shroud their faces in cloth. The checkered Photoshop pattern appears on a blanket that's draped across a figure's entire body; it's like a request for anonymity or deletion. My favorite of all is Syjuco's "Color Checker (Pileup)" (2019), which features a still-life of patriotic paraphernalia in the background and a rainbow ColorChecker card thrust into the foreground by the artist's hand. At a moment when the politics of white nationalism threatens to engulf America, it's hard not to see the colorful checker card as a reminder of our nation's diversity. What other colors are hiding behind red, white, and blue?

Another impressive exhibition of political commentary was Federico Solmi's orgiastic nightmare video-painting hybrids, on view at Ronald Feldman Gallery's booth in Pier 94. The Brooklyn-based artist twists reverence for the Founding Fathers into a carnival masque of unwieldy ghouls. There is a childlike essence to the work, which collapses American iconography with a Nickelodeon palette of neon pinks and booger greens. Even his frames burst forth with cartoonish (but pertinent) juxtapositions: skyscrapers and rollercoaster tracks, Mount Rushmore and King Kong, Las Vegas and Washington DC. In one work by Solmi, "The Grand Masquerade" (2018), we see battalions of Native Americans and colonists fighting inside a football stadium.

Grander trends within this year's Armory Show are likely obvious to anyone who's hoofed around galleries in the past few years. Surrealism is back with a vengeance, alongside figuration. Erik Thor Sandberg (on view at the Connersmith gallery's booth in Pier 90) works in a conceptual mode and color palette similar to René Magritte, but ups the existential ante — if you can believe it. For example, one of his works, called "Blossom II" (2017) features a subject peeling back layers of their own personhood, reflecting a variety of different personae from different ages, genders, and races. This type of work definitely indulges in the cliché and bathos of the genre — clocks shorn of its numbers, vacant stares mixed with expressions of abject terror — but it still holds one attention better than the many lackluster conceptual-based works on display.

There's also indication that experimental film is slowly creeping its way into the art market's arms. There were more than a handful of galleries that displayed compelling video work. The best was undoubtedly the small exhibition of José Val del Omar at Galería Max Estrella in Pier 90. The Spanish abstractionist may have died in 1982, but his dreamlike films remain captivating. Filled with amorphous blobs and biological forms, the Grenada-born artist's work is an examination of film as a painterly medi-

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um. Included in the gallery's show are Del Omar's improvised projection equipment, which combine light gels and warped plastic lenses for a spooky effect.

Speaking at a press conference ahead of the Armory Show's opening, executive director Nicole Berry said that she hoped this year's edition would be a "reflection on the enduring promise of New York's cultural and commercial scenes." Emphasis on diversity throughout the fair's curatorial programs is an important indicator of the Armory Show's progress, but it remains to be seen whether or not the market will embrace this better vision of itself.

The 2019 Armory Show continues through March 10 at Piers 90, 92, and 94 near Midtown, Manhattan.

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ARTNEWS

Scenes from the 2019 Armory Show

BY Maximiliano Durón and Katherine McMahon

March 6, 2019



Stephanie Syjuco, *I Am An...*, 2019, in the booth of Ryan Lee, of New York.

This 2019 edition of Armory Show opened to members of the press and VIPs on Wednesday, March 6. The fair, which has brought 198 exhibitors from 33 countries to New York, is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. After a slight hiccup two weeks before the fair, with most of Pier 92 being declared unsafe for usage at the event, the Armory Show opened with the usual fanfare and sales on Piers 90 and 94. Below, a look at some of the work on offer, including Mark Dion in his lemonade stand, an unmissable Sadie Barnette installation at Charlie James Gallery, and a choice 1979 painting by Miriam Schapiro.



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ARTNEWS

Armory Show Survives Pier Pressure, Sees Big Names and Strong Sales on VIP Day

BY The Editors of ARTnews

March 6, 2019

This article includes reporting by Annie Armstrong, Andy Battaglia, John Chiaverina, Maximiliano Durón, Alex Greenberger, and Claire Selvin.

By 11 a.m. the champagne was flowing.

It was bone-achingly cold in New York this morning, when the Armory Show, New York's most established fair for contemporary art, threw open its doors to VIP guests. The bubbly was to celebrate an anniversary—the fair is turning 25 this year—but it could just as well have been a toast to the organizers having narrowly avoided a disaster.

Less than two weeks ago, Armory organizers announced that Pier 92, typically home to about one-third of the show's 200 exhibitors, had structural problems. They said that dealers slated to show there would be relocated south, to Pier 90. As a result, Volta, the sister fair that typically calls that space home, was canceled.

Silver Linings to Pier Problems

Volta ended up finding an alternative now known as Plan B, courtesy of some helpful dealers and collectors, and mercifully, Pier 90 turns out to have a remarkably similar layout to Pier 92: if you were dropped into it without being told about the change of venue, you could be forgiven for not noticing the difference. Armory Show organizers had gotten the job done, and as staffers began scanning VIP cards, many big art world names were already on hand.

There were collectors Beth Rudin DeWoody, Donald and Mera Rubell, and Susan Hort; Museum of Modern Art trustees Glenn Fuhrman and AC Hudgins; curators Hans Ulrich Obrist, Alex Gartenfeld, Cecilia Alemani, Massimiliano Gioni, and Gary Carrion-Murayari; other art-fair machers like Untitled's Manuel Mozo and 1-54's Touria El Glaoui; and, last but not least, actor Paul Rudd (who was on The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon last night, re-creating the music video for the song "King of



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"Wishful Thinking" by Go West).

No one seemed to be complaining about the venue—and it doesn't hurt that Pier 90 is only a couple minutes by foot from Pier 92 (which is still home to a VIP lounge) and Pier 94.

Some visitors even thought the potential debacle was providing some benefits, like Ilya Fridman, whose New York-based Fridman Gallery is showing on Pier 90, in the Focus section (for one-and two-artist booths) of the fair. "We're overwhelmed by the positive response to our presentation" of Nate Lewis works, he said, amid a crowd that included artist and Pioneer Works founder Dustin Yellin. "The fair has gone out of its way to bring foot traffic to this pier, and it's definitely showing. We've had a rush of collectors buying work already, in the first hour." At that point he had sold four pieces from a series by Lewis, all priced between \$8,500 and \$12,500.

Fridman (whose Lower East Side gallery is hosting an "On-Hold Music Dance Party" on Thursday featuring sounds assembled by artist Nina Katchadourian while waiting on the phone on hold) said his good fortune owed in part to a switch in schedule, in which early-access collectors who had been slated to enter at noon could go to Pier 90 an hour earlier, at 11 a.m. "That worked," Fridman said.

Also in the Focus section, which was organized by Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art curator Lauren Haynes, Tif Sigfrids, the director of a namesake gallery in Athens, Georgia, is showing paintings by the young Los Angeles-based artist Becky Kolsrud. "She's interested in painting water and how to make something transparent opaque," Sigfrids said. "She's also painted fingernails a lot." Were her own red fingernails inspired by the red polish in a painting nearby? "They are, yes!" the dealer said. "I never paint my nails, but it seemed weird not to."

Before noon, Sigfrids—participating in the Armory Show for the first time—had sold half of her inventory of Kolsrud paintings, for \$3,600 each. Asked if the move to a different pier was disruptive, she said the show organizers seemed to have smoothed it all out. "It's like Frieze in reverse," said said, referring to last year's unexpected heatwave that made Frieze New York, in a tent on Randall's Island, unbearably hot. "Whereas Frieze had to make it up to dealers afterward, here they had to do all that work up front. And they did a good job, with a special opening and help with storage. I have positive feelings about the fair."

Sales Across the Spectrum

Nothing makes an art dealer feel more positive than sales, of course, and many reported early successes.

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New York's Ryan Lee Gallery sold photographs by Stephanie Syjuco for prices between \$5,000 and \$15,000. Jeffrey Lee, a partner in the gallery, said, "There was incredible buzz in the first few hours."

The Brussels outfit Sorry We're Closed sold sculptures by Eric Croes to private collectors and one foundation for prices between \$4,000 and \$25,000. New York's 303 Gallery reported moving a bunch of paintings—a Sue Williams for \$100,000, a Mary Heilmann for \$95,000, and a Sam Falls for \$65,000, among others. Within an hour of Pier 94's opening, an extroverted Devin Shimoyama painting had sold for \$65,000 in the booth for the Chicago dealer Kavi Gupta. New York's David Benrimon Fine Art, participating in the Armory for the first time, said early in the afternoon that Tom Wesselmann's *Birthday Bouquet (Hat Vase)*, 1988–91, had sold for around \$150,000.

On the high end of the price spectrum, New York's Hollis Taggart gallery parted with Lee Krasner's *Peacock* (1973) for "very near the \$1 million asking price," according to director Ellis Kelleher. Nearby, the London outfit Archeus/Post-Modern had a booth that was completely dark from floor-to-ceiling, amplifying the selection of light-based works in the booth from masters of the form like James Turrell, Larry Bell, and Keith Sonnier. The gallery reported that it had sold a jet-black acrylic painting by Pierre Soulages, *Peinture 202 x 143 cm, 14 août 2015* (2015), for a seven-digit figure. And New York-based Michael Rosenfeld Gallery had sold a nearly 8-foot-tall red canvas by Frank Bowling for around \$500,000 in the fair's first hour.

For more darkness and light, the global giant Pace Gallery said it had sold a number of LED-panel works for \$48,000 a piece by Leo Villarreal, who is one of the stars of the Armory Show: To enter Pier 94, one walks through a long, dark tunnel with shimmering lights by Villarreal along its ceiling.

New York's Van Doren Waxter sold 12 wild ceramic works by Brian Rochefort for prices between \$3,500 and \$4,500, all within the first hour of the show, plus two drawings from Marsha Contrell's *Aperture Series* (2016), for \$8,000 each, and Moira Dryer's *Untitled* (1982) for \$16,000.

As is often the case in fairs, concise and focused presentations stood out. ACA Galleries was offering a multi-decade survey of the storied artist Faith Ringgold, who will have a solo show at the Serpentine Galleries in London in June. Victoria Miro gallery, of London and Venice, had devoted most of its booth to understated paintings by Celia Paul—seascapes and portraits that were rendered in brown and beige tones—who had a Hilton Als-curated exhibition at the Yale Center for British Art last year. Tucked off to the side, in a separate room, were Chris Ofili works on paper that depict what appear to be mermaids and are absolutely unmissable.



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The Paris-based gallery Ceysson & Bénétière, which also has a location in New York, had given over its whole booth to the pioneering Supports/Surfaces artist Claude Viallat, whose work was priced between €8,500 and €60,000 (about \$9,600 to \$67,800) and had already sold one work for €14,000 (\$15,800).

Jeffrey Deitch, the dealer (and former director of Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art) who now has galleries in New York and L.A., dedicated his splashy booth to a solo presentation of Ai Weiwei's "Zodiac" series, which depicts the 12 animals of the Chinese Zodiac calendar in Legos. (The works were also included as part of Deitch's collaboration with Larry Gagosian, "Pop Minimalism Minimalist Pop," during Art Basel Miami Beach last year.) The series is an edition of 10, with two of those editions being sold as individual works for \$150,000 apiece. A full suite of the series carries the hefty price tag of \$1.2 million.

Galleries on the Move

The Armory Show also provided an opportunity to catch up on galleries that are on the move. "It's been an incredible turnout—a remarkable improvement over last year, actually," said Adrian Sutton, the director of Blain Southern gallery, which recently announced that, in addition to running its London and Berlin spaces, it will open in New York, in Cheim & Read's former space in Chelsea. Early in the day, a monumental Lynn Chadwick sculpture had been placed on reserve, and a sale was in the works for a figurative painting by Jonas Burgert.

Mariane Ibrahim Gallery, which is decamping from Seattle for Chicago, is showing figurative collages made with materials like ink, mylar, and glitter by Florine Démosthène, a Haitian-American artist whose works, as a sheet of text tells it, "excavate new diasporic mythologies and ancient heroine figures while reconstructing Black female heroine personas." "We've had very strong interest from the beginning," said Ibrahim, who early in the day had so far sold seven works, for \$7,000 a piece.

Ramiken gallery, which recently resurfaced in New York after a brief sojourn as a Los Angeles enterprise, was participating thanks to having won the Armory Show's first Gramercy International Prize for New York galleries that have never shown at the fair. On view at the booth are paintings by Andra Ursuta and Darja Bajagic, the latter of whom figured in a two-person show with Boyd Rice planned last year at New York's Greenspon gallery that was scuttled amid controversy surrounding previous provocative comments by the artist.

"I've loved both of these artists' work for a long time, and I've always wanted to combine them because they both reconfigure hardcore aesthetics with a playful extremism," Mike Egan, the gallery's founder said. At the booth's center is a 2019 Ursuta work



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shaped like a butterfly and inspired by ISIS's flag, with the title *Vanilla Isis (Antisocial Butterfly)*. Reading the text scrawled in white paint on its surface, Egan, doing his best Axl Rose impression, intoned, “Na-na-na-na-na-ee-ee!”

A Los Angeles Presence

Ramekin may not be in L.A. anymore, but other dealers hailing from the city were out in force. Philip Martin Gallery, in the Focus section, had a solo presentation of Katy Crown wall sculptures of cast-aluminum string that the artist painted over with acrylic and graphite. Two of the works had sold before noon, each for \$8,500. Charlie James had artist Sadie Barnett showing a massive installation—replete with a spacey couch, wallpaper featuring images of a hair pick, glitter sculptures, and photographs—in the Presents section, which is reserved for large-scale works.

Kayne Griffin Corcoran, another L.A. shop, sold a Llyn Foulkes work for \$60,000 and three Mika Tajima pieces for \$7,000 each. A Mary Corse painting was on reserve for a price around \$400,000. Three recent paintings by Jonathan Lyndon Chase had sold to three U.S. arts institutions—the Walker Art Center, ICA Miami, and an unnamed one—for undisclosed prices at Kohn Gallery. Luis De Jesus sold two Peter Williams paintings for around \$20,000 to \$30,000 each. Roberts Projects sold work by Kehinde Wiley in the range of \$100,000 and \$500,000, as well as a sculpture by Jeffrey Gibson for around \$225,000. “It’s going better than could have been expected,” Bennett Roberts, the gallery’s co-founder, said. “And it’s not just about the sales. It’s about the follow-up and the other things that happen at this fair.”

Elsewhere in the Presents section, Apalazzo Gallery of Brescia, Italy, had four new works from Edson Chagas’s ongoing photographic portraits with African masks (an earlier example appeared on the cover of ARTnews’s “Africa Now” issue last year). Each work was on sale for €7,500 (about \$8,500).

Document from Chicago had a two-person showing that included four works by photographer Paul Mpagi Sepuya, who is currently the subject of a solo show at Team Gallery in New York. A large-scale collage is on offer for \$13,700, two works for \$7,100 each, and one for \$4,700.

New York’s Cristin Tierney gallery dedicated its booth to video works by Peter Campus (he prefers lowercase letters), who is the subject of a retrospective that opens at the Bronx Museum this week. The gallery will also open a solo show of his work on Friday. Each video is from an edition of five and is on offer for \$20,000.

Liliana Porter, who was the subject of a just-closed survey at El Museo del Barrio in Upper Manhattan, had work on offer in the booth of two galleries. Mor Charpentier



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of Paris had a small section of several works, and Porter fabricated several new works for the booth of Chicago's Carrie Secrist Gallery. These include a multi-object sculpture of figurines, titled *Them with traveler*, on offer for \$50,000; a 2019 clock work for \$10,000; and *To Hold a String* (lady in red), showing a figurine on a wooden shelf holding a long string and priced at \$10,000.

Among the more unusual exhibitors at the fair, which runs through Sunday, was Vhernier, an Italian jewelry brand beloved by celebrities like Jennifer Lopez. A representative from the company showed off a handcrafted 18-karat gold bracelet. "Our pieces are known for being very sculpture-like and artsy," the rep said.

One nice surprise was the inclusion of Belgian-style Stroopwafels—thin waffle snacks with a caramel syrup filling—in the small press lounge. Though the brand, Rip Van Wafels European Snack, is perhaps not the best known in the market (that would likely be Belgian Boys), the treat was a nice option for those not wishing to part with more \$20 for a sandwich and chips.

Perhaps no booth captured the fair environment as succinctly (or as bluntly) as New York's Pierogi gallery. Andrew Ohanesian was on hand there to activate his new P.O.S. work, which takes the form of a Verifone credit-card machine sitting on a pedestal. Ohanesian charges cards a minimum of \$5, and visitors sign the printed receipts, which carry the gallery's old logo on the back and a watermark of the artist's signature in UV-sensitive ink. "What am I selling?" Ohanesian asked. "I'm selling the sale itself." The Verifone machine is also on offer as a readymade sculpture in an edition of three, each priced at \$5,999.



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Smithsonian.com

Four Craft Artists Use Their Medium to Tell the Story of Our Times

The Renwick's newest show challenges everything you thought you knew about craft art

BY Alicia Ault

February 5, 2019

When Smithsonian curator Abraham Thomas realized that the 2018 Renwick Invitational would open just after the midterm elections, he knew that he wanted the juried exhibition to be about more than just the showcasing of midcareer and emerging artists. He felt that it should say something about the times—and the four artists selected for “Disrupting Craft,” on view through May 2019, make big statements about where we stand.

Thomas, along with independent curator Sarah Archer and Annie Carlano, a senior curator at the Mint Museum, chose the artists in large part because of their political activism and focus on community engagement. The Renwick Gallery, Thomas says, is the perfect setting to encourage visitors to delve into some of the great debates of the moment.

The Smithsonian’s museums “are important civic spaces where we should be able to create a safe environment where we can have different conversations,” says Thomas. He’s hoping the show engages with audiences over “the questions it raises about immigration or about complex cultural identity.”

A mass of disembodied ceramic human heads randomly piled onto the floor in the first gallery provides one jarring example. The viewer is confronted by the bald figures, all with a slightly different physiognomy and in the different shades of human skin—brown and black, and occasionally, white. The assemblage by ceramicist Sharif Bey, titled *Assimilation? Destruction?* is primarily about globalization and cultural identity. It is also a reference to Bey’s identity as a potter and an artist of color.

The piece is never the same in any exhibition—the 1,000 or so pinch pot heads are brought to a gallery in garbage cans and “unceremoniously dumped out,” says Bey, showing a video of the process. The heads break, crack and get pounded into smaller shards. Over time, he says, the piece, which he created for his MFA thesis project in

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2000, will become sand. Ultimately, *Assimilation? Destruction?* signifies that “you’re everything and you’re nothing at the same time.” With its shifting collective and individual shapes, the assemblage is also “a comment on what it means to be a transient person,” he says.

Bey, 44, has had his own migrations—out of a Pittsburgh working-class neighborhood into that city’s artistic incubators, taking classes at the Carnegie Museum of Art, and being selected for a prestigious after-school apprenticeship at the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild. It signaled a new and perhaps previously unconsidered career path for a kid with 11 siblings in an industrial town. Currently a dual professor at Syracuse University’s College of Arts and School of Education, he has never lost touch with his first love—making functional pots, some of which are included in the Renwick show.

“We all have histories as makers,” says Bey. “My orientation is the vessel,” he says, adding that for as long as he can remember, working with clay has been therapeutic. He often works in his living room while watching over his children—it helps him evade the guilt he feels when in the studio, which his wife says is like his own little vacation, he says with a laugh.

Tanya Aguiñiga, 40, has also used her art to examine her history. As a Mexican-American, born in San Diego, who grew up in Mexico within shouting distance of the U.S. border, she is an unapologetic and energetic activist—a feature nurtured by her experience working in the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo when she was a 19-year-old college student. After earning her MFA in furniture design from Rhode Island School of Design, Aguiñiga missed her homeland. A United States Artists Target Fellowship in 2010 gave her the freedom to go back and learn weaving and embroidery from indigenous craftsmen.

Her latest piece, *Quipu Fronterizo/Border Quipu* evolved from her project, AMBOS—Art Made Between Opposite Sides, and a play on words—ambos means “both of us” in Spanish—and is an artistic collaborative along the border. Quipu signifies a pre-Columbian Andean organizational system of recording history. Aguiñiga began her Quipu at the San Ysidro crossing in Tijuana in August 2016—after presidential candidate Donald Trump’s derogatory statements about Mexicans.

She and AMBOS team members circulated among mostly Mexicans waiting to cross to the United States, or who lived or worked nearby and asked them to take two strands of colorful stretchy rayon fabric to tie knots in a kind of reflection on the relationship between the two countries, and to respond to a postcard that asked: ¿Qué piensas cuando cruzas esta frontera? / What are your thoughts when you cross this border?

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The artist had her own feelings about the border—which she crossed each day to go to school in San Diego, where she was born, and where her grandmother watched over her while her parents worked in the city. In creating the Quipu, says Aguiñiga, “I thought about how many of us make that commute every day, and how it’s so stigmatizing.” The wait for crossings is long and Mexicans are exhaustively questioned before they are permitted to enter the U.S. “It’s this really weird thing where you feel like you’re doing something wrong even though you’re not,” Aguiñiga says.

“I wanted to get a gauge on what people were feeling because there was so much hate being thrown our way,” says Aguiñiga, who published the postcards on a website. The knotted strands were collected from the commuters and displayed on a billboard at the border crossing. The assemblage of knots—tied together into long strands—and postcards, are both meditative and moving. One postcard response channeled Aguiñiga’s thoughts: “Two indivisible countries forever tied as 1.”

Aguiñiga has since recreated the Quipu project at border crossings along the length of the border. “For the most part, the U.S. thinks about the border as this really separate place, black and white, and it’s not. It’s like one family going back and forth,” Aguiniga says.

Stephanie Syjuco, 44, born in the Philippines, also punctures perceptions about culture and “types,” often using digital technology to comment, somewhat cheekily, on how viewers take computer-generated images to be “real.” The University of California, Berkeley assistant professor of sculpture is not a traditional craft artist, but was chosen, says curator Thomas, for “the way that the artist takes the conceptual toolkit of craft and uses it to interrogate those issues around cultural identity and cultural history.”

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Syjuco pokes fun at how the West views and consumes ethnicity in *Cargo Cults: Head Bundle* and *Cargo Cults: Java Bunny*. In the two black and white photographs, Syjuco, as the subject, is dressed in a variety of “ethnic”-looking patterned fabrics, and elaborate “jewelry.” The ethnic fabrics are fictional—often digitized mimicry. The fabrics were purchased at mall retailers and one of the “bracelets” around her arms is a cord bought at an electronics shop. In *Java Bunny*, Syjuco is posed against various black and white patterned fabrics, but a “Gap” tag is visible. The artist says she was inspired by a graphic technique—dazzle camouflage—used on battleships in World War I to confuse enemy gunners.

“They’re a projection of what foreign culture is supposed to look like,” she says—just like ethnographic images from the 19th century. Those images often represented “true” natives, but the notion of “native,” isn’t straightforward. The idea of authenticity “is always in flux,” Syjuco says. The Philippines, for instance, is a hybrid of its colonizers: Spain, Japan and America. “I’m not saying all culture is made up. It’s just that

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there's a lens through which culture is filtered, so the viewer is narrating a lot."

Dustin Farnsworth, 35, has also recently begun focusing on cultural stereotypes. The artist spent some of his early career examining the impact of the decline of industry and recession on his native Michigan.

He constructed massive architectural pieces that teetered on top of sculpted mannequin-like heads of young people. The effect was to vividly convey the weighty consequences of industrial and civilizational decline on the generations to come. Several are featured in the Renwick show.

But a 2015 artist residency in Madison, Wisconsin, changed his focus. He arrived soon after the police shooting of the unarmed 19-year-old, African-American Tony Robinson. Then, in 2016, while he was in a similar visiting artist residency in Charlotte, North Carolina, police killed Keith Lamont Scott, also a black man. Both shootings intensely reverberated in the communities.

"It felt like that was so much more important than the things I was inventing and projecting," says Farnsworth, sporting a trucker hat with "Dismantle White Supremacy" emblazoned on the front.

Shortly after those residencies, he created *WAKE*. With its diagonal black stripes that reference the U.S. flag, it features dozens of skull-like masks sculpted out of Aqua-Resin displayed in repeating rows over a white background. It was Farnsworth's powerful response to the numbing effect of multiple school shootings. *WAKE*, he says, recalls the word's multiple definitions and usages—it can be a vigil for the dead or to rise out of slumber; and the phrase, "woke," is a term used in social justice circles meaning to be aware, a usage that grew out of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Farnsworth has collaborated with sign painter Timothy Maddox to create *WAKE II*, a massive 9.5- by 26-foot piece in the Renwick show. The skull-death masks return, with hundreds set on a colorful background of overlapping sloganists' banners: "Dismantle White Supremacy;" "No Justice No Peace;" and, "No racist police," among them. The immense size of the piece is no accident.

"I'm very interested in memorial," Farnsworth says. *WAKE II* was also meant to be in-your-face—a way to stir the pot about police shootings and social justice. "A lot of us kick it under the carpet," he says.

He's now moving away from the dead and towards elevating the living. *The Reconstruction of Saints* is his first attempt. It is his David, aimed at confronting

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the Goliaths of Confederate monuments, says Farnsworth. The heroic bronze-like bust of an African-American boy reflecting skyward is his attempt to sanctify minority youth, Farnsworth says.

Reactions to *Saints* when it was in progress—mostly in the Carolinas—was distressingly bigoted, he says. That attitude “is something that needs to be confronted, and I’m still figuring out the best way to do that,” says Farnsworth.

Thomas says he and his fellow curators chose Farnsworth and the other three artists in large part because of their willingness to confront established attitudes and conventions.

“The work featured here offers us moments of contemplation on the rapidly transforming world around us, and disrupts the status quo to bring us together, alter our perspectives, and lead us to a more empathetic, compassionate future,” he says.

“Disrupting Craft: Renwick Invitational 2018,” curated by Abraham Thomas, Sarah Archer and Annie Carlano, is on view through May 5, 2019 at the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s Renwick Gallery, located at Pennsylvania Avenue at 17th Street NW in Washington, D.C.

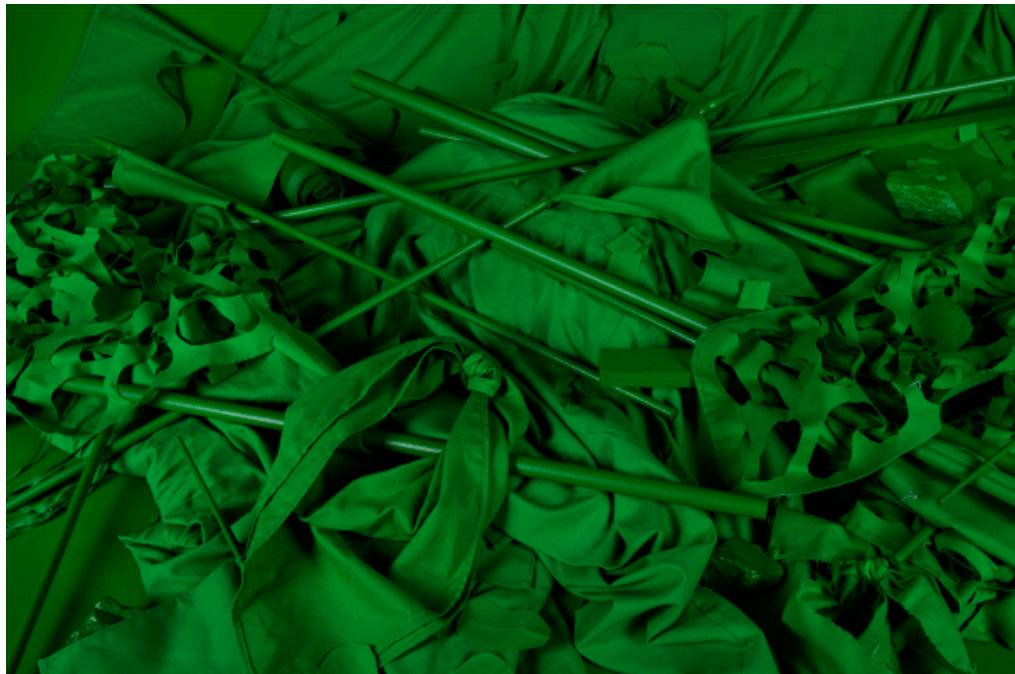


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art21 magazine

Whose Speech? Artists, Activists, & Being Heard: A Conversation Between Stephanie Syjuco and Astria Suparak

by Astria Suparak and Stephanie Syjuco | September 19, 2018



Stephanie Syjuco. *Chromakey Aftermath 1*, 2017. Archival pigment print; 36 × 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York. Re-fabricated objects based on the physical residue found after public protests. © Stephanie Syjuco

This interview took place in Stephanie Syjuco's East Oakland home on a gleaming June afternoon, squeezed into our busy schedules between flights and residencies, and accompanied by snacks culled from her garden. I first met Stephanie in 2008 in Pittsburgh, where we were both working at Carnegie Mellon University (she was a visiting assistant professor and I was the gallery director and curator). Years later, Ceci Moss and I included two of Stephanie's projects in Alien She (2013–16), a traveling exhibition on the impact of the punk feminist movement Riot Grrrl on contemporary artists. —Astria Suparak

Astria Suparak: We've talked about how the 2016 election was a turning point in your



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understanding of your roles as an artist and as an educator. Can you tell me more about that revelation and where you are now, almost two years later?

Stephanie Syjuco: It goes without saying that the election shocked a lot of people, including artists who create work that reflects what's in front of them—whether it's a personal, emotional, or societal situation. Prior to the election, I was dealing with topics that were very broad: issues of globalization, copyright, or public access. While those can be specific in certain ways, they can also be so broad as to lack direct politics. And with the run-up to the election happening, I struggled with how to address politics more explicitly. I felt I didn't have the luxury to be vague anymore. Things were unfolding in real time. After the election, I felt I had to shift my practice.

Astria Suparak: As an educator, you also felt a sharpening of your responsibilities during this time, right? Especially with what was going on in Berkeley, with the protests and counter-protests of white supremacist speakers on campus.

Stephanie Syjuco: Yes. I have a full-time job as a professor at UC Berkeley. A lot of that hinges on me being a professional artist, but I spend a lot of time working with students who, in some cases, are going through a new political reality, which could be in terms of how to navigate or negotiate what actions they are supposed to take as they look to the future. Many of them are immigrants, people of color, LGBTQ, young women, refugees, and even undocumented—people directly targeted by policies being put in place by the current administration. In my mentorship role, it became clear that I had to address the many emotional, confusing, and contradictory moments for them because it was manifesting in their work and in their lives. They are making artwork about their lives, and their lives are changing.

Astria Suparak: That's a major responsibility to take on, especially with students at that critical age and juncture. Did you feel motivated, maybe earlier in your career, to push against stereotype—against what an “American” is supposed to look like, against what an Asian woman or an immigrant could be interested in or capable of making work about?

Stephanie Syjuco: While I think most of my projects don't articulate a specific Asian identity, I think that people read that into the work, whether I like it or not. People have assumptions of what kind of work I should be making.

I am adamant, especially in this political climate, that my work be considered American. Of course, it literally is American, by virtue of me having grown up in the United States and being culturally American. But I think it's important now to claim that, specifically for Asian Americans, because the political climate is creating polarizing spheres of who is and who isn't seen as truly American. Asians are constantly seen as outsiders, of not belonging here. I want to strongly stake the claim that I am an American artist as much as an Asian American one.

Astria Suparak: I am in complete alignment with all of that. I've heard Black and Brown colleagues talk about the self-imposed pressure to mentor because they know young people of color have few role models, few professors and artists who look like them and can talk about experiences and issues that may resonate more closely with their lives.



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Stephanie Syjuco: When CITIZENS opened at Ryan Lee Gallery in New York, a group of graduate students who were predominantly young artists of color visited. They were really curious to talk about it because it was one of the first times that they'd seen someone who looked like me making work that appeared so overtly political, and I think they were considering it as a possibility for themselves. My show featured photographs of people of color representing political resistors. The students saw themselves reflected in a way that they hadn't seen in other art works.

Astria Suparak: During our lifetimes, there has been an evergreen critique of art that's considered too political, too didactic. Or, more recently, not political enough, like it's ineffective existing within an art institution. Or not political in the right way.

I recall seeing on Facebook someone's criticism of your CITIZENS exhibition because it contained symbols and aesthetics from real, specific protests, which that person felt was inappropriate for an artist to use in a gallery setting, especially a commercial one. How are you feeling today about political art within a white cube and about those persistent complaints?

Stephanie Syjuco: It's tricky. You and I are in the same generation and came of age in the 1990s. I remember going to school as a young art student and being heavily influenced by identity politics. Now, thirty years later, that cultural work has taken on a different, negative spin in some circles. It's also seen differently by a younger generation. I learned a lot from those early years in art school and from the 1993 Whitney Biennial, the pivotal one that not only polarized a lot of people but also brought a lot of artwork into the forefront. It made a big impression on me, but so did the backlash against it. Broader cultural representation was finally happening in contemporary art, and these strident voices were able to speak out. But the criticisms lobbed against them were: "This isn't good art," "It's art for a specific cause, and it isn't relatable to everybody's lives," or "It's sacrificing aesthetics for politics."

After creating my most recent exhibition, in which I explicitly dealt with some of the protest imagery that I was witnessing, a different dialogue came up: Should these images be in the art world and the commercial gallery, or do they belong in the street—not because political art doesn't belong in the gallery but because the gallery is a tainted, commercial, and out-of-context site for activist work that is happening right now? In other words, by making work about real protests, was I wrongfully capitalizing from political imagery in a way that I shouldn't be?

I hoped that the exhibition put a spotlight on post-election issues, in a way that I hadn't yet seen artists do. I was pulling from direct observation, as a witness to the protests, and I wanted to reflect on what I saw.

Astria Suparak: I think that's an important distinction: you were physically on the ground, actively participating in the protests.

Stephanie Syjuco: Exactly. I wouldn't define myself as an activist, and that's not to make a big distinction between art and activism. I think being an activist is actually a job that's much more important than what I am doing as an artist. But I do feel like I create work that has an activist nature and that supports activist causes. Something I don't make explicit in some of these

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projects is that I donate my sales to nonprofit advocacy groups. It doesn't make sense for me to profit from certain works, given the subject matter.

Astria Suparak: The photo series reflected the present, but your work often connects to histories, archives, and "unruly materials," as you describe them.

Stephanie Syjuco: I've been thinking a lot about how exhibitions function as visual archives. An exhibition is a space where, whatever is happening in the studio, the work has to pause and be presented in a way that the public is able to understand and see the narrative arc. Back to the CITIZENS show: I needed to act as a documenter to what I saw, to what other people saw during those moments of tumult.

At multiple times during 2017, protests erupted on the Berkeley campus, in which political forces were playing out. The protests were incredibly dramatic and very scary, in some cases. With others in my campus community, I was trying to process these events. By creating work about them, I was locking into my experience and attempting to freeze an external picture of what I saw.

Astria Suparak: You were also correlating different historical moments in the show, like with your banner that references the "I Am An American" sign put up by the shopkeeper Tatsuro Matsuda during the internment of [more than 100,000] Japanese Americans during World War II.

Stephanie Syjuco: I'm trying to analyze historic precedents to make sure that when people see images of what's happening today [such as immigrant detainment and incarceration], these events don't appear unmoored from ones that have happened before.

I struggle over negotiating the functional divide between art and activism and how these worlds do and don't meet. I know that other artists and curators also think about this a lot. For instance, we can go into a museum today and view exhibitions of political posters from the 1960s and later. These are objects that were created to function in the world, and they have entered a visual archive as artifacts. But they also function as contemporary touchstones to help us realize that we have been in this situation before. I've been thinking a lot about the oddness of the functional sign, the protest accessory—or protest prop—and how it can go back and forth between being a historical art object and something that had nothing to do with the art world when it was made. Many of these things were made by artists but went out into the world because they had to do something.

I made the CITIZENS show specifically for a commercial gallery space in New York. The signs in that show were not the protest signs that I was concurrently making for the street, for my project, Reap What You Sew. I see these projects as two separate things. For the gallery exhibition, I made a set of objects that attempted to critically examine how protest signs are distorted, manipulated, and sometimes rendered illegible by the media. Meanwhile, my public-protest signs are straightforward and functional in their messaging; they are a different type of speech.

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The Counterfeit Crochet Project (Critique of a Political Economy) and FREE TEXTS: An Open Source Reading Room by Stephanie Syjuco in Alien She at Vox Populi, Philadelphia, March 7 – April 27, 2014.

Astria Suparak: You're an artist who works on several levels: formal and political, conceptual and practical. Your work also critiques and comments upon popular culture, technology, art history, and various movements and cultures.

Stephanie Syjuco: Hopefully all of us can do that! I am a citizen—and I mean that in the civic sense, of being an active civic participant in society—and an artist, and at times those two things diverge. I am often asked by young artists, "Is what we do as artists really what we need right now, in this political moment?" I used to say, "Yes, just keep making your work; that itself is a political act." But in the past year and a half, I realized that although making art can be a reflection of our time, it isn't the most expedient way to create a political effect. Sometimes you have to participate in direct action, as opposed to making art about politics. I think one needs to act as a citizen at the appropriate moment, not just be an artist in the studio.

Astria Suparak: There's speed and responsiveness, and there's context.

Stephanie Syjuco: When I'm making art, I hope that it will enter into a larger art-historical dialogue. Maybe, if I'm lucky, decades from now, it will be carried forward to say, "This happened before. Here's the visual evidence of it in our art world, in art history." This is in contrast to the protest signs, props, or other things that I've put into the world that will most likely be forgotten. I haven't been keeping them; I'm not saving them in a flat file to donate to a museum later. They're lost, or I lend them out. I'm less hopeful that they will circulate beyond that moment, and they don't need to. They have their own context, and they did their work.

Astria Suparak: I've heard you distinguish between paper signs and fabric banners. Some protest signs need to be made quickly, for an immediate response to an urgent moment. But protest signs can also be made to be durable and reusable.

Stephanie Syjuco: Yes, the difference between permanence and impermanence makes me think about some of the concerns you faced in your curatorial projects, specifically the zine archive you created for Alien She. The cheap, low-budget zines weren't originally meant to be in a museum. Who knows if some of the zine makers would be flattered by being included in a museum show



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or would have thought that it was an inappropriate context for their work. But for the sake of historical knowledge, the zines need to be circulated in the public imagination.

Astria Suparak: When Ceci Moss and I were putting the exhibition together, which included a section focused on you, with some of your projects that invite the visitor to become producers and distributors of the work, Riot Grrrl had been flattened and misremembered as a briefly lived subgenre of music. We were trying to present Riot Grrrl as a creative, activist movement that had a long-lasting impact, including on the lives of present-day artists like yourself.

The zines we exhibited were from personal and institutional collections, but we also reached out directly to many of the zinesters and musicians to obtain permissions or to invite them to contribute. Many of them visited the show, and we saw a lot of happy, and amused, selfies on social media, like, “Look, Ma, I’m in a museum!” Other people told us, “I don’t have any copies of my zine anymore. Can we get a copy from your copy? I’m so glad someone saved this.”

Stephanie Syjuco: These are definitely instances of a radical shift in context and presentation—from being circulated among young people and activist communities to the formal, historicizing museum.

Astria Suparak: There’s a world of archive and library ethics that I was learning about as I went along. Some zinesters originally made their zines for a small set of people that they personally handed their zines to. There’s a question of whether a zine should live on, like online, for a different time and for different people. I think the general route is to try to contact the original maker and ask if they are okay with the new context. Although a lot of zine makers used pen names or just their first names, so it’s really difficult, almost impossible, to track them down, especially with zines from the early 1990s or older, before widespread Internet use.

In a discussion about zine archiving, someone said their reason for not wanting their old zines to be available online was because images tend to get separated from their context on the web. For example, understanding page 12 might require page 11 to be read beforehand, to build to that moment.

Stephanie Syjuco: It’s a good point. The zines you chose are so important because they could influence or inspire the same ethos down the road. But is it antithetical to put something super punk rock, or radical, or political in a museum? I think a common critique is that by becoming institutionalized, objects are neutered of their politics. We may have had the same critiques voiced against us.

Astria Suparak: That assumes that the museum is a neutral space—or a grave.

Stephanie Syjuco: The CITIZENS show featured what appear to be portraits of anti-fascist activists, but they were actually UC Berkeley students who witnessed some of the major political protests that happened on campus in 2017. These students weren’t directly involved, but they were deeply affected by the events and began to consider themselves as political beings. I invited them to act as stand-ins for composite portraits of anonymous activists who cannot be photographed. I wanted to represent these activists in some way, to create humanizing portraits



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of them.

Astria Suparak: And identifying activists and other targets through online image searches and social media now presents a real danger.

Stephanie Syjuco: Yes, totally. The potential fallout from doxing [the tactic, favored by the alt-right, of exposing an anti-fascist activist's identity and subjecting them to direct threats of violence] is dangerous and very real. I think it has muzzled people, facilitating even more anonymity. So, when trying to create images of resistant voices, it's important to protect people. That's similar to the need for some zine writers to operate under pseudonyms: You're sticking your voice out for something that could put you in harm's way, but you're also trying to make sure you're connecting with those who you need to. You have to be legible in certain ways and illegible, or unidentifiable, in other ways.

Astria Suparak: We're in the era of the anonymous online troll, and people still can't separate hate speech from the right of freedom of speech. There are academics and artists who are die-hard free-speech advocates, but some people are finally seeing how hate speech results in serious abuse and deadly consequences.

Stephanie Syjuco: The term "free speech" is thrown around so easily, and it's ingrained in all of us that it's one of the pinnacles of what it means to be an American because it offers us a diversity of opinion. It was a shock to me when I realized that, legally, hate speech is free speech.

Astria Suparak: In America.

Stephanie Syjuco: Yes, good point. I heard from friends, who are citizens of other countries, that hate speech is not intrinsic to the idea of free speech; it's a legal designation. UC Berkeley has a motto, "Fiat lux" (Latin for "let there be light"), supporting the notion that if you put ideas into the world, there will be an enlightened, dialectic sorting out of good ideas versus bad ideas. I agree with it on principle, but how it's actually unfolding is a problem that needs fixing, given the power dynamics of how hate speech—attached to white supremacist, anti-LGBTQ, and anti-immigrant xenophobia—directly bullies, belittles, and threatens people.

Astria Suparak: In forums where the phrase "freedom of speech" is bandied about the most, it's not presented honestly. Speech has always had legal constraints, and the idea that it's free is a falsehood in America. There are legal restrictions against child pornography, blackmail, and yelling "Fire!" in a theater. Those kinds of speech create public threats or personal harm, as do incitements to violence, and hate speech is punishable in many countries.

Stephanie Syjuco: As artists, we've been taught to champion free speech because we associate it with the idea that our work—depicting our lived realities—will be protected. Because of the 1980s government censorship of artists—such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Karen Finley, Andres Serrano, and others who were targets of NEA defunding—many in the art world are familiar with this issue. It depends on what side is taking advantage of free speech, it seems.

For many people, the reality of some of the problems with free speech hasn't touched them



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directly, so they're still invested in it as a philosophical concept.

Astria Suparak: I feel like there have been great strides in the freedom-of-speech debate in the past few years. There have been many brilliant discussions about these issues. But that might be within my bubble, where I've chosen to follow thinkers, writers, and artists of color—people who are the targets of most of the hate speech, who are being attacked and murdered because of their perceived race or ethnicity.

Stephanie Syjuco: I'm really curious: As somebody who is a curator and an organizer of culture, for archiving and for display purposes, have you found that the last year and a half has changed your focus, or your opinion on what you do, and how you do it?

Astria Suparak: I'm much more deliberate about how I'm using my role, resources, and platform. I've always been particular about which voices and imagery, and which ideas and stories I want to elevate or support, as a curator. I've become more attuned to racial politics, colorism, white supremacy, and related issues, particularly with the rise of Black Lives Matter and the recent discussions around Indigenous identities and representation in the art world. Throughout most of my career I've worked in predominantly white scenes like experimental film and alternative music—and art! And I've been employed by very white institutions in smaller cities.

I moved to the Bay Area a couple years ago, and it's been really important for me to be around more people of color and people who are actively engaged in thinking about and working on these issues.

Stephanie Syjuco: Last night I was talking to another curator of color based in Portland—which is one of the largest cities in America with the fewest people of color, the result of historically racist, exclusionary policies. We were thinking about questions like: When I make art, who do I generally assume the audience is? Do I assume they are people who look like me, or are they people who don't look like me who I'm attempting to educate about the reality of people like me? And I'm starting to get tired of that—of all the extra labor that goes into having to make sure that your project or work is actually also a pedagogical tool, so that white audiences can get on the same page to even understand the nuances of what you're saying.

I'm concerned about how our work—our speech—as artists and curators of color is hampered by the inability of many people to even hear what we're saying, even when we're saying it.

Astria Suparak: Yes! That right there.

But we also have these double roles, as educators, as curators, to provide context, through writing, lectures, tours, outreach, and so forth. At least, this is the way I approach curating; I usually want to bring in, and collaborate with, people who aren't comfortable with art, or within an art space, or with these issues.

Like with my recent series around sports. The prevailing belief is that sports and art—or sports and politics, for that matter—are two completely separate realms. I don't know if I can get away from plotting how to lure people in and how to contextualize for those who aren't familiar with all the references, or for those who feel like they are outsiders.

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But I understand that pressure, both from the exterior and internalized, to imagine a default white audience. And I understand that exhaustion.

Stephanie Syjuco: That is our supposed target audience—or it's assumed that it should be. Otherwise you're not addressing "everybody," which is ironic.

Astria Suparak: Sometimes I want to enter a space with the assumption that everyone understands that we're living under white supremacy.

Stephanie Syjuco: Wouldn't that be amazing?

Astria Suparak: I've been trying to do that more often, but I'm not sure if it's landing right.

Stephanie Syjuco: A friend told me she watched two people view my Cargo Cults photographs [at MoMA in the exhibition Being: New Photography 2018] and ask each other, "I wonder where the woman in this picture is from. Her culture looks beautiful and amazing." The photographs were staged, fictional images that critiqued racist ethnographic photographs from the 1800s. My friend finally went up to them and pointed out the visual cues and text that indicated this wasn't a real culture. And they were shocked because they couldn't read the image that way; it was illegible to them, despite being perfectly clear in many ways.

So, even when you're saying something, you are not being heard. The flip side of this demand for free speech—and more speech—is that you could be saying something, but it doesn't matter. There's a distinction between utterance and legibility. In this case, utterance is the desire for someone to express her lived reality, but a large portion of the dominant society is unable to even understand her, even when she is speaking clearly. So she is rendered illegible.

Astria Suparak: I'm also thinking of memeification, and how the goal is to distill the message so that there is no subtlety, so it's crystal clear, in order to propagate successfully. But then that exact same image can be used for a totally different purpose!

For example, the NFL kneeling ban: Even though the players have been unequivocal that they are protesting police violence against Black people, the white NFL owners, fans, US president, and others have created this totally different narrative that says that the players are disrespecting the military. That's a dishonest, intentional misconstruction.

Stephanie Syjuco: Yes, exactly. It is ironic that you could be saying something really radical in your moment of "free speech," and it still doesn't necessarily go where you want to go because it can get turned 180 degrees or miscontextualized.

Astria Suparak: Or a critique can be derailed because people are focusing on one of the words used, rather than the substance.

But then some people, usually white, get the benefit of the doubt.

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Stephanie Syjuco: Here's another example: Melania Trump's infamous jacket that said "I REALLY DON'T CARE, DO U?" when she was visiting immigrant children in detention centers. Now I feel like we're a podcast or something, recalling recent political moments! Okay, it is free speech. Of course she has every right to wear this most tasteless thing wherever the hell she wants. But there will be fallout, a backlash. There are contextual ramifications.

Astria Suparak: Some people thought it was an intentional distraction to what her husband was doing.

Stephanie Syjuco: Was it a dog whistle? One can read it in a totally awful way, which I do. We've strayed from talking about art, but I think this does go back to the idea of impact: what one says and what one puts out in the world has impact.

Astria Suparak: I want to loosely connect that jacket to art, through fast fashion often taking inspiration from artists and from the aesthetics of protest. I don't mind that we are encompassing all of this. And it's not unconnected to the photos you made in CITIZENS.

Stephanie Syjuco: Yeah, you're right. Culture gets absorbed that way. The style of writing on that jacket is obviously influenced by punk rock.

Astria Suparak: That jacket is a derivative of military style. And punk detoured army gear. Since we've been talking about misinterpretations and omissions: What do you feel is often overlooked, in writings about your work?

Stephanie Syjuco: I've been making work for more than two decades. I think that's long enough to have built up a complicated and varied art practice. Based on my interests, the work manifests in different forms. Sometimes, they are temporal events; sometimes, they are installations of thousands of objects; sometimes, they are online databases. I feel like the work can be hard to pin down, and I am fine with that.

What's problematic for me is the art world's tendency to focus on selected forms, which silos artwork into discrete categories (for example, "activist oriented," "social practice," "textiles," "photography," "artist of color"). While these are not untrue categories, they are also convenient ones that can fit into a curatorial theme, article, or what-have-you. I think there's something interesting about acknowledging extreme diversity of form in an artist's work. The work should be as varied and interesting as you are, as a person, and even contradictory of the expectations placed on any of those individual categories.

Astria Suparak has curated exhibitions, screenings, performances and live music events for art spaces, festivals, and publications internationally, including The Liverpool Biennial 2004, PS1, Eyebeam Art and Technology Center, Museo Rufino Tamayo, The Kitchen, Participant Inc, The 50th Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, and Exposition Chicago 2014, as well as for non-art spaces such as roller-skating rinks, ferry boats, elementary schools, sports bars, and rock clubs. Stephanie Syjuco was born in Manila, Philippines, in 1974. Syjuco works in photography, sculpture, and installation, moving from handmade and craft-inspired mediums to digital editing. Her work explores the tension between the authentic and the counterfeit, challenging deep-seated assumptions about history, race, and labor.



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The New York Times

What's New in Photography? Humanism, MoMA Says

by Arthur Lubow | March 9, 2018

A new group show called “Being” moves away from last year’s navel-gazing digital obsession to explore reality-based portraiture, politics and gender.



Stephanie Syjuco, “Cargo Cults: Cover-Up”, 2013-2016, pigmented inkjet print (c) Courtesy the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco and Ryan Lee Gallery, New York

At the last survey of new photography at the Museum of Modern Art two years ago, the atmosphere was so self-referential and hermetic that a visitor panted for oxygen. Often, the photos were images of images, taken off a computer screen or digitally created in the studio. It seemed as if photography, which continued to engage with the world after modernist painting

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and literature turned inward, had finally crumpled into solipsism.

A lot can change in two years. In response to the last exhibition and to the intervening political upheavals, the show “Being: New Photography 2018,” which opens on March 18, offers a broader and more stimulating range of work. The rubric of “Being,” which is defined as “notions of personhood and identity,” proves capacious enough to include portraiture, reportage, fashion, and pretty much everything you can turn a camera on. (The museum decided in 2016 to present exhibitions with a theme rather than simply highlighting promising photographers.) The show includes the work of 17 artists — two of whom collaborate as a team — all under 45.

The exhibition was orchestrated by Lucy Gallun, MoMA’s assistant curator of photography, who worked on the last one and agrees that this year’s represents a departure. “The strongest takeaway from the last show was about the dissemination of images and the way images circulate,” she said in a phone interview. “Here it’s a much more personal, intimate approach.” She added that she “tried to emphasize the diversity of approaches.” A sampling of artists included indicates she succeeded in that.

Although questions of racial and gender identity and politics perfume the air, the best photography in the show touches lightly, if at all, on these subjects. One artist who squarely addresses the political predicament is Stephanie Syjuco, 43, a Bay Area resident who was born in the Philippines and immigrated to this country when she was 3. Ms. Syjuco employs diverse formats — installations, performance and photography — to investigate such subjects as the distribution of goods under capitalism and the persistence of neocolonialism.

Her large black-and-white photographs, in which she appears in costume, bring to mind the work of the Samoan-born photographer Shigeyuki Kihara, who also stages self-portraits in the pose of native women in the Pacific islands, reprising how they were depicted in studios decorated with ethnic props by 19th-century photographers.

Unlike Ms. Kihara, who is particularly interested in gender, Ms. Syjuco is more concerned with capitalist commodities, and is a student of how Western manufacturers both appropriated and created “primitive” designs.

She purchased all the ethnic materials that she wears in her photographs at chain stores in a mall in Omaha, where she was living at the time. The clothes conspicuously retain store labels. (She returned them for credit after the shoots.)

Like the fabrics, the backdrops in the photographs are intensely patterned, in the manner of the “dazzle camouflage” painted on British warships as protection from airplane bombers during World War I. “It was used not to hide the battleships but to confuse enemy aim by making it unclear what you are looking at,” she explained in a phone interview.

In addition to the portraits, which come from a series she calls “Cargo Cult,” Ms. Syjuco has included in the exhibition a series of passport-style self-portraits (taken with her cellphone) with her face obscured, alluding to the anxiety presently felt in immigrant communities in this country.

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Paul Mpagi Sepuya, 35, also critiques photography portraiture, from a vantage point that is more formally inventive and politically oblique than Ms. Syjuco's. Black and gay, with an interest in investigating his racial and sexual identities, Mr. Sepuya uses collages and mirror shards to fragment the image; and he raises out of their customary invisibility the black cloths and tripods of a photographer's studio. His photographs were included in the recent "Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon" at the New Museum and the current "Tag: Proposals on Queer Play and the Ways Forward" at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia.

Along with large inkjet prints on the wall, in the MoMA show he has a table with found objects, both photographs and books, to provide context (a presentation style associated with Wolfgang Tillmans). Mr. Sepuya is a postmodern portrait photographer, but one who chooses to reshuffle real material rather than compose on Photoshop. "There's a codedness," he said, describing his work. "I'm interested when someone can piece together another layer of meaning from a fragment of a body or the location of a room."

And he relates his formal strategy to his sexual orientation. "There is a history of queer social spaces inhabiting the back room," he said. "In these darkroom portraits, I'm thinking that being under the black cloth is like being in the back room." It is a space "of creative friendship and sexual exchange all happening in the same places."

Although photographers have always been acutely conscious of what lies just outside the edges of their pictures, the viewer may overlook this central fact. Mr. Sepuya is not alone in wanting to highlight what usually goes unseen. Andrzej Steinbach, 34, a Polish-born photographer based in Berlin, photographed three young people together, as if in a fashion shoot, and then displayed the portraits as a sequence, where a person who is mostly out of the frame in one picture becomes the central figure in the next. "They switch places and they switch clothing," Ms. Gallun said. "It's unsettling."

Matthew Connors, 42, likens his position as a photographer to the unreliable narrator in contemporary fiction. The body of work he is showing comes from five trips he made to North Korea between 2013 and 2016. Earlier, he took pictures in Egypt during the street demonstrations that culminated in the fall of President Mohamed Morsi. If that job description makes him sound like a photojournalist, he quickly dispels the notion. "I would be a terrible photojournalist, because I'm very slow and I'm not always training myself on the event that's unfolding," he said.

In many of his photographs of North Korea, where he was invariably accompanied by a couple of handlers, he emphasizes how partial his images are. He photographs electronic billboards in which the image is incomplete because some of the lights are out. He depicts a dark cave decorated for tourists with projected patches of colored lights — a stand-in for the cave in Plato's allegory, where only the shadows of outside life are visible to those chained within. Both the photographer and his subjects see each other indistinctly, a fact that the sharpness of Mr. Connors's digital images doesn't deny.

We are a long way from MoMA's most famous photography exhibition, Edward Steichen's "The Family of Man" of 1955, which presented people from all around the world as being more alike than not. Some of the most striking of Mr. Connors's photographs are portraits of North

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Koreans: three schoolgirls as frozen as waxworks, one young man affectionately touching another at a public swimming pool. The pictures are compelling but resist easy understanding. The emblematic photograph in Mr. Connors's contribution to the show appears in a print twice the size and separate from the North Korea pictures: a mask held in a fist at a New York anti-Trump rally. Because of the positioning of the tape and the eyeholes, what we see looks like a crude rendition of a face, but it is actually the back of the mask.

Some of Mr. Connors's images — the geometric reflections in a nighttime swimming pool, the rushing cascades in a water park — are reminders of the pleasures that photography can provide when practiced by a technically skilled artist. Even more daringly retrograde in the embrace of tradition is Sam Contis, 35, who sometimes shoots with film and a vintage view camera (as well as a digital one). She has made repeated visits over the last five years to photograph the students at Deep Springs College, a small, all-male institution in a remote valley in eastern California. The breadth of her ambition is discernible in the exhibition, and even more so in her impressive book, "Deep Springs."

Ms. Contis is informed by the great photographers of the American West, notably Timothy H. O'Sullivan and Carleton Watkins. She is also very aware of the regional mythology, as conjured up and questioned by predecessors like the director John Ford and the artist Richard Prince.

"Part of this project is thinking about this place that is in my mind," said Ms. Contis, who was born in Pennsylvania and educated in the East. "I'm not so interested in debunking the myth. I'm more interested in dismantling and taking the multiple myths apart and recontextualizing them."

Yet while her photographs reflect the history of photography, they also examine a very contemporary issue: the development of masculine identity. In Deep Springs, the young men combine ranching and farming with intensive reading. "There is an expectation of what a man is, especially against the backdrop of the West," she said. "But it's really much more nuanced than what our visual culture has shown us."

In the book, she has the room to evoke the myth of the West with photographs of cattle being branded in a cloud of dust and irrigation lines being adjusted in the majestic high desert. Those in her small grouping at MoMA (supplemented by a brand-new two-channel video) dwell on ambiguities of gender and fragile tenderness.

In one, a recumbent figure in a denim skirt in the grass proves, on second glance, to be a boy; a similar double take establishes the gender of a longhaired youth being embraced from behind by a lean-limbed fellow. Some of Ms. Contis's photographs are presented as matted, silver gelatin prints. They demonstrate, if there was ever any doubt, that old-fashioned photography in the hands of an artist can feel completely up-to-date.

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art21 magazine

Cloth is a Battleground in Stephanie Syjuco's "CITIZENS"

by Anna Burckhardt | Oct 13, 2017



In her latest exhibition at the Ryan Lee Gallery in New York City, Stephanie Syjuco continues her practice of investigating and questioning cultural objects. Here, she conducts a symbiotic analysis of the symbols that affirm or negate the idea of citizenship. Spread across the two rooms of the gallery space, the exhibition's first noticeable aspect is the initially menacing-looking portraits that hang on the walls. Clad in historically subversive clothing, including balaclavas, leather jackets, and hoodies, a closer look reveals that the portraits depict young revolutionaries of color. As stated in the press release: "four staged portraits present black-clad, masked 'protestors' depicted by young UC Berkley students who are grappling with an uncertain reality and their own precarious status in the current political climate." Each of the subjects is queer, a person of color, a woman, or undocumented. Their bodies and identities are simultaneously seen as

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threatening to a conservative nationalist ideology, and oppressed due to their marginality. Masks and other subversive garments symbolize this dichotomy, as they have become crucial for protesters by providing a sense of privacy from facial recognition technology while at the same time contributing to their perception as a threat.

The most telling of these portraits, *Total Transparency Filter (Portrait of N)*, depicts a veiled figure hidden behind a checkered cloth. The pattern, taken from Photoshop's grey and white transparency background, "translates a digital tool into material existence" and acts as conceptual camouflage against a white wall. From afar, it looks as if the sitter is wearing a niqab or a burka, modest Muslim garments that have been particularly contested in recent debates over privacy and public policy. Even more so than the hoodie, the hijab, burka or niqab, allow the wearer to create a wall between herself and the outside world. This private space created by cloth is often seen in the West as a threat to secularism, freedom, and even national security. The portrait, with its camouflaged textile that covers the sitter's head, renders her simultaneously visible and invisible.

A dual use of textiles in contested spaces is present throughout the entire exhibition. In her recent book *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, Julia Bryan-Wilson writes that there is an inherent tension to textiles. "They occupy a central place in traditionalist histories," she notes, "while they also erupt as potential sites of resistance to that very traditionalism, claimed by competing factors at one hegemonic and counterhegemonic."¹ This dichotomy is elucidated by Syjuco's two central pieces: *Ungovernable* and *I AM AN...*. The latter, a 30" x 40" black cotton panel with the words "I AM AN AMERICAN" sewn on in white, occupies most of the exhibition's second room. A reference to a sign posted by a Japanese American business owner following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the image was memorialized in a photograph by Dorothea Lange. This piece alludes to the contested patriotism required in times of war—especially in the United States—and to the inherent racism that has helped build ideas of national identity and belonging.

Contrarily, in the first room of the gallery stand three tattered white muslin banners with the words "BECOME UNGOVERNABLE" written on them in black. Inspired by iconic protest signs and reminiscent of hand-sewn suffragette banners, the piece adopts the phrase from anti-fascist protesters following the 2016 presidential election. In opposition to *I AM AN...*'s proclamation of patriotism, *Ungovernable* explores ideas of subversion in a fraught context, indicated by the ways in which the fabric is torn and in one instance, falls to the ground. In situations of oppression, it seems to say, it is necessary to dismantle the institutions that facilitate that oppression.

Taken as a whole, *CITIZENS* is an exploration of the ways in which meaning can change depending on the context in which it's produced. The same symbols that are understood as peaceful and patriotic can be read as subversive in a different decade or by a different individual. Most importantly, textiles and cloth, inherently human in nature, can easily become signifiers of the battles over patriotism and identity that are fought in moments of political upheaval.

Stephanie Syjuco: *CITIZENS* is on view September 7 – October 14, 2017 at Ryan Lee Gallery, New York.

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Art in America

Stephanie Syjuco

by Glenn Adam | December 04, 2017



Stephanie Syjuco: CITIZEN (Portrait of B), 2017, inkjet print, 40 by 30 inches; at Ryan Lee.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. That seems to be the animating principle behind Stephanie Syjuco's recent work, as presented in her exhibition at Ryan Lee, "Citizens." In the past year, many artists have offered responses to the dystopian rightward lurch of the United States (one thinks, perhaps, of Rachel Harrison's bitterly satirical Trump piñatas). For most of them, explicit protest art is a side project. They continue their work as before, albeit with trouble in mind.

For Syjuco, by contrast, the situation seems to have engendered a thoroughly new direction. She has long been a politically engaged artist, perhaps best known for organizing events in which teams of volunteers manufacture knockoffs of luxury products and artworks. These performances dissect fashion and art alike as elitist commodity systems in which the realities of

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production are willfully concealed. “Citizens,” however, was much more explicitly grounded in the language of protest. The show looked and felt like a street action.

Since the election, Syjuco has been going to a lot of protests, and making a lot of banners. This activity furnished the raw materials for her exhibition. A red cloth emblazoned with RESIST hung in the third-floor gallery’s window, admonishing passersby below. The show’s largest work was another banner, this one reading, I AM AN AMERICAN . It’s a direct quotation from a 1942 Dorothea Lange photograph, in which the statement appears on a sign hanging in a San Francisco shopwindow. The Japanese-American proprietors had just been shipped off to an internment camp, and thus their plaintive statement seems to end with a ghostly question mark.

Three banners featuring the phrase BECOME UNGOVERNABLE were draped precariously on scaffoldlike structures. The text was hard to make out, distorted and interrupted, and the banners were moved around during the course of the show, further interfering with their legibility. (When I visited, one was halfway on the floor, as if abandoned.) Syjuco seemed to be casting doubt on the slogan rather than simply claiming it. This was a welcome note. The show could have felt too much like marching arm in arm, without offering enough of a space in which to reflect on the necessity of doing so.

Syjuco veered closest to agitprop imagery in a series of photographic portraits of recent graduates of the University of California, Berkeley, where she teaches. Each sitter is a member of a group—undocumented or queer, for example—whose rights are currently threatened. Syjuco shows the subjects in protest gear, anonymized by masks. They hold protest flyers and banners much as a painted Renaissance princeling might clutch a symbolic attribute. The series is usefully complicated by the illegibility of these props—and by one portrait that shows a figure draped entirely in a gray-and-white checkered cloth. The pattern, recognizable as a default background in Photoshop, also appeared in a large wall hanging in the show. Finally, two further photographs depict discarded banners lying amid rubble, all rendered in the bright hue of a cinematic green screen.

These visual references to easily manipulated digital imagery were essential to the exhibition. Everyone, these days, wants to have their voices heard. Syjuco is no exception, and her show was fired by conviction. But it also invited us to think hard about the stakes of political speech, the compromised contexts in which it appears, and the consequences of extremism. We may not want a fascist nation, but do we really want an ungovernable one?

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XXWEEKLY

Stephanie Syjuco

Colonial Mentality

By Jonathan Curiel
June 29, 2016



"Basketwoman" from the series, "Cargo Cults"

Until President Barack Obama signed legislation last month that eliminated “Oriental,” “Eskimo,” “Negro,” and other outdated terms as references in written federal laws, the U.S. government effectively sanctioned those terms for public use. These vestiges of racist colonial-era mores remained in official American documents, and their elimination is yet another step that Western leaders have taken in recent decades to help purge their cultures of antiquated prejudices. Of course, variations of these views thrive in other more subtle ways — as artist Stephanie Syjuco suggests in her new San Francisco exhibit, “Neutral Calibration Studies (Ornament + Crime).”

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Language is one thing; objects are another. If someone is selling an “ethnic” carpet on eBay or offering a photograph of an “exotic” woman clothed in “traditional” garb, aren’t they really resorting to the same outdated notions that existed in the 18th century? Syjuco is being ironic — and a bit postmodern (and post-colonial) — by incorporating a title that cites its own neutrality. In fact, Syjuco’s exhibit is an invitation to scrutinize the ongoing habits of popular, consumer culture.

As art-goers walk into the first room of Catharine Clark Gallery, they’re greeted by a series of Turkish, Afghan, and Pakistani carpets — ones that have been seemingly bleached of color. They aren’t really carpets, either; they’re synthetic fabrics imprinted using dye-sublimation. Next to them are large black-and-white photographs of women posed in print patterns from what could be Africa or Asia. Like the carpets, the images are devoid of any hue. Look closely, and each photo has a color-calibration chart that implies the images are from a kind of modern ethnographic study. These nameless women have been posed, or calibrated, in the same way a photographer would situate a studied insect or animal. Or is there something more going on here?

Yes, says Syjuco, who also references the work of two Malians, Malick Sidibe and Seydou Keita, who in the 1950s — at a time when geographical colonialism was still in effect — emerged as two of Africa’s greatest homegrown photographers. Instead of publications like National Geographic dispatching non-Africans to take pictures of Africans for the enjoyment of other non-Africans, these were Africans taking their own images.

“It’s a bit of a double-edged sword, my portraits,” says Syjuco, who was born in the Philippines and raised in the Bay Area, and is now an assistant professor in sculpture at UC Berkeley. “There’s an amount of play in them, because I’m fictionalizing what I’m considering these almost Filipino tribes. There’s playfulness, but also a nod toward ethnographic portraiture and a more institutionalized way of looking at culture.”

The gallery’s multimedia room features Syjuco’s 22-minute, 3D-animated work in which she wraps Villa Savoye — Le Corbusier’s famous 1930s French building — in camouflage style, using layers of patterns from three of France’s former colonies: Morocco, Algeria, and Vietnam. All the while, we hear sounds of people from those countries — recordings of everyday (publicly sourced) scenes that Syjuco found in her research.

“It’s kind of these invisible societies that aren’t depicted in the video,” says Syjuco, who won a prestigious Guggenheim fellowship in 2014. “They’re like ghosts, or the hidden ‘other,’ or the hidden colonial society, that helped fuel the creation of this modern, Western society. Le Corbusier’s building was supposed to represent progress and the modern ideal, and it was built around the same time that colonialism existed.”

Syjuco’s own story is geographically and culturally complicated. Growing up, she used other people’s images to imagine what the Philippines were like. She knows how images can easily sway perception. “My family migrated to the U.S. when I was 3 or 4, and I grew up mostly in the Filipino-American community. What’s interesting about first-generation American children is that they usually have a fantasy about where they came from,” she says. “You’re removed from what’s considered a homeland, and you’re piecing it together and constructing it. There’s

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an amount of fictionalization that goes with that, even for someone who claims to be of that identity.”

On some level, then, the fictionalized women in Syjuco’s photographs are a proxy for Syjuco herself. She’s imposing a “make-believe” atmosphere onto her subjects that seems familiar and strange at the same time. Parsing out these competing elements gives each object in “Neutral Calibration Studies (Ornament + Crime)” its power to engage an art-goer.

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San Francisco Chronicle

Syjuco discovers the colors of 'neutrality'

By **Charles Desmarais** Updated 4:02 pm, Friday, June 10, 2016



"Cargo Cults: Cover-Up" (2016), a photograph by Stephanie Syjuco

There is a technical concept in photography and film of "neutral gray," a tone that most of us would perceive as halfway between black and white. Stephanie Syjuco wants you to know that, physics aside, images are never neutral.

Born in the Philippines — first a colony of Spain and then of the United States — Syjuco has shown in her work a continuing interest in the kind of cultural subjugation that inevitably ac-

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companies colonialism. That would include both historic, military imperialism and the current form of, mostly, economic neocolonialism.

Rather than preach or harangue, however, she brings to her art a sense of humor and an acute understanding of the often barely visible remnants of those systems.

In “Neutral Calibration Studies (Ornament + Crime),” a tightly structured exhibition at Catharine Clark Gallery, Syjuco examines the notion of neutrality from, literally, various angles. A large installation in the central room is a sculptural paradox: a three-dimensional structure built up, you soon realize, mostly of overlapping cutout pictures, propped up together on a platform. The images become characters — some human in form, others not; in flat monochrome, black-and-white or full color; ranging from life-size to minutely reduced — all actors together on a stage.

From the entrance it seems substantial. Walk around to backstage, though, and you see how flimsy it all is: a child’s toy theater; the proverbial Potemkin village. From the rear, everything is coated with paint of the same 18 percent gray — neutral gray.

The falseness of it all so blatantly exposed. What were those actors purported to be? The exotic. Oriental. Ethnic. Worn-out words for tattered notions of difference, matched here by the artist’s choices of found examples and images of sculpture, carpets, furniture, plants. Visual material that once had authentic cultural value, stripped of spirit and genuine function, demeaned by its ubiquity in inhospitable settings, lifted from Internet posts and auction sites, recopied from loss-y reproductions.

A Roman bust, likely based upon a Greek model. Statuettes from ancient Egypt, Africa, Central America — or, perhaps, the dime store downtown. Charlotte Perriand, reclining on the lounge she probably designed for Le Corbusier (he of the invented, meaningless name) and for which he received credit. Fakes faking fakes.

Arrayed around the central installation are individual photographs, these produced by the artist rather than appropriated, that fall into two categories. In the main room are images of orchids — exotic flora to most of America — sprayed with more of that gray paint, in an apparent attempt to “neutralize” them — which in this case, of course, would also starve them of air, killing them. Their subtly colored blossoms are signs they still survive, for now.

The other grouping of photographs consists of self-portraits of the artist, attired in what appears at first to be some sort of native dress. It’s all mall-bought, geometrically patterned clothing — with Gap and Charlotte Russe price tags still attached — set off by jewelry fashioned from digital cables and bungee cords. Syjuco titles the series, appropriately, “Cargo Cults,” a reference to one particularly bizarre effect of colonialist adventure in some parts of the world.

Haphazardly piled on the floor are black-and-white photographs on cloth — pixelated images of rugs from various cultures (or imagined cultures), stolen online, blown up to their original size.

The artist employs an alternate strategy in a video work, in a final gallery, that again references

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Le Corbusier. Here, she alters a digital model of the architect's Villa Savoye to cover the stark white walls of the strictly Modernist residence with, a wall text tells us, folk textile patterns from former French colonies; street sounds from Algeria, Morocco and Vietnam make up the soundtrack.

Every photograph, the artist and theorist Allan Sekula wrote in a seminal 1975 essay, "is a sign, above all, of someone's investment in the sending of a message." To invest, of course, is not only to make a conscious calculation, but also to gamble. Those messages we are sending may, if we are lucky, communicate what we mean. At the same time, as Syjuco points out in this deeply engaging exhibition, we may also be saying a lot more than we intend.



Left to right: "Neutral Orchids (Phalaenopsis + Dracaena sanderana)" (2016), a photograph by Stephanie Syjuco and "Cargo Cults: Head Bundle" (2016), a photograph by Stephanie Syjuco

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Napa Valley
Register

YOUNTVILLE — How can someone persuade others to waste less and reuse more? One can lay out the facts and figures of conservation – or show, face to face, how inventively artists can turn trash into treasure.

This winter, the Napa Valley Museum is taking the second path.

"Trashed and Treasured," an exhibit that opened last month in Yountville, is showcasing the work of a 26-year partnership between the Recology waste management firm and a host of artists. From raw materials gathered at Recology's trash collection center in San Francisco, artists in residence craft works as diverse as typewriter-ribbon black dresses, mid-20th-century Modernist living room sets of scrap wood, and likenesses of a Disneyesque princess or Beatrice from Dante's "Divine Comedy" – all meant to creatively call attention to the torrents of refuse generated in people's daily lives.

The myriad ways of reshaping throwaways – and the nearly pristine condition of what people discard – can be the most eloquent message for conservation, according to Meagan Doud, curator of the Yountville museum.

"People would be surprised at what's thrown away," she said while the gallery was empty around noon Sunday. "A lot of the artists can't believe the new-looking things that get thrown away, things that are still useful."

"It's not about beating people over the head asking 'Why aren't you recycling?' It's asking what else you can do with trash that could be useful, reimagining what your trash could be."

Despite the weekend's scarcity of visitors shortly after the holiday break, Doud said the recycled-art exhibit, which debuted Dec. 12 and remains on view through March 27, has attracted more committed visitors than many other showings in the Yountville gallery. "We get people staying for much longer – an hour, an hour and a half at a time – and getting engaged with

From dump to gallery: Exhibition highlights trash turned art

the displays and the wall didactics," she said.

"Trashed and Treasured" may mark the Recology art collection's first appearance in Napa County, but the program has produced numerous works from more than 150 partners since its 1990 founding, according to curator Sharon Spain.

Each year, the company sponsors two artists in residence, who are invited to collect materials from the waste transfer center in San Francisco. An on-site studio provides the space for assembling art pieces and exhibiting them to visitors, and selected works are shown around the Bay Area at six to 10 exhibits annually.

"The underlying reason for this program is educational, to teach people about reuse and recycling and resource conservation," said Spain. "We do a lot of tours for elementary-school children and the general public, so they have an opportunity to meet the artists and reflect on their own consumption patterns. This is an innovative way to get people to think about reuse."

Messages embedded in the artworks can range from the polemical to the historic to the simply playful. At

the Napa Valley Museum, Stephanie Syjuco's replicas of 1950s living room furniture by the designers Charles and Ray Eames – but pieced from surplus lumber, old tarps, foam and duct tape – intended to point at economic inequality, shared floor space with the strangely soothing revolving motion of yellow sailcloth "petals" within A Spring Rain, a 2013 creation by Benjamin Cowden that Doud slowly cranked with the handle of a repurposed meat grinder.

Elsewhere in the gallery, a set of pale white embossings in quaint-looking cursive script were more than what they seemed at a passing glance. The creations by Julia Anne Goodman, made from rag-based paper, were in fact an homage to the lowly, anonymous women who combed the San Francisco landfill for fabric scraps to use for papermaking before the mid-1960s.

The chance to bring to light not only buried treasure but such long-forgotten stories is one way such artworks can touch the heart as well as the brain, said Spain, the Recology curator.

"Art has a way of reaching people that is unique," she said. "It's very different than just reading about something, because it creates an emotional response. It can be more profound."

- Howard Yune



Installation view, *Eames Style Storage Unit, 4x2 (Multi)*, 2014, *Wassily Chair in Belting Leather (Black)*, 2014, *After Anni Albers*, 2014.

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ARTFORUM

Singapore

“Double Vision”
NUS MUSEUM, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE
50 Kent Ridge Crescent, University Cultural Centre
June 9, 2016 – July 31, 2016



Shireen Seno, *Shotgun Tuding*, 2013, 16-mm film, 13 minutes.

There is a silence around hegemony—a lack of diverse voices, born not of subaltern complicity, but of structural acceptance and, sometimes, forgetfulness. It is thus no surprise, in the global theater of art and film festivals, where hegemonic spectacle subsumes other projects into its main narrative, that an exhibition such as this one is so rare.

Curated by Singapore-based Siddharta Perez, the show features video work and experimental film by David Griggs, Gym Lumbera, Miko Revereza, Roxlee, Shireen Seno, Angel Velasco Shaw, Stephanie Syjuco, and Kidlat Tahimik—artists working in the Philippines or belonging to its diaspora. An incisive look at the country through the lens of American culture and Cold War policy, the exhibition imagines the Philippines as a “doubled” land and nation. For example, Syjuco’s abstract video work *Body Double (Platoon)*, 2005, presents excerpts of Philippine jungle footage from Oliver Stone’s Vietnam film, *Platoon* (1986).

American tropes are recurrent in the other works presented, such as Seno’s video *Shotgun Tuding*, 2013, an appropriation of spaghetti western films; Tahimik’s *Perfumed Nightmare*, 1977, inspired by Voice of America radio broadcasts; and Grigg’s *Where’s Francis?*, 2013, a short film about two Filipino extras acting as severed heads in the film *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The satire and appropriation in the works rouse us with disquieting revelations, nowhere more poignant than in *Where’s Francis?*, when a protagonist, after thirty years of being stuck in the mud, claims that “Sheen had a heart attack and so now they forgot about us”—referring to actor Martin Sheen’s medical crisis that almost derailed the filming of Coppola’s classic.

Breaking the silence, “Double Vision” inspires an uncanny terror in the encounter with something insidiously familiar, returning our attention to the important, wordless, often forgotten implications of brushing against the soft power of a hegemonic culture.

— Kathleen Ditzig

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WIRED

Painting the Store Red

By Rachel Swaby 06.05.12

The Golden Gate Bridge just celebrated its 75th birthday. There were boat parades and bands and an impressive fireworks show. But tucked under a span of the bridge's South side, inside a building once tasked with protecting the city behind it, a quieter tribute was taking place.

As a part of the "International Orange" exhibit, 16 artists are displaying work at Fort Point to toast the bridge. Paper dresses, photographed sea creatures, and a real-time sound installation will occupy parts of the historic building's chilly barracks through October 2012.

Among them is Stephanie Syjuco's "International Orange Commemorative Store," a gift shop in which every item on offer is dipped in the bridge's iconic orangey-red paint. It's a place where everything is familiar, but nothing is quite right.

It's a souvenir store with a twist. "What is the most disconcerting is that there are no images on things," says Syjuco. Apart from that iconic orange marking each and every object, there is no branding to speak off."

The range of products on display is also slightly absurd: Pencils, keychains, and earrings sit atop a table. An Eames chair is perched on a stand to the left. Lined up on shelves against the back wall are mugs, pillows, plate sets, and bottles of unidentified red sauce. "I tried to overdo it," says Syjuco. "There's wine, deodorant, car air fresheners — it gets crazy."

But that initial impression of excess is just for show. None of the color-splashed items, as it turns out, are actually for sale. The only souvenir you're allowed to take home is a bridge-colored postcard — one of 50,000 made for the exhibit — offered for free.

The experience is one you can't pay for. (get it?) But there's also a simpler reason you wouldn't want to open your wallet: "A lot of the packaging is empty," says Syjuco. "The store is a giant prop."

That set was created over the course of five months with the help of half a dozen local vendors and several assistants. Together they constructed, painted, and labeled thousands of items — many by hand.

Syjuco also enlisted Heath Ceramics to create a set



Keychains and canned food: just a few of the blank items on display at Stephanie Syjuco's shop

of vibrant dinnerware for the installation as well as a local fashion designer and a screen printer to help with the clothing and tote bags. It turned out to be a pretty extreme craft project.

Before the making got underway, Syjuco had to source the paint color (which, by the way, is no longer International Orange). "The color actually changed," explained Syjuco in a video produced for the For-Site Foundation. "This [work] is based on the actual paint, which is a custom mix just known as Golden Gate Bridge."

The initial impression of excess is just for show. None of the color-splashed items, as it turns out, are actually for sale.

Where do you go to get Golden Gate Bridge? Syjuco ventured out onto the pedestrian walkway and kindly asked a painter for a sample. With bounty in hand, the artist then headed over to Sherwin-Williams to get a match.

The good news: the paint maker just so happened to be the Golden Gate's official color supplier. The bad news: The color is a special order for industry, mixed up in 500-gallon batches. But Sherwin-Williams obliged with a five-gallon sample in a matched color to cover all the work Syjuco was planning to do by hand.

But when it came to printing the postcards, dyeing the material, glazing the ceramics, and screen-printing the T-shirts, each manufacturer made their own approximation of the bridge's hue. "Everyone's interpretation of the color swatch is different," explains Syjuco. "There is not an equivalent Pantone." To most of us with untrained eyes, the exhibit will just look like one gloriously ruddy homage to the Golden Gate Bridge. For Syjuco, the color with all its variants, "has grown on me," she says.

It's a good thing, too. As the San Francisco native was elbow deep in paint in preparation for the bridge's birthday, she was also preparing for her own, which lands on the same date.

"Apart from just the color," says Syjuco. "The bridge and I have had a long-term relationship."

Photos courtesy of Stephanie Syjuco

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STEPHANIE SYJUCO

by Stephanie Smith and Ariel Rosen



Open-source Conceptualism

In Arfham in 1967, Sol LeWitt famously said: "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art." This challenge to the cult of the object-masterspiece, to both viewer and art establishment, was present in today's digitized and globalized world as it was in the Conceptual Art movement of the 1970s. Stephanie Syjuco is a contemporary artist whose work disrupts normal modes of function and distribution, such as how they challenge the role of the museum and digital copyright. Commenting on over-access and the loss of the object in the digital age, she uses Conceptual tactics of institutional critique, text and a do-it-yourself, amateurish facility.

As e-books displace libraries and web pages replace the museum visit, Syjuco examines the role of the object in this century. Using images from museum databases to generate "borrowed" or mis-translated artwork, she challenges the primacy of the institution and its collection. In her 2010 project, *neMoMA*, Syjuco worked with art students at the University of Washington, Pullman, to recreate fifty objects from the collection of the inaccessible, perhaps reluctant art institution located on the other side of the country. With pixelated JPEGs and scavenged materials, students created an "illegal traveling exhibition" that re-fabricated masterworks from the Museum of Modern Art, New York, such as a Calder made of cardboard. In the same town that hosts the National Lentil Festival, Syjuco orchestrated an exhibition that might convince the average American of its authenticity. The project reframes a question that continues to occupy Syjuco: "Does the aura of famous artworks still exist when remade by others?"

Syjuco makes creators of viewers and often gifts the visitor with something physical to take home. In her *FREE TEXT*: An Open Source Reading Room, she delves into the hot button issue of digital copyright. Using text and viewer interaction as a primary tool, Syjuco opens a dialogue about cultural ownership in the 21st century. At the 2012 ZERO1 Biennial Seeking Silicon Valley, she created an inviting library space with the "artist-as-librarian" at her production desk amidst shelves of blank bound books, communal tables and benches. Ironically, Syjuco curated and obtained her library contents addressing the copyright issue by downloading texts from illegal, open-source websites. Visitors pulled tabs bearing URLs linking to free texts from flyers that plastered one wall in the library. The viewer is the cog in LeWitt's proverbial machine and in Syjuco's project, accessing and disseminating these illicit texts-cum-artworks whether from the exhibition space or home office.

This core notion of access, illegal, over-abundant or denied, interests Syjuco, who continues to probe how culture and taste are assessed, produced, and disseminated. Her delivery system promises to keep pace with evolving technologies.



*FREE TEXT: An Open Source Reading Room, 2012, photo: Invited to View, contribution by the ZERO1 Biennial, San Jose, CA, image courtesy of the artist and Co Curatorial Gallery



*FREE TEXT: An Open Source Reading Room, 2012, photo: Invited to View, contribution by the ZERO1 Biennial, San Jose, CA, image courtesy of the artist and Co Curatorial Gallery

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Los Angeles MAGAZINE

So You Want a Dior Handbag? Make It Yourself

Artist Stephanie Syjuco is writing the anarchist's guide to couture accessories

Posted on 3/1/2013 4:45:00 PM by Jenny Lower



Photo courtesy of Counterfeit Crochet



A few years ago, Stephanie Syjuco received what amounted to a cease and desist letter from Louis Vuitton. The designer was concerned about how she was appropriating their trademark clover—alongside logos from Chanel, Gucci, Yves Saint Laurent, Coach, and Burberry—in a global craft insurrection she's calling The Counterfeit Crochet Project (*Critique of a Political Economy*).

In 2006, fascinated with issues of piracy and reproduction, the San Francisco-based artist issued an international crafting call to arms: Dig up a picture of your favorite couture

handbag; approximate your best version, sans pattern, with wool and a crochet hook; then post your version online, disguising your identity (and theoretically guilty conscience).

The initiative caught fire. The best efforts of Syjuco's collaborators—uncannily precise knock-offs that only reveal their soft, knobby nature up close—are currently on display in the Craft Art and Folk Museum's Social Fabric exhibit running through May 5th. On Sunday, Syjuco will hold beginner and advanced workshops at CAFAM, teaching participants basic stitches and techniques for starting their own bags.

Louis Vuitton's scolding letters never escalated into a lawsuit, but Syjuco said via email she still feels like she has a strong case. For one thing, nothing gets sold. Each product is the sole invention of its creator and not reproducible in any way. "There is also the question of artistic appropriation (à la Warhol's Campbell Soup Cans) that puts it squarely in line with historical art issues," she says.

For Syjuco, the project isn't about thumbing her nose at the designer industry or smirking at an advertising machine that schools us to desire arbitrary objects we can't afford. Since most bags are manufactured overseas with cheap labor for a fraction of their final price, luxury goods raise fundamental questions about equity.

On her website, Syjuco writes, "I view the impetus to hand-make something as a personal and perhaps even political act, a way to give yourself agency to create and produce in an age of standardization and retail."

There's something especially sweet about subverting a one-percenter system of supply and demand with a fundamentally unsexy, supposedly unskilled activity like crocheting, which Syjuco jokingly calls "the lowly stepchild" of crafting.

Will it catch on? We're hoping to see one of these babies on Jennifer Lawrence's arm at the next Academy Awards.



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Current Exhibitions in New York

TOP 5 EXHIBITIONS TO SEE IN NEW YORK THIS WEEKEND. RYAN / LEE GALLERY 527 WEST 26ST STREET

Stephanie Syjuco: Raiders is a collection of vessels—digitally printed on archival photo paper, scaled to actual size and mounted on laser-cut wood—that has been culled from the public online database of the prominent Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. The artist investigates the idea of cultural appropriation and the Internet's role in its dissemination. In addition, the series functions as a means to explore her Filipino heritage and its relationship with other Asian cultures in a social context. Including mostly Chinese vases, Syjuco references the common assumption that, because of her race, she has knowledge of these objects. The title of the series, "RAIDERS: International Booty, Bountiful Harvest (Selections from the Collection of the A____ A__ M____)," touches on notions of archeological raids and popular culture, such as Indiana Jones and Raiders of the Lost Arc, as well as 21st-century piracy as it pertains to issues of the cultural acquisition of historically significant objects.

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BLOUIN ARTINFO

Faking It at Frieze

by Sarah Douglas

Published: October 19, 2009



Want to make some acquisitions at Frieze but afraid you'll break the bank? Tried to ask a dealer for a 97% discount — hey, isn't it a recession? — and got laughed out of the booth? Don't despair! Head on over to stand P7, devoted to Philippines-born artist Stephanie Syjuco's project "Copystand: an Autonomous Manufacturing Zone," which is part of the Frieze Projects series curated by Neville Wakefield. Syjuco and several of her artist colleagues have set up a workshop where they're recreating art being sold by other Frieze presenters out of humble materials, such as cardboard. All the copies are for sale, and all are priced no higher than £500 (\$820).

Now, contemporary art's relationship with fakes has always been a little complicated. You've got your appropriationists, your rephotographers, your art world-approved, official fakers — Sherrie Levine, Mike Bidlo, Richard Pettibone, et al. — and then you've got your unofficial fakers, like Eric Doeringer, who used to set up a folding table outside art fairs and peddle his bootleg copies of works by Richard Prince, Jeff Koons and other household names.

Lately, Doeringer has been hawking his bootlegs inside art fairs, invited by Flash Art magazine, or even a fair itself, as was the case in Miami at the Geisai fair two years ago. And now, enter Syjuco's officially sanctioned project at Frieze, where, on Friday afternoon, she could be found standing next to what looked like one of Mark Wallinger's signature paintings depicting the single letter "I" in bold typeface. Syjuco herself had made this particular copy, which, unlike Wallinger's paint on canvas, is constructed from cardboard, wood, and paper; a pink dot on its label indicated that it had sold.

"There are two of these Wallinger paintings in the fair," Syjuco remarked. "So I wanted to make a visual play on the multiplication." This particular copy was one of the more expensive pieces on the stand, priced at £500 (\$820). "It will probably cost more to crate and ship it than it did to buy it," she observed. Compared with the large Wallinger "I" painting at Anthony Reynolds, which goes for £75,000 (\$123,000), her copy is a steal.

In Frieze's first two days, Syjuco and her colleagues sold a little under half of the 30 copies they'd made. Asked which of them are on the cheaper side, she pointed to one of her fellow Copystand artists, Otto von Busch, who was just then emerging from the workshop carrying a set of adorable, six-inch high cardboard-and-paint copies of classic Jean Dubuffet sculptures. "Those are just 10 pounds each," Syjuco announced. Just then, a couple browsing the Copystand asked to purchase one for their daughter, an art history student in Leeds who was disappointed about missing Frieze. A fair to remember, indeed.

Sarah Douglas is Senior Correspondent for Art+Auction, Modern Painters, and ARTINFO.

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ARTFORUM

March 2010
Reviews, New York

"1969" P.S. 1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER

It wasn't too long ago that the fortieth anniversary of the Summer of Love held boomers and civilians alike in its onanistic thrall. Yet in a chastened—even anodyne—return, the 1960s now invoked more frequently come at the decade's end. This exhibition, for one, means to recover the heterodox production of 1969 through a full-floor survey of works made that year. Perhaps it is unsurprising that we find our times reflected in this earlier postdiluvian climate, but that is not really the point. Indeed, in spite of originating in "a period marked with revolution and socio-political tumult," as the P.S. 1 press materials synopsize, "1969" comes off as surprisingly bloodless. Politics here are mostly local, which is to say self-referentially institutional. Culled from all of the Museum of Modern Art's departments, including its estimable archives, the exhibited works bespeak patterns of collecting then and financial constraints now; they also chronicle the museum's engagement with its critics (the Art Workers' Coalition features prominently, at least in the vitrines). Plus there is the restaged exhibition within the exhibition, "Five Recent Acquisitions," organized by MoMA curator Kynaston McShine in, yes, 1969, boasting a California posse (Larry Bell, Ron Davis, Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman, and John McCracken).

That attention is paid above all to MoMA's own record suggests that even the date is blindered—1969 is the median of the museum's eighty years. Setting aside such concerns, however, the premise of the exhibition still prompts questions, not least of which is what story the curatorial team (Neville Wakefield, with Michelle Elligott and Eva Respini) means to tell. Certainly—and despite the patent self-reflexivity—they do not seem to have combed the permanent collection for lost gems; nor do they argue for an alternative post-'60s trajectory. Helen Frankenthaler stands in for the waning of formalist modernism with a Color Field gone dimly, darkly monochromatic; Pop's afterlife is registered in a Richard Avedon photo of Andy Warhol's scarred torso, and in Warhol's own cult film *Blue Movie*; Minimalism shades into process in a Richard Serra scatter; Conceptualism encroaches in works by Robert Barry and Douglas Huebler; and so on. There are few women to speak of—the Frankenthaler, a Lee Lozano, a Martha Rosler—though there are several Bruce Naumanns. Painting is deemed irrelevant, with just a handful of traditional canvases on display.

One still might well ask why this year and not the one before or after—or what rounding up these relatively arbitrary objects might tell us about them or their period. A pedantic Wikipedia timeline hugging the interior hallway doesn't help in this regard. It does, however, raise the issue of the show's own context: this list of events downloaded from the Internet would have been just as remedial in the building when it was a functioning school. This broaches the matter of P.S. 1's position as a MoMA affiliate, and whether that relationship has here yielded anything more than a collection show absent works unfit for a building lacking climate control.

In the spirit of critique, the curators invited five contemporary artists, including the Bruce High Quality Foundation and Hank Willis Thomas, to produce "interventions." Most successfully, Stephanie



View of "1969".
2010. From left:
Stephanie Syjuco,
*Temporal Aggregate/
Social Configuration
(Borrowed Beuys)*,
2009. Background,
from left: Stephanie
Syjuco, *Custom
Transitional*;
Object (Morris A...),
2009; Martha
Rosler,
Cleaning the Drapes,
1969-72.

Syjuco's *Temporal Aggregate/Social Configuration (Borrowed Beuys)*, 2009, and *Custom Transitional Utility Object (Morris Mover)*, 2009, take on P.S. 1's stepchildlike status explicitly. The former is a Joseph Beuys re-created with felt, wax, and wood sourced from Syjuco's friends and the latter a fabric sculpture that could be used to transport works between MoMA and its satellite—works that could not be shown in the present grouping. As Syjuco's *Morris Mover* wall panel lays bare: "The original Morris could not be shown at P.S. 1 due to the felt's tendency to attract dirt, dust, and moths. . . . In addition prolonged exhibition of the work at P.S. 1 would preclude it from being presented in the immediate future at MoMA." Thus she admitted the exhibited works' insistent materiality, inscribing a history elsewhere rendered abstract.

—Suzanne Hudson



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The New York Times

Art Review | '1969'

The Year of Tumult

By HOLLAND COTTER

Published: October 29, 2009

In the fall of 1969, the country was having a nervous breakdown, and I was in my last year in college. I'd spent half the summer working in the emergency room of a New England factory town hospital, the rest traveling across Canada in a ruin of a car to visit friends in San Francisco.

Being in Canada, away from the political tumult at home, was a huge relief, though news kept breaking in throughout the ride: war, the moon walk, Charles Manson, Woodstock. Back in school in the fall there was more news: of Altamont, of Black Panthers killed in Chicago, of a panic-inducing draft lottery.

By many accounts, this was the year that finally snuffed out the flower-power high, turned the era sour. Whatever the reality, the cultural atmosphere was unforgettably manic and clamorous, though almost no sense of this comes through in the exhibition "1969" at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens.

True, the show was conceived with certain restrictive parameters. Almost everything in it is from the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, P.S. 1 being a MoMA affiliate. Maybe this explains why the selection adheres so closely to the late-1960s art establishment demographics, with a negligible presence of black, Asian, Latin American and female artists.

In addition, almost every piece dates from the year of the title, a year that fell squarely within the early, intensively dematerializing phase of Conceptualism, an art movement that privileged ideas and words over object and left relatively little to look at — a printed phrase, a list of instructions, a documentary snapshot — after the visual glut of Abstract Expressionism, Pop and Minimalism.

Radical discretion, though, is what made this art look revolutionary, as is evident in the first gallery. On one side you see a kooky Pop drawing of a scowling face by John Wesley, a gleaming brass Donald Judd box and a big Helen Frankenthaler painting that suggests a patch of aquamarine mold spreading elegantly across the wall.

Opposite the Frankenthaler is something quite small, a sheet of framed writing paper with a single typed phrase: "Something which can never be anything specific." It's by the Conceptual artist Robert Barry, who had earlier gained notice for a solo show consisting entirely of radio waves.

Farther down the wall is another framed sheet of paper, this one carrying a handwritten and heavily annotated proposal by the artist Lee Lozano for setting up one-on-one conversations

between herself and invited guests. Ms. Lozano was a painter who also developed idiosyncratic forms of social art, which were and weren't performances.

For one piece, she withdrew from the New York art establishment in an extended boycott. For another, she resolved to stop talking to women. Needless to say, this decision seriously complicated her already complicated relationship to feminism, which — though you would not know this from the show — was already a significant political force by 1969.

Whether Ms. Lozano was, strictly speaking, a Conceptualist is a question, one that might also be asked about the German artist Joseph Beuys, who appears, matinee-idol pretty and unblinkingly staring, in a video by Lutz Mommartz. Beuys referred to himself, his thinking and everything he did and made as “social sculpture,” thereby politicizing every aspect of daily life.

This was a sexy idea, particularly in the 1960s, and had enormous influence on young artists in Europe, though we learn little directly about Beuys's politics here, or about any other kind of politics in a burningly polemical, liberationist era. There's a flash of women's liberation in Ms. Lozano's sardonic word pieces and of gay liberation via Andy Warhol's hilariously wearisome talk-and-tease “Blue Movie.” A single poster by Emory Douglas, the official revolutionary artist for the Black Panther Party, is one of the few references to black power.

What does receive some detailed scrutiny is MoMA's own fraught history. A collection of letters, news releases and clippings is a reminder of ideological tussles between the museum and the Art Workers' Coalition, which formed in 1969 to demand rights for artists to control their work within the institution. In a separate display is a text-and-photo spread on the Guerrilla Action Art Group, whose bloodbath performance in MoMA's lobby to protest the war was conceived and executed with an activist vehemence apparently now extinct.

It is absent, at least, from much of the rest of the show, which tends to define radicality in aesthetic terms of less-is-more. A page from a John Cage score points to other examples of reductive playfulness: tiny items, like party favors with surprises inside, by members of Fluxus; an exhibition catalog published by the art dealer Seth Siegelaub, which doubled as the exhibition itself; 1969 issues of Artforum in which Stephen Kaltenbach ran advertisements consisting of nothing but cryptic commands: “Start a rumor,” “Perpetuate a hoax,” “Become a legend.”

The show doesn't lack for conventional objects. Chunky wall pieces by five California artists have been installed in a gallery-within-a-gallery as a reminder of what art at MoMA in 1969 actually looked like. And there are solid-gold stars. Bruce Nauman is ubiquitous; for him 1969 was a very good year, as it seems to have been for Richard Serra and Robert Smithson, both skeptics of the dematerializing trend.

And sure enough, the trend didn't last. Galleries need retail; artists need to provide it; critics like to write about what they know. So it wasn't long before big, solid and bankable were back. They're going strong still, and in a nice touch, the show's organizers — Neville Wakefield, P.S. 1 senior curatorial adviser; Michelle Elligott, a MoMA archivist; and Eva Respini, associate curator of photography at MoMA — have acknowledged the present by inviting some young artists to add a final word to the show. Hank Willis Thomas brings black popular culture into the picture with doctored clips from 1969 issues of Ebony and Jet magazines. The very-on-the-ball collective called the Bruce High Quality Foundation runs art historical pedagogy through visual shredders in its “portable museums.”

And, in the spirit of early Conceptualism's rejection of the preciousness of objects, the San Francisco artist Stephanie Syjuco has created her own version of a multipart Beuys ensemble that is owned by MoMA but couldn't, for reasons of fragility, be brought to P.S. 1. The original, which consists of a sled, a flashlight, a roll of felt and a hunk of wax, was inspired by a formative, possibly fictional episode in Beuys's life when, after being shot down in a plane in World War II, he was rescued by nomadic Tartars, who rubbed him with fat, wrapped him in felt for warmth and transported him by sled to safety.

Ms. Syjuco specializes in making inexpensive, recyclable reproductions of famous art. Her solution in this case was to recreate the Beuys installation from elements contributed by friends she contacted by e-mail, thus creating a literal “social sculpture.”

The piece was meant as a homage to Beuys, which is nice. But it's a funny thing: a work that was created as an emblem of a personal emergency, and that became a symbol of the artist-hero traveling with his survival kit of ideas and ideals through the world, looks, in reproduction, like a toy, intriguing but slight.

A lot of what's in "1969" looks that way: clever, hermetic, tame, even timid, an impression reinforced by the fact that early Conceptualism's one overarching political gesture — to make itself market-resistant, uncollectible — was a bust, as the very existence of "1969" demonstrates.

At the opening I watched an audience of mostly young people, no doubt many of them artists, drifting through the galleries. And I wondered three things. First, what could anyone who wasn't around in 1969 make of this stuff, given that someone who was around then was having such trouble connecting it to any lived experience of that time?

Second, did the old notion that art reflects, in some profound way, the era that produced it become invalid as work grew increasingly self-referential and inaccessible? Such a question should be placed in the hands of imaginative art historians, and it's too bad some weren't invited to shape and contextualize this show, which is ridiculously withholding of factual information.

And third, should young artists fret about any of this? To some extent, yes. Whether they are making history or not, history is making them all the time as news pours in, constant and inescapable. They should pay attention to that news, sort through it, find their place in it, be as alert to the past as to the present. Then, overwhelmed, they should get behind the wheel, step on the gas and go till the tank's running dry.