Making Faces, Making Do

Curator's Catalogue Notes
Titamarialmairma: Conversations with 19th Century Artists
Surrounded by Water Alternative Space and Gallery, 2002

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The title of this exhibition –TITAMARIALMAIRMA – combines the first names of four contemporary artists, who I invited to share their insights on the 19th century, by conversing with artists of their choice from that period. They are: TITA Lim; MARIA Taniguchi; ALMA "Urduja" Quinto; and IRMA Lacorte.

The artists in this exhibition represent a range of artistic histories and locations. TITA Lim is a photographer, whose works revolve around the manipulated photograph, a process that in her words, "fractures the myth of mirror/literal truthfulness" of photography and its "oppressive requirements as a medium"; ALMA "Urduja" Quinto is a feminist activist, art educator and artist, who utilizes the labor-intensive art forms of fiber and needlework; and IRMA Lacorte is one of the few artists in the Philippines, who openly confronts and declares her lesbian identity, through painting, collage, assemblage and installation.

While these three artists belong to the generation who started to pursue art seriously in the 1980s to the 90s, MARIA Taniguchi represents an up-and-coming generation barely out of art school, but who are already posting remarkable gains in their practice. Taniguchi is an art student majoring in sculpture at the UP College of Fine Arts, who also works on a variety of mediums, from painting to installation.

Common to all four is a contemporary artistic language that revolves around **"cultural appropriation,"** a process of borrowing, "stealing," or "making do" with, or making a new use for, and in effect, changing the meaning, of cultural objects and artifacts by mobilizing a varied range of strategies of media. (Sturken and Cartwright 2001) In the process, they present "Other" ways of resisting, as well as retooling the durable legacies of the 19th century, not only as period, but as a contested site of contending discourses that continue to resonate two centuries later.

The strategy of making do is clearly seen in how these women combine and straddle a broad variety of artistic disciplines and cultural domains in their works. In *Making Faces Series* for instance, Tita Lim combines artistic sites and sights from opposite ends of the spectrum - from the fine art/high culture of painting and its consumption through the photographic image in art books, to popular culture with its glossy fashion magazines and Xerox machines. Similarly, Irma Lacorte's *U.F.O Urbana, Felisa and Others,* juxtaposes a 19th century code of manners, written in epistolary format by a priest, with elements from popular TV shows, tabloids, advice columns, horoscopes, get-rich-quick games, and showbiz gossip. Like Lim, Lacorte draws on several mediums

and formats – the photocopy machine, photographs, collage, the diary and the book bound sketchpad.

Alma Quinto and Maria Taniguchi, on the other hand, foreground the art forms of woodcarving and needlework, thus calling attention to the overlooked traditions in the 19th century, but which continue to exist and evolve to the present. As accounts by Alice Guillermo (1997) and Patrick Flores [1] tell us, it was during the 19th century when concept of "art" as academic, studio or "fine art," took hold[2], thus occasioning a shift, not only in the very definition of art, but also in the structures and patterns of patronage of the "art world." (Flores 1998). And as I have argued more fully elsewhere (Datuin 2002), these transformations marginalized, not only of the "pre-colonial" or "indigenous" craftsperson (Guillermo 1997), but especially of women such as embroidery, weaving, basket making and so on.

"Art" then became the proper domain of men, and creation, the domain of the maestros, from the 19th century to the present.[3] From colonization to decolonization, and the subsequent formation of the modern nation-state, women are many times marginalized, because of their race and history as colonial subjects, and secondly, because of their positions in the class and gender structures.[4]

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[1] Accounts by Alice Guillermo and Patrick Flores tell us that the 19th century is a period marked by momentous turning points in political-economic and cultural spheres. It was during the 19th century when the Philippines inserted itself in the global economy through the export of agricultural crops, which resulted, among others, in the deepening of the division between classes. This period saw the rise of an *Ilustrado* elite - mestizo traders, agents, and landed proprietors, who benefited from the export trade, on one hand; and the emergence of contractual wage labor and tenant-operated farms, on the other. (Guillermo 1997)

In this configuration, men and women of the period continued to share a common subjection to Spanish colonial rule, which despite token educational reforms, "remained as backward and as erratic as ever." (Guillermo 1997, 279) Along class lines however, it is the ilustrado reformer/collaborator, who occupies the most privileged position vis-à-vis for instance, the exponents of "native revolts" like Esteban Villanueva (*Basi Revolt Series*) and "homegrown" talents (Damian Domingo, Antonio Malantic, and Simon Flores, among others) who did not go to Europe and America for art training and education (Luna, Hidalgo, and Rizal) (Flores 1998).

[2] The "swerve" in the definition of artist from the anonymous artisan to named artist began as early as the 17th century when engravers like Nicolas dela Cruz Bagay and Francisco Suarez signed their work, with "Indio Tagalo" and "Filipino," respectively. However, the shift in the notion of art as academic, and the definition of artist as professional practitioner who has acquired training and specialized skill in art were institutionalized through the establishment of the Academia de Dibujo in 1821 and the exodus of ilustrado scholars to Europe at the turn of the century (Flores 1998)

[3] Juan Luna, Felix Resureccion Hidalgo, Simon Flores and Fernando Amorsolo have no known female counterparts; neither do the vanguards of pioneering art movements, like Victorio Edades, the father of Philippine modernism. From Lyd Arguilla, the founder of Philippine Art Gallery to Purita Kalaw Ledesma, founder of the Art Association of the Philippines (AAP), to Imelda Marcos, one-time patroness of the arts, women were merely adjuncts to the male artists and were not creators themselves.

[4] In the 19th century, women were hardly documented and considered as artists, and it is only recently that they are becoming more visible through empirical research and "compensatory histories." For documentation on women artists on the 19th century, see the studies done by Rivera (1998), Icagasi (1998) and Hernandez (2001). For a compensatory history of Filipina artists in the Visual Arts, from the 19th century to the present, see Datuin 2002.

It is this theme of women's multiple subjections and continuing invisibility that I wish to foreground in this exhibit. And it is also in the light of this curatorial agenda that this exhibit features the work of artists, who I invited to reflect on this theme, not only because they are women, but more so because their works manifest some of the ways by which women artists can look back and return the gaze of the 19th century optic.

Challenging the Master's Gaze

In her works, Lim offers "a new way of seeing photographically" and "changing the terms of reference on the depiction of the female body" by altering photographic images through unorthodox darkroom techniques (bleaching, burning, coloring, scratching a processed film), collage and in this case, the "cut-and-paste" method, among others. In *Making Faces,* she unfreezes the inert, passive figure of images of women made by a 19th century painters, particularly Juan Luna, and urges us to adjust our focus, and re-calibrate our shutter speeds and apertures.

Like Lim, Lacorte urges us to adjust our vision, and view with critical eyes the oppressive constructs of women, which are widely-disseminated through several periods and media – from the 19th century *Urbana at Felisa* down to the popular TV show of the same title. As hinted at by Maria Taniguchi in her work, we must "zoom out" from the myopic view of women, the better to challenge the master's gaze from another perspective, and another eye/I.

The patriarchal gaze and everyday life

These women's challenge to the patriarchal gaze can best be understood in the context of their everyday experiences of oppression, which in the case of Lacorte, is compounded by being many times more disadvantaged, on account of her position as lesbian. In *U.F.O.,* she zeroes in on the 19th century's ladies of privilege through the photocopied excerpts from *Urbana at Felisa,* which she proceeds to irreverently "update" through photographs of her lesbian friends. On one hand, she forges a link with the cosseted ladies of the 19th century, and taps on their common subjection to the panoptic, patriarchal structure. However, she also asks a question, that runs like a strong undercurrent in this work: "If (heterosexual) women were and still are kept in closets and convents, can you imagine how it is with us with lesbians?"

Maria Taniguchi's work suggests a similar policing of women's bodies, this time, within the domestic interiors of the home and its accessories. Through miniaturized furniture crafted by Paete woodcarvers, she brings to mind the limited space and confined movements of the ilustrada, which we access largely through faded photographs and 19th century miniaturist paintings. In these portraits, the ilustrada, signifier of ilustrado wealth, class and prestige, is garbed in her formal finery, cast in the classic, frontal pose of proper decorum as set down by the *Urbana at Felisa* code of manners. Although she has freedom to move around within her *bahay-na-bato,* she is admonished not to stray too close to her open windows, lest she demean and expose herself as an immoral woman, waiting to picked, like a succulent cluster of grapes.

As wife, mother, daughter and sister, respectable women of the 19th century were confined to their comfortable but limited spaces, where they are shielded from the "risk and fluidity of the street. " (Pollock 1995) Literature on the 19th century Philippines suggest that the only women who regularly plied the streets of the city unaccompanied were prostitutes and revolutionaries (e.g. Rizal's Pepay), destitutes, mad women (e.g. Rizal's Sisa), and women of the working classes. The demarcations that kept elite women in the private interiors of the home were drawn, not only in terms of gender, or between the spaces of masculinity (the city, the workplace, the brothels and bars) and femininity (home, garden, opera, salon); but also in terms of class. Respectable women had to distinguish themselves from their "others" – the prostitutes, entertainers, and laborers.

Alma Quinto crosses these lines by taking us to the streets of *Road 29,* and by giving voice and face to domestic helpers - anonymous women who keep house in middle class homes. She re/collects their stories and dreams through a collaborative tapestry, fashioned out of small scraps of fabric, assembled, embroidered, and stitched together in a way that simulates and reenacts the helper's daily rituals of cleaning and maintaining their employers' homes.

Harnessing Women's Creative Power

In her work, Quinto re-connects with Adelaida Paterno, a 19th century artist who used her hair as medium for her intricately embroidered landscapes and genres. As discussed by Eloisa May Hernandez in her study of 19th century women artists (2001), Adelaida is often lauded in art criticism because her works approximate the texture of drawing or etching, art forms which are more legitimate, compared to a "feminine" pursuit associated with "sewing circles."

But by recalling the work of Adelaida, Quinto harnesses women's specific creative power through a focused, meditative and communal language, which they can rightly call their own. By stitching women's collective memories together through cloth and needle, she testifies to women's generative capacity, particularly their power to give birth, which produces the next generation, and their ability to weave, quilt and sew, which produces cloth.

As products of tourism and industry, textiles signify the subjugated "third world," which continues to be plundered as fertile source of touristic souvenirs and trinkets, of industrial raw materials and cheap labor, and as dumping ground for the first world's finished products. But as she draws her visual language from the textile's fabric of communication Quinto disrupts the grammar of capitalist transactions through her own improvisational gestures of collecting and re-collecting memories through discarded cloth or "retazos," of mobility and fixedness, doing and undoing through the very actions of sewing, quilting, and threading. As she puts it: "I am using the very same 'tool' that our colonizers used to subjugate women to liberate/empower them." (in Canta 2000, 2).

This sly and silent tactic of returning the colonizer's gaze by stealing, borrowing and modifying his language and schemes is the thread that stitches this exhibit together.

TITA makes faces at the masters, and tampers with their masterpieces; IRMA peeks into the closets of prim and proper ladies, and slyly inserts her lesbian identity to make fun – with tongue in cheek - of their code of ethics; MARIA shrinks the elite ladies' world of interiors, thus craftily simulating their confined and policed spaces; and ALMA stages her own "sewing circle" of anonymous and invisible women of the laboring domestic class.

As a collective and as individuals, TITAMARIALMAIRMA thumb their noses and make faces at the 19th century, its modes of erasures, surveillance, and oppression. In the process, they make do and make the best of the historical givens of a period, the echoes of which reverberate to the present.

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