

Fabric, Foam, Stories: Alma Quinto's *Soft Dreams and Bed Stories*
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In this exhibition, Alma "Urduja" Quinto mobilizes fiber and foam and re-forms them to produce works that signify what the artist describes as "the struggles of memory against forgetting." Entitled "Soft Dreams and Bed Stories," this work is composed of tapestries, soft sculptures of toys culled from Philippine mythology and folk stories and a bed, shaped in the form of the *babaylan* or ancient priestess. As in her other works, these pieces embody and reiterate the following threads of Quinto's artistic vocabulary:

1. The artist's belief in and commitment to the power of art to transform, heal and empower, as exemplified in the collaborative tapestries in this exhibition. Spinning off from an earlier project called "Sew and Tell", held at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, the tapestries re-collect the painful stories of Quinto's students in the art workshops she conducts for CRIBS Philippines, a Manila-based institution where girl survivors of abuse are housed and cared for. In those workshops, Quinto encouraged the children to remember and disclose their stories by writing, drawing, painting and embroidering their traumatic memories on grids of cloth, which Quinto sewed together to form a tapestry entitled *Sugat* or "wound" for this exhibition. In the other tapestries, Quinto reweaves the stories of the children, which she culled from the children's case histories and interviews with the children and CRIBS's social workers. Through what Quinto terms as "creative visual autobiography," the children's painful memories are not only retrieved, but also *reshaped*, through the processes and materials of art. Art, in this case is not just a form of therapy, outlet or means of "catharsis" or just a way of coping with pain (as in art therapy). It is also a means for reconnecting with others and the larger domain of culture, where the survivor returns to live.
2. The artist's refusal to "purge" needlework of the "stigma" of utility and decoration, as seen in the interactive bed, tapestries and soft sculptures that function as mediums for telling tales and weaving stories. In the process, she challenges the sexist and dualistic distinction between "high art," traditionally associated with masculinity and the feminine and feminized "low arts" of handicraft. By referencing the intricate relationship between process and material in women's traditional arts, Quinto dissolves this duality by challenging the assumption that making art and designing functional objects are two conflicting occupations.
3. The interactive and collaborative character of the artist's pieces, which encourages the viewer to initiate a tactile, therapeutic and celebratory encounter with the works. The works are not to be "looked at" with a disembodied seeing eye/I, but must be felt, touched and appreciated for their textural and performative properties. Thus, the artist-as-medium urges us to recover those forgotten gestures, which have become increasingly automatized and mechanized within the consumerist and mediatized habituations of our daily lives

4. The artist's use of recycled materials or discards, such as foam and "retazos" she collects from thrift shops or "ukay-ukay," which she stitches and glues together through a technique closely aligned with the additive and cumulative process of quilting and patchwork. When women quilt, they "make do" with whatever is available, to produce utilitarian objects through a focused, meditative and communal language which they can rightly call their own. As women go through the motions of quilting, they summon each fabric, and proceed to re-form, re-use and re-stitch it, not only for what it could contribute to their over-all plan or design, but more so for what it *means* to them, emotionally and historically. And as can be seen in the tapestries woven out of the children's stories, cloth and needlework are harnessed as medium for feminine meditation, communication and resistance.
5. The artist's symbolic and iconographic motifs, which are visual testimonies of memories associated with the realm of the night, dreams, sexuality, and re/birthing as well as the real, the lived and the mundane. In her use of the *babaylan* figure as bed, Quinto alludes to a life-giving primeval presence, who ruled the realm through her restorative and healing powers. The bed or mattress, on the other hand, "is a symbol of modern domestic life, as the artist puts it. "Foam, the basic material for the mattress, is a modern invention intended to provide comfort and warmth... The mattress represents everyday life and domesticity and it is where one retreats and rests, thus providing a source of empowerment." The toys drawn from Philippine mythology and folk stories "visualize the girls' objects of desire (their lost childhood denied them a "soft" and comfortable life) and objectification (as sexual objects)."

All these threads and elements highlight the core principle around which Quinto's body of works revolve: "that everyday life is not separate from the creative/artistic expressions." It is a principle that guides an artistic practice that finds meaning and connection with the lives of women and children like the girls at CRIBS, and their journey from darkness, pain and trauma towards light, healing and empowerment.