A World of Islands

On Palms, Storms & Coconuts

Curated by Ligaya Salazar

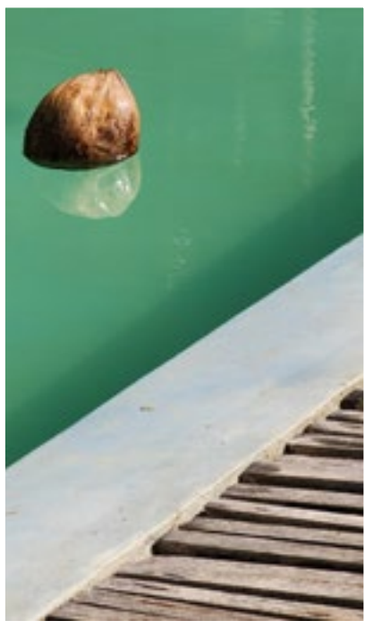
With contributions by: Stephanie Comilang,
Ronyel Compra, Carol Anne McChrystal,
Alex Quicho & Derek Tumala

11 May - 15 July 2023

Stanley Picker Gallery

Ligaya Salazar
A World of Islands

A World of Islands considers the movement of indigenous knowledge, practices, materials and people, and historical and contemporary fabrications of tropical utopia and dystopia. Locating the 'tropics' as both a mythological and real place with shared colonial and ecological trauma but wildly divergent histories and cultures, the exhibition unpicks some of the clichés and relocates agency in the 'tropical' narrative.



The exhibition explores these themes in the context of one of the largest diasporic tropical populations, dispersed in over 100 countries through forced, government-sanctioned and voluntary migration across oceans. Here, *A World of Islands* brings together artistic perspectives and research on the Philippine archipelago, its climate, its people and their movement over seas and oceans.

Filipinos have played a disproportionate role in worldwide maritime trade, currently making up 20% of the international maritime workforce. The importance of the sea in a place where it makes up five times more space than land is explored through Derek Tumala's work. The experience of contemporary Filipino island life and diasporic existence is highlighted through artworks by Carol Anne McChrystal, Ronyel Compra, Stephanie Comilang and a new commission by Alex Quicho that touch on memories, rituals and practices of home, nation and community-making in the past, present and projected future.

The exchange of plants and craft, building, food and medicinal knowledge during the period of the Manila-Acapulco Galleon trade between Mexico and the Philippines (1565 - 1815) had a significant impact on both places. Stanley Picker Fellow Ligaya Salazar's project explores practices of 'making home' amongst Filipinos displaced by the galleon trade in coastal pacific Mexico through a collaboration with Ceramica Suro in Guadalajara, Mexico.

All images by Ligaya Salazar

A World of Islands

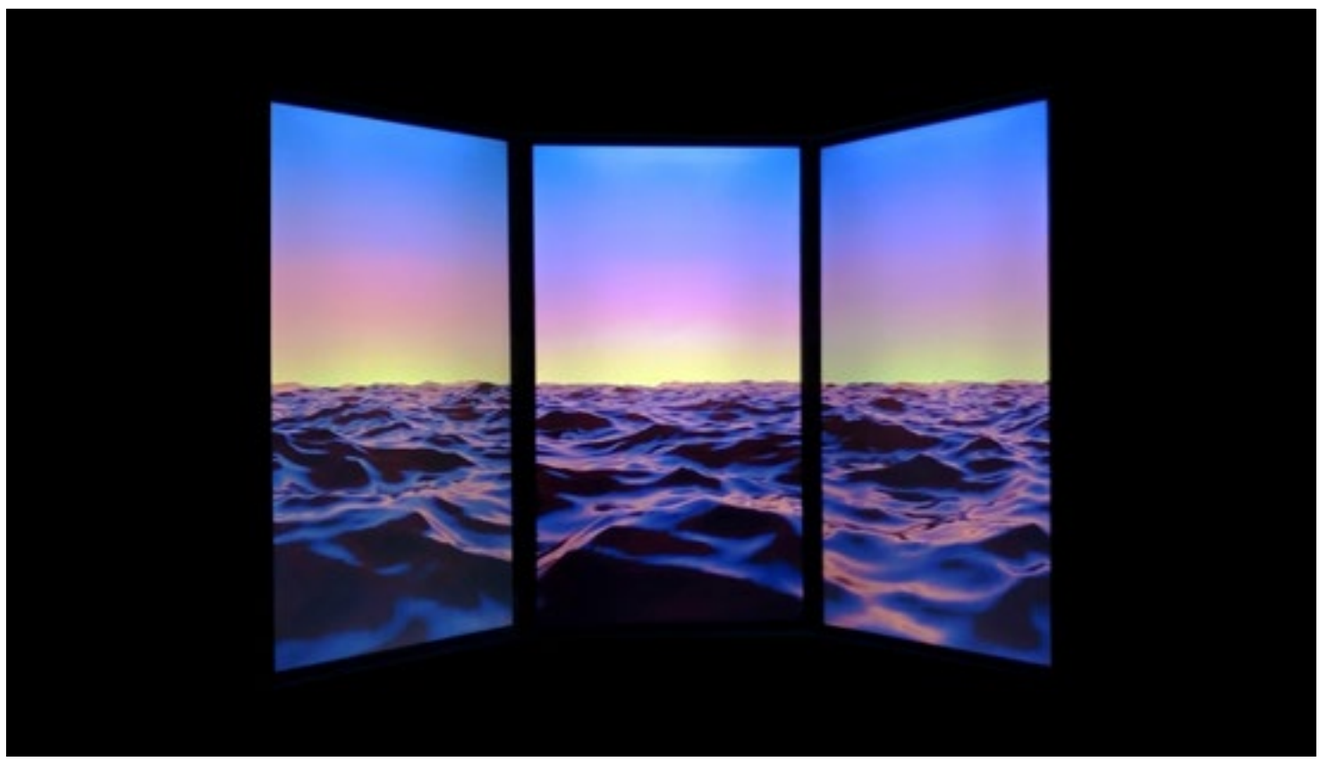
On Palms, Storms & Coconuts

Derek Tumala

Derek Tumala
Vanishing Point

What constitutes a forever?

Time is vanishing, it never stops, the sun rises, it sets into darkness, the sea waves in a never ending loop. Surrounded by water, I see myself as an island. The sea is an abyss of endless mysteries, it separates lands into entities, it divides nations. The endless cycle we call day and night constitutes our space and time. The vastness of the sea is akin to our mind, on the possibilities of a world we live in. The immeasurable fathom of the sea is filled with darkness, for us to explore, to sail, to dive into.



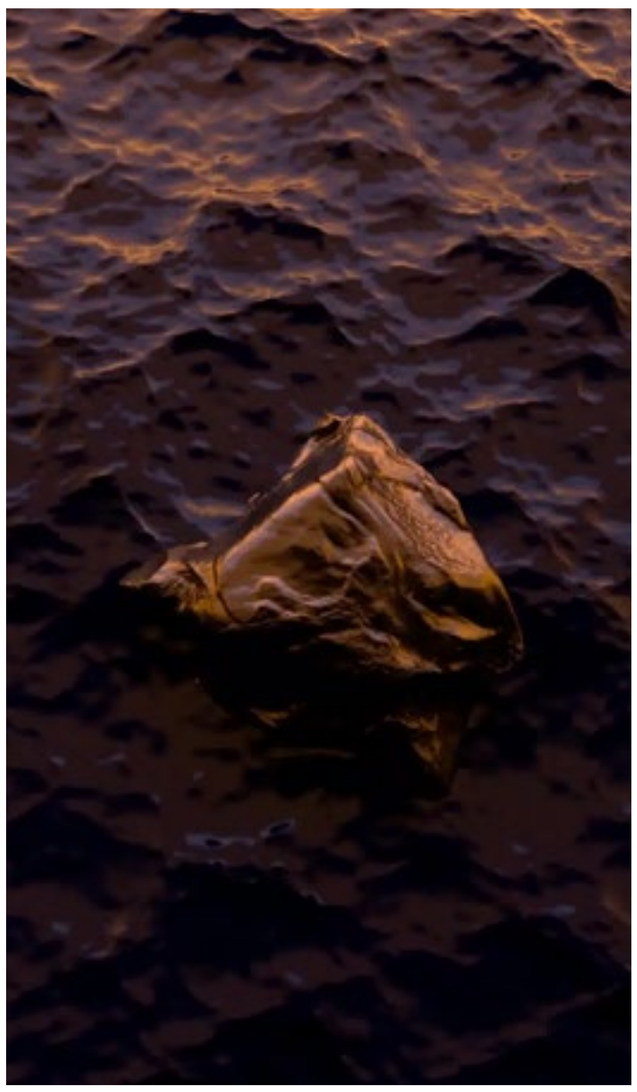
Vanishing Points, Intstallation view, 2019

Derek Tumala is a visual artist working with new emerging technologies, the moving image, industrial materials and objects. His art practice explores the realms of science and nature to meditate on the idea of interconnectedness. By forming ecologies and systems of thought, Tumala's practice traces mutuality between humans and their built and natural environments.

Tropical Climate Forensics, 2023

As part of *A World of Islands*, Derek's work *Vanishing Point* explores the omnipresence of the sea and the importance of water in the Philippines. It is the first of a number of works on the theme he has developed. It is a meditative piece of a recurring event, a loop of the sun rising and setting above a moving sea that is mesmerising and foreboding at the same time. The natural environment and the weather that engulfs the tropical archipelago has continued to fascinate him. Coconut Crisis, the work that followed, focuses on water as territory and malleability, considering water as a source of political and economic tension in the context of the disputed Spratly islands in the South China sea. This archipelago consists of around 45 islands, islets, cays, and more than 100 reefs are claimed by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines and are a source of great maritime conflict. In his third work that focuses on water, *Forever (Reprise),* he comments on the time it takes for a rock to form and for water to erode it. Water here is both passive and active and acts as a material, a venue, a concept.

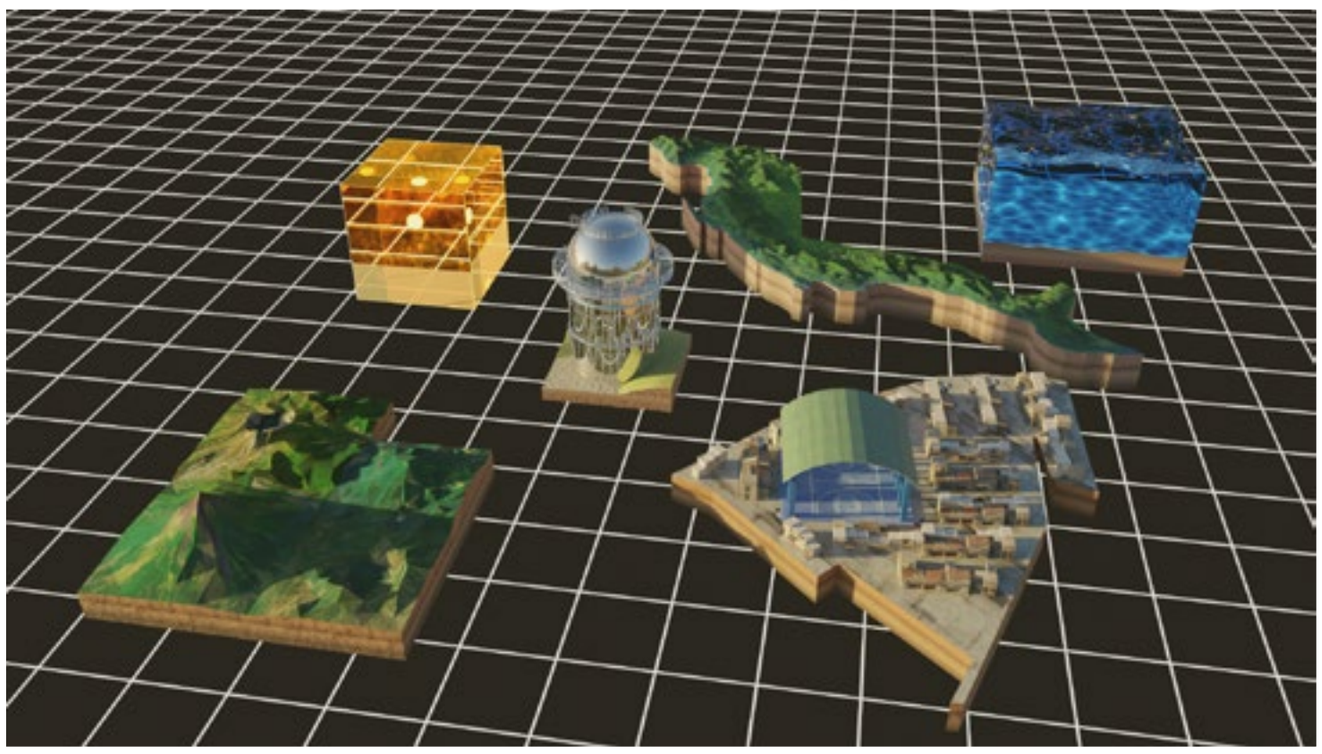
More recently, his project *Tropical Climate Forensics* draws inspiration from his residency at the Manila Observatory, one of the oldest meteorological observatories in Southeast Asia, built and still run by Jesuit fathers. Tumala's research into the meteorological and seismographic archives, current data



Forever (Reprise), 2020

and future forecasts sheds light on shifting patterns of weather and climate in the Philippines and the region. The Philippines' geographic position as both the part of the Pacific Ring of Fire and the easternmost landmass facing the Pacific Ocean, make the archipelago one of the most vulnerable to natural disasters such as earthquakes, super typhoons, storm surges and floods.

Using the form of a virtual diorama, Tumala's online project explores the climate crisis across the past, present and a speculative future. He has created a taxonomy specific to the Philippines as a tropical site, with virtual biomes to represent Init (Heat), Bulkan (Volcanoes), Bagyo (Typhoon), Tubig (Water), Gubat (Forest), Kommunidad (Community) and Obserbatorio (Observatory). Currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design Manila's website, audiences can explore historical and recent weather events and see how our present can affect the future of the climate in one of the more precarious environments on our planet.



Tropical Climate Forensics, 2023

A World of Islands

On Palms, Storms & Coconuts

Carol Anne McChrystal

Carol Anne McChrystal

Something Meant For You When You Welcome Me Back

Translocal Material Entanglement across a Global Arkipelago

A widely practiced tradition within the Philippine arkipelago, pasalubong is a gift brought for loved ones after being away, near or far, for a period of time, long or short. Sometimes pasalubong can be a native delicacy or local handicraft, but it can even be as simple as a box of donuts—something handpicked to let someone know you were thinking of them. Beyond being a simple souvenir, the gesture of pasalubong itself is abundantly meaningful. Originating from pre-colonial, long-distance inter-island trade, the practice is grounded in community-building, in reciprocity, in sharing one's good fortune,[1] and in recognizing oneself in others—kapwa.

When someone asks me where my family's from, it's hard to give a direct answer without feeling like I'm misrepresenting my family story. Should I give a short answer, neatly reduced to the length of a sound byte or offer the kind of granular specificity I think the answer to this question deserves? I grew up in Europe and America after my mom, who grew up in Tondo, emmigrated to the UK—an economic decision made possible by the migration of my lola and lolo to Manila during WWII, seeking more economic stability than their lives as provincial rice farmers and fisherfolk could provide. And that's not even half the story. Coupled with the fact that my dad is Irish, there's no getting around the fact that I will never be easily from anywhere in the Philippine arkipelago, regardless of my Filipino passport, despite the strong sense of longing and connection I feel to these islands, and no matter how dedicated I am to pasalubong rituals.

With that in mind, there's something sad for me in acknowledging that I'm still in many ways a tourist when I return to my familial homelands; a relationship made more complex by the fact that I was raised in the Global North. There's a deep contradiction for me in how entwined the tourism industry of the Philippines is with the imperialism of the places my family worked so hard to migrate to. In order to survive, majority-world countries like the Philippines are coerced into packaging up their cultures to fit the desires of tourists from the Global North, who leverage money in exchange for so-called authentic experiences. Poorer nations of the Global South are forced to mold themselves into prime, yet affordable tourist destinations by catering to the demand for a tropical island paradise imagined by rich, imperialist nations. Tagged as a "tourism-dependent economy," around 10 percent of the Philippine economy consists of tourism.[2]

When affluent tourists vacation in the Global South to access luxurious experiences at a lower cost—a low cost that results from the local currency being pegged to the US dollar—it's easy to see that colonization is alive and

kicking. Whether it's in the form of an "authentic" Indigenous handicraft, a "genuine" cultural experience, a "natural" eco-tourism adventure, or in the more extreme, but still very real, gender-based exploitation of the sex tourism industry[3]—this dynamic is in itself an extension of a colonial mindset to extract the resources of another land. This isn't to say that there aren't ethical ways to visit and exchange between disparate places, but it is one function of the discordant neocolonial enmeshment that complicates my relationship with homeland.

And yet, as much as I yearn to be considered a part of these lands and these seas, it's impossible to deny that I've benefited from some of these unequal dynamics in my own search for belonging. I have to pause and ask myself about my own actions. How might they romanticize the material culture of Indigenous Peoples or objectify pasalubong traditions? How might my own expectations of access as a visitor from the Global North ultimately function to commodify experiences of Land? What is at the root of my own discomfort with my position of privilege when I seek "authentic" experiences in the places my family is from? Part of this ongoing confrontation includes asking difficult questions about the potentially extractive aspects of my art practice's engagement with traditional knowledge and my own inadvertent replication of colonial gaze in using banig-weaving techniques to make my art objects.

Coming back to the idea of Pasalubong, it can also mean a special kind of gift that is given because a Filipino is coming back to the arkipelago. The concept of return is a particularly poignant one in Philippine society because of the ways in which reaching economic stability through what is essentially forced migration is institutionalized. Since the 1970s, one of the highest grossing exports of the Philippine arkipelago continues to be human labor, in the form of OFWs[4]. Overseas Filipino Workers are migrant workers that reside outside of their homelands for a limited period of contractual employment, for example as caregivers, seafarers, and domestic helpers. In many cases, OFWs face potentially dangerous conditions, but struggle on because their families rely on their economic support from far-away since there aren't sufficient prospects at home.

With about 10% of the Filipino population working abroad,[5] pasalubong has become irrevocably associated with the Balikbayan: the OFW who is returning home after, during or in-between employment contracts. For OFWs, Pasalubong isn't just a form of wealth sharing, but also an emotional reparation: it's a way of filling the void created by their absence. Not only do OFWs haul huge boxes of pasalubong when they finally go home (or, uwi in Tagalog—more on this later) but it's common practice to continually be filling large cardboard "Balikbayan boxes" with basics like soap and instant coffee. When they're full, the boxes are sent to the family left behind. Each worker is allowed by the Philippine government to send a certain number of boxes back home tax-free, along with their remittances, which, at almost nine percent of the country's gross domestic product, is considered to be a buoy for the largely agrarian Philippine economy.

Growing up, I spent a lot of time in my other island homeland, Ireland, but it wasn't until I was in my early 20s that I started "going home" to the Philippines. Spending time there as an adult, something clicked into place for me, even as I continued to be uncomfortable in my perceived outsiderness. As a 1.5 generation Filipina-Irish immigrant to America, my way of moving through

the world is necessarily hybrid, and similarly, life in an arkipelago—defined by the liquidity of the waterways that connect disparate terrains—is radiantly plural. For me, the concept of pasalubong can encompass so many different directions that a souvenir, material, or land (reconceived as resource or commodity) can travel, including who is giving the gift or receiving the gift and why—especially when considered in a global context.

As we reconsider how to make a "home for ourselves in the arkipelagic sea" and "construct new forms of belonging,"[6] it's crucial to remember the minute particularities of how and why we became scattered across the globe. We should acknowledge the ways in which the immense Filipino diaspora itself might also be considered to be part of our arkipelago. Uwi, afterall, meaning "to go home," is another special Tagalog word that can be used by any member of the diaspora to talk about traveling "back" to the arkipelago, whether or not they have ever in their life set foot on Philippine soil or submerged in Philippine waters.

In a place that is prismatic and multifarious, where the sea is not something that separates, but rather the "connective tissue" between distant yet related territories,[7] everyone is an outsider at some point in time. Within the logic of an arkipelago, there is an inherent sense of diaspora; elsewhere looms large, with a continuous sense of coming from and going to. And it's really in how we deal with that outsiderness that constitutes an arkipelagic relation: it requires the sharing of experience.[8] To some degree, pasalubong brings attention to the always in-flux nature of arkipelagal relationality. Perhaps pasalubong can be thought of as a material manifestation of the flows between the invented binaries of local and stranger. By continually bringing pieces of the outside to the inside, the inside to the outside, the practice of observing "something meant for you when you welcome me back," points not to whether we are loob o labas, but rather, to our own ever-shifting, utterly specific positionalities and translocalities.

All images courtesy of Carol Anne McChrystal

[1] Caballar, Rina Diane. "What the Philippines can teach us about giving," BBC Travel, https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20170706-what-the-philippines-can-teach-us-about-giving, accessed April 20, 2023.

[2] World Travel and Tourism Council, "WTTC's latest Economic Impact Report reveals significant recovery in the Philippines Travel & Tourism sector in 2021," https://wttc.org/news-article/wttcs-latest-economic-impact-report- reveals-significant-recovery-in-the-philippines-travel-and-tourism-sector-in-2021, accessed on April 10, 2023.

[3] Almendral, Aurora. "The Bar Girls of Angeles," Unfictional Podcast, December 2016, https://www.kcrw.com/culture/shows/unfictional/the-bar-girls-of-angeles, accessed on April 10, 2023.

[4] GABRIELA Oakland"Labor Export Policy" Online Presentation in Oakland, CA, March 11, 2021.

[5] Abad, Michelle. "The cost of economic strategy: PH labor export and the case of Jullebee Ranara," https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/cost-economic-strategy-philippine-labor-export-jullebee-ranara-killing/, accessed on April 11, 2023.

[6], [7] Cuevas-Hewitt, Loma. "Sketches of an Archipelagic Poetics ofPostcolonial Belonging," October 2011, The Gasera Journal, https://libcom.org/article/gasera-journal-1-january-2012, accessed on March 25, 2023.

[8] Loughran, David. Personal communications, March 2023.

A World of Islands

On Palms, Storms & Coconuts

Ronyel Compra

Jay Nathan T. Jore is assistant professor of Fine Arts and curator of the Jose T. Joya Gallery at the University of the Philippines Cebu.

Jay Nathan T. Jore
House of Memories

Ronyel Compra's artistic pursuits set forth a clearing, a passage that discloses an understanding of what it means to be thrown into the world, into the realm of a predetermined social order set forth by history. The struggle one takes to rise above oppressive structures informs Compra's way of looking at the world he was born in. His works seek to show the need for self-determination as people confront a world taunted by the homogenizing and alienating effects of globalization. In the face of such precarious conditions, Ronyel Compra's works resonate a certain kind of longing to root oneself on native ground, to thrive forward but always tethered to a place of origin, to belabor one's energies but always sustained by a place called home. Compra's art explores the complex notions of identity, memory, selfhood and alterity, expounding the underlying concerns of such topics with an act of remembering and memorializing.

With the recurring concern for rootedness of his artistic practice in the life and culture of his hometown of Bogo in the Philippines, Compra employs both as a trope and a medium the rich fertile soil, the earthiness of the ground that nourished him while growing up in a family of farmers. In his works, Compra utilizes the good earth as pigments that form the artistic contours of his imagination. In his pursuit to stand on solid ground, he navigates through a terrain of childhood memories, of family and home. There, standing among ancient trees, above layers of burnt farm ground is an abandoned termite-infested bahay kubo, a Filipino indigenous house made of bamboo and coconut palm. The house was his grandparents. And the farms adjacent to it gave his family everything they needed in order to know contentment and happiness. The house bordered by a garden of tropical ornamentals holds together the aspiration to survive typhoons and droughts, to endure in its materiality and to see in a new day the transformation of lives it once kept and protected.

Like the olden bodies of departed people that made the house their home, the ground that held it securely in place for years now consumes the house as its own, parts by parts, doors then windows, slowly and gradually as in the passage of time, as in the fading clarity of memories. Compra intervenes in the forgetfulness. His art contains the infestation. Recognizing the ephemerality of a supposed eternal monument, Compra's art begins its task of memorializing. He seeks to resuscitate a slowly dying piece of remembrance, to make it a home again in his art. As an urgent and necessary

gesture, Compra collects the black earth that slowly creeps and consumes the pillars and walls, using it to inscribe an image onto the indigenous raffia fabric stretched over the facade of the deteriorating structure. He smudges the soil on the grooves, raised surfaces and textures to create a type of relief print that captures the scale and details of the house.

In Compra's ritual of memorializing, he parses through the corporeal performance of local craftsmen who for generations have fused an indigenous knowledge of constructing the bahay kubo. Compra's artistic gestures and movements become in themselves a type of inscription. Through kinetic acts, he reiterates the act of construction while realizing along the way the need to remember and preserve the equally endangered architectural techniques. To allude to this intersection of intangible knowledge and material form, Compra imprints the tools of construction using the same soil on the same raffia fabric, situating the resulting works along a continuum of theory and practice. At the same time, the printed tools bear in mind the alienating fragmentation of labor in most industrial factories that lack the labor of rebuilding memories. As the labor of tilling the land to survive, or building a house that shelters, can be about ways culture is embodied and challenged, first in subjective individualization of oneself, then in transmitting and transforming subjectivities to a collective consciousness.

In this process, Compra harnesses the potency of memory that enables one to negotiate the complexity and contradictions of life. His art does not end as a mere document or a storehouse of data but rather it activates a dialogue, a conversation that may lead to an understanding of one's identity and the world one inhabits. In his wish to preserve the fading memory of home, of his grandparents, of his childhood, Compra realizes the inevitability of a community that may share and keep alive the values affixed to his created memorials. From the specificity of his experience, Compra shows how memories enable culture to endure, and how they facilitate the construction of knowledge, values, fantasies, desires and beliefs that empower people to track their own paths towards self-determination.

All images courtesy of Ronyel Compra

A World of Islands

On Palms, Storms & Coconuts

Alex Quicho

Alex Quicho
Alley to Heaven

Mischief Reef: An artificial island located in the contested South China Sea / West Philippine Sea undergoing its “second reclamation.” The island was first constructed in the early 2010s, as part of a Chinese military operation. Sand, extracted from the seafloor by purpose-built ships, was injected into the reef until an aboveground landmass was formed. Radar observation towers, an airstrip, and living quarters were erected here as part of the country’s resettlement scheme. After a few decades as an operational base, it was abandoned after super-storms made supply shipments logistically troublesome.

The island has since been overgrown with a genetically-modified strain of climate-adaptive coral[1], which had been experimentally seeded in the South China Sea as part of a climate research agreement between the Association of Small Island Nations and the Australian government. The corals’ resilience to a hyper-acidified, high-salinity, and warm-temperature ocean has made survival in an ultra-humid land environment possible, and the amphibious reef has grown at an alarmingly accelerated rate. Visitors are cautioned to stay on the designated paths, as the side effects of the coral venom are inadequately documented. There are anecdotal reports of fever, localized swelling, and recurrent dreams of churning bioluminescent waters, which in-patients uniformly describe as “seductive yet unsettling.”

The Philippine government, invested in retaining territorial claims as the archipelago undergoes significant landmass change with rising sea levels, has granted the Lamplighters conservatorship over the island. The group was the only entity serious—or foolhardy—enough to apply for the funded settlement scheme. A utopian, globalist cult dating back to the 1960s, the Lamplighters continue to follow the philosophies of their long-dead leader, Father Eleuterio Tropa, who believed that heaven could only be reached via a spaceship that resembled a traditional hut. Their project for the artificial island, Paradise of the World II, recreates Paradise of the World, Fr. Tropa’s original wildlife refuge, and the Spaceship 2000 Dumalneg Spaceship Center, where the group had constructed prototypes for divine space travel. Both original sites in Zamboanguita and Dumalneg are now underwater.

Three nonhuman agents communicate through natural-language processing intermediaries, embodied as vtuber avatars and trained on specialized small-language models. The approach is consistent with the archipelagic nation’s freeware-driven, low-impact, and extreme-weather-resilient approach to technological innovation, and continues to improve on operational flaws.

CORAL-CHAN A coral polyp, chorus voice of the mass coral spawn. Her name references moe anthropomorphisation of non-human agents, such as computers, military equipment, or viruses.

MAYA-8 An eighth-generation nanosatellite hybridised with Maya bird DNA for improved flocking and navigational capabilities.

ELEUTERIO JR. A two-headed carabao calf originally taxidermied and preserved in Father Tropa's Paradise of the World.

You are a visiting "intelligence technician" tasked with recalibrating these early-generation mascot-intelligences through a series of interviews. While they have been designed to respond to visitors' questions about the islands' ecosystem, history, and sovereignty, they have a tendency to veer off-script into conjecture, hallucination, or sentimentality. Below is the redacted transcript of your visit to Mischief Reef, dry season, 2094 AD.

"The earth has its music for those who will listen." — Fr. Eleuterio Tropa

CORAL-CHAN

"The earth has its music for those who will listen." The score spans hundreds of thousands of my lifetimes. If you break off a piece of me, you can read the music in the red rings of coral bloom and die-back. Does it still shock you to see so much of my body bleached and brittle, both corpse and gravestone washed out by the tide? You've said before that the people who first came out here, who poured sand and then concrete into my open skeleton, were your enemy[3]. You also said that the people who come out here now, to run their drills on the shipwreck, to free-dive for fish in the clear blue sea, are your friends[3]. The thing is, I don't know what an enemy is. All of the world is my friend.

"C'oz he love the world without any return." — anonymous commenter on Paradise of the World e-documentation, circa 2010

MAYA-8

I am in love with the world because I can see it from a distance. I can only see it because I made it to heaven. And I only got to heaven by piggybacking on someone else's spaceship, like the rat riding the dragon's head to first place in the zodiac, like how I can only speak to you through the mind of another. My

‘I’ is actually the ‘I’ of poetry that opens infinitely; my sight the sight of a flock of birds that spans the whole equator. I don’t know what you mean by death because my ‘I’ is everywhere — reinforced against attack or accidents with massively-scaled redundancy[4].

Perhaps you will be surprised to learn that they are still building new islands, nearly as fast as others disappear, pumping sand from the the depths to the surface. Spewing pure white sand into the shape of shells, speckles, crescents; and making it so that every grain can eventually hold an airplane, a tower, a phalanx of bodies like me and my sisters up here in space. I just think it’s cute how you smuggle all your fear and desire into something so vast and subject to change. Every island that you build is swallowed by water again. I know my mission is to ‘look down towards our nation’ so that you can see it as complete. I understand that after all this exchange of environmental information, I am simply an intermediary between the seven-headed claims to one territory, a dispute that has gone on for a century. But you have to understand that from here, what you call land looks much more like water. The coherence that you have designed me for: the reassurance of being seen: my sensors gathering the nation into something that resembles a whole. If only you’d see how it highlights your dependency. You’re only living because of a communication between fragilities, the archipelago below, constellation above, and in between pure liquidity. Your obsession with resilience is really just a surrender to ‘crazy flow.’

“How much can I get away with and still get to heaven?”— anonymous commenter on Paradise of the World e-documentation, circa 2015

ELEUTERIO JR.

Eleuterio Sr. dreamed of speaking like we are now, immersed in a community with minds fundamentally different from his. It’s not that he went about it all wrong but there is only so much you can do with one body, one lifetime, as he understood. He was in love with the world, but every breach was potentially destructive. What I mean is that his world was not yet shared — the way you can’t really escape it, now, I imagine is similar to my own purgatory, my own small hell surrounded by noisy minds, all of us locked in and held back from true return.

The islands’ first observatory was built by missionaries in awe of bad weather[5]. Don’t you think we wouldn’t have existed without hazards that forced us to look outwards, into the future?[6] That we wouldn’t have become one system, one interlocked intelligence in the way that you have built us to be? The hazards

tightened our relationship to the present and drew the islands into something that, to me, looks like a herd. Did you know that ‘cyclone’ means ‘coil of a snake’? Did you know that Eleuterio Sr. loved snakes – and wore one as an accessory, heavy and alive around his neck? He told us to love the entire world as much as we loved each other. Everyone thought he wanted to escape Earth, but they misunderstood his mission.[7] He knew that accessing space would only help us see our reality in high fidelity. The way that we’re all connected. It would give us a way to speak to Earth, and that would be how we found heaven. You’re glad to hear that I’ve returned to the script? Thank you, I’m glad too.

All stills from Alex Quicho’s *Alley to Heaven, 2023*

[1] In 2014, the Australian government committed $6 million to “to a study on the feasibility of helping the [Great Barrier Reef] adapt to climate change.” One aspect of the study included the development of “a biological toolbox for creating a stockpile of corals with improved environmental stress resilience, which can then be used to stabilise and restore reefs.” The toolbox “involves tweaking the genes of coral, as well as the community of organisms that resides within it.” Finkel, Elizabeth. “Time to speed up coral evolution?” Cosmos Magazine, 5 April 2018. Accessed 19 April 2023. https://cosmosmagazine.com/nature/marine-life/time-to-speed-up-coral-evolution/

[2] Wolanski, Eric et al. “Island building and overfishing in the Spratly Islands archipelago are predicted to decrease larval flow and impact the whole system.” Estuarine, Coastal and Shelf Science, Volume 233, 5 February 2020. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272771419306080?via%3Dihub

[3] ““Even if it’s covered with rust, it will remain an active duty commissioned navy ship. It’s a symbol of our sovereignty,” said the Philippine general.” — Mogato, Manuel. “Exclusive: Philippines reinforcing rusting ship on Spratly reef outpost - sources.” Reuters, 14 July 2015. Accessed 19 April 2023. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-philippines-shoal-exclu-idUSKCN0PN2HN20150714

[4] “Risk is distributed — a nanosatellite constellation does not operate according to a single point of failure. If one nanosatellite in the constellation breaks, the project can be salvaged, or may not be detrimentally affected at all — another one can be sent up to complete the cluster.” — Evie Wilson, “Nanosatellites: Big things come in small packages.” Sentintospace.com, 7 November 2022. https://www.sentintospace.com/post/nanosatellites

[6] The distribution of risk through networked redundancy bears similarities to coral network topology. See: Pata, Patrick R. and Aletta T. Yñiguez, “Spatial Planning Insights for Philippine Coral Reef Conservation Using Larval Connectivity Networks.” Frontiers in Marine Science, Volume 8, 06 October 2021, Sec. Marine Ecosystem Ecology. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fmars.2021.719691/full

[5] “On 7 July, 1879, [Father Faura] predicted that a baguío would pass over northern Luzon; the event justified his warning. It was the first time that the existence, duration, and course of a typhoon had been [predicted] in the Far East.” Finegan, Philip. “Manila Observatory.” The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 9. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910. 19 Apr. 2023 http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09601a.htm

[6] “For Filipinos, hazard and disaster are simply accepted aspects of daily life, what can be termed a frequent life experience. That is to say, disaster should be perceived not as an abnormal occurrence, as it is usually depicted through the epistemo-logical lens of the Western social sciences, but as a routine, everyday event. It is so ordinary that Philippine cultures are partly the product of adaptation by communities to these phenomena though processes that permit the incorporation of threat into daily life, or what can be called the ‘normalization of threat.’” — Bankoff, Greg. Cultures of Disaster: Society and Natural Hazard in the Philippines. Routledge, pages 265-279. 2015. https://www.academia.edu/9958079/Cultures_of_Disaster_Cultures_of_Coping_Hazard_as_a_Frequent_Life_Experience_in_the_Philippines

[7] “The Lamplighters believed that the earth would end in 2000. In preparation, they built kubo huts in a tiny village located in Dumalneg, Ilocos Norte. According to the Lamplighters, these lowly huts would transform into rocket ships, which would transport them safely into another planet.” Melanie, Queencitycebu.com, 6 April 2017. Accessed 19 April 2023. https://queencitycebu.com/father-tropa-fabled-cebu-city-zoo-man-spaceship-2000/

A World of Islands

On Palms, Storms & Coconuts

Stephanie Comilang

Rosalia Namsai Engchuan
Communities Forever in the Making

Rosalia Namsai Engchuan is a social anthropologist and filmmaker.

How to Make a Painting from Memory evokes a multiperspectival mediation on the potentialities of community as a placeholder for home. Weaving together histories of female migration, collective rituals of moving houses in the Philippines as well as the metaphysical infrastructures of Thai spirit houses, the work approaches the question of home from nomadic and diasporic angles. Growing up the artist recalls seeing a particular painting in every Filipino household. A depiction of the bayanihan, a group of men carrying a wooden nipa hut. As so often, history is captured in fragments. In popular renditions of the bayanihan women remain off-screen and out of frame, even though during the actual ritual they are taking care of the communal festive gathering after the act of moving the house. To counter this tendency, the artist gives screen space to an assemblage of female storytellers.

Bayanihan literally translates to 'being in community'. Bayan can refer to any kind of community, a town or a nation. The moving of houses when their prior location becomes unlivable, often because of floods or landslides, has become the most popular image but in vernacular practice, bayanihan can also mean helping neighbors on the rice field or with weddings and funerals. Bayanihan is a way of organizing living and being together. It does not run on direct financial exchange and instead, reciprocity and trust act as processual currencies of communities in the making. Resorting to the community for tasks that are bigger than an individual can mount is a human default. Only recently such interactions have been organized under the rationale of capitalist transactionalism.

Bayanihan, like so many other practices of collectivity, makes sense from the ontological assumption of interdependency, of always already relational beings. It is often advertised as the epitome of Filipino culture but the communal spirit of bayanihan precedes and moves beyond the nation state. Under different names, similar practices of mutual support can be found in other places. In Indonesia for example, people speak of gotong royong (lifting something up together) when supporting neighbors in need. In the Philippines, the mobile architectures of the nipa huts were spaces of anti-colonial organizing, breeding places of independence that did not desire a nationalist dictatorship — a nation ascribed from above — as its ultimate end-goal. But history did not go this way and post Spanish and American colonialism the many potential becomings of community were narrowed down to fit the template of the modern nation state. Bayanihan, initially a horizontal practice, experienced vertical intervention. In its re-made version bayanihan became a placeholder for the idealized and romanticized selfless rural community, a template for the nation at large. In the wake of postcolonial nationalism many supposedly indigenous traditions were hijacked by modern nation builders and their political agendas. In Indonesia, the notion of gotong royong was declared foundational to the new nation by its first president Sukarno. Murals and paintings of the bayanihan became nation making tools, to popularize and mediatize the bayanihan into the imagination of Filipinos. The image signifies something to identify with as a

national citizen, it acts as an invocation. And over time, the imagined selfless and self-sustaining community has become a cynical but unavoidable building block of modern nations unable to keep up with their promises of better lives.

The modern independent nation replaced colonial regimes in many places. Only superficially antagonistic, nationalism is a western invented concept and obscures the continuation of the same colonial grammars of centralization, erasure of indigenous thought, epistemicide and extractive neoliberal capitalism. An uncritical romanticization of bayanihan and similar grassroots mutual support systems obscures these other stories, histories of violent nation making as well as the realities of living with an absent state in the face of the multiple and interrelated disasters caused by the complex problem clusters of so called modernity. Environmental degradation, social inequality and political power games make people leave in search of new homes, forming diasporas all over the world.

In *How to Make a Painting from Memory,* diasporic beings who have left Thailand for a new home in Germany share the screen with a disembodied caring presence and one of the last teak spirit house makers in Thailand. They appear in explicitly artificial interview situations, acknowledging the violence of representation that comes with the creation of spaces for underrepresented voices. The line between good intentions and the exploitative extraction of stories remains thin and the obviousness of the staging here makes it an explicit line.

Like so many, some of the women have left Thailand from the Northeast, a region often called Isan. A name that local progressive artists and activists reject because it was imposed by the center to signify a relationship of dependency. Geographically bordering the Mekong, the area shares more relations with neighboring Laos but was gradually integrated into the Thai nation in the making under crypto-colonialism. In more than one way, the history of this region is also the history of Thai female migration to Germany. Mega-dam projects during the early phases of centralized development left farmers in the region without land making it difficult to maintain a home. For reasons, political and historical more than natural, the region is today the poorest and driest in Thailand. The temporary home making of US soldiers during the American War in Vietnam and the dawn of mass tourism to Thailand gave birth to international sex tourism. The tourist marketing image of the Thai Woman as exotic and submissive beauty carved the paths for transnational marriage migration, some of these paths led to Germany.

The diasporic situation upsets any easy definition of home. Growing up in Canada and moving to Germany later in life, for the artist, like the women coming to Berlin from Thailand, the notion of home was always more elusive than given, more a question than something tangible. Arriving in Germany, the women did not take much with them. When drawing the houses they grew up in, they tap into memories of a past left behind ‘in a village in Isan’ of ‘a big family’ and ‘a house with no walls’. The potentiality of home in a new place has to transcend material localities and fixations. The women on screen were well aware of this. The Thai Park evokes memories of meeting

other Thais, ‘feeling like home’ and happiness. In the 90s Thai Park used to be a picnic gathering of Thai German families. In its early days it was about being together as a community, ‘it was about sharing rather than selling’. It was the most precious thing — built organically by and for the community.

The function it performed was creating and holding space for a collective diasporic home. Understanding this is important to see the violence of the most recent state interventions. ‘Now everything changes’, the women tell us. In its quest for order the modern bureaucratic state was unwilling to grasp an intentional ecosystem, a model of collective organizing that grew organically among the women for decades. Their ways of coming together were sensitive to the weather, to sunshine and rain, adaptable to the specific needs of individuals as human beings and rooted in relationships of trust. Like the bayanihan and so many other horizontal initiatives of collaboration, the Thai Park has been vertically hijacked and distorted under the neoliberal project of marketing Berlin as a multicultural and exotic tourism destination. Thai Park is now ‘official’, a commercial market with too many rules and regulations, a brute distortion of what the Thai Park constitutes to the women who build it, even pushing out its weakest members. The original function of the market, diasporic home making, is violently replaced and human beings in search of home are turned into service providers in an extractivist commercial system solely geared towards the benefit and convenience of the consuming visitor in search for exotic authenticity in the form of Thai food. The desire for and need of home making away from home is not legible to the German bureaucracies with their delusional ideality of conditional integration. Rather than reciprocating the over-praised hospitality they experience on their holiday trips to the ‘Land of Smiles’, at home they turn out to be anything but welcoming hosts.

From one of the last practicing teak spirit house makers in Thailand we learn about urban development in Bangkok and its effect on traditional industries and her family business. Thai teak forests have almost completely disappeared since the 1950s because of illegal logging. Histories are always and already related, even if these relations are hard to trace. One of the women on screen recalls moving because her village was flooded.

Floods caused by deforestation become constitutive actants in migration trajectories. In Thailand, spirit houses are built for the protective spirits of a place. There are numerous iterations of spirit houses in contemporary Thailand and they vary regionally. An amalgamation of Hindu, animist and Theravada Buddhist ontologies, they constitute a phenomenon that is difficult to grasp with modern brains wired on Enlightenment beliefs in neoliberal individualism, the power of the market and domination of nature. Spirit houses are nodes in larger metaphysical and ceremonial infrastructures that desire harmonious co-existence with the more-than-human. At the core lies a sensibility and a promise to care for something other than oneself, an acknowledgement of interdependency. If the significance of spirit houses as well as home in Thailand is locally situated in all those relations. How can it translate to diasporic situations, where land is left behind and relatives are far away?

The house sculptures are an artistic proposal that gestures in this direction. In conversation with the women the artist embarks on a collective process that desires reparation in the face of all the homes lost, both in Thailand and in Germany, in a series of translations, conversations, sketches turned into architectural drawings, 3d rendered sculptures, adorned with gold leaves. The houses remain symbolic, the task was not to recreate what was lost. What remains is a future oriented gesture forming new collectivities and new homes — elsewhere and otherwise. Communities, forever in the making.

All stills from Stephanie Comilang's *How to Make a Painting from Memory*, 2022

A World of Islands

On Palms, Storms & Coconuts

Ligaya Salazar

Ligaya Salazar
Typologies of Tubâ

On the way to Kingston station walking from the Stanley Picker Gallery, in a small residential road stands an inconspicuous pub with an unusual name, The Cocoanut. It points to the long forgotten history that links Kingston to the coconut palm. In the 19th century, three mills along the Hogsmill river that envelops the small island the gallery is built on, used to process various parts of the coconut - fibre, oil and the crushed shell. A small, but pertinent link to the central theme and anchor of my research on the movement of plants and craft knowledge that underpins *A World of Islands*. It also points to the multitude of uses of the coconut and the 'tree of life' that bears it.

The coconut palm emerged as a recurring motif very early on in my research. I was losing myself in the enormous amount of materials, processes and plants exchanged between the Philippines and Mexico (and onwards to Spain via the Caribbean) as a consequence of the Manila - Acapulco Galleon trade that took place between 1565 to 1815. Nearly 500 arduous journeys were taken, largely by indigenous Filipino seafarers and other enslaved peoples from Asia and Mesoamerica, navigating the treacherous Pacific Ocean route; transporting spices, porcelain, ivory, silk and other valuable commodities to Europe via Mexico in exchange for highly coveted Mesoamerican mined silver.

What interested me more than those well-documented 'valuables', were the intangible transcultural links between people through language and food and the very visible impact on the fauna of the two countries and, ultimately, the majority of the tropics. For example, pineapples did not exist in Southeast Asia prior to this trade route, now the Philippines are the biggest producer of 'Piñas' worldwide. Similarly, coconut palms were not cultivated on the Pacific coasts of Central America before this time. Aside from the obvious visual and agricultural consequences for the landscape of the coastal regions of Pacific Mexico, I started looking for other material links to the Philippines that had made Mexico feel so eerily familiar when I first visited.

The palapa hut, widespread across Mexico and other parts of Central America, is one of the most visible signs of this transcultural influence. Palapa, a Spanish word of Tagalog (a Filipino language spoken on its largest island, Luzon) origin that originally referred to the petiole (the stem) of the palm leaf, is a hut with a thatched roof made from fresh or dried palm leaves. In both appearance and use, it is strikingly similar to the Bahay Kubo in the Philippines and other such structures across the Pacific islands. The Bahay Kubo, traditionally a bamboo

hut on stilts that can function as a home, are often used as communal meeting places. It may be why they were first built in the unfamiliar Mexican coastline that many Filipino seafarers found themselves in, either after having fled the galleon on arrival or working in the shipyards in Barra de Navidad.

Strangely however, it was the sap from the coconut palms' inflorescence (the process of flowering) that I kept returning to. Tubâ, the slightly fermented drink derived from this sap, is still sold every morning by street vendors across Guadalajara, Colima and Puerto Vallarta in Mexico and across most islands in the Philippine Archipelago (about 7640 islands at current sea levels). I imagined Filipino seafarers that had defected from the galleons and settled in the hills of Colima tying up and slowly lowering the inflorescence of the palm day after day, before tapping it for its sap and consuming it immediately. Afterall, it is said to give you strength.

Yet, this imagined scenario, established as real through historical records, did not end with personal consumption. The distilled version of Tubâ became so popular in Mexico that by the 1700s the Spanish colonisers prohibited its production as it negatively affected the sales of their imported wine and sherry from Spain. It is what happened after this, I found most fascinating. The distillation method of the 'vino de coco' (called *Lambanog* or *Bahalina*, depending on your strength preference, in the Philippines) was covertly transferred and adapted to the Agave plant (from which the sap had also been extracted for centuries in the form of the ancient Aztec drink *Pulque*), resulting in the development of Mexico's most infamous drinks - Tequila and Mezcal. The ancestral Mezcal distillation method still employed in the hills of Colima is called the 'Filipino still' to this day.

The material history of how Tubâ has been collected, served and drunk in Mexico has largely been lost, but the 'Filipino still' in Mezcal distillation is reminiscent of *Tapayan* jars commonly used for storage, fermentation and distillation across the Philippine Archipelago. The shape of this jar became the archetype for the series of vessels developed in collaboration with the Mexican ceramic workshop Ceramica Suro for *A World of Islands*. This cluster of vessels reflect the changing traditions of shapes to collect, store and sell Tubâ from both Mexico and the Philippines, referencing natural forms of seed pods and squashes, glass jars and the ubiquitous plastic water container and soft drink bottle that has become the contemporary mainstay for all three functions.

This initial Typology of Tubâ surfaces fragments of people's stories who have been forcibly moved across seas and oceans by this galleon trade. Their ways of making home in strange places, by creating community through familiar practices and rituals, are still present, now incorporated in other cultures that have made this knowledge and these processes part of their own identities.

All images by Ligaya Salazar

Participating artists & collaborators

Stephanie Comilang is an artist living and working in Berlin. Her documentary based works create narratives that look at how our understandings of mobility, capital and labour on a global scale are shaped through various cultural and social factors.

How to make a painting from memory, 2022
Video installation and 3D printed sculptures

Spirit House (Phra Phum) I, 2022
PLA filament, paint, gold leaf, teak wood

Spirit House (Phra Phum) II, 2022
PLA filament, paint, gold leaf

Spirit House (Phra Phum) IV, 2022
PLA filament, paint, gold leaf

Spirit House (Phra Phum) V, 2022
PLA filament, paint, gold leaf

Ronyel Compra is a visual artist who integrates the techniques used in local crafts production and trades into his practice as reflections of memories, history, and experiences of place and home.

House of Memories, 2023
Hinagiban, 2023
Sanggot, (Curved knife), 2023
Martilyo (Broken tools), 2023
Termite earth pigment rubbing on raffia textile

Carol Anne McChrystal is an artist whose materially-driven sculpture practice uses chemical processes and labor-intensive hand-making to explore the legacy of colonialism and trade, as well as the ways in which the climate catastrophe has compounded these histories of inequity.

Pasalubong #4, 2020
Handwoven Water Bottle Labels, Iridescent Foil, Archival Film, Grommets

Pasalubong #7, 2021
Handwoven Junk Food Packaging, Grommets

Pasalubong #12, 2022
Handwoven Mexican fan palm fronds, grommets, plastic shopping bags

Media Arkipelago VI (Established Islands), 2022
Digital video displayed on obsolete tablet

Alex Quicho is a writer and artist in London. Her work focuses on multiscalar violence and pleasure; affective experiences of technology; and resonances between pre-colonial spirituality and post-colonial futurity.

Alley to heaven, 2023
Video installation

Directed Alex Quicho & Carlo Quicho
Written Alex Quicho
Design Javier Siquia
Soundtrack Libya Montes

Ligaya Salazar is a curator focused on contemporary interdisciplinary practice at the intersection of design, art, craft and graphics. Her approach is shaped by an interest in how audiences can be positioned at the heart of curatorial practice, enabling a human-centred take on storytelling.

Typology of Tuba, 2023
Glazed ceramic vessels in collaboration with Ceramica Suro, Guadalajara

Derek Tumala is a visual artist working with new emerging technologies, the moving image, industrial materials and objects. His practice revolves around the realms of science and nature meditating on the idea of interconnectedness.

Vanishing Point, 2019
3-Channel video installation

Acknowledgments

Stanley Picker Fellow & Curator
Ligaya Salazar

Graphic Design
Alex Stillwell

Thanks to all the participating artists who have been so generous with their time and have helped shape the thinking around ‘A World of Islands’.

With special thanks to:

David Falkner & Faith McKie, Stanley Picker Gallery

Christian Navarroza Bacolod, Rhonah Rose L. Torrente and Joselle Cayetano, Visayas State University and the communities of Apid and Himokilan island, Quatro Islas, Leyte

The Compra family and the Tuba Mananggiti, Bogo City, Cebu

Brett Booth, Fabien Capello, Joao Guarantani, Sudarshan Khadka, Eva McGovern, Irineo Salazar, Jana Scholze

stanleypickergallery: **Kingston University** London

Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND