

# LEESE STREET STUDIO X MARKS THE SPOT: FILIPINX FUTURITIES

Patrick Cruz x Excel Garay  
Julius Poncelet Manapul x John Ephraim  
Ella Gonzales x Revil Villanueva  
Curated by Dr. Marissa Largo  
July 14-22, 2022



**Figure 1:** X Marks the Spot Installation View

X Marks the Spot takes the X in “Filipinx” as a theoretical and methodological intervention in curation (Fig. 1). The X signals an intergenerational relationality—a sort of “call and response” --between recognized and rising practitioners working on Turtle Island that speaks to the legacies, influences, and transformations of Filipinx visual art in the last decade. These relationalities generously explore themes such as spiritual healing and hauntings (Cruz x Garay), queer recuperations of colonial gazes and consumerist desire (Manapul x Velasco), and migration, movement, and transcendence (Gonzales x Villanueva). Marking “the spot” identifies our moment in time and space that gives rise to aesthetic possibilities that imagine and embody diasporic Filipinx subjectivity. They transcend nationhood, normativity, capitalist aspirations, and colonial temporality. These investigations take form through sculpture, painting, and photocollage and propose alternative engagements with space,

place, materiality, selfhood, and community that defy modernism's limiting ideologies. Beyond identitarian politics, X Marks the Spot gestures to the multifarious ways in which diasporic Filipinx artists invent aesthetic futurities as an emancipatory practice.

I invoke trans studies scholar and poet M.T. Vallarta's argument that "Filipinx" is a method--an art practice and a site of mobilization--that can interrogate the heteronormative and its unmistakable alliances with White supremacy.<sup>1</sup> Not only does the "X" index the undoing of gender binaries, but it also motions to imaginaries produced and enacted by diasporic Filipinx artists that surpass colonial and neoliberal prerogatives that place limits on our citizenship, belonging, expression, and subjectivity.

In the mid- to late-2010s, "Filipinx" emerged on social media among Filipino American students and activists to create inclusivity among queer, trans, and non-binary subjects in the diaspora.<sup>2</sup> Emerging from Western community-led movements, the "X" has been used to better represent gender non-conforming members of the Filipino diasporic community in White-dominant contexts. It is, however, a contested term to which some Filipino and Indigenous groups in the Philippines will disidentify. Some critics of "Filipinx" believe that the term is an attempt to decolonize binary gender formations brought by the Spanish and US Colonial projects. However, non-binaristic understandings of gender and sexuality were already part of the Philippine Indigenous worldviews, such as the baybaylan, the gender fluid or third gender shamans of pre-colonial societies. To critics, the diasporic turn to the X can be seen as eliding the fact that Indigenous societies in the Philippines already acknowledged gender as a social construct.

In the decade after its emergence online, "Filipinx" has garnered more traction in academic circles. Kay Ulanday Barrett, Karen Buenavista Hanna, and Anang Palomar argue in their ground-breaking 2021 article entitled, "Defense of the X," that the X centres the material realities of queer, trans, gender-nonconforming Filipina/o/x in their day-to-day experiences of violence. The authors assert that the self-identification of the X supports dignity and self-determination. For those who want to embrace the X, the authors declare that they engage in an act of "self-naming as radical imagination."<sup>3</sup>

If the X indexes radical imagination in self-determination, then this linguistic transformation goes beyond identity politics and can offer theoretical and methodological possibilities in imagining new directions in Filipinx Diasporic art and studies.

While all the artists and the curator of this show are of Filipinx descent, this exhibition exceeds identity politics and any kind of nationalisms. Instead, this exhibition considers the influences of manifold colonial projects (Spanish, American, and now, Canadian), fraught migrations, and the ambivalent and vexed everyday realities of these artists who live and work in the midst of multiple and intersecting oppressions. These complex histories

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1. M. T. Vallarta, "Toward a Filipinx Method: Queer of Color Critique and QTGNC Mobilization in Mark Aguhar's Poetics," *The Velvet Light Trap* 86, no. 86 (2020): 39, <https://doi.org/10.7560/VLT8605>.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Kay Ulanday Barrett, Karen Buenavista Hanna, and Anang Palomar, "In Defense of the X: Centering Queer, Trans, and Non-Binary Pilipina/x/os, Queer Vernacular, and the Politics of Naming," *Alon: Journal for Filipinx American and Diasporic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2021), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7148255f>.

and diasporic movements have given rise to these Filipinx aesthetic interventions on Turtle Island that use art to create anticipatory futures. These yet-to-come expressions offer poetic rendering of space and time as diasporic consciousness, promise, and aspiration.

### **Julius Poncelet Manapul x John Ephraim Velasco**

When Filipino American artist Carlos Villas asked his art professor, Walt Kuhlman from the California School of Fine Arts, about Filipino art history, he replied: “there is no Filipino art history.”<sup>4</sup> Decades later in Canada, while this statement is not overtly asserted, it is loudly evidenced by the absence of Filipinx art in most university syllabi.

Grappling with this omission, Filipinx artists in Canada grasp at the thin connections to ancestry, particularly through web-based research that yield digital representations of Philippine Indigenous materiality. Turning to digital representations of ancestral culture *as a method* of refuting colonial logics that figure Filipinx subjects as always peripheral and itinerant, these digital representations became lifelines for artists in need of a visual vocabulary for making sense of their place on Turtle Island in the face of multiple colonialisms, pop culture, consumerist culture, and in the persistent presence of White supremacy and heteronormativity.

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4. Mark Dean Johnson, Trisha Lagaso Goldberg, Sherwin Rio, T. L. Bloom, P. D. Flores, Luis Francia, Theodore S. Gonzalves, P. J. Karlstrom, L. R. Lippard, and M. Machida, *Carlos Villa: Worlds in Collision* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 17.



**Figure 2:** Julius Poncelet Manapul & Ephraim Velasco



**Figure 3:** Queerios Murses, Julius Poncelet Manapul

In considering the digital collage work of Manapul and Velasco, I ask: *what does their art do rather than what it represents?* If we think of Manapul and Velasco’s digital collage as *a method of crafting subjectivity*, then their recombinations of a wide range of visual references, from pornography to popular fashion and Indigenous materiality to Philippine flora and fauna, are evidence of excess (Fig. 2). Manapul’s triptych queers diaspora beyond bloodlines and conquest. Their drag persona is birthed by the merging of skin-whitening products, abstracted queer flesh, and collaged body parts that form freed butterflies, asserting self-determination outside of colonial conceptions of beauty, gender, and sexuality (Fig. 3).

Velasco, an undergraduate visual arts student at York University, was driven to articulate his own Filipinx diasporic aesthetic in an educational context that consistently exalts the aesthetic of Whiteness. Internet image

searches become a method of subjectification through consolidating visual references from various Philippine Indigenous communities: Moro, Ifugao, Kalinga, and T'boli. While this work may be critiqued through the lens of representational appropriation, I suggest that we consider its function as a refusal of Western hegemonies in art education. Velasco is aware that these sources are rooted in displaced tribal and Islamic cultures of the Philippines and, in light of this, proposes a future in which these visualities can thrive and are as globally celebrated as Nike or Versace. Velasco puts contemporary Philippine Indigenous culture in conversation with global consumerism to construct a diasporic subjectivity that is in excess of Canadian multicultural categories that seek to contain difference.

In a similar vein, Manapul culls homoerotic images from the internet, digitally combines them together, and within the curvilinear designs, homophobic and racist slurs are hidden through ornamentalization. Words and phrases such as “ladlad,” “badig,” “rice queen,” and “bakla” are transformed into decorative motifs, thus recuperating these problematic terms into something of beauty. Displayed upon plinths and adopting the merchandizing techniques of luxury stores, the purses (male purses) and clutches have the appearance of highly-coveted designer goods available for purchase, alluding to the commodification and objectification of queer and racialized flesh. Through digital collage and paper sculpture, Manapul affectively transforms the pain and trauma of discrimination into desire and splendour. 136

### **Patrick Cruz x Excel Garay**

With shared interests in transcendence through Philippine materiality, the works of both Cruz and Garay activate the ground; the viewer looks down upon these installations in reverence and contemplation to consider the eternal, mystical, and sublime.



**Figure 4:** *Novena* (2022) Patrick Cruz

In Patrick Cruz's new work *Novena* (2022), the artist alludes to the devotional practice of nine days of consecutive prayer that many devout Filipinx/o/a Catholics partake in, usually to petition for special requests. For many Filipinx/os/as in the homeland and in the diaspora, devout Catholicism is syncretically entangled with folkloric beliefs and actions. The *novena*, like ancestral invocations, is predicated upon intense belief and commitment and veneration of the sacred. Cruz adopts the role of the devotee who conjures spells and enacts prayerful actions as a spiritual aesthetic praxis.

The artist has placed the holy trinity of Filipino food—garlic, onion, and ginger (*bawang, sibuyas, luya*)—on banana leaves on the gallery floor. These foods are base ingredients in Filipino cuisine and are known for their medicinal qualities. Coincidentally, they are also used to ward off evil supernatural forces in Philippine folklore. Arranged in the configuration reminiscent of a mandala—a repetitive circular pattern used for meditation—Cruz's offering demarks a space of care that provides physical and spiritual immunity from forces seen and unseen (Fig. 4).



**Figure 5:** *Clashes from Beyond the Sea* (2021) Excel Garay

There is no “pre-colonial” or “Christianised” moment here. Unlike modernism's progressist march into the future, Cruz proposes an ethic of care in the present that recognizes comingling temporalities and epistemologies that attends to the nuanced specificity of Filipinx diasporic consciousness and spirituality. By warding off harm—both supernatural and institutional—the artist extends his artistic practice of care to those around him to produce futures of wellbeing.

Just as Cruz marks a Filipinx temporal and epistemological multiplicity coexisting in one spot, Excel Garay's *Clashes from beyond the sea* (2021) alludes to colonial hauntings in the present. Bathed in blue light, this work references the etymology, history, and symbolism of the colour ultramarine blue (Fig. 5). From the Latin word *ultramarinus*, literally translating to “from beyond the seas,” this hue is a sublime temporality that collapses the past, present, and the yet-to-come. Garay's oceanic references recall the maritime ebbs and flows indicating non-human rhythms that extend beyond modernist scales of

temporality and space, and even beyond our lifespans.

The artist also considers the Christian art historical trajectory of the colour blue. For example, blue is the result of resource extraction of lapis lazuli from Afghani mines for use in iconographic sculptures of holy virgin Mary during the Renaissance. She coats quotidian plastic objects in this revered hue: artificial roses in a vase, a faux pineapple and dragon fruit washed in blue paint, and glass Coke bottles with straws folded inwards as practiced in sari-sari stores. They sit upon a banig, or sleeping mat typically used in the Philippines, but hers is not handwoven from palm leaves, but polystyrene that will likely survive the Anthropocene. Together, the installation is tropical simulacra and evokes an eschatology of uncertain futures that are both awe-in spiring and haunting.

### **Ella Gonzales x Reville Villanueva**

Coincidentally, both Gonzales and Villanueva were born in Saudi Arabia and subsequently migrated to Canada, where both of their families settled in the east Toronto suburb of Scarborough, a geography in which many immigrant and refugee families settle due to its relative affordability in the city's housing market. Diasporic movements through time and space are common preoccupations for these two artists (Fig. 6).



**Figure 6:** *X Marks the Spot* Installation view by Villanueva and Gonzales

In *Light Gathers* (2022), Gonzales adopts a visual vocabulary of transitional architectural spaces first rendered with computer-aided technologies and then translated by hand and through washes of acrylic upon piña. Piña—derived from pineapples which arrived in the Philippines during the Spanish colonial era as a cash crop—is a semi-translucent fabric woven from pineapple fibres. Alluding to transnational movements, Gonzales captures the in-between space and time within which Filipinx subjects are entangled. The artist renders each threshold, stairwell, and window as a transitory passageway that is not-quite-here-nor-there. They are portals to liminal spatial and temporal formations,



**Figure 7:** *Light Gathers* (2022) Ella Gonzales

becoming visual metaphors for diaspora as the diasporic subject often finds themselves moving among and in-between. Her paintings themselves become new architectures for thinking of the diasporic subject as an abstraction. If we think of abstract art as removed from its original object of reference, the diasporic subject, too, may be considered an abstraction—an entity that is detached from archetypal representation and that indexes another reality and another form. Gonzales shows us Filipinx diasporic subjectivity and temporality through the non-figurative, transcending the limits of the discourse of visibility and representation.

Villanueva mediates connection with his ancestral home through technology and performance in *I Wanna Go Home* (2022). The artist is seen about to break through a projected image of the Google Street View of his hometown of Tiring, Cabatuan, Philippines. He attempts to transverse the digital and virtual through painting, fusing media, temporalities, and geographies in an act of diasporic longing.

In *Halos of Scarborough Town Centre* (2021), Villanueva pays homage to the east end Toronto suburb and to video-gaming culture. The structures depicted in the painting are space-age beacons that suggest Scarborough as a

site of futurist possibilities for the many diasporic and racialized subjects that call it home. In another act of worldmaking, Villanueva portrays memories of home as geometric and organic shapes that move with him through space and time in the painting *Fleeting Memories of the Chocolate Hills* (2022).

### **The Promise of Filipinx Visual Futurities**

Futurities are collective imaginings that generate cultural and knowledge production about the future. In speculating Filipinx futurities, I have considered “Filipinx” as a transformative theory and method in curation. The confluence of these artists at different stages of their careers formulates possibilities that exceed the tropes of visibility and representation and instead, tap into generative powers for worldmaking in the diaspora. These critical visualities provide a blueprint for Filipinx subjectivity on Turtle Island to transcend the limitations of Western modernity by self-determining their present realities in order to bring about abundant futures.

### **ARTISTS**

Patrick Cruz (He/Him) is an artist, organizer, and educator born in Quezon City, Philippines. Cruz studied painting at the University of the Philippines, Diliman, and holds a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Guelph, a certificate in Pochinko clowning, and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Cruz is a co-founding member of Kamiasspecialprojects (KSP), a curatorial collective that hosts the Kamiasspecialprojects Triennial in his hometown of Quezon City. His practice is informed by the intersections of folk spirituality, diasporic aesthetics, cultural hybridity, and the project of decolonization. Cruz is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Arts, Culture and Media at the University of Toronto Scarborough.

[www.patrickcruz.org](http://www.patrickcruz.org) | [www.kamiasspecialprojects.com](http://www.kamiasspecialprojects.com)

Excel Garay (They/She) is an expanded-media painter, community worker, and curator. Garay’s work is informed by prismatic contradictory experiences they continue to 142 have as a transgender diasporic-settler currently occupying Mi’kma’ki territory in Kjiptuk, Eskikewa’kik (Halifax, Nova Scotia). They graduated with a BA in Art History and BFA in Fine Arts from the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design (NSCAD University) in 2022. They are the recipient of the RBC Emerging BIPOC Artist Award in 2021. Hauntology and Queer Phenomenology under a necropolitical lens foregrounds their practice. Garay’s artistic practice materially manifests as paintings, immersive installations, and interdisciplinary assemblage.

Ella Gonzales (She/Her) is a Filipina Canadian artist working between painting and Computer-Aided Design programs, as led by her interest in space making. Her paintings and installations are inspired by narratives of migration that inform the Filipino Diaspora. She has shown work with Galerie Nicolas Robert (Toronto), the plumb (Toronto), Patel Brown (Toronto), Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre (Kingston), and Zalucky Contemporary (Toronto). Gonzales holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in Studio Art from the University of Guelph and was the recent recipient of the 2021 Nancy Petry Award in painting. gonzalesella.

com Instagram: ellaggonzales

Julius Poncelet Manapul (They/Them, b. 1980 Manila, Philippines) immigrated to Canada in 1990 and identifies as a queer migrant Filipinx artist of Ilocano ancestry. In 2009, they completed a BFA at the Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCAD U) and MFA at the University of Toronto (U of T) in 2013. Over the last decade, Manapul has exhibited across North America and Europe. They had held positions as Associate Chair of Contemporary Drawing & Painting and are currently an assistant professor in the Faculty of Arts at OCAD U. Through research-based art practice, Manapul examines eternal displacement, complicated by colonialism, sexual identity, diasporic bodies, global identity construction, and the Eurocentric Western hegemony. Focusing on the hybrid nature of Filipinx culture through post-colonial realities, as well as through the gaze of queer identities as taxonomy, they study narratives specific to diasporic queer bodies, the loss of motherlands, and feelings of belonging as a consequence of the colonial pedagogy and imperial power. [www.juliusponceletmanapul.com](http://www.juliusponceletmanapul.com)

John Ephraim Velasco (He/Him, b. 2001 Philippines) is currently a Visual Arts major at York University. He is a diasporic Filipinx illustrator and interdisciplinary artist. Ephraim's work consists of mixed media, digital drawings, collages, drawing, and painting. Through a vibrant and energetic style, he explores people and portraiture, examining their role in popular culture, mass media, and the constantly changing landscape of social media. He conveys the denial of labels and expectations of gender and sexuality through visualizations of the human subject. As a non-Western creative force, he expresses his longing of his Philippine heritage using cultural designs and creating a hybrid of this along different imageries reminiscent to material commodity. His philosophy creating his works is to empower self-confidence through the human subject and propel them to their full potential. Instagram: flaming.hot.papi

Revill Villanueva (He/Him) is a Filipino Canadian visual artist whose works explore the synthesization of modern technology and futuristic aesthetics, along with themes and concepts from his Filipino culture. Villanueva was born in Saudi Arabia in 2000, raised in the Philippines, and immigrated to Canada in 2013. Villanueva's migration results in a feeling of alienation to a new world. Therefore, he uses science fiction and futuristic visual qualities as a form of storytelling to resemble his experience of being an outsider. In addition, Villanueva embraces the use of various technologies in his creative practice to reveal the unification between the obsolete and the contemporary. He is currently a BFA Special Honours Visual Arts major at York University. He is the recipient of the 2022 Dean's Purchase Award, Willowdale Painting Award, G44 Award, and Art History Honorarium Award at York University's Visual Arts and Art History Open House. Instagram: revillvillanueva