



SILA / SIYA / AKO
Julius Poncelet Manapul
Curated by Dr. Marissa Largo

January 5 - April 27, 2024
Reception Friday January 5th from 6 - 8 pm
A Space Main Gallery and Windows



Julius Poncelet Manapul, *Sila*, Collaged sculpture, 2023 (detail)

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Biographies

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 their BFA at OCADU and their MFA at U of T in 2013. They are currently an assistant professor in the Faculty of Arts at OCADU. Through research-based art practice, Julius P. Manapul examines eternal displacement, complicated by colonialism, sexual identity, diasporic bodies, global identity construction, and 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, exclusion as a consequence of the colonial pedagogy and imperial power. They have presented their work at the Paradise Now Collective (2011), Nuit Blanche-Toronto (2010, 2012 and 2014), Toronto World Pride Toronto (2014), the Art Gallery of Ontario (2017 & 2022), the Koffler Gallery, A Space Gallery, Art Museum at the University of Toronto, University of Toronto Art Centre, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, John B. Aird Gallery, Propeller Gallery, PM Gallery, and Daniel Spectrum. They have

also exhibited internationally in the UK, France, Germany, and the US.
www.juliusponceletmanapul.com

Dr. Marissa Largo (She/Her) is an assistant professor in Creative Technologies at York University. She is a researcher, artist, curator, and educator whose work focuses on the intersections of community engagement, race, gender, and Asian diasporic cultural production. Her forthcoming book, *Unsettling Imaginaries: Filipinx Contemporary Artists in Canada* examines the work and oral histories of artists who imagine Filipinx subjectivity beyond colonial logics (and features Manapul as one of the four artists in her study). She is co-editor of *Diasporic Intimacies: Queer Filipinos and Canadian Imaginaries* (Northwestern University Press, 2017) and since 2018, she has served as the Canada Area Editor of the *Journal of Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas* (ADVA). Her projects have been presented in venues and events across Canada, such as the Varley Art Gallery of Markham (2021), A Space Gallery (2023, 2017, 2012 and 2009), Royal Ontario Museum (2015), WorldPride Toronto (2014), Nuit Blanche in Toronto (2019, 2018, 2012 and 2009),

and MAI (Montréal, arts interculturels) (2007). Largo's 2021 curatorial project *Elusive Desires: Ness Lee & Florence Yee* at the Varley was recognized by the 2022 *Galleries Ontario/Ontario Galleries (GOG) Awards* for best exhibition design and installation and best curatorial writing.
www.marissalargo.com



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The holy trinity – God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – is a Christian doctrine that expresses the threefold conception of God. The trinity also describes the composition of the human person as consisting of a mind, body, and soul. These trifactas become part of the conceptual framework for Toronto-based Filipinx artist Julius Poncelet Manapul's solo exhibition, *Sila/Siya/Ako*. Tagalog for *they/them/me*, the exhibition's title alludes to the gender neutrality that is embedded in the Philippine language, and most vividly, the colonial order of church, state, and the colonized.

From the 16th century to the end of the 19th century, the Roman Catholic Church enabled the Spanish colonial conquest of the Philippines and its people. We see its residues today: from our Hispanicised last names, to the imposition of the narrow binaristic definitions of gender and sexuality, and in the adoration and elevation of whiteness through skin lightening products such as the Likas soap featured in many of the artist's works in this show. For the artist, these colonial ideologies of race and gender have led to daily oppression in the Philippines and in its diaspora.

Manapul brazenly reconfigures church architecture, cultural symbols, and religious iconography to assert their queer diasporic Filipinx subjectivity. The artist does this by transforming the gallery into a theatrical Catholic church-meets-early 2000s gay dance club. One sacred and the other profane, it can be argued that both the church and dance club are sites of worship, music, and community. For example, the exaltation of writhing hypermasculine bodies can be found on the ceiling of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel and in Toronto's gay scene. Both can be communities of acceptance, but also insidious spaces of vehement rejection. They are simultaneously "zones of ambivalence and contradictions"¹ in which those who do not fit the ideal are excluded and devalued. The artist collapses these two discursive spaces to create a new world in which colonial harms are taken to task through their queer decolonial aesthetic.²

Within Manapul's church-club, three figures dominate the space: the Spanish *conquistador*, the *Indios*,³ and the *Santo Niño* (the Holy Child Jesus). To symbolize this trio, the artist dresses three mannequins with attire created from thousands of hand-crafted paper motifs constructed from collaged queer erotic imagery and Philippine symbols. An artful replica of King Philip II's armour, the conquistador's paper breastplate and helmet can no longer withstand opposition. Coming to heads are the colonizer who comes with paternalism and white knight syndrome and the *Indios* who embodies ancestral knowledge and culture. A nod to the controversial Philippine past time of cockfighting, the *Indios'* attire is fashioned from hundreds of paper feathers that even



Julius Poncelet Manapul, *Sila*, Collage, 2023

envelop the figures' faces. While cockfighting is a literal blood sport, metaphorically, it indexes colonial violence and imaginable liberation from it.

A deeply revered and celebrated figure in Philippine Catholicism is the *Santo Niño*; it can even be said that they are a queer icon. In his article *Sacred Camp*, dance ethnographer Patrick Alcedo examines the experience of *agi*⁴ participant, Tay Augus, in the *Ati-Atihan* in Kalibo, a yearly carnivalesque festival that venerates the *Santo Niño*. Tay Augus participates in the religious festivities while in drag as gender norms are suspended during this time. Alcedo argues that since the *Santo Niño* is a child, their gender is enigmatic and, therefore, festival-goers tap into the *Santo Niño's* fluidity to "subvert and make fun of the gender norms the Roman Catholic Church has institutionalized."⁵ In a similar subversive manner, Manapul draws on Philippine Catholic camp and the Y2K Toronto gay scene to remap colonial gender expectations and racial hierarchies.

In the artist's version, baby Jesus is now grown up and is ready to compete in Manila Luzon's *Drag Den*.⁶ Manapul's *Santo Niño* is decked out in a spectacular ruby red satin cape decorated with bottles of Eskinol, a whitening facial cleanser popular among Filipinos, and emblazoned with the baybayin⁷ word for *sila* (them). It is edged with racial and homophobic slurs that are ornamentalized and transformed into delicate filigree, obscuring the painful words. *Santo Niño's* face is masked by the artist's trademark butterflies that are collaged from queer erotica that highlights white bodies. The butterflies explode from underneath the decadent crown eliding *Santo Niño's* European phenotypes. Manapul's suturing and juxtaposition of disparate images of whiteness recodes these colonial visualities. They reduce these hegemonic images into a decorative motif, thus subverting their authority and injurious power. This aesthetic strategy resists dominant Eurocentric representations that erase the artist's lived experiences of difference and exclusion.

From the ceiling hang pigeons, which are common sights and sounds in the town plaza in front of the church and, sometimes, in the church themselves.

These pigeons hold in their mouths red ribbons that carry haunting messages. These texts proclaim: *dumating ka para sakupin ako* (you came to conquer me) and *vine a salvar tu alma* (I came to save your soul), marking Indigenous cultural and linguistic erasures and the western saviour complex.

The looped video projection, *Erasing a Country/Pagbubura ng Isang Bansa* (2023) animates Manapul's labour-intensive creative practice, making visible raw processes of assimilation and evisceration of self into idealized forms. Sonically, the artist fills the gallery with a cacophony of 90s dance music, cooing pigeons taking flight, and ringing church bells. Manapul seems to express, through this soundscape, that the post-colonial condition is charged with dissonance, both cognitive and affective. Among other songs the artist remembers from their days in the gay club scene, the artist adds Haddaway's 1993 dance hit *What is love?* (*Baby don't hurt me/ Don't hurt me/ No more*) to the church-club playlist, capturing the minefield that is gay hook-up culture.

In the windows, Manapul furthers their practice of assembling *cabinets of queeriosities*.⁸ This collection of curated objects— works from the artist's oeuvre from the past decade, history books, Philippine souvenirs, religious iconography, and belongings from the artist's own archive— create a personal museum that disrupts the Western civilizing project for which museums were notorious. At the same time, they pay homage to their matriarchs such as anti-colonial heroine and the artist's ancestor, Gabriela Silang, and their own *Lola* (grandmother), Gloria D. Manapul.

Through their multisensory worldbuilding in the gallery, Manapul reclaims their Filipinx mind, body, and soul. To quote pop sensation Pink, let us pray:

*If God is a DJ,
 then life is a dance floor.*

susmaryosep!⁹
 Amen.

¹ Alcedo, Patrick. "Sacred Camp: Transgendering Faith in a Philippine Festival." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (Singapore) 38, no. 1 (2007): 107-32.

² Largo, Marissa. "A Country That Does Not Exist." *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas* 1, no. 1-2 (February 24, 2015): 108-30.

³ This is a Spanish term that refers to the Indigenous peoples of the Philippines.

⁴ In the Philippine regional language of Hiligaynon, *agi* is a gender expression that is effeminate and includes camp behaviours and mannerisms.

⁵ Alcedo, Patrick. "Sacred Camp", p. 110.

⁶ Produced and hosted by Filipino American drag queen Manila Luzon, *Drag Den* is a uniquely Filipino drag pageant reality television show in which contestants compete for the title of the Philippines' "Drag Supreme".

⁷ Baybayin is the Philippine writing system that predates European contact

⁸ Cabinet of Queeriosities: The Art of Julius Poncelet Manapul. Exhibition essay by Marissa Largo, 2015.

⁹ This is a portmanteau of "Jesus, Mary and Joseph" that is used to express surprise or vexation.