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Value Studies

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Value Studies

by Thea Canlas

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About the Artist

Thea Canlas is a Filipina-American artist whose conceptual, research-driven work explores the entanglements of diasporic Philippine identity through sculptural objects, installations, and digital media. Thea received her BFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art in 2006 and her MFA from Emily Carr University of Art and Design in 2023. Her work has been exhibited in Washington, DC, Houston, Vancouver, Glasgow, and Baltimore. In 2024, she received the Ruby's Artist Grant and was selected as a semifinalist for the Sondheim Art Prize.

Value Studies

Thea Canlas

In Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* (1997), they argue that "to study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it" (7). And while hauntings in social realities, as Gordon describes, can call attention to what is lost, it is also the lingering impression of a repressed horror rematerializing in the present.[1]

The circumstances of pandemic living instilled an anxiety-fueled urgency to address hauntings that have shaped my identity as a Philippine-born Filipina-American. As reports appeared of Filipino nurses and healthcare workers being disproportionately affected by coronavirus and Filipino overseas contract workers stranded indefinitely in inhospitable locales, it felt even more imperative that I understand how we came to this point of becoming a source of disposable labor for countries all over the world.[2] What does it mean to be reduced to a commodity? And what is lost when you are commodified?

Value Studies (2022–ongoing) is a series I conceptualized during the pandemic and continued through my Master's program at Emily Carr University immediately after quarantine. These works examine how centuries of violent commodification through colonization and American imperial occupation have informed present ideations of Philippine cultural identity and our human economic value. The installations and sculptural objects in this series incorporate various materials such as traditional Philippine handicrafts, historical textiles, exported goods, human hair, and tropical fruits to interrogate the relationships between economic value and cultural narration. Out of these materials, ghosts materialize into earthly forms: the translucent uniforms of invisible laborers float in the space of the gallery (see Fig. 1); the flags of spectral nations dangle from the ceiling; brooms of human hair hang anonymously (see Fig. 2). They appear as visitations and apparitions, yet they reflect contemporary horrors.

Figure 1. Canlas, Thea. *Value Studies: Uniforms*. 2023. Machine embroidered piña cloth, white sand, sugar, pearls, and human teeth. Installation view. Photo by David Sloan.

Philippine labor migration can be traced back to 1565 with Filipinos being forced to work on the Spanish galleons that travelled between Manila and Acapulco. During the American occupation in the 1900s, Filipino workers were deployed first to Hawaii, and then to mainland United States for various unskilled labor in manufacturing, agriculture, and construction. The exploitation of Philippine labor is inextricable from the history of colonial economies and globalization.

Since the 1990s, state-encouraged inflows and outflows of workers have drastically shaped Philippine social life and cultural identity. Any imagined identity tied within the borders of the nation-state is in constant battle with the realities of mass movements of

overseas contract workers (OCWs), also known as overseas Filipino workers (OFWs). How does the exodus of skill and labor and the influx of outside capital inform cultural value? As Vicente L. Rafael argues in *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (2000):

> As foreign sources of aid, overseas Filipinos come to occupy ambiguous positions. Neither inside nor wholly outside the nation-state, they hover on the edges of its consciousness, rendering its boundaries porous with their dollar-driven comings and goings. In this sense, they take on the semblance of spectral presences whose labor takes place somewhere else but whose effects command, by their association with money, a place in the nation-state. As extruded parts of the body politic, the traces of their bodies continue to circulate, producing 'radical effects on people's lives.' For this reason, overseas Filipinos now increasingly represent novel elements in local understandings of 'cultural transformations' and 'national development.' Their absence becomes an integral feature of vernacular narratives regarding what it means to be modern. (205)

For *Value Studies: Uniforms* (2022-present, see Fig. 1), I researched the uniforms for the most common occupations that OCWs are contracted to do and recreated each one in piña or pineapple cloth.[3] Piña cloth is still made entirely by hand—first by boiling and separating the long fibers of pineapple leaves. Woven together, it is light, strong, and diaphanous—a textile well-suited for the heat and humidity of the tropics. I use piña cloth's embedded history to convey the connections between commodification and identity. Piña is intrinsically tied to the Philippines' colonization by the Spanish, who introduced the plant to the islands as a cash crop.[4] It is still used for the Philippines' designated national attires, the *Barong Tagalog* and *Baro't Saya*.[5]

Piña cloth is a strong, translucent material making it a versatile medium for material experimentation. Its seeming lightness and gossamer nature evoke wisps and ghosts—subtle impressions that require closer attention. Piña's materiality captures the notion of invisibility and erasure I want to emphasize in this series. I also wanted to "make visible" the throughline between the economies and labors embedded in our Spanish colonial past to the present ideation of national identity and culture.

Figure 2. Canlas, Thea. Installation view of *Value Studies: Uniforms* and *My Filipino Baby*. 2023. Photo by David Sloan.

When I think of how Filipina identity and commerce intersect, I think of the sustained narratives around sexual labor and exploitation of exoticized brown female bodies. Mail-order brides, military-controlled sex workers outside US bases in the Philippines, and OFWs employed as domestic workers are constantly under threat of abuse. Philippine news and media in the 1980s and 1990s were rife with stories of exploited Filipinas abroad, and this had embedded a certain anxiety over my body long before I lived outside of the Philippines. Now that I've spent the majority of my life in the United States, I am constantly aware that my body is minimized in these same ways.

In *My Filipino Baby* (2023), I wanted to embody these internal conflicts. Using hair seemed natural for this work as I've been conditioned to see my thick, black, straight hair as a point of pride, especially in terms of expressing my sexual value as an Asian female. As a form, the broom was the perfect vehicle for the hair—expressing with it other forms of bodily labor, namely disposable domestic labor, imposed on brown female bodies. Also, as a cleaning tool, the bristles (or in this case, the hair) get impossibly tangled and dirtied with each use.

The specific broom I recreate is called a *walis tambo*, which is specific to brooms used indoors in the Philippines. The *walis tambo* usually has a decorative handle wrapped in plastic rattan. More expensive versions, usually for the tourist market, have short text woven into the rattan. Often the text will say *Export Quality*—a marketing term in local parlance expressing that the quality of the object is so fine that it is fit for export to other countries. Previous iterations of this piece kept this original text.

Figure 3. Canlas, Thea. Detail of *My Filipino Baby*. 2023. Photo by David Sloan.

The text on the handles in *My Filipino Baby* has the chorus to the country song, "My Filipino Baby," woven in, a song I found in the digital archives of the New York Public Library.[6] First written in 1899 after the Spanish-American War, "My Filipino Baby" is about an African-American sailor who falls in love with a Filipina maiden while stationed in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War. He later returns and marries her while on the ship to take her back to America. It was later re-recorded by three white country singers, and the lyrics were altered to take out the references to a colored sailor and a black-faced Filipina girl. For this piece, I chose to use the newer version as its history of omission seemed most befitting to the themes of erasure within the series. The chorus is as follows:

> She's my darling Filipino Baby
> She's my treasure and my pet

Her teeth are bright and pearly
And her hair is black as jet (Cox & Van Ness 1946)

Creating (nearly) uniform brooms for this installation was important in emphasizing the historical repetition and uniformity of the forms of violence, subjugation, and devaluation against brown and black bodies. In tracing the histories of materials intrinsically linked to Philippine cultural and national identity, the rhizomatic nature of its entanglements with colonial and capitalist economies became abundantly clear in my research. Furthermore, the histories I've researched illuminate the intersections of racial capitalism, gender, and negotiations of power amongst nation-states. For future iterations of these works, I am looking to experiment more with site-specific installations and work with existing Philippine cultural objects in museum collections and archives to expand on this aspect of cultural value production.

Notes

[1] In *Ghostly Matters* (1997), Gordon argues for a conceptual shift in sociological analysis in order to understand the interconnected complexities of social life. An analysis of "haunting" is a way to understand what has been suppressed and hidden. Simultaneously, they argue against the limited scope of sociological studies—opting for a much more interdisciplinary method for comprehending what is known.

[2] According to a study updated in 2021 by National Nurses United: "83 registered nurses (26.4 percent) who have died of Covid-19 and related complications are Filipino. Filipinos make up 4 percent of RNs in the United States. Just under half of the registered nurses of color who have died to date have been Filipino (48.8 percent)" (5).

[3] According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (Mapa 2023), 60.2% of OFWs were women, with 64.8% of that population taking on "unskilled labor" (domestic work is not segregated from this number but other studies suggest that a majority of unskilled labor jobs for women are in the domestic sphere). Among male OFWs, 31.2% fall under "plant and machine operators and assemblers" (2023).

[4] Contrary to popular belief, the pineapple is not native to the Philippines. During the Spanish colonial period, much native farmland was razed by the Spanish for planting highly-valued colonial commodities like pineapples and sugar cane. "Panay, and particularly Iloilo province, became the center of piña weaving. When the pineapple grew successfully, the natives who were already skilled in weaving fabrics from such plants as cotton, abaca, palms and plantains, were predisposed to consider it as another source of fiber" (Montinola 1991, 12). Because of its high tensile strength, lightweight, and sheerness, piña became a valuable Philippine export for the European market, thus quickly becoming a marker of class within the Philippine colonies.

[5] In 1975, a few decades after the Philippines gained its independence, President Ferdinand Marcos declared the Barong Tagalog (for men) and the Baro't Saya (for women), two attires made with embroidered piña, as the "national attires" of the Philippines ("Barong Tagalog"). This particular designation was intended to boost the commercial export of these textiles.

[6] According to Wikipedia: "Songwriter Bill Cox claimed he wrote the song about an uncle who married a Filipino woman during the Philippine–American War. However, the lyrics largely mirror an earlier song, 'Mah Filipino Baby', copyrighted in 1899 by Charles K. Harris" ("Filipino Baby").

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