

**Visual Arts****Beautiful imagery from an ugly past: Maia Cruz Palileo, Pioneer Works, Brooklyn**

Filipina-American artist Maia Cruz Palileo reflects on the Philippines' colonial history in a series of richly allusive paintings



'Ancestral Home' (2018)  
Ariella Budick MAY 25, 2018

The art world is addicted to bigness: themed extravaganzas, panoramic biennials and multi-decade retrospectives. Sometimes, though, what the soul needs is an anti-blockbuster — a single work, say, that anchors a miniature exhibition in an upstairs gallery of an out-of-the-way arts centre. Meet Maia Cruz Palileo and her “Ancestral Home”, a magnetic painting of seductive surface, structural complexity and strong character, now on view at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn.

A woman sits in a high-backed carved red chair, her back to the viewer, gazing into an elaborate gilt mirror. All else is mystery. Is that her or an alter-ego staring back from the glass, clutching something that might be a bird? What vast vaulted space opens into the reflected distance, where a

dark-suited man stands and observes? Does the mirror show the same cheery room it sits in, hung with an ornate chandelier and adorned with art? Four women cluster along one wall; are they really there, or do they exist only in a painting-within-a-painting?

Ambiguities and allusions pile up. Palileo invokes Velázquez's brilliant puzzle "Las Meninas", with its echoing dialogue of mirrors, paintings and people, and its shadowy chamberlain holding open a door to another world. Her quartet of women on the wall could be cousins of Picasso's "Les demoiselles d'Avignon". The interior quivers with the colours and melancholy of Bonnard. Even before we can make out the various elements or their interplay, we perceive a layering of generations, memories and cultures. The paint is sometimes thinly applied and the perspective disorienting, but the sense of depth is unmistakable.

Like many children of immigrants, Palileo has multiple ancestral homes. She was born in Chicago in 1979 to parents who had uprooted themselves from Manila and dropped into suburban Ohio. Her earlier work dwells on the years before her birth: she photocopied snapshots of the couple's first car and first house many times over so that they faded and grew vague. Then she used those degraded images as kernels to paint memories that weren't hers. Palileo left Chicago for college on the East Coast, and her ties frayed. Her mother died. The family scattered. Over time the Midwest and the Philippines grew increasingly nebulous.



'Amerikanistas' (2018)

"I wondered if they felt like visitors in a new land," she has said. "They didn't talk about it very much. That's the other thing that motivated my work: what they didn't tell us — reasons why they left, the stories that they didn't want us to know." Painting became a way to flesh out the past.



Now a bone-fide Brooklynite, she returned to Chicago in the summer of 2017 to examine the archive of Dean C. Worcester, an early-20th-century American zoologist, Philippines expert and colonial official. Worcester both took and acquired photos, amassing a collection with an argument: that the US's "civilising" mission in the Philippines was virtuous and necessary. As a photographer, he merged the exotica of tropical foliage, native costume and brown-skinned subjects with familiar tropes of western art. He placed nude women in the same recumbent pose that runs from Titian's Venus through Matisse's odalisques.

Worcester was a friend and colleague of General Henry Ware Lawton, whose lavish Manila mansion serves as the setting for "Ancestral Home". Palileo doesn't identify the location, but a search through the Worcester archives yields a photo from 1899, showing the same chandelier, pilasters and arches, the same high-backed chairs and deep shadows. Lawton's two young daughters perch in front of the same gilt mirror; the photographer's reflection appears in the glass. In the painting the grey-haired, dark-skinned woman has taken the girls' place, but their spirits haunt the scene.



'Lover at Woodland Creek' (2018)

Palileo, a Filipino-American reflecting on the US's presence in the Philippines, hints glancingly at the violent clash of western and south-east Asian cultures, but she also lingers on the artistic fruits of these encounters. In another fierce and delicate painting she reimagines one of Worcester's ethnographic nudes as a "Lover at Woodland Creek" — an androgynous Adam (or is it Eve?) in a nocturnal garden, flanked by a friendly snake, guarded by bats, and lit by an enchanted moon. Eyes

are everywhere, watching, waiting for some terrible event. With its intense hues, graphic clarity, and atmosphere of voluptuous calm, the painting strongly evokes Gauguin in his Tahiti period.

Westerners have always loved and destroyed the places they colonised, and some saw entire populations as narcissistic projections of themselves. In 1889, Gauguin wrote: “You know that I have Inca blood in me” — he didn’t — “and it’s reflected in everything I do. It’s the basis of my personality; I try to confront rotten civilisation with something more natural, based on savagery.” More than a century later, Palileo is trying to reconcile the ugliness of colonial history with the appeal of its imagery. She makes pencil drawings of plants and figures from Worcester’s archive, then cuts them out to form a cast of characters she can reinsert into imaginary landscapes.



'Askal Song' (2018)

In “Askal Song” a drummer in a baggy blue-and-magenta uniform, a bandanna around his head and a cigarette dangling from his lips, slouches in a jungle landscape. A platoon of dogs surrounds him, alert and full of personality. To our eyes, the man is a character out of Worcester’s inventory

of local types, but the dogs see through the costume to the individual. They perceive what the colonist can't.

Palileo invokes pre-colonial folkloric beliefs as an antidote to western paternalism. Her characters protect themselves with amulets and animals, night-time rituals and incantations. The nightmare of empire runs through her work, but it's just one note in a rich harmony of topics. Although she is mostly mum on her influences, references and preoccupations, the title "Askal Song" refers to a Filipino pop number from 2013 that features heartbroken canine howling and a chorus of dancing women in leotards doing some pert puppy moves. By combining the timeless with the trendy Palileo reminds us that every era has its forms of tragic shallowness, its misunderstandings and convoluted mythologies, inexplicable from a distance. At the same time, she whirls together past and present in concoctions of luxuriant, irresistible beauty.

To July 8, [pioneerworks.org](http://pioneerworks.org)

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