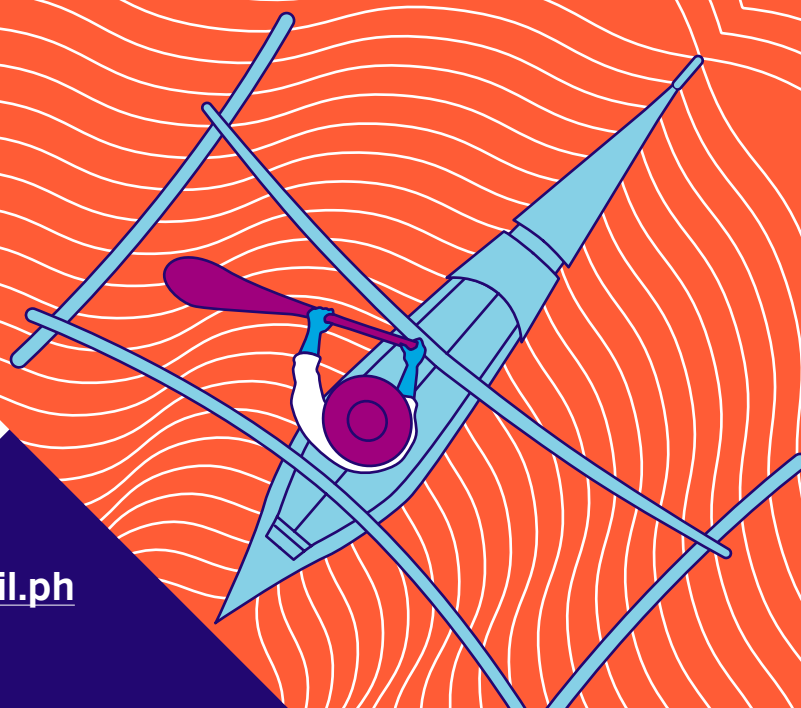


Culture Connects

Isles and islands

Cultural flows
between the UK
and Philippines



Lead editor: Arianna Mercado
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Introduction

Convergences, often invisible and overlooked, mark the history of relations between the Philippines and the UK. The Philippines was one of the UK's colonies in Southeast Asia, albeit only very briefly. British forces occupied Manila, the capital of the Philippines, for a grand total of 20 months. While this British colonial occupation is now a mere footnote in Philippine history, more recent connections through culture echo the same problems of inequality, visibility, and global geopolitical strategy that had characterised that initial convergence.

Today, the constant traffic of people and ideas flowing between the Philippines and the UK often goes unnoticed. The Philippines has long-established and fraught relationships with the US, Spain, and the Middle East while, in comparison, Philippine-British relations are less obvious and examined only infrequently. With a more modest tourist industry than its neighbours and lacking a prominent public presence in UK high streets, for most UK residents the Philippines seems unfamiliar. Still, growing numbers of British citizens have relocated to the Philippines for business or as retirees, while even larger numbers of Filipinos have migrated to the UK for work opportunities or study.

Along with the flows of bodies come connections generated through exchanges of information, skills, and understanding. This anthology explores the cultural relationships and shared knowledge circulating between the two from the perspective of those who criss-cross that space. It brings together contributions from writers, artists, and academics – identifying as British, Filipino, Filipino-British, and as global citizens – all working to make contemporary convergences visible.

The British Council is one of the main facilitators for exchanges between the UK and the Philippines. Founded in 1934 and working in the Philippines since 1978, they have developed several programmes which encourage these convergences within arts, culture, and education. British Council programmes include the Connections through Culture collaboration grants and the Newton Agham Fund for scientists, among others. With a recent series of shifts emerging in the Philippine-UK relationship, this anthology, commissioned by the British Council, explores what it means to build complex cultural relationships through the arts, across geographies, and within entangled global contexts.

The Philippines has long-established and fraught relationships with the US, Spain, and the Middle East while, in comparison, Philippine-British relations are less obvious and examined only infrequently.

Isles and islands focuses on opportunities to enhance the growth of creative collaborations between the Philippines and the UK. These collaborations are not only a story of creativity, but a story of navigating bureaucracy. Making collaborations visible and identifying how institutional infrastructure can support Filipino relationships with the UK and with the lived histories of the contemporary Filipino diaspora is key to this growth.

Echoing comments from Filipino artists Pio Abad, much of the work of visibility is about form-filling and persistence, but the payoffs from these efforts are generating high profile creative and artistic projects. These projects feature Filipino culture in new ways. They also recognise and expand multicultural and cosmopolitan creative expressions in contemporary UK. This is the key convergence that runs through the entirety of this anthology. In the nine chapters that follow, we present new and nuanced narratives, which describe the expanding creative relationships between the two countries.

We begin the anthology with a brief history of the Philippine-British connections written by Filipino-British historian Dr Kimberley Luistina Weir. Her article, *"A big and beautiful city"*, traces the waves of migration and contact between the two countries from 1579 to today. She frames this history within her own lived experience as a child of a first generation immigrant, growing up in the Filipino community in Leeds. Grounded by Kimberley's personal-global history, our texts move on to explore the creative exchanges that bring together two contemporary cultures.

These projects feature Filipino culture in new ways. They also recognise and expand multicultural and cosmopolitan creative expressions in contemporary UK.

Transnational exchanges

Our next three chapters are linked through a focus on transnational cultural exchanges between the UK and the Philippines. Each of the three pieces, exploring the work of artist David Medalla, examining the role of the Metropolitan Museum of Manila (the MET), alongside a series of letters by artist Mica Cabildo to the British explorer John Whitehead, unpacks the back-and-forth relations between these two global locations and the taut strings that tie them together.

Focusing on the work and legacy of groundbreaking and legendary Filipino artist David Medalla (who sadly passed away in 2020), Eva Bentcheva's chapter examines his status as a key nodal point in connecting art movements and artists across Asia and Europe. Untangling the different periods of Medalla's practice, Bentcheva's chapter explores Medalla's political activism and innovative artworks as similarly creative practices. This shows us the incredible breadth of his work while also highlighting numerous artistic and political convergences structuring the relationship between Medalla's two homes: Britain and the Philippines.

Discussing the exhibition histories of British artists in Manila, Regina Bautista's interview with Tina Colayco reveals that the Met was the first cultural institution in the Philippines to utilise bilingual communication in its exhibitions of international artists.

Bilingualism appeared around the same time that local practitioners also began to be included in the Met's exhibition programming. The museum's pedagogical role in literal translation is made clear here, not only through joint exhibitions of Filipino and international artists, but by demonstrating the importance of international exchange and education within the Philippines.

Finally, Mica Cabildo's *Letters to Whitehead: A specimen search in London*, recounts her time in London in 2020 as part of a residency at Gasworks. Focusing her research on the life of explorer Whitehead, who first 'discovered' the famous Philippine eagle amongst many other species. Cabildo's series of letters narrate her experiences in pre-pandemic London searching for still-extant artefacts and specimens collected by Whitehead. As the pandemic emerged, she found parallels between herself and Whitehead in their hasty exits from the UK and the Philippines respectively.

After migration

What comes after migration? Settlement, sojourning, exchange and integration, then hybridity and the efflorescence of new cultural forms. We find all these processes, happening recursively, in the waves carrying Filipinos to the UK and British residents and Filipinos back to the Philippines.

In the UK, many Filipinos navigate persistent stereotyping as 'natural caregivers', being associated with their compatriots working in the health and care sector and as domestic workers, childminders, or caregivers in private homes. Stereotyping obscures the diversity of Filipino migrants and immigrants to the UK.

There are many Filipino engineers, educators, tech workers, and artists who settle in Britain. These stereotypes diminish the education, talents, and skills of those who do move to take up work in the UK's care sector. How migrants push against this stereotyping and make a public space for Filipino creativity and culture is, in different ways, what the next three chapters introduce.

Rogelio Braga's interview describes his experience of seeking asylum in the UK. Shifting his status from artist to asylum-seeker to refugee, he discusses the ways he has navigated the UK's 'hostile environment' and found spaces that foster his creativity. Already an established playwright, director, and publisher in Manila, starting again in the UK has been both invigorating and exhausting for Braga. Now in the UK, he finds that his creative practice emerges from the convergences between the issues he encountered in his life in the Philippines and those of his new life in London.

Deirdre McKay and Nathalie Dagmang write about Kamustahan Art Projects, an online space that cultivated conversations surrounding experiences of migrant workers during the pandemic. Here, art-making via Zoom became a way to catch up with fellow Filipinos for migrants who were often isolated in employers' homes or facing economic precarity. Kamustahan demonstrates how, for people that host societies assume to be low-skilled and uncreative, a creative practice can open up new avenues to self-actualisation.

Pio Abad's interview explores how bureaucratic street smarts enables Filipino artists to succeed in the UK's contemporary art scene. With over two decades in the UK, Abad's artistic career has intertwined themes from the Philippines with more distinctly British concerns. While his art practice was invigorated by frequent visits to the Philippines and by a much wider Asian art ecosystem, he really developed his career by being a 'geek for institutional procedures'. In this, he is describing what is now a familiar migrant kind of knowing, that of figuring out how to conform to institutional requirements.

Expanding fields

Our final section explores the potential futures for collaboration between the UK and the Philippines, examining opportunities for education, co-learning, and what these may mean looking forward.

Access to resources and education continues to be a challenge across many regions and sectors in the Philippines. Moreover, the complicated histories of colonialism and imperialism in the country have undoubtedly created barriers for Filipinos to become visible on an international stage. This section focuses on the fields that blossom in spite of these obstacles.

Award-winning documentary filmmaker Baby Ruth Villarama meets up with Arianna Mercado to share their experiences. Both Villarama and Mercado studied in the UK, facing confusing labels, unique institutional opportunities, and homesickness. They discuss the potential for cultural connections to shift and complicate the stereotypes attached to Filipinos as a result of labour migration, and the stories which frame their own contributions to the UK.

Cristina Juan, a researcher and educator at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, closes the anthology with another institution-building account. Juan pieces together the creation of Philippine Studies at SOAS, thinking through the creative projects that have constructed resources for study. These projects include mapping Philippine material culture held overseas and enabling digital access to Filipiniana texts and archives held in the UK. The project of making long standing Philippine-UK connections visible through SOAS then reverberates into the much wider field of shared creativity.

Taken together, these contributions show how contemporary connections between the UK and the Philippines are historic and dense, yet often overlooked. The work being done by cultural practitioners to create new networks and new spaces for opportunity and growth is an invaluable resource for both countries and their diasporas. Through *Isles and Islands: Cultural flows between the UK and the Philippines*, we highlight this space of collaboration between the UK and the Philippines, bringing to the forefront persistent creative practices as they converge across geographies.

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Arianna Mercado

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"A big and beautiful city": Philippine-British connections 1579 to 2022

Hidden amongst the Regency-era townhouses of London's Primrose Hill is an English Heritage Blue Plaque, marking the brief 1888 residency of Philippine national hero José Rizal. While it commemorates an extraordinary cultural connection between the United Kingdom and the Philippines, this obscure memorial is testament to the often-overlooked historic ties between the two nations.

Kimberley Lustina Weir

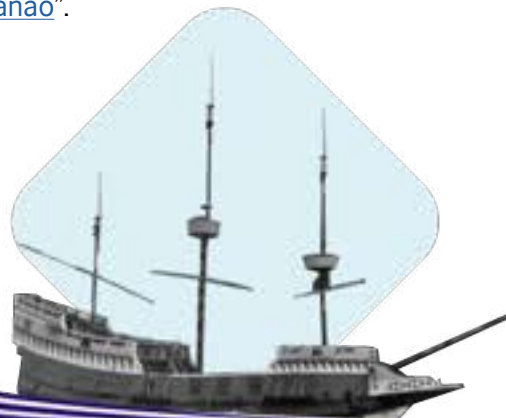


As the child of a 1970s Philippine emigrant and English father, growing up I often felt I occupied two very separate worlds. In the 1980s and 1990s it seemed strange to me that the Philippines, such a huge part of my life, was practically unknown outside of the Leeds Filipino community of which I was a part. I remember telling classmates at school when describing its location that it was “near China”! Coming across this English Heritage dedication to Rizal is a wonderful reminder, both of the interconnectedness of these two nations, and that their history extends far beyond the 1970s wave of immigration that brought my own mother to the UK.

There has been much focus on more recent Philippine migration to the UK, particularly following significant [National Health Service \(NHS\) recruitment in the 2000s](#). This article uncovers the lesser-known periods of contact and migration, revealing a long history of political and cultural connections, from Sir Francis Drake’s landing in Mindanao, to Rizal’s London residency. I also talk about some of my own experiences of growing up between two cultures.

Elizabethan exploration to British occupation

The first British contact with the Philippines occurred in 1579 during the renowned circumnavigation of the globe by Elizabethan explorer Sir Francis Drake on board the *Golden Hind*. Despite mistaking the Davao Oriental peninsula for a series of islands, accounts show that there is little doubt the *Golden Hind* “[anchored and watered upon the biggest of them called Mindanao](#)”.



The Golden Hind Museum Ship, Brixham Harbour, Devon, taken 1968

Photo ©Christine Matthews

Following Drake’s brief mooring, there was little contact between the Philippines and Britain for another 150 years. However, after Britons started settling in the Philippines in the 1700s, they infiltrated Spanish trade networks, trading arms with Sulu in order to obtain marine and forest products to trade with China for tea.

In 1762 the East India Company took advantage of the Spanish-French alliance during the Seven Years War between Britain and France (1756-1763), and together with the British military, invaded and occupied Manila. However, confronted with reprisals, the British occupation never extended beyond Manila. Ultimately, following a peace treaty, Britain returned the Philippines to Spain in 1764. After a decline in the Spanish Galleon Trade, economic development became an increasing priority, which led to an easing of immigration restrictions as the Philippines opened up to world trade. This buoyed agricultural industries, leading to the rise of sugar plantations. The first half of the nineteenth century saw a dramatic increase in Philippine exports and the development of trade and agriculture in the Visayas.¹

In 1853 the British firm Smith, Bell and Company, trading in sugar and hemp, was established in Manila. 1856 saw the arrival of a British consul in Iloilo who facilitated the island’s transformation into a major producer of sugar. Throughout the nineteenth century the British and Chinese dominated the Philippines’ export economy, with many referring to the islands as the “Anglo-Chinese colony”.²

Britain also facilitated the expansion of Spanish rule, recognising Spanish sovereignty over Sulu in 1877. The import of cheap cotton from British firms led to a collapse of the weaving industry in western Visayas, displacing workers into sugar production. Their persisting poor working conditions were a contributing factor towards the 1896 Philippine Revolution against Spain.³

Europe and the Philippine Propaganda Movement

At the same time as many Britons were settling in the Philippines, the nineteenth century also saw the first Filipinos arriving in the UK. Primarily working in cargo and shipping, Filipinos arrived through the port of Liverpool, eventually establishing a small community in the vicinity known as “[Little Manila](#)”.

However, nineteenth century Philippine migration was not solely driven by economic need. Economic growth and educational reform in the latter half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of a new *Ilustrado* class from the *principalia*. In the highly stratified colonial society, the *principalia* were the native elite who were used by the colonial government for local rule.⁴ Many *Ilustrado* artists and writers travelled to Europe where a growing sense of Philippine nationalism emerged. This became the Propaganda Movement and the writings of Filipino expatriates would call for political reform.⁵

José Rizal was a key figure in the Propaganda Movement. Born in 1861, Rizal studied medicine in Manila before moving to Madrid in 1882, where he finished his training. He moved around Europe publishing political articles on the poor conditions experienced by Filipinos under Spanish colonial rule, before eventually publishing his most famous work, *Noli Me Tangere* (Touch Me Not) in 1887, a love story exposing the repressive and corruptive practices of the regime.



José Rizal (left), Marcelo H. del Pilar, and Mariano Ponce (seated), who worked together for *La Solidaridad*, 1892.

Photograph from [Wikimedia Commons](#) (public domain)

During his travels, Rizal visited England, arriving through the port of Liverpool, “a big and beautiful city”, on 24 May 1888.⁶ The following day he travelled to London where he would stay until March 1899. Rizal spent time in the British Museum discovering the Sanskrit origin of many Tagalog words, which CuUnjieng Aboitiz has argued “restored Tagalog to its precolonial Asian world”.⁷ He also worked on annotating the 1609 publication *Sucesos de Las Islas Filipinas* by the Spaniard Dr. Antonio de Morga, an account of pre-Spanish colonial Philippine culture.⁸

In aiming to form a national identity, the Propagandists wanted to reconnect the Philippines with its pre-colonial Asian roots. Rizal commented that “we are anxious to learn of the Philippines’ past which we need to understand in order to plan intelligently for the future”.⁹ Rizal was deeply focused on his research in London. He even declined an invitation to become editor of *La Solidaridad*, the leading publication for the Propaganda Movement, as he was “dedicated day and night to certain studies”.¹⁰

Rizal’s connections to Britain also extended to Hong Kong, which was then under British colonial rule. Rizal arrived in Hong Kong in 1891 to continue his political work on the island.

One of La Solidaridad's founders, Marcelo H. del Pilar, described Hong Kong as "the haven for sons of the Philippines", enabling them greater "liberty" than they could have at home.¹¹ In 1897, Hong Kong would also be a refuge for future Philippine President Emilio Aguinaldo who was exiled to the island following the end of the Philippine Revolution.

Rizal's political writing inevitably drew the ire of the Spanish authorities. In 1896, having returned to Manila, he was arrested, found guilty of sedition, and executed by firing squad on the site of what was then Bagumbayan Field, now Rizal Park, on 30 December 1896.

Following the outbreak of the Spanish-American War on 25 April 1898, the US Navy arrived in Manila, defeating Spain in the Battle of Manila Bay on 1 May. Aguinaldo travelled with the US Navy from Hong Kong to Manila and declared the Philippines to be an independent nation on 12 June 1898. The First Republic of the Philippines was inaugurated on 23 January 1899 with Aguinaldo as its president.



Blue Plaque commemorating writer Dr José Rizal at 37 Chalcot Crescent, Primrose Hill, London, NW1 8YG, London Borough of Camden.

Photo ©Megalit, CC-BY-SA-4.0

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Despite this, the US Navy began to extend its occupation to the entire archipelago. Aguinaldo threatened "hostilities" if any of the islands were taken by force, and the Philippine-American War began on 4 February 1899 when the US Navy opened fire in Manila.¹²

Though he was the Philippines' first president, Aguinaldo is absent from government-led commemorations, whereas Rizal has monuments dedicated to him across the country.

Many historians have attributed Rizal's prominence and the elevation of the *Ilustrados* to the US colonial government which promoted Rizal's remembrance, whilst denigrating Aguinaldo.¹³ However, Rizal's memorialisation was also fostered by Filipinos. Aguinaldo instigated Rizal's first national day of commemoration and the earliest recorded monument to Rizal was erected by two members of the Philippine Revolutionary Army.

Twentieth and twenty-first century connections

The twentieth century saw three main waves of Philippine migration, with US colonial rule precipitating the first wave, as Filipinos were recruited by Hawaii's sugar and pineapple plantations. By the end of the 1920s, just over 26,000 Filipinos had migrated to the United States, particularly to California where they mostly worked in agriculture alongside many Mexican immigrants.¹⁴

The end of the Second World War and the US recognition of Philippine independence on 4 July 1946 instigated a second wave of Philippine migration. However, it was not until Ferdinand Marcos' declaration of Martial Law in 1972, which would see him rule as dictator for another fourteen years, that the third wave of significant migration was triggered. Marcos completely systematised Philippine migration, [establishing an Overseas Employment Development Board in 1974](#). Many have argued that the focus on overseas recruitment was a strategy to quell dissent over significant domestic unemployment.¹⁵ Indeed, many of those deployed overseas may have been propelled by the worsening economy and oppressive political climate.



The author dancing the traditionally male role in the Tinikling, c.2000.

Photo ©Kimberley Lustina Weir

It was this "third wave" of labour migration that brought my own mum to the UK. She was keen to travel overseas, yet as one of ten children, it was also a means to provide for her family. Despite having a college degree, she could earn more in a non-professional vocation abroad. Following her recruitment as a domestic worker, she arrived in Leeds in 1976 to work in a large house in a relatively wealthy suburb. Her employers would eventually become her second family, with the father of the family touchingly walking her down the aisle when she married my father in 1982.

My mum's employers helped to put her in touch with other Filipino employees in the area who remain her friends to this day. This group of Filipinos and others like them were the beginnings of the Filipino community in Leeds. When many of her female friends married and established their own homes, most often with white, British husbands, a vibrant social scene was born.

At the time, I didn't see my childhood as being particularly different from that of my English friends. Looking back, I guess many weren't spending weekends eating *pancit* or being roped into dancing the *tinikling* at Christmas parties! Many of my mum's friends had also found English or Irish partners and so I spent a lot of my childhood playing with other Filipino-English/Irish children, which may help to explain why I never felt any different. I also have wonderful memories of visiting the Philippines as a child: being met at the airport in Manila by my large extended family and travelling in a jeepney up to the place of my mother's birth, the province of Pangasinan.



pancit

Stir-fried noodles

tinikling

Traditional Philippine folk dance that involves two people beating, tapping, and sliding bamboo poles on the ground and against each other in coordination with one or more dancers

However, while my mum's experience as a migrant and a British resident is a positive one, for others it has been a difficult journey. In fact, the figure of [200,000 Filipinos resident in the UK today](#) belies the estimated 10,000 or more undocumented Filipinos in the country. Undocumented Philippine migrants were particularly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, as [many did not seek NHS treatment for fear of revealing their undocumented status](#). Indeed, despite their crucial role on the NHS frontline, there were accusations that Filipinos were [particularly impacted by the lack of personal protective equipment](#), resulting in a [disproportionate number of deaths among Philippine healthcare workers](#).

While it is important that this inequality and the darker side of Philippine-UK migration is addressed, over my lifetime I have loved seeing the growth of the British-Philippine community.

From being the only bi-racial Philippine-English person at my primary school, it is heartening to see my son now attending a school with a number of children of Philippine descent. British-Philippine connections extend far beyond economic migration, which is often the focus. This anthology will reveal even more cultural associations. While it felt like there was little crossover between the Philippines and the UK when I was growing up, I hope this publication will help to bring these two worlds closer together. Indeed as Filipino scholar Lou Antolihao has proposed, perhaps one day [the Philippines can even participate in the Commonwealth Games!](#)



¹ Abinales and Amoroso, State and Society in the Philippines, xxix, 71-77.

² Ibid., xxxii, 80.

³ Ibid., xxxii, 83.

⁴ CuUnjieng Aboitiz, Asian Place, Filipino Nation, 32; Kramer, The Blood of Government, 42.

⁵ CuUnjieng Aboitiz, Asian Place, Filipino Nation, 34, 44-45.

⁶ José Rizal to his family, 12 June 1888, cited in Zaide and Zaide, José Rizal, 143.

⁷ CuUnjieng Aboitiz, Asian Place, Filipino Nation, 45.

⁸ Francia, A History of the Philippines, 120.

⁹ José Rizal to Vicente Garcia, 7 January 1891, cited in Zaide and Zaide, José Rizal, 144.

¹⁰ José Rizal to Mariano Ponce, 12 October 1888, cited in Zaide and Zaide, José Rizal, 145.

¹¹ CuUnjieng Aboitiz, Asian Place, Filipino Nation, 74.

¹² Corpuz, "The Filipino Revolution in Our Collective Memory", 32-34.

¹³ Morley, Cities and Nationhood; Mojares, "The Formation of Filipino Nationality Under U.S. Colonial Rule", 11-32.

¹⁴ Guevarra Jr., Becoming Mexipino, 23, 27-29.

¹⁵ Abinales and Amoroso, State and Society, 215.

Transnational exchanges



Dr Kimberley Weir recently completed a PhD in History at the University of Nottingham. Her thesis explored the construction of monuments during the US colonial rule of the Philippines and examined the extent to which the United States shaped the Philippine memorial landscape from 1898 to 1978. This PhD formed part of the Cultures of Occupation Project in Twentieth Century Asia, funded by the European Research Council. Kimberley also has an undergraduate degree in American and English Studies from the University of Nottingham, and a Masters in Art Gallery and Museum Studies from the University of Manchester. She is Secretary for the Association of Southeast Asian Studies in the UK.

David Medalla: A life and legacy between the UK and the Philippines

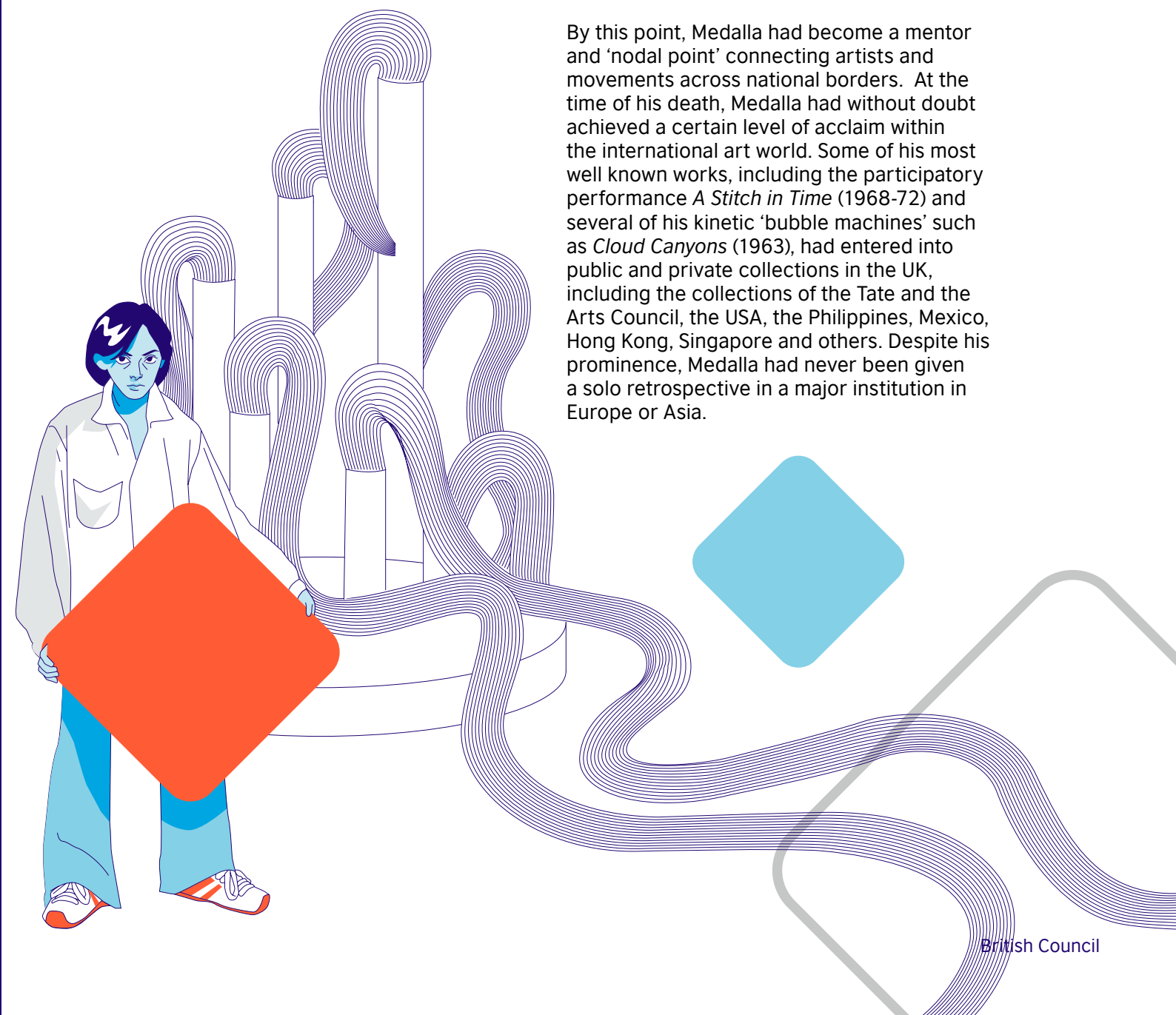
Following a lifetime of travel and sojourns across the UK, France, the USA and the Philippines, artist David Cortez Medalla (b. 1938) died in his birthplace, Manila, in December 2020. Medalla's seven decades in the art world bequeathed us a vast legacy. His career as an artist has been characterised by art critic Guy Brett as having different "episodes".¹

Eva Bentcheva

Medalla's career began in the Philippines in the 1950s with Art Brut-like paintings and experimental poetry. Upon arriving in Europe in 1960, he then produced a number of 'kinetic sculptures' inspired by the intersection of art and science. Beginning in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, he then explored counter-culture movements and socialist ideology. His work took on a markedly political turn as he joined and co-founded important leftist cultural networks in the UK. Through these networks, he campaigned for democracy and socio-economic justice in the Global South through public and participatory performances, collages and political posters.

In the 1980s, his political interests shifted again, this time towards race rights and sexuality, both themes which he explored chiefly through collage-based works and impromptu performances. Finally, from the 1990s until his death, Medalla's art reflected a range of all these activities. This final episode of his career demonstrated his ongoing commitment to supporting under-represented, minority and experimental artists. He continued to encourage his fellow artists to exhibit their works outside of institutional contexts – a goal which he had pursued since the 1960s. The principal vehicle for this was the *London Biennale*, a nomadic and open-to-all festival Medalla co-established with artist Adam Nankervis in 2000.

By this point, Medalla had become a mentor and 'nodal point' connecting artists and movements across national borders. At the time of his death, Medalla had without doubt achieved a certain level of acclaim within the international art world. Some of his most well known works, including the participatory performance *A Stitch in Time* (1968-72) and several of his kinetic 'bubble machines' such as *Cloud Canyons* (1963), had entered into public and private collections in the UK, including the collections of the Tate and the Arts Council, the USA, the Philippines, Mexico, Hong Kong, Singapore and others. Despite his prominence, Medalla had never been given a solo retrospective in a major institution in Europe or Asia.



Curators found the episodic nature of his career, coupled with the ephemeral and under-documented character of his works, difficult to reconstruct or display. Scholars, too, struggled to find archival and documentary material on Medalla. With the exception of a seminal publication *Exploding Galaxies: The Art of David Medalla* (1995), written by close friend and writer Guy Brett, Medalla's identity as a Filipino artist abroad rendered his works less recognisable than that of his Euro-American peers. Despite this comparative lack of recognition, Medalla had continued to pursue an idiosyncratic and experimental practice. When his personal archive was transported from his home in Bracknell in the UK to Berlin between 2015 and 2020, it revealed the sheer breadth and depth of his activities. Medalla's itinerant practice cannot be reduced to any one national art history. Rather, it emblematises the influence of important networks of avant-garde artists working between Asia and Europe in the postwar decades.

Medalla in the UK

Medalla's most extensive professional engagements had been in the UK and the Philippines. During his early years in the UK, he played a central role in establishing artistic networks and collectives. Several of these, such as the London-based art gallery Signals (1964-67), the dance-drama collective Exploding Galaxy (1967-69) and the politico-cultural organisation Artists For Democracy (1974-77), have recently been recognised as pioneering experimental platforms in postwar British art.² However, Medalla's time in the UK also reflected his deep-seated engagement with the intersection of art and politics. He has often been framed with the British 'Black Art Movement' alongside other diasporic artists from the Caribbean, Africa and Asia.³ The 'Black Art Movement' movement began in the 1980 and was characterised by artists campaigning for racial equality in the arts and cultural sector.⁴

However, even prior to this, Medalla had already begun to critique Philippine art, culture and politics from his position as a diasporic Filipino. After departing Manila in 1960, Medalla next returned to the Philippines in 1969 after a year-long journey across Africa and Asia with fellow artist John Dugger. Over the course of this decade, the Philippines had experienced momentous political change. The late 1960s saw the election of President Ferdinand Marcos (1965-86), and the first steps towards the instigation of Martial Law (1972-81).

Arriving at a moment of mass demonstrations against Marcos's decision to support the USA against the war in Vietnam, Medalla's return also coincided with a critical moment in an authoritarian consolidation of power. He observed that the arts and culture were an integral part of this political shift. On the one hand, the Philippines was undergoing a revival of many traditional folk art, theatre and dance. On the other hand, as part of a wider initiative to develop urban and economic infrastructure, the Marcos government commissioned the building of expansive cultural institutions to showcase state-sanctioned forms of traditional as well as modern and contemporary art. One of the most grandiose of these projects was the Cultural Center of the Philippines on Manila Bay.

The Cultural Center of the Philippines was intended to function as a regional "mecca for the arts", raising the profile of modernist and abstract forms of non-political art. Its grand inauguration in September 1969 was attended by high profile dignitaries including then Governor of California, Ronald Reagan. Medalla, who had also received an invitation to the opening, chose this occasion to stage a protest with posters from the upper floor balcony (Fig. 1) together with fellow artists Jun Lansang and Mars Galang.⁵

His poster read "A bas la mystification. Down with the philistines!" – an open declaration of opposition to the co-option of art into the cultural politics of the dictatorial regime of Marcos.⁶

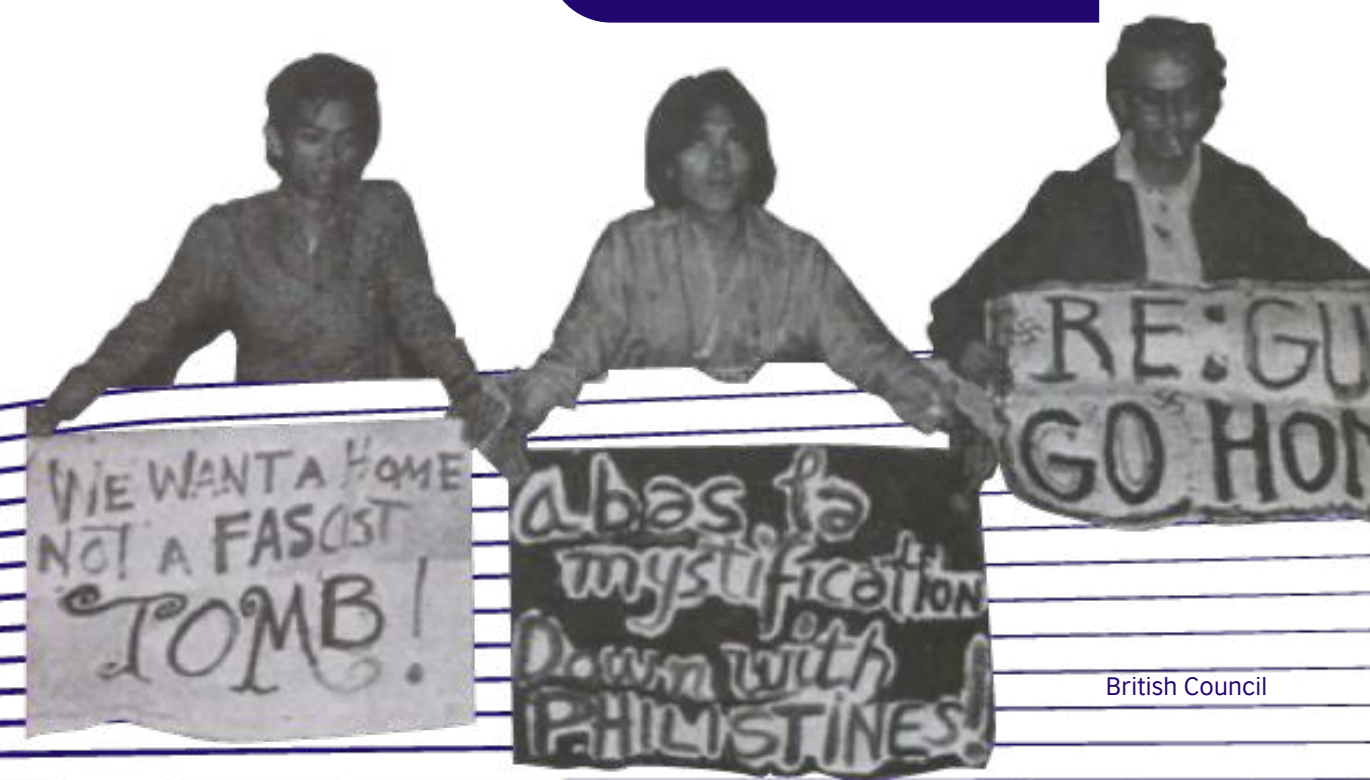
Figure 1 Mars Galang, David Medalla and Jun Lansang protesting at the opening of the Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1969.

Photo ©The Philippine Free Press

Returning to London soon after, Medalla continued to reflect upon his encounters and observations in the Philippines. In the early 1970s, he co-established two important politico-cultural initiatives in London: the short-lived network, 'The Artists Liberation Front' (1972) and the organisation, 'Artists for Democracy' (1974-77). The latter came to have an important public profile in London. In a statement written by Medalla in 1974, he promulgated the aims of Artists for Democracy (AFD):

'The basic aims of our organisation are three-fold and interlinked:

1. To give moral, cultural and financial support to genuine liberation movement all over the world;
2. To propagate democratic culture everywhere and To encourage all forms of progressive experimental art and cultural work;
3. To explore and develop concrete ways of integrating our varied artistic theories and practices with the struggle for emancipation of the international working class.⁷



Headquartered on Whitfield Street near Tottenham Court Road, AFD served as a meeting place for cultural workers, writers, activists and artists. Among now-prominent artists associated with AFD at different points in time were Pakistan-born Rasheed Araeen and AFD co-founder, Chile-born Cecilia Vicuña. AFD also provided an exhibition space and platform for artists committed to speaking about cultural and political issues of the Global South. These issues ranged from the 1973 military coup in Chile and the war in Vietnam to criticism of neo-colonial economic exploitation of the working classes. In the context of his own practice, AFD granted Medalla a space to develop a series of works dealing with the political situation in the Philippines.



Figure 2 David Medalla, photographs and poster for 'Meeting on the Crisis in the Philippines', 15 December 1972, organised as part of the installation *People Weave a House!* by John Dugger, Institute of Contemporary Art, London, 1972. Documentation from *This Way Out of England: Gallery House in Retrospect*, Raven Row Gallery, London, 2017.

Photo ©Eva Bentcheva

Philippine activism in 1970s' London

Following his visit of 1969, Medalla had kept a watchful eye on the onset of Martial Law and censorship of politically critical art. Experiencing greater freedom of speech than his peers in the Philippines, he organised events such as 'Meeting on the Crisis in the Philippines'⁸ in December 1972 accompanying the exhibition *People Weave a House* at the Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) and a panel on the political situation in the Philippines as part of AFD's 'Arts Festival for Democracy in Chile' at the Royal College of Art in October 1974 (Fig. 3), among others.⁹ He also produced a number of political posters and performance-based actions (Figs. 2, 4 & 5) criticising oppression of the Philippine peoples and the usurpation of cultural spaces by the Marcos government.

Produced on low budgets and with simple materials, Medalla's political posters and their accompanying events were highly significant in the 1970s' British context at a time of intense internationalist and leftist activism. More importantly, however, they also established a link to formative emerging discussions around Asian and Afro-Caribbean diasporic politics which would later flourish as the British 'Black Art Movement' during the 1980s. In these debates, Medalla was one of the few active contemporary artists from Southeast Asia.

Whereas most discussions around Black British Art centred on the identity politics of South Asian and Afro-Caribbean artists (epitomised in the exhibition *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Postwar Britain* curated by Rasheed Araeen at the Hayward Gallery in 1989), Medalla's presence and practice raised the profile of Southeast Asia.

His works raised attention to the postcolonial complexities of the Philippines in particular, directing its message not only to artists and activists in London, but also engaging prominent international artists in the discussion. An example of this is the participation of the renowned German artist Jörg Immendorf in Medalla's aforementioned 1974 panel (Fig. 3).



Figure 3 David Medalla, Jörg Immendorf and Jun Terra, Festival for Democracy in Chile, organised by Artists for Democracy at the Royal College of Art, London, 1974.

Photo ©Jun Terra Archive

More importantly, however, they also established a link to formative emerging discussions around Asian and Afro-Caribbean diasporic politics which would later flourish as the British 'Black Art Movement' during the 1980s. In these debates, Medalla was one of the few active contemporary artists from Southeast Asia.

Connection to Philippine 'Social realism'

Despite building extensive networks in the activist art scene in the UK throughout the 1970s, Medalla gradually became disillusioned with the political efficacy of art. By the end of the decade, he expressed a desire to not be seen only as a 'political activist'. In an interview with artist Rasheed Araeen in 1978 he explained:

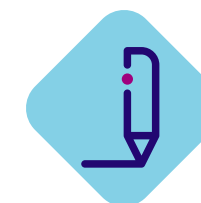


RA: You mean to say that during that period you were more of a political activist than an artist?

DM: No, no. I was both. I mean, the artist was always there, but I was also trying to find out what politics were...¹⁰

Frustrated with the consolidation of power of the Marcos regime and facing an increasingly precarious financial situation in London, Medalla abandoned political activism. He moved on to another career 'episode' in the 1980s, one of "Synoptic realism". Yet, despite seeming to have later abandoned his political cause, his politico-artistic practice remains historically significant. Medalla had established a durable connection to the aforementioned 'British Black Art' movement. Less often acknowledged, however, is that his art from the 1970s had also reflected an important artistic movement, 'Social realism', in the Philippines.

'Social realism' – a tradition of socially and politically conscious art – took on an important role between the late 1960s to the mid 1980s during the period of Martial Law. Spearheaded in this period by the group *Kaisahan*,¹¹ it took inspiration from international leftist movements.¹² As noted by art historian Alice Guillermo, it embraced not only recognition of a "shared point of view which seeks to expose or lay bare the true conditions of Philippine society"¹³, but also developed a rich and distinctive visual language.



Kaisahan

Solidarity



'Social realism' deployed figuration, allegory and multimedia strategies to represent workers, families and masses, alongside surrealist, abstract or metaphoric depictions of concepts such as 'imperialism', 'capitalism', and 'power'. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, Social Realist artists played an important, underground role as cultural messengers and forceful critics of the Marcos regime. Their expressions would later become influential as part of the visual protest language of 'People's Power Movement' of the 1980s which toppled the Marcos regime in 1986.

Medalla was based in Europe during the key years of Social Realism. While he remained a well-known name in the Philippine art world, his works were seldom shown there during this period. He never formally identified himself as part of Social Realism's networks. Nevertheless, his posters, collages, and performances showed a strong kinship with their themes and artistic forms. Medalla, too, used a playful, easily accessible language to give voice to the Filipino people. Social Realism has come to be recognised as an influential art movement within the Philippines during the 1990s in the post-Marcos period, and Southeast Asia more broadly.¹⁴ So, too, has new interest arisen in Medalla's political engagements across the UK and the Philippines.

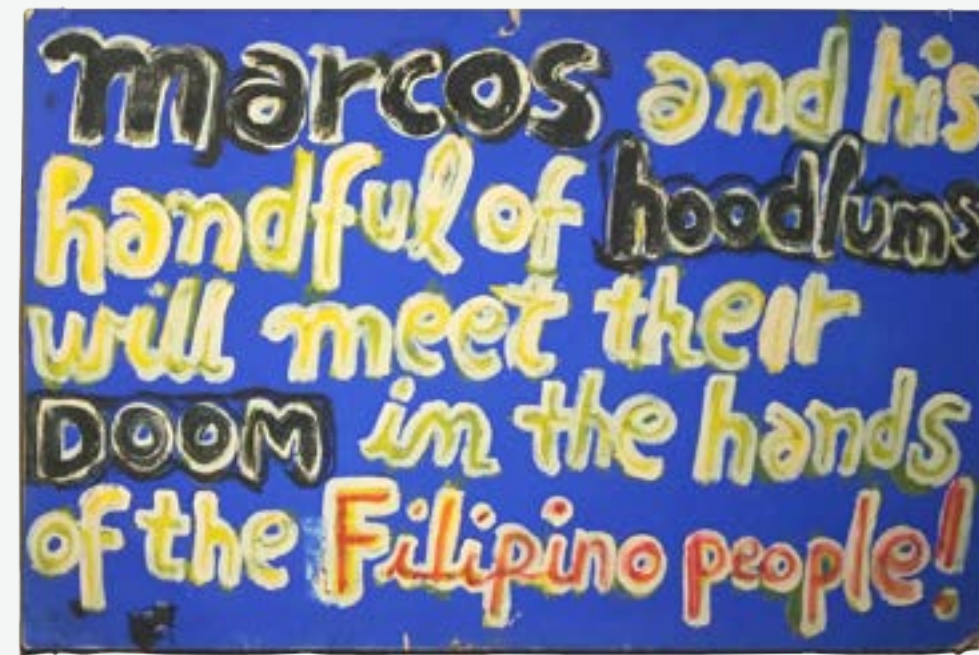


Figure 4 Political posters by David Medalla. Acrylic on cardboard. Undated, ca. 1970s. Presented at the exhibition *David Medalla: Parables of Friendship* (2021-22) at the Bonner Kunstverein, Germany.

Photo ©Eva Bentcheva

Rather than ascribing his art solely to marginal and avant-garde circles within the two countries, critics now praise his work for drawing out connections between the two nations. These connections between experimental art and protest culture of the 1970s, the 'British Black Art' discourses, and internationalist calls for social equality and democracy in Southeast Asia. Thus Medalla's art – albeit still difficult to categorise and exhibit – offers one of the most nuanced and interesting insights into often invisible convergences between art and politics in Britain and the Philippines during the 1970s and beyond.

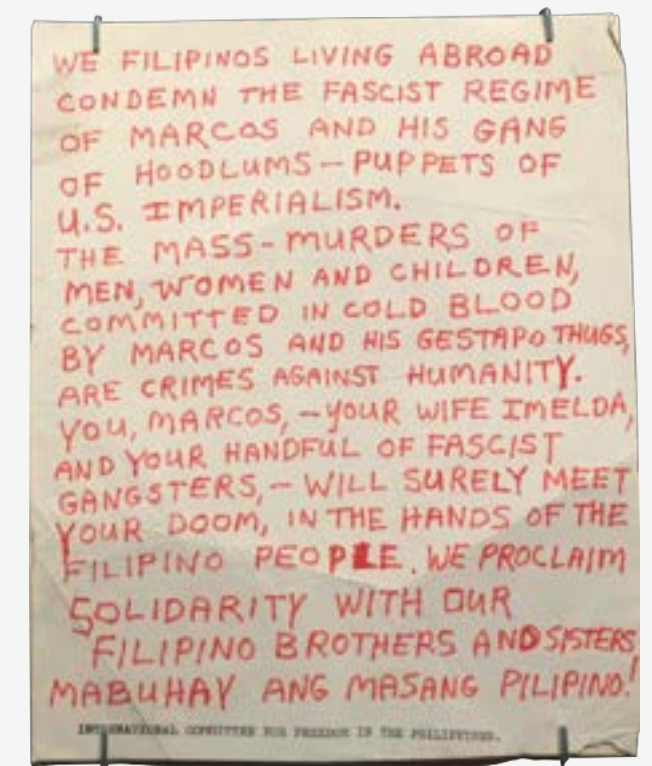


Figure 5 Detail of Medalla's political posters. Undated, ca. 1970s. Presented at the exhibition *David Medalla: Parables of Friendship* (2021-22) at the Bonner Kunstverein, Germany.

Photo ©Eva Bentcheva

¹ Guy Brett, unpublished interview with Eva Bentcheva, London, November 2016.

² Signals gallery and its accompanying publication, the 'Signals Newsbulletin' edited by Medalla, played a pioneering role in introducing artists from continental Europe and Latin America into the British art scene during the 1960s. See Whitelegg, I. (2018). 'Everything Was Connected. Kinetic Art and Internationalism at Signals London, 1964-66' in London Art Worlds, ed. Jo Applin, Catherine Spencer, Amy Tobin, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press. For a history of Exploding Galaxy, see Drower, J. (2014). 99 Balls Pond Road. The Story of Exploding Galaxy. London: Scrudge Books.

³ For a recent discussion of Medalla's role in Black British Art, see Sonia Boyce and Dorothy Price, "Dearly Beloved or Unrequited? To Be 'Black' in Art's Histories," Art History 44 (June 1, 2021): 462–80.

⁴ Medalla was featured in the most seminal exhibition of Black British Art, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, curated by Rasheed Araeen at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1989.

⁵ Artist Jun Terra has recalled that Medalla's politico-artistic work in Manila during this visit was not restricted to the protest at the CCP. On other occasions, he mobilised young people to partake in mass dances, gatherings and protests in the city's Luneta Park during his visit of 1969. In one such gathering, Medalla and others were dispersed by the police. Conversation with Jun Terra, 4 March 2022.

⁶ For a description of this protest, see Eva Bentcheva, 'From Ephemeral Experiences to Lasting Legacies: Discourses on Experimental Art in the Philippines during the 1960s and 1970s', Tate Papers, no.32, Autumn 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/32/discourses-experimental-art-philippines-1960s-1970s>, accessed 20 February 2022.

⁷ 'Artists for Democracy'. Document drafted by David Medalla and presented to an AFD general meeting on Tuesday, 26 November 1974, in London, for general discussion by all AFD members. Guy Brett Archive / Tate Archive.

⁸ *People Weave a House* (July 1972-February 1973) featured an interactive installation of hanging tubes by artist John Dugger and panels by David Medalla featuring texts and images of international pro-democratic initiatives. Recalling the contents of these panels, artist Jun Terra has stated: "On the sides of the hall, David put up panels in the manner of the Ta Tzu Pao, or (big character poster) re-introduced by Mao Tse-Tung where people could post their views/opinions in the villages, towns and cities of China during the Great Cultural Revolution. This was a kind of democratising process on a mass scale from the lowest to the highest level of society. David filled the panels with text and images of massacres, burning of villages and other forms of military violence against ordinary people, Moslems of southern Philippines and members of opposing organisations in magazines and newspapers I took along with me, a whole suitcase of them, when I left for Europe in late 1970." Conversation with Jun Terra, March 2022.

⁹ In 1972-73, Medalla and Terra also gave talks on the situation in the Philippines at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, the Coventry and Sheffield branches of the National Union of Miners, and the School of Epistemics, Edinburgh University.

¹⁰ Medalla quoted in Rasheed Araeen, 'Conversation with David Medalla', Black Phoenix, no.3, 1979, pp.10–19, p. 18

¹¹ The group Kaisahan ('Solidarity') which formed in 1976 comprised Papo de Asis, Pablo Baens Santos, Orlando Castillo, Jose Cuaresma, Neil Doloricon, Edgar Talusan Fernandez, Charles Funk, Renato Habulan, Albert Jimenez, Al Manrique and Jose Tence Ruiz, who were later joined by Vin Toledo.

¹² Guillermo, Alice G. *Protest/Revolutionary Art in the Philippines 1970 – 1990*. Manila: University of the Philippines Press, 2001.

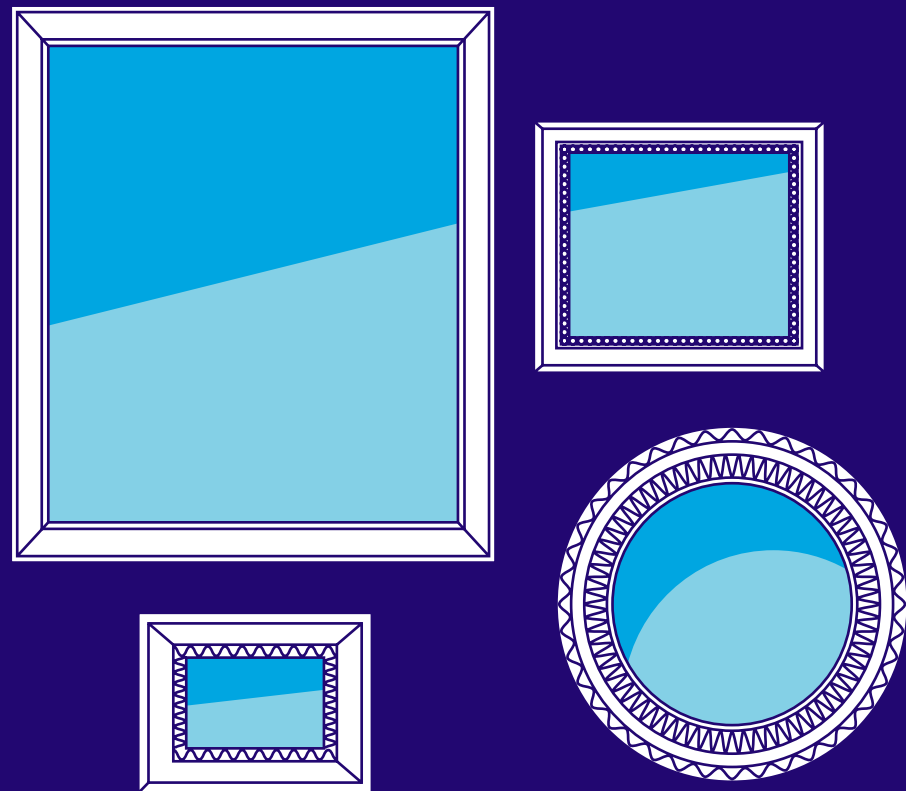
¹³ Guillermo, Alice G. *Social Realism in the Philippines*. Manila: Asphodel. 1987: 50

¹⁴ Social Realism was recognised as a formative art movement of Southeast Asia in the prominent recent exhibition *Awakenings: Art and Society in Asia, 1960s–1990s* (2018–19) at the National Gallery of Singapore, the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, South Korea.



Eva Bentcheva is an art historian and curator with a focus on histories of performance, participation and conceptual art, as well as archives between Southeast Asia and Europe. She is currently an Associate Lecturer in Art History at Heidelberg University in Germany, as well as Postdoctoral Researcher and Managing Editor for the international research project, *Worlding Public Cultures: The Arts and Social Innovation*. Her previous positions have included the Goethe-Institut Fellowship at Haus der Kunst in Munich where she co-curated the exhibition *Archives in Residence: Southeast Asia Performance Collection* with Annie Jael Kwan and Damian Lentini in 2019, as well as Adjunct Researcher for the Tate Research Centre: Asia in London, Postdoctoral Researcher at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, and Senior Teaching Fellow in Art History at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

Art for all!



“There’s so much more that can be seen in exhibitions,” says Metropolitan Museum of Manila (Met) Director Tina Colayco on British art. As the Metropolitan Museum of Manila marks its 44th year with the opening of art spaces in a new location at the Bonifacio Global City, it continues to reinforce its mission to bring art to all – in an environment where people from all walks of life can appreciate and embrace it.

Regina Bautista

As a professor of the University of the Philippines’ College of Fine Arts teaching design theory and history, Colayco notes that the Industrial Revolution in Britain changed notions of design across the world. Colayco notes, “The UK were the first ones to come up with the idea of design the way we understand it today.” If these early masters were exhibited here, Colayco asserts, it would generate more interest in British art, and hence more knowledge in the history of design, and other disciplines that emerged during that period. “There is more to appreciate in the culture and the nuances of heritage.”

One important moment in British art history is that of design and theory attributed to the Industrial Revolution, which was characterised by technological advancement, urbanism, manufacturing, and progress, and thus a turning away from the old classicism and romanticism. With such innovations, the sense of sight overtook the other senses in importance, and so the primacy of pictorial representation, including the birth of photography, occurred in modern art and aesthetics. As Anne Helmreich writes,



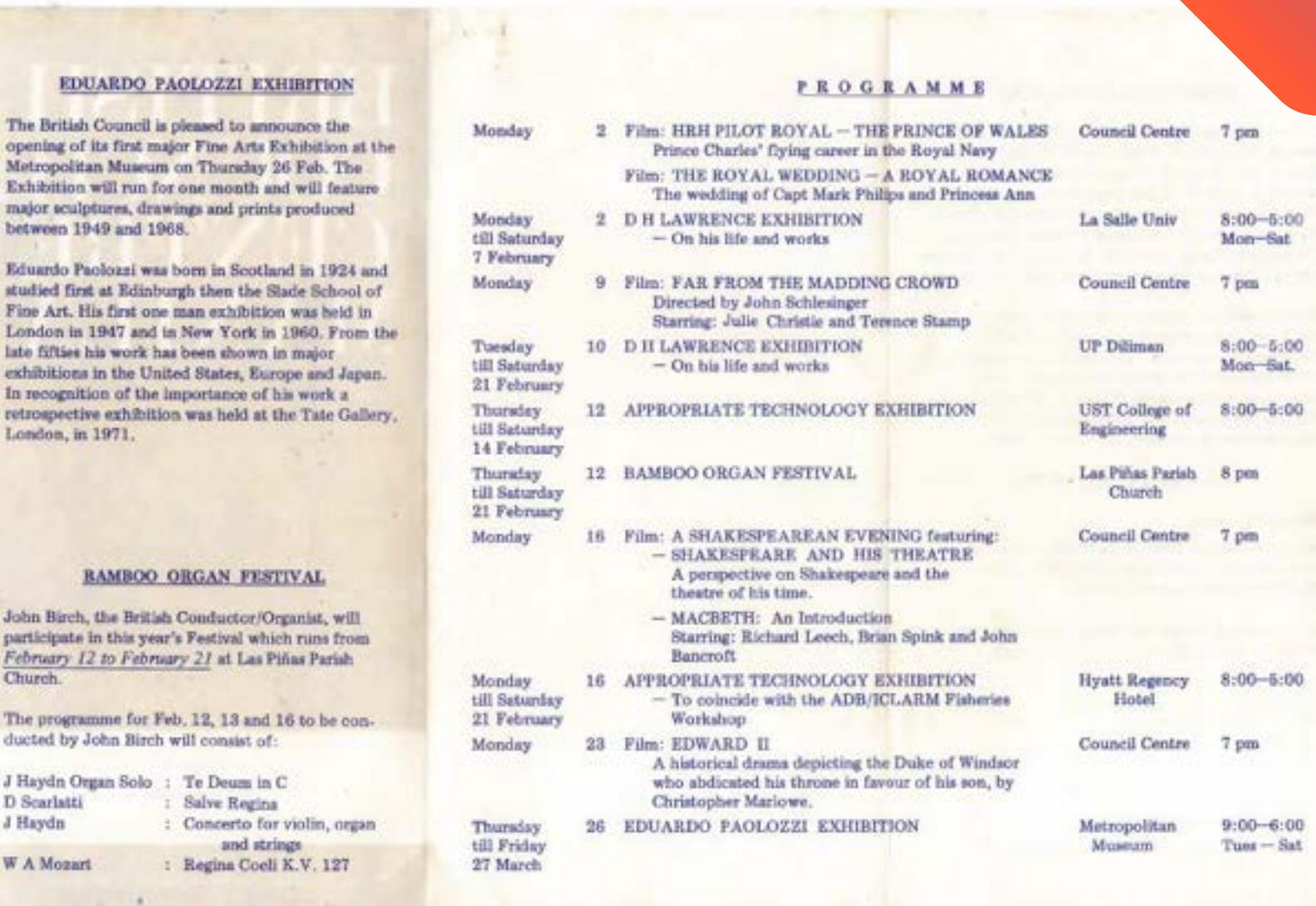
Related to experiments concerning vision and the location of visual processing – debated to be either in the retina or the mind – were explorations of the perception of colour, the composition of colour (related to the designation of primary, secondary, and tertiary colours as well as contrasts and harmonies), and the relationship between light and colour.¹



Opening of the Great Exhibition, 1 May 1851 by Eugène Louis Lami, 1851.

Photo from [Wikimedia Commons](#) (public domain)

These new aesthetics for fine arts were spread through the Great Exhibition signalled international exhibitions as a tool to link nations culturally and economically.² The British Council itself has been acquiring British art since 1938 and has amassed over 8,500 works,³ because they recognised the need for sharing British values of democracy through art and culture.



British Council flyer promoting the Eduardo Paolozzi exhibition. From the Met archives, 1981.

British art in the Philippines

Through the auspices of the British Council, some of these works reached Philippine shores in partnership with various museums in Metro Manila as early as 1962. Barbara Hepworth’s modern sculptures were exhibited at the Phil-Am Life Insurance Building. An exhibition of sketches and maternal sculptures, her works were important because of the modernist techniques and three-dimensional sensibilities that saw a synthesis of human experience and the landscape. The [“sea or landscape accordingly became a key aspect of Hepworth’s artistic agenda and material output.”](#)

Years later in 1990, the Met presented *40 Years of British Sculpture*, which included Robert Adams sculptures famous for its “iconography of despair” as described by art historian Herbert Read; and Robert Moore who was also known for his distortion of the human form through sculpture. The year after, also at the Met, David Hockney’s prints gave form to the odd narratives of the Brothers Grimm. Then in 1994 and 1995, the British Council exhibited two group shows of sculpture and wood: *All that Glitters* and *Out of the Wood*.

Added to the list of British artists presented at the Met are Paul Nash, Eduardo Paolozzi, and Ian Berry who were exhibited under the directorship of National Artist Arturo Luz through the British Council. For Colayco, they mirrored cultural, social and artistic perspectives as visual artists, which related to audiences in the 1980s, not least because of political upheavals around the globe including the Philippines.

A surrealist painter, Nash's photography was shown at the Met in 1980 from August to September. Appearing in London in 1936, a little earlier than when the British Council was established, the British surrealist movement was an "art of *discovery*"⁴ found outside the usual places where high art abounds, and is an artform affected by the dark imagery of World War I. Nash is famous for his seaside surrealism that transformed the landscape as a "dynamic social space, embedded in history."⁵

Whereas Nash was categorised as a pre-war surrealist, Paolozzi, the son of Italian immigrants, returned to vernacular street culture of his youth and "introduced forms of mass culture into the discussion of art".⁶ Forty-five of his works were exhibited at the Met from February to March 1981.

The Met becomes bilingual

What the Philippine public saw in these exhibitions more than forty years ago is not readily known, but it is interesting to note that in the mid-1980's, a shift occurred in how the Met presented international artists. The museum archives show that the Metropolitan Museum of Manila was the first museum in Manila to implement bilingual communication in its exhibitions and activities. Aside from international exhibitions, the museum also began organising exhibitions by leading Filipino artists.

Colayco states, "We were the first museum to do bilingual communication, and then it also began exhibiting Filipino artists." In the last ten years, the Metropolitan demonstrated the importance of history to contextualise art movements to the place and time of its origin as well as its resonance with Filipino artists. Survey exhibitions showing the development of modern and contemporary Filipino art from Fernando Amorsolo to the present, allow audiences to understand more about art history in the Philippines. This inclusion could then productively connect to art seen abroad and be able to find resonances between two different cultures.

This exchange of knowledge continues to happen through exhibitions like the 2020 shows that opened prior to the pandemic: *Arte Povera: Italian Landscape* curated by Danilo Eccher at the Metropolitan coincided with *Cue from Life Itself: Artists Transform the Everyday* curated by Patrick Flores. Paying tribute to the important movement in Italian art history that broke "every rule about art," the *Arte Povera* exhibit focused on "[the materiality of everyday life through the use of humble materials and found objects](#)." Meanwhile *Cue* reflected on the way that Filipino artists "[make do and dream up, transforming everyday forms with intuition and insight](#)."

What more is to be done to continue the exhibitions and relations through art? Colayco also cites educational exchange programs and residencies as one important way to nurture artists into maturity. She singles out the artist Joseph Gabriel from University of the Philippines College of Fine Arts who, under her leadership as dean, was given a scholarship for ceramics at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris, 2012. Gabriel later finished his MA in Ceramics and Glass at the Royal College of Art in the UK. When young artists are given the opportunity to experience learning from different cultures and places, Colayco has observed that "some transformation happens in terms of finding and expressing themselves in a world that has become bigger and more challenging. They are able to discover their confidence and their strengths in carving their future paths."



Joan Hassall, *Title Page for Pentheperson*, 1938
Wood Engraving
18.5 x 12.5 cm
British Council Collection
©Bluefruit Video Ltd. Photo by Simon Difazio

Exhibited at *OUT OF THE WOOD*
13 October 1995–6 June 1996
Philippines, Manila
Metropolitan Museum



Leon Underwood, *Harvest Corn*, 1943
 Woodcut and linocut
 45 x 62 cm
 British Council Collection
 ©The Artist's Estate

Exhibited at *OUT OF THE WOOD*
 13 October 1995–6 June 1996
 Philippines, Manila
 Metropolitan Museum

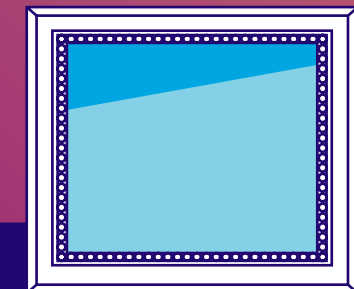
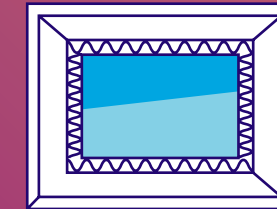
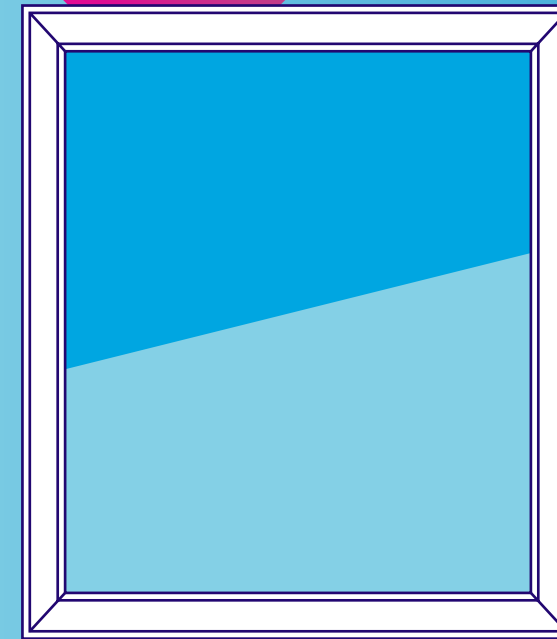


Eric Gill, *Eve*, 1926
Wood engraving with hand colouring
23.7 x 118 cm
British Council Collection

Exhibited at *OUT OF THE WOOD*
13 October 1995–6 June 1996
Philippines, Manila
Metropolitan Museum

Thus, the British Council Philippines are important facilitators in ensuring these relations are strengthened especially as the Met opens its new doors in Bonifacio Global City. “The museum aims to broaden its reach and deepen its relationships with its partners and the community,” Colayco enthused. “The possibilities are endless for international and British contemporary art.”

“It’s not only about British art but about the possibilities that can be brokered for British art... and the avant garde.” The truth is, inasmuch as one can read about art history and the context and relevance that art can bring to its viewers, Philippine audiences will only know for sure once they are able to see it for themselves. Once curation and cultural exchange come together to bring more British art back to the Philippines for all to see for the sake of, as Colayco exclaims, “art for all!”



Florentina (Tina) Colayco's professional career draws from over 30 years experience as an educator, curator, designer, publisher, and museum president. She has been involved in art and design education as a professor and a former dean of the College of Fine Arts at the University of the Philippines. In 2000, she founded a specialist publishing company, ArtPostAsia Inc. which produces coffee table books on Philippine and Southeast Asian art, heritage, cultural and natural studies. Colayco took up art history from Fordham University in New York, and completed her post graduate degree in graphic communications management and technology from New York University. She currently holds the position of President of the Metropolitan Museum of Manila, a leading non profit cultural institution in the country.

Regina Bautista, dancer, scholar, and arts manager, is pursuing her PhD in Anthropology at the University of the Philippines (UP). She received her MA Dance from York University, Toronto, and BM Dance from UP, cum laude. She was a member of Ballet Philippines' junior company BP11, and danced with the Filipino-Canadian troupe Hataw. As a dancer/scholar, she has presented research papers in international conferences in dance, and her essays have been published at the CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Art, academic journals, and online websites. She has also been engaged in research projects on health equity, the creative economy, virtual ethnography, and dance history. Currently, she is a full-time lecturer for performing arts and research coordinator at Guang Ming College, Manila, and is a part-time lecturer for dance at the De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde. She is also the Project Manager for CCP Choreographers Series, and runs a dance calendar on Instagram called [@WatchDanceManila](#).

¹ Helmreich, “Shaping, and Picturing Landscape in the Nineteenth Century,” 317-350.
² Codell, “International Exhibitions: Linking Culture, Commerce, and Nation,” 220-264.
³ Grant, “Cultural propaganda? The British Council collection,” 26-31.
⁴ Highmore, “Itinerant Surrealism,” 241-264.
⁵ Ibid, 245
⁶ Ibid.

Letters to Whitehead: A specimen search in London



Sat in her studio at Gasworks in London, the following series of letters form part of Mica's wider [Whitehead's Ark project](#). Here, she writes to the long-dead explorer in order to both examine their own parallel, or mirrored life experiences, as well as to help unpack her simultaneously enlivening and turbulent period in London itself.

Mica Cabildo

January 9th 2020

Dear Mister John Whitehead,

Good day. My name is Mica Cabildo, and I am an artist and designer from Manila, Philippines. I have recently been awarded a fully-funded art residency at Gasworks London to conduct research on your ethnographic collections and zoological discoveries from the Philippines in 1893-1896. I have read a few of your field-notes in preparation for this endeavour; I hope to share my thoughts and experiences with you during these busy weeks in London.

I arrived in London on the 7th of January after a thirteen-hour flight, to be welcomed by a lengthy queue at the immigration desk. The officer was a cheerful woman who understood quite well what 'cultural exchange' meant, and let me through without any trouble. The taxi driver, who had waited for me for nearly 2 hours, drove me to South London in comfortable silence, through a wet blur of buildings and traffic lights.

I am now residing in a shared house in Stockwell, South Lambeth, where I will be living with three other international artists for the next eleven weeks. The commute from Stockwell to our studios in Vauxhall will take some getting used to, but I suppose a daily walk in the cool winter air could help get the circulation going and lift my spirits on grey London mornings.

In the coming weeks I will be visiting various collections and archives to learn more about your activities in the Philippines. I will write to you again soon.

Yours very respectfully,

Mica!

January 11th 2020

Dear Mister John Whitehead,

I thought it best to begin my investigations by reading about your virgin expedition to Corsica, Spain. I obtained pages of your "Ornithological Notes from Corsica" published in *The Ibis* 1885 from the Biodiversity Heritage Library, and was impressed to learn of your very first discovery, the Whitehead's nuthatch (*Sitta whiteheadi*). This is quite an achievement for a twenty-three year-old naturalist. I am, however, somewhat appalled by your frequent mention of "shooting" and skinning of birds. In the present day, birds are better shot with a camera rather than with a gun. I do believe the Dutch illustrator Mr. J.G. Keulemans has rendered the male and female quite beautifully in the accompanying lithographic plate.

In the same account, you tell of visiting a Golden eagle's nest and encountering the bird not far from a shepherd's village on 12th June 1883. I wonder if this was a foreshadowing of a significant discovery you will make in the Philippines more than a decade later?

Yours with esteem,

Mical!

Whitehead's Nuthatch (*Sitta Whiteheadi*) lithograph by J.G. Keulemans. Appeared with "Ornithological Notes from Corsica" by John Whitehead in *The Ibis* 1885. Pages downloaded from the Biodiversity Heritage Library.



January 13th 2020

Dear Mister Whitehead,

I went to the British Museum yesterday morning with the Argentine filmmaker. Sadly, I did not find traces of you nor the Philippines there. Perhaps I got too distracted by the Egyptian and Greek collections to do a thorough search in the China and South Asia wing. At this point I decided to narrow down my search to your ornithological specimens, which would be best accomplished at the Natural History Museum.

Today, I paid an initial visit to the Natural History Museum in South Kensington. I lingered first on a touching diorama of an adult swan cradling its young, then on a large cabinet containing an alarmingly vast quantity of taxidermied hummingbirds. I then busied myself searching for specimens from the Philippines, perhaps some collected by yourself, but found only a dainty little Mountain sun-bird (*Aethopyga pulcherrima*) and a grotesque-looking Philippine flying lemur (*Cynocephalus volans*). I climbed a few staircases, paid my respects to a statue of Charles Darwin, and arrived at a splendid display of raucous parrots frozen in flight beneath a painted ceiling. I began to feel tired, so I took a quick look at Darwin's finches and pigeons, and left. I did not find you at the Natural History Museum in London either.

Yours with esteem,

Mical!

January 28th 2020

Dear Mister Whitehead,

This morning I procured reading passes at the British Library and Wellcome Library. At the British Library, I accessed a second edition of Spenser Buckingham Saint John's 1863 volume *Life in the Forests of the Far East*, which you have mentioned as your main inspiration for your travels to Asia. I only had enough time to briefly admire the voluptuous renderings of various purple, fuschia, and chartreuse pitcher plants from Kina Balu, which I quickly digitised and sent to my inbox, before departing and making my way to the Wellcome Collection.

At the Wellcome Library, I found an original printing of your *Exploration of Mount Kina Balu*. While I did not find it as cumbersome as you had claimed in your introduction, I did find the physical volume to be a heavy and somewhat fragile object, given its age. I took great care in opening the large green hardcovers, and I must confess that I had once again taken more time to appreciate the illustrations than to read the text. Nonetheless, I was greatly affected by your description of the primeval tropical forests of Palawan. You described the vegetation and landscape with such clarity and sensitivity that I began to feel somewhat homesick. I printed out a copy of your illustration of a pair of little green broadbills (*Calyptomena whiteheadi*), as they reminded me of the green ring-necked parakeets flitting about London, then took the tube back to Stockwell.

A visitor asked me the other day whether I liked London. She said that most people either love or hate the city. I think there is much to love and discover about London, although such 'discoveries' are perhaps of a smaller and more intimate scale than your own. One would discover, for example, weeds growing in cracks and crevices of the urban centres, and small critters hiding in the wild lawns and untended yards of the suburbs. The Italian filmmaker delights in watching squirrels and pigeons in our Stockwell backyard, while the Portuguese sculptor has identified a bay laurel tree on the property and predicted a magnificent blooming of our neighbour's magnolias in spring.

I myself have made reluctant friends with the neighbour's fat three-colored cat, who exposes her belly for treats but rudely swats my hand if I get too intrusive. At night, coming home from Gasworks studios, we walk slowly and softly to watch foxes scavenging for food, their eyes glistening in the dark. On some nights, we can hear vixens screaming faintly in the distance.

I have sent enquiries to the Zoological Society of London and the Natural History Museum for any information on your ornithological discoveries. I expect to hear from them soon.

Yours with esteem,

Micael.



Whitehead's broadbill (*Calyptomena whiteheadi*) original illustration by John Whitehead and title page scanned from *Exploration of Mount Kina Balu*, North Borneo 1893 by John Whitehead at the Wellcome Collection.



NEPENTHES VILLOSA. 22.
Painted by Hook. & Arner. 1862. Coloured by Smith.

BOTANICAL DESCRIPTIONS.

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is eight inches long, dense flowered. Peduncles simple. Perianth with depressed glands on the inner surface, externally rufous and pubescent. Column long and slender. *Female* inflorescence: a very dense oblong panicle; rachis, peduncles, perianth, and fruit covered with rusty tomentum. Capsules, two-thirds of an inch long, one-sixth of an inch broad.*

The outside colour of the pitchers is a bright pea-green, the inside dark mahogany; the lid is green, while the glandular are mahogany-coloured. A very elegant claret jug might be made of this shape.

"*Ascidia magna, ore lamellis latis disciformibus annularibus remotis instructo.*

"*Nepenthes Villosa, H. f. (Hook, Ic. Pl. t. 888).*—*Ascidia magna* turgida late pyriformia coriacea, 5" longa, 3½" lata, alis anticis mediocribus grosse dentatis, ore aperto annulo maximo! lamellis annularibus distantibus disciformibus rigidis, 1" diam., cristatis posticis in spinas rigidas ½" longas, fundum ascidii spectantibus productis, collo elongato erecto, operculo orbiculato intus densissime glanduloso dorso basi longe cornuto. (Tab. LXIX.)

"*Hab.*—Borneo (*Lobb*), Kina Balu, alt. 8,000–9,000 feet (*Low*).

" . . . The whole inner surface of the pitcher is glandular, except a very narrow area beneath the mouth at the back."*

The pitchers of the young plant resemble the old, and their colour looks like that of a downy peach skin, with a great deal of dark crimson in it. The circular

* *The Transactions of the Linnean Society of London*, Vol. XXII, Part IV., p. 420.

VOL. I.

22

Villose pitcher plant
(*Nepenthes villosa*)
lithograph by Smith, Elder &
Co. and opposite page
scanned from Life in the
Forests of the Far East
Volume 1 1862 by Spenser
Buckingham St. John at The
British Library.

February 10th 2020

Dear John (if I may),

I have begun reading your "Field-Notes on Birds collected in the Philippine Islands in 1893-6" from *The Ibis* journal more thoroughly. I am glad to know that you have enjoyed the mountains and climate of North Luzon and have obtained a fine collection of birds. It is also fortunate that you have found professional bird-skinners and collectors amongst the locals. I do, however, worry about your health, and hope you recover from dysentery and regain some strength. The tropical forests of the Philippines may be unforgiving to strangers, but there is certainly no lack of fresh food there. Perhaps hiring an indigenous forest guard might help you survive this expedition in better health?

I am writing to you now as I finish a sandwich from Pret a Manger, and will move on to the Wellcome Collection after lunch, having just finished browsing through illustrated bird books at the British Library. I am completely fascinated by these beautiful illuminated bestiaries, but thinking about the colonial and imperial structures that have made these expeditions possible gives me an uneasy feeling.

I have heard back from a scientist from the EDGE of Existence Programme at the Zoological Society of London. Tomorrow, I will visit London Zoo to attend her presentation, and check the ZSL Library and Archives.

Your sincere friend,

Mica

February 13th 2020

Dear John,

After several visits to the Natural History Museum London, I was glad to finally visit the London Zoo last Tuesday, to see living animals. I spent most of my time at the Blackburn Pavilion, which houses several 'exotic' bird species in an artificial tropical habitat. In the anterior glass cages I saw a lone living specimen of the Socorro dove, native to Mexico and extinct in the wild; and a vulnerable Mindanao bleeding-heart pigeon hiding behind some tangled branches. I arrived in time for a scheduled tour with the animal-keeper. We entered a large room filled with many small, colourful birds. She told me that the birds come from different tropical regions all over the world; I asked her how these particular birds were chosen, and she answered that they had chosen birds that could live together peacefully in that particular climate. It seemed strange and somewhat unnatural to me, that birds who do not flock together in the wild would be kept together in such a small space.

I reckon you will be very pleased to know that your prized discovery, the Philippine eagle (*Pithecophaga jefferyi*, after your father Jeffrey), is presently well-represented at the London Zoo. Inside the Zoo, a street artist named Louis Masai has painted a large, patterned mural of the Philippine eagle, tethered to a little honey bee with a piece of red string. On the second floor of the ZSL Library and Archives hangs a commissioned painting of the Monkey-Eating Eagle by George Edward Lodge, dated 1944. London Zoo was also the first institution in the world to hold a Philippine eagle in captivity in 1909, and afterwards kept live specimens two more times. In all cases, the birds expired from respiratory problems. I am glad that they now keep a mural and a painting instead. You may be saddened to learn, however, that the eagle is celebrated because it is an EDGE species – Evolutionarily Distinct and Globally Endangered, with only 400 pairs left in the wild.

In the early evening, I attended the scientist's presentation, introduced myself to her, and asked about their conservation efforts with regards to the Philippine eagle. She kindly offered to introduce me to their former Philippine cohort. However, I feel such a connection would be better made in person back home.

Yesterday, I went to the Grant Museum of Zoology, as it had been recommended by a friend at Gasworks, to see the exhibition Displays of Power: A Natural History of Empire. The show exposed how, at the height of the British Empire, wildlife and 'exotic' animals were captured from the colonies and put on display in zoos and museums for education and entertainment. At this point I have probably spent too much time at the Natural History Museum among various specimens from countless expeditions, as the connection between empire, slavery, and natural history did not strike me as deeply and offensively as it should have. But I must tell you, John, that I wince a little whenever you speak ill of your native assistants, or complain of the inconveniences you experience in the Philippine islands. I do, however, admire your dedication and feel much sympathy for you. I imagine you must have loved the forests and your birds very much; otherwise you would not have intended to return.

In other news, I heard back from the curator of the bird skin collection at the Natural History Museum at Tring. I had given him a list of ten of your birds and he has confirmed that they are all still in the collection.

Ever your friend,

Mica



Philippine eagle mural painted by Louis Masai in 2018 at ZSL London Zoo.

Photo ©Mica Cabildo

Monkey-Eating Eagle (*Pithecophaga jefferyi*) 1944 oil painting by George Edward Lodge on display at the ZSL Library and Archives.

Photo ©Mica Cabildo



February 20th 2020

Dear John,

I set out in the early morning for Hertfordshire, a little north of London, and arrived half an hour before opening. The Natural History Museum at Tring is smaller than the one in London, and more quaint. I followed the curator's directions into a separate building, deposited my coat and bag in a locker, and entered a work area where I could examine and photograph your birdskins.

The curator brought out a tray and two boxes of ten of your birds, carefully chosen based on their current conservation status. I reckon you would not be very happy to know that these species are now dwindling in number: White-browed jungle flycatcher, vulnerable; Visayan pygmy babbler, threatened; Philippine eagle, critically endangered; Mountain shrike, vulnerable; Montane racquet-tail parrot, endangered; Mindoro imperial pigeon, endangered; Luzon water-redstart, vulnerable; Luzon striped-babbler, vulnerable; Luzon highlands scops-owl, vulnerable; Golden-crowned babbler, threatened.

I was most enamoured by the little golden-crowned babbler, with its delicate yellow feathers and fairy-like appearance, and most impressed by the sheer size and tattered tail feathers of the Philippine eagle. The parrot has kept its bright green body, red cap, and pronged tail; the owl, its wild and variegated brown plumage. The curator called my attention to the Mindoro imperial pigeon, admiring its beautiful gradient of iridescent feathers, from grey to rust, then emerald, then black.

Their eye sockets were stuffed with white cotton, a grim reminder of the violence of their final moments, perhaps in your hands. As I held each little specimen to arrange and photograph them, I remembered how you described their calls: the owl's whistling "quop", the pigeon's booming "boo-houp", the parrot's noisy screeches, the eagle's plaintive "w-au-w-au". It felt strange to hold such rare birds in death, all the way in England, when I have never encountered them so intimately in real life in the Philippines. The babblers, flycatcher and water-redstart were like light little rag-dolls, while the eagle was about the size and weight of a house cat. I took comfort in the thought that you had once held and marvelled at these birds yourself.

I finished my job, bade the curator farewell, and left. I enjoyed the two-mile walk back to the train station from the museum and was relieved to breathe fresh air again. While walking amongst the trees, I suddenly wished I could see all that you have seen in the Philippines. The forests you have explored are not the same forests I will come home to; most of them are vanishing, just like your birds.

Yours,

M.C.



Specimens from the Whitehead Expedition in the birdskin collections of the Natural History Museum at Tring, Hertfordshire/UK.

Photo ©Mica Cabildo



Specimens from the Whitehead Expedition in the birdskin collections of the Natural History Museum at Tring, Hertfordshire/UK.

Photo ©Mica Cabildo

March 14th 2020

Dear John,

The past month has been surreal and almost impossible. I had barely begun to process my time with your specimens, when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out. The residency has cancelled our presentations and arranged for our hasty departures.

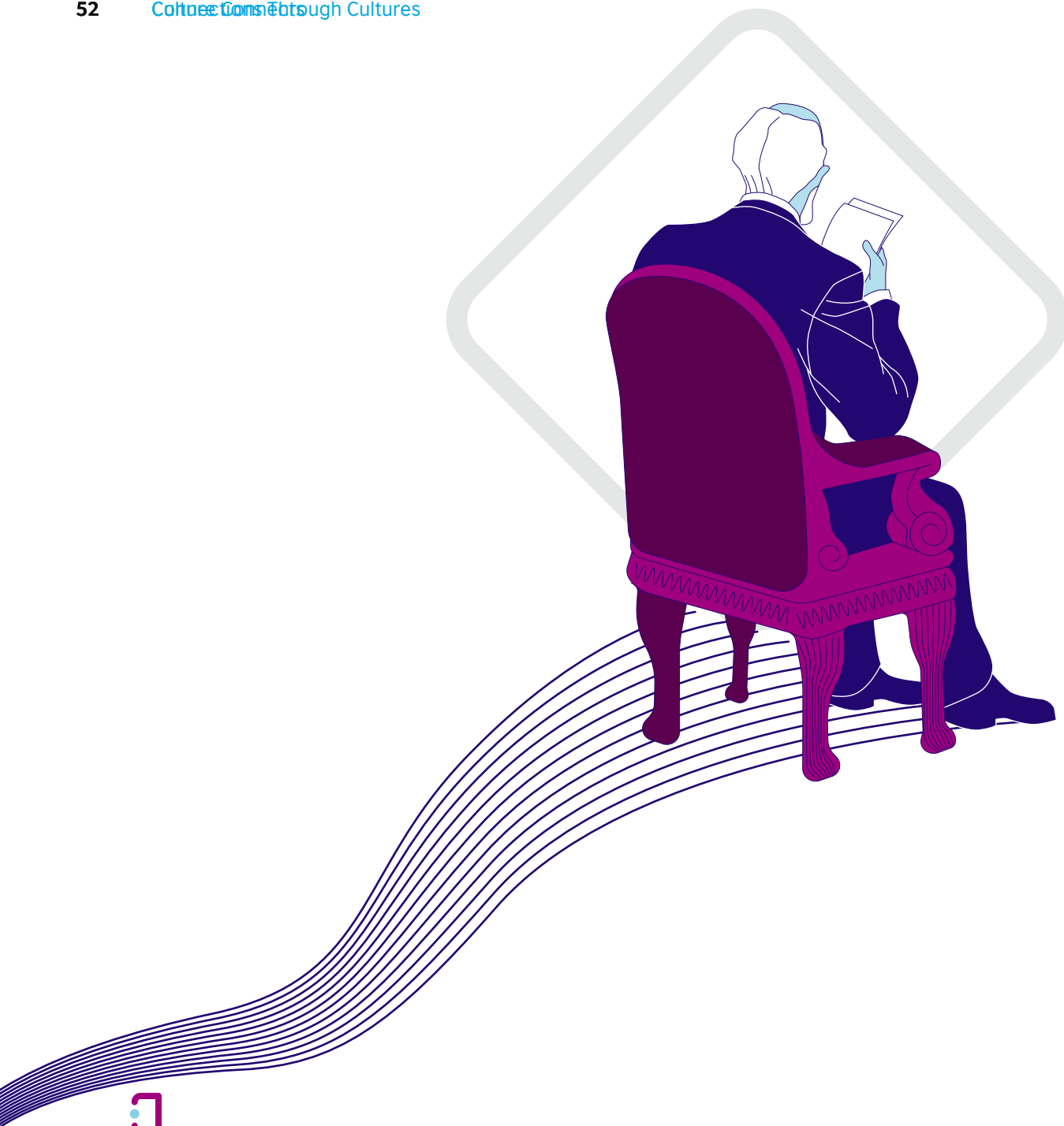
I am writing to you now on the last flight from London to Manila. I wonder whether your departure from the Philippines at the outbreak of the rebellion in 1896 was just as chaotic and frustrating. I still want to ask you so many things: Why did you come to the Philippines? Did you find what you were looking for? Were you ever lonely? Did you find peace, despite the discomforts? Were you thinking of the Philippine forests on your last days in Hainan?

I wish to meet you someday like an old friend. For now, farewell.

Yours,

M.C.





Mica Cabildo, born 1986 and living in Metro Manila/PH, is a Filipina artist and designer with a background in visual communications. She graduated from De La Salle University-Manila in 2005 and since 2014 has been working on various interdisciplinary collaborative projects about climate, landscape and ecology. She has held fellowships and undertaken artist residencies at Akademie Schloss Solitude (Stuttgart/DE), Sapporo Tenjinyama Art Studio (Hokkaido/JP), Akiyoshidai International Art Village (Yamaguchi/JP), Schleswig-Holsteinisches Künstlerhaus (Eckernförde/DE), and Gasworks (London/UK). In 2020, she received a grant from Prince Claus Fund and Goethe-Institut's Cultural and Artistic Responses to Environmental Change funding scheme for the VR project *Whitehead's Ark*. She is bound to attend Re-PAIR: Ocean Artist-in-Residence Program at Pier-2 Arts Center (Kaohsiung/Taiwan) in the near future. You may learn more about her recent projects at <https://mica-cabildo.com>.

The photographs in this article are taken from Mica's video, *Whitehead's Birds*. She recently co-produced *Whitehead's Ark* with Tof Zapanta and Artblox Asia.

After migration

A hostile environment: from Manila to London with Rogelio Braga

I met Rogelio on a sunny March day in London. Only a month before, Rogelio, or Ogie as they are known, had finally been granted asylum in the UK and thus transitioned to the position of 'refugee'.

Rafael Schacter



An open critic of the Duterte regime in the Philippines, Ogie sought asylum after a series of death threats were made against them. Sitting on a park bench in Gordon Square, however, adjacent to both University College London and Birkbeck, University of London – where Ogie was working on a PhD in English and Humanities – we spoke about this movement from asylum seeker to refugee, as well as their creative writing practice in both London and Manila. What appeared particularly important was the way they navigated the asylum system both as an individual and as a writer, not only refusing to be beaten down by the system itself, but also incorporating it in his artistic work thematically, linguistically, and conceptually.



Rogelio Braga with the National Theatre Studio for 'Miss Philippines', November 2021.

Photo ©Lao Lee

So sat here, right now, what's so interesting is that you are at such a pivotal shift in your life, from asylum seeker to refugee.

It's a huge, shocking change. I haven't really processed it properly yet. You're going to be here forever! Literally. That's the judgement! So, what am I going to do now?

Concurrently with all the other projects though you have your PhD to finish still! But what a radical shift. Perhaps before we go back to talking about the Philippines and why you became an asylum seeker here, we could talk about how you experienced this position over the last three years?

Well the first thing is that if you're an asylum seeker in this country you carry a stigma due to the **hostile environment**. They say 'you came here for the benefits', 'for the NHS (National Health Service)'. People automatically make these kinds of judgements about asylum seekers, about people seeking protection from their governments. And this has been going on since 2012. I had to carry this whilst living as an asylum seeker for two years and three months. And so I had to adjust to the system.

Luckily when I applied for asylum I was a graduate student so I was holding a Tier 4 visa, so all the privileges of having a student visa were carried over. That's how I survived. I also had legal aid, and you can work 20 hours a week as a student but cannot have an income beyond £750. So I lived in that monthly cycle. And, of course, as an asylum seeker you cannot access public funds either. But the real problem is that at any time the result of your asylum could be released, and if they say no to your claim, you have to leave the country immediately. And that's what you have to carry every day. For two years and three months, every day you're thinking about this, and then suddenly there's a decision out of the blue!



Hostile environment

As described by The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, the Hostile Environments is a "set of policies introduced in 2012 by then-Home Secretary Theresa May, with the aim of making life unbearably difficult in the UK for those who cannot show the right paperwork". The policies meant that migrants were treated "as less deserving of dignity and humanity than British citizens"

Yes I understand there is a huge backlog in the system. It must have been absolutely exhausting.

It's like you've been working for 17 hours straight and suddenly your shift ends and the exhaustion hits: that's what's happening to me right now. So those two years, and then adding to that what was happening to me in the Philippines before that, suddenly I feel that in my body now. And my way of how to cope with that is making myself busy!

Oh no! You're one of those!

Always! But when I became an asylum seeker I told myself that I couldn't let my life end up like so many whose world becomes wasted by the **Home Office**, by the Hostile Environment, waiting for 5 years, 4 years, for an outcome. That's why I decided to enrol for a PhD.

You were doing your Masters here when you first came here, right, so did you apply in the same department?

No in a different one. I was originally studying politics. In fact my background in the academe is social sciences, but when I applied for my PhD it was for creative writing. And whilst I was accepted, as an asylum seeker I was not allowed to apply for a scholarship, and also I'm considered an **International Student**.

So how did that work?

Luckily they let me pay on a monthly basis! But my salary, every month, 70-80% of it would go straight to my tuition.

Wow.

I just didn't want my life to stop once I sought asylum. And if they declined it, I'd have my PhD! So I would have a backup – even though this was not actually my academic background. My research interests were the nationalist identity formation of Muslim separatist groups in Southeast Asia, but I was unable to return to my country, to Mindanao, where I was planning on doing fieldwork.

As a writer I thought the best way to continue was to move towards creative writing and write a novel in English. I made a conscious choice to lead my life as an asylum seeker in this way... and then suddenly it changed and I am a refugee!

Can you tell me about the situation for you in the Philippines before you came here?

In the Philippines I was a writer. I wrote novels, short stories, I had a publishing house, and in 2007 I also established a small theatre company, all in Manila. I was also teaching at two universities and working with the Bangsamoro Autonomous Government who hired me as a consultant. I still have my publishing house but will be moving it here to the UK, but I had to close the theatre company. I had plays being performed across the country. But I first came to the UK for a **Chevening Scholarship** which was supposed to be for 10 months.



Home Office

The ministerial department responsible for immigration, security, and law and order

International student

International students pay much higher fees than local students

Chevening Scholarship

a UK Government international award programme aimed at developing global leaders

So why did you apply for Chevening specifically?

My research interests are on nationalism and ethnic conflict, and there were two universities in the UK – Edinburgh [the MSc in Nationalism Studies] and Birkbeck [the MSc Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict] – who specifically focus on this topic. So I came to London for this ten month scholarship, but on my third month here, I received a call from my relatives in Manila telling me that I could no longer return. There were people harassing my family, which had been happening since 2017, but my family were afraid to tell me. But that January things had begun getting even more serious. So, my family warned me that **I could not return...** but with the Chevening scholarship you have to return to your home country or they make you return the money! Again, it's part of the wider Hostile Environment. But if you can never return because of safety, they say you have to go to a third country, instead of applying for asylum!

And this was just three months into your stay.

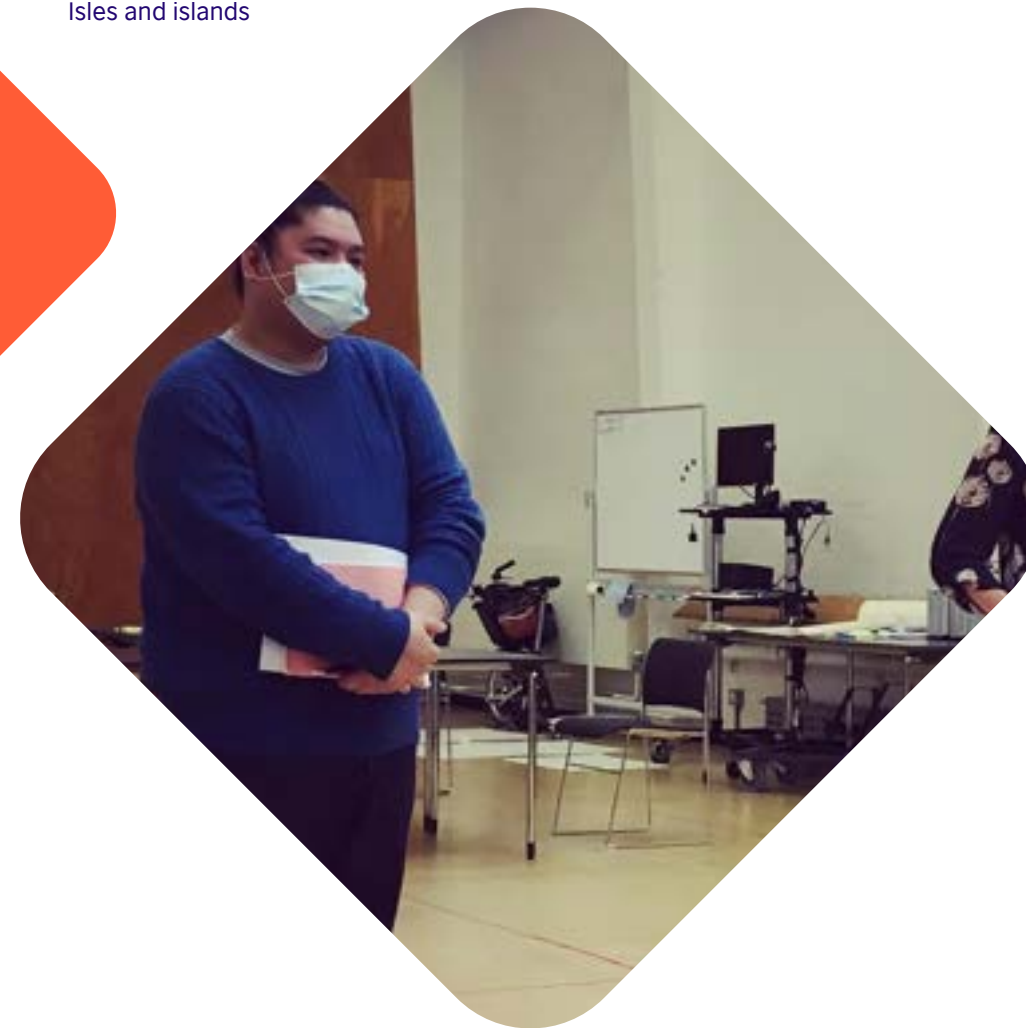
That's right. So of course, I escalated my concern with the British Embassy in Manila, with Chevening here in London, and told them about my situation. I tried really hard to look for a third country. I was looking at Berlin or New Zealand to do a PhD, looking for work in Vietnam and Thailand, but unfortunately nothing was successful. I really didn't want to apply for asylum here, to carry the burden of the stigma, but my visa was running out and in the end, I had no other options.

What happened next?

I spent two weeks studying the asylum system – the culture of the system when it comes to asylum seekers, and I asked myself if I was really ready for it. I eventually applied and screened in Dover in November 2019. The decision was originally supposed to be ready within six months but it extended to over two years. And then sometime in 2021, they lost my papers! It really affected me badly. It felt like we were waiting for nothing. And it was only by chance that we found out! One of my colleagues in Manila, Lady Ann Salem, a journalist who reviewed one of my plays that was cancelled due to censorship in 2015, was imprisoned [thankfully she was released after three months], and in a panic I asked my solicitor to check on the status of my asylum application at the Home Office and then she found out that they lost my papers. So if I didn't panic... we would never have known!

So when you applied for the Chevening, was there something about the UK or was it the specific course of study you were focused on?

It was the course, really, I needed to expand my network within this area. If I was ever going to leave the Philippines for good, I would have gone to the US because of the historical relationship. But the course here was just perfect, and it was for ten months, unlike two years in the US. Ten months meant everything could continue in Manila – the publishing company, the theatre company – while I would meet other scholars of nationalism and widen my knowledge.



Rogelio Braga rehearsing 'Miss Philippines' at the National Theatre Studio with director Ria Parry.

Photo © Warren Hallet-Cousins



I could not return...

This forms part of the climate of fear and extrajudicial killings that occurred during the Duterte regime which targeted writers, artists, and journalists amongst many others.

Okay. You came for the Chevening, you sought asylum, but how did you find the creative scene here, what were your networks, how did you engage and what did you engage with?

When I came here, most of my networks were related to my interests in social science; I didn't even watch plays when I first arrived! But when I finally made asylum in November, I told myself that it's going to be a long time and I needed to continue writing. The problem was that I write in Filipino... as I told you I'm no longer young, I'm in my mid-career.

Hey we were born the same year stop telling me I'm old!

(laughs) In my country, I already have books, I have plays! And suddenly you have to begin again. And not only did I always write in Filipino, but all my writing in the Philippines was based on Moro [muslim]-Filipino relations, so they were very specific to the country and the local geopolitical situation. There I had an audience that wanted to learn more, but already had a basic idea. And suddenly I'm living here!

So how did it all start?

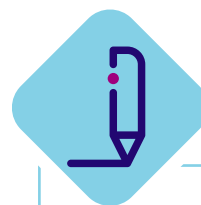
It was with **New Earth Theatre**. They had an open submission called the Professional Writers Program. If you are British and of East or Southeast Asian descent, and have a permanent or regular residency in the UK, you can apply for this. It is for 12 people, you have a month to prepare the first scene of your play, and then they go down to four people who are given a commission over two years. When I read about this, in January 2020, I emailed them and explained the situation of my asylum and my background. I said I don't need funding, I can't get the funding, so if you could just let me sit in? And lo and behold, they accepted me on the programme.

I attended the workshop and then they chose me as one of the four to go forward with the commission, which was where **Miss Philippines** first began. We will actually be having a reading of this at the Soho Theatre in May and I also recently had an attachment at the National Theatre who were supporting the development of the play too. At the same time I also submitted an application for a theatre company in Colchester, Theatre Témoin, and they commissioned me to write a short play on the NHS [*Till Human Voices Wake Us and We Drown*]. The play was performed in the Mercury Theatre last October.

I was also invited by St Paul's Cathedral to write a response to a specific statue or memorial at St Paul's [for *50 Monuments in 50 Voices*]. I'm also attending a six-month programme at the Royal Court for twelve theatre makers called No Borders, interrogating political theatre in the UK. Oh and my 2017 book of stories *Is There Rush Hour in a Third World Country* is being published in English, translated by Kristine Ong Muslim, this November for 87Press, a radical South London publishing house.

You've had a quiet time, then!

I am so tired (laughs)!



New Earth Theatre

then called Yellow Earth, a theatre company dedicated to British East and Southeast Asian voices

Miss Philippines

Play about a fictional slum community in Manila struggling to mount a gay beauty pageant amidst Duterte's drug war

In your writing the focus is on producing work in English now but what about your subject matter?

Well as you say, first I'm really trying to be comfortable with the English language. And the only way I can do this is to invent my own English, where I can comfortably express myself, tell a story on stage and on paper, and explore the boundaries or limitations that go beyond my writing. But yes, second, when I left the Philippines my focus was on Southeast Asia. But right now, for example with *Miss Philippines*, the play talks about the situation in the Philippines but also about the hostile environment here in the UK because that's what I've experienced here.

So I'm looking for the convergences of the issues that I explore between myself in the Philippines and myself in the UK. I feel that with *Miss Philippines* I'm on the right track; it explores the killings in the Philippines, but also about the life of nurses in the UK; one character, for example, is trying to get to London to work, another character has been deported back there as she was undocumented. So it is both the struggle with language and the struggle with the context.

And how does it feel to write in English now?

I would like to create my own language, my own English, so that an 'English English' person can read my work and understand the story, but that reader will know that the one telling the story is a foreigner. I want the idioms, so that it's standard English but from the outside. I'm not sure what will come out from this, so I'm curious! I'm excited! English in the Philippines is the language of our colonisers, the language of the elite, so out there I would never write a play in English! (Laughs) But this is my life now! I have to continue writing. That's what I am. Otherwise I would die! I have to find a way to continue this life. And this is what now separates me from the Philippines, geographically and aesthetically.

I actually would consider *Miss Philippines* and my new book for my PhD as British literature – if that's even a thing of course, if you believe that literature is a cultural marker for participating in national identity formation. My novel is about documenting the narratives of Filipino migration in the UK. And the narratives of these migrants are part of British life! They are part of British national identity formation. Nationalism is a process. It happens everyday. So the retelling of these stories is a British story, and that's what I'm trying to tell.

What I take from that is your interest in the relationship between the UK and the Philippines is a very real, grounded rather than conceptual one. It's about the everyday lived experience and reality of being a migrant, being an asylum seeker, being a refugee, and how those competing narratives are being fixed, being fixed here.

And from someone that has actually been living in the Hostile Environment! It's not just a policy; it created its own language, its own relationships, consciousness, imagination. These are my concerns that I want to challenge and interrogate, to find the right language to do so. To invite it into sparring!

Do you feel there has been an embracement of that narrative in the theatre and literary scene here in the UK?

Well theatre here in general is very White, very middle class, very conservative. But as an asylum seeker here, I learned a great skill, which is that if it is a white space, stay away from it! That's how I survived. I learnt where to apply and where not to apply, which spaces to enter and which not to.



Transpinay London-based actor Victoria Gigante playing a powerful mambabarang (sorceress) and a migrant NHS nurse for '*Till Human Voices Wake Us and We Drown*' at the NHS Yarns presentation, Mercury Theatre, Colchester, England in October 2021.

Photo ©Theatre Témoin



But how do you find the right spaces?

Well research. And networking. I think that's the London strategy. You have to find your tribe. There is a space for everyone here. The tragedy is that the largest spaces are reserved for white people - although they are often quite mediocre. So I head towards the small pockets, the small projects.

Do you think this is about the size of London compared to Manila for example?

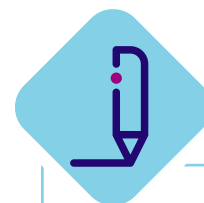
Actually, I think it's a danger to compare London to Manila. The **padrino** system is still really present in the Philippines. It's really hard to be neutral. Here you can just stay away, find your tribe. There you stay away but you also have to protect yourself from them too.

It's a different animal when it comes to Filipino gatekeeping. With that said, in the Philippines I was able to stay away from it by having my own publishing house, my own theatre company, and while I was isolated, I could still access funding like the Asian Cultural Council of the Rockefeller Foundation, Chevening. My project to stay away from the mainstream Filipino literary and theatre industry was working, for myself as a creator. The sad part of it was when Duterte came to power, the attack on writers, on cultural workers, on us as independent writers and theatre-makers outside of the establishment doubled. To whom should we run?

So what is your feeling about London today now, as a place that is, for now at least, your home

London, I guess, is a safe space for me, a haven for me. I can just get on with things here. People just leave you alone here! So just leave me alone and let me create and when I have something new, I will present it to you if you are interested. If you are, let's talk! If you're not, that's fine I will move on. That temperament of this city really works for the kind of creative process I uphold.

It's such a London attitude! Don't talk to me unless we need to talk. And if we do, then let's talk! You've caught London exactly!



Padrino

An embedded system of nepotism and cronyism in the Philippines



Rogelio Braga is an exiled playwright, novelist, essayist, and a political activist from the Philippines. They published two novels, a collection of short stories, and a book of plays before they left the archipelago in 2018. Unable to return home due to the deteriorating state of human rights and freedom of expression in the Philippines, Braga is the first Filipino writer who fled to the United Kingdom seeking protection from persecution, state harassment, and censorship since Duterte came to power in 2016.

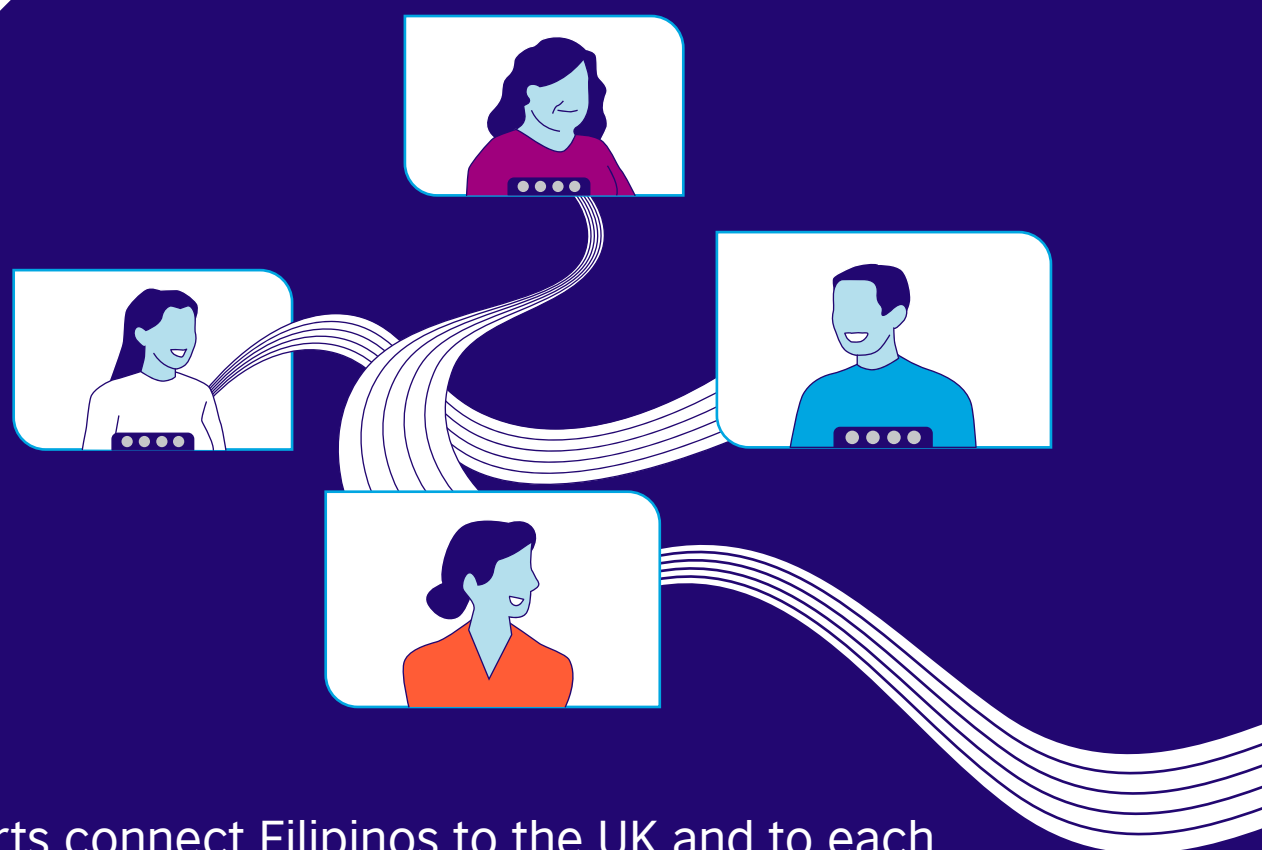
Braga was a fellow of the Asian Cultural Council for theatre in Southeast Asia in 2016 and a recipient of the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature for his fiction. Braga is being supported by Kanlungan Filipino Consortium as one of the hundreds of vulnerable Filipino migrants living in London today and currently volunteers for Campaign for Human Rights in the Philippines (CHRP). *Miss Philippines* is their debut play written entirely in their second language, English.

Dr Rafael Schacter is an Associate Professor in Anthropology and Material Culture at University College London. Schacter works on public art and global art, lecturing, curating, and writing widely in both these areas. He received his PhD at UCL in 2011 and was a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the same institution from 2014-2017.

Schacter has published three books; *Street to Studio* with Lund Humphries in 2018; *Ornament and Order: Graffiti, Street Art and the Parergon* with Routledge in 2014; and the award-winning *World Atlas of Street Art and Graffiti* with Yale University Press in 2013. He is currently working on the manuscript for his fourth book, *Monumental Graffiti*, forthcoming with MIT Press in 2024.

Schacter also has a wide-ranging curatorial output. Most recently curating *Motions of this Kind* at the Brunei Gallery (SOAS) in 2019, Schacter has curated at the Tate Modern (the *Walking Tour* for the *Street Art* exhibition in 2008), Somerset House (*Futurismo Ancestral*, *Mapping the City*, and *Venturing Beyond*) in 2014, 2015, and 2016 respectively), and recently completed curating a four-year public art project in Heerlen, the Netherlands (2018-2022).

Connections, care, and culture



The arts connect Filipinos to the UK and to each other, transcending isolation and distance at a global scale. This chapter explores how enhancing artistic connections worked to sustain members of the UK's Filipino community during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Deirdre McKay and Nathalie Dagmang

Filipinos in the UK

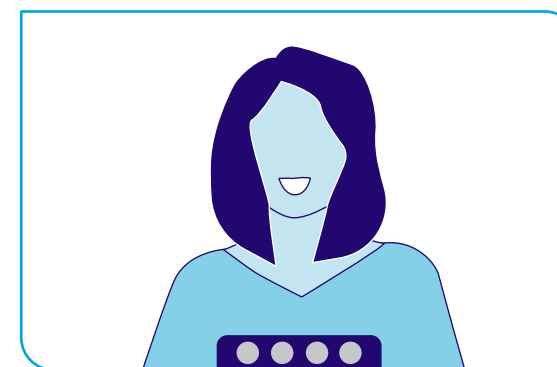
The Filipino community in the UK is both settled and sojourning. There are about 250,000 Filipinos permanently resident in the UK, with another 70,000 or more migrants living and working in the country on short-term contracts. As Filipino Overseas Contract Workers, these OCWs belong to a global labour diaspora from the Philippines.

Filipino migrant workers connect the UK to the Philippines through culture. Though they may be defined by their professional roles, they also share their skills, beliefs, festivals, and rituals with their compatriots, employers, and neighbours.

Many Filipinos work in the UK's health and care sector. This includes employees of the National Health Service (NHS), Filipinos who work for commercial providers in care homes or home care services, and those who work for private employers. An estimated [40,000 Filipinos work for the NHS, making it the single biggest employer of Filipinos in Britain](#).

During the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, the proportion of Covid-19 infections in the nursing workforce was highest [among Filipino nurses](#) and they had [much higher death rates](#). Only in 2022, however, did 'Filipino' become a recognised option for NHS employees to record their ethnic identity. Up until this point, Filipinos were recorded as 'any other Asian background'. The absence of a separate Filipino category, despite the sacrifices of so many migrant healthcare workers, reveals how Filipinos have lacked visibility to wider UK society, other than as care experts.

Because Filipinos in the UK predominate in caregiving work, they are often stereotyped as naturally caring. This stereotype can then become an excuse for UK institutions that fail to recognise Filipinos' talents and skills and then relegate them to risky, unskilled, and low-paid work. Working against this stereotype by celebrating their creative skills and practices forms an important part of many Filipinos' cultural lives in the UK, especially when care is their work.





Stills from Nathalie Dagmang's short film on the Santacruzán in London, *Dios Te Salve*.

Fostering creativity to build community

During the Covid-19 pandemic, creative practice was limited to indoor spaces. And many Filipinos who were working in private care roles, often without visas, struggled with isolation and loss of earnings. Supported by a British Council grant, we worked with FDWA to set up *Kamustahan*, an online-only pandemic-response project. When they joined, most of our UK participants were staying in and around London.

FDWA had documented how, when the Covid-19 pandemic arrived in London, the resulting restrictions pushed some vulnerable Filipino migrants towards isolation. Those without the formal right to work in the UK found that pandemic restrictions made them more hesitant to seek healthcare or approach groups offering financial and mental health support³.

These irregular migrants feared they would be reported to immigration authorities. Several had both lost their employment and been ill themselves and were effectively destitute, staying with friends while they figured out what to do next.

Moreover, the initial UK information campaigns on Covid-19 and mental wellbeing were limited to formats and languages that were not very accessible to Filipino migrants. FDWA's Cielo Tilan identified domestic and care workers who were undocumented or informally employed to join Kamustahan workshops as a way of improving the flow of information and care. FDWA had determined that undocumented workers working for private employers were at the most risk, health-wise. These migrants had close contact with their employers and precarious working conditions. Even when they had Covid-19 symptoms themselves, their lack of access to sick leave or support payments meant they found themselves compelled to keep working.

Undocumented migrants were also hesitant to join in public events, like the Santacruzán parade, because they feared the ramifications of disclosing their immigration status to the organisers or other Filipinos. Recruiting undocumented workers to participate in a virtual Santacruzán was one way to draw them into conversation with the wider Filipino community.

Your care is our culture

Filipinos in the UK draw on transnational connections to the Philippines and migrants elsewhere to sustain their culture. These connections are brokered by cultural exchange and practice. Nursing and social care professionals reflect¹ that it's often the connections they make through community creativity that underpin their personal abilities to deliver the high-quality and compassionate care for which Filipinos are renowned.

From the UK, Filipinos access a rich world of fiestas, life events, neighbourhood *chica-chica*, and even exchanges of poetry, music, and art online. Practising their culture, whether that is through activities like singing in church or making paper flowers, allows migrants to express their creativity and ground themselves in their ethnic identity. Between online connections and Filipino community events, this practice of culture replenishes Filipino migrants².

When Filipino migrants in the UK connect via culture to broader UK society, they typically choose to share performance events. For our Curating Development project (2016–2018), members of the London-based Filipino Domestic Workers Association (FDWA) staged a Santacruzán procession through the streets of West London. London is where the majority of Filipinos in the UK live and work, so those staying elsewhere gravitate to London events, both online and offline.

Cielo Tilan, from the FDWA, asserts the importance of this church-sponsored event in consolidating the bonds within the Filipino community in the UK. The Santacruzán is one of the festive highlights of the year for the Filipino community. Filipinos, both those living in London and those visiting friends there, congregate at London churches. Participants dress up as *reynas* and process through public spaces, with the event recorded on video and shared widely on social media. Parading as a festive group makes Filipino culture visible to the wider UK public with crowds forming to watch and passers by stopping to take photos. Santacruzán parades not only stop local traffic but also receive coverage from UK news outlets, with media reports further raising the Filipino community's profile.

What makes the Santacruzán parade unique, however, is behind-the-scenes events involving creativity and craft skills, all very much focussed on celebrating feminine care and knowledge. Around the Santacruzán, the festivities of *Flores de Mayo*, the creative practices of *salu-salu*, flower offerings, paper flower-making activities, photoshoots, fashion shows and other associated performances help Filipinos strengthen the bonds of their community. During the pandemic, making a virtual online-only Santacruzán became a way for migrants to sustain each other in the face of loss, restrictions, and isolation. Making together online, dressing up at home, and parading in front of a camera via Zoom replicated the shared rituals of the procession.



Chica-chica

Convivial chat

Reyna

Queen

Flores de Mayo

Flores de Mayo is a Filipino festival and commemoration of Marian devotion held during the month of May. Throughout the month, devotees would offer flowers to the statue of the Virgin Mary.

Salu-salu

A gathering around food usually held among families and friends, or a larger social group as part of a celebration or festival.

Kamustahan

From the Filipino for 'how's it going' is an art project and online space where conversations surrounding experiences of migrant workers during the pandemic can transpire. Kamustahan's activities brought together Filipino labor migrants, artists, family members, academics and activists across the diaspora.

The act of greeting each other / Asking each other how they're doing. The root word *kamusta*, or more formally, *kumusta*, was derived from the Spanish "Como esta" (how are you?).

Creativity and self-care

Kamustahan was facilitated by Filipino arts professionals in the Philippines and Hong Kong collaborating via Zoom with migrant worker-artists in London, Hong Kong and Taipei. Four artists – Nathalie Dagmang, Alma Quinto, Henrielle Pagkaliwangan, and Jason Dy – offered art workshops from Manila and Pangasinan. The Hong Kong migrant-artists' collective, Guhit Kulay, offered sessions from Hong Kong. Working with these professional artists leading the online workshops enabled participating migrant-artists to pick up new skills and techniques. These skills included perspective and shading in life drawing, reinforcing mobile joints in sculptures, and paper flower-making as well as learning how to plan and lead their own online arts workshops.

Responding to the needs expressed by the migrant-artist participants, Kamustahan worked to embed ongoing artist collaborations and training for migrants in arts techniques in the work of our partner advocacy and activist groups – FDWA in the UK, Guhit Kulay in Hong Kong, and Serve the People in Taipei.

Migrant advocates discovered online arts training online offered a welcome way to support migrant workers coping with isolation and restrictions right across the diaspora. Migrant-artist participants expressed that just knowing that someone else understood how they needed to create to take care of themselves and have hope was something that helped them persevere through multiple lockdowns and much uncertainty. Advocates found adding an online arts offer helped their workers to identify and target additional support to precarious and vulnerable migrants.

Making art with others helped migrant-artist participants rebuild their sense of self. When Julia Mariano, from Serve the People in Taiwan, observed migrants were feeling worn out due to pandemic working conditions, participants strongly agreed. Migrants across Hong Kong, Taiwan and the UK found themselves restricted from socialising and travelling other than to work.

They were often required to self-isolate in their employers' homes – which were their workplaces – alongside their employers' family. Unable to escape their work and their workplace, being creative via Zoom was a way of taking their mind elsewhere and imagining a future, post-pandemic.

During our online art workshops, participants spoke with each other about the activities that they commonly enjoyed. They shared the things that they would do to de-stress, like walking or exercise. They also shared their strategies to reconnect with their friends and families back home. Online workshops created spaces for participants to express themselves and share stories about their hopes and frustrations. Making art with the guidance of artists allowed them to discover skills they had not previously explored because of the demands of their work. Finally, they often had to get creative with their own – limited – living spaces and relationships with their employers to accommodate their creative practice.

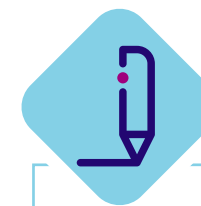
Connecting through culture

Our online art events thus opened up new conversations between our participants and their employers and families about their interests in the arts. Migrants' art-making and artistic skills caused their employers to see them in a new light and sometimes become involved themselves. Art connected them to families and friends, too, when they asked for help or input from partners, fellow Filipinos, family, and employers both online and in person.

Chell, for example, invited her employers to view our public program via Facebook Live. Her employer's whole family watched the event from their living room. They saw Chell's works and her recorded "artist studio" tour – a visit to her room in their house, set up as an arts studio. Her employers expressed surprise to see how many domestic workers were also interested in the arts. They admired Chell's determination to sustain her creative practice despite her small living space and tight schedule.

Other participants decorated their employers' living rooms in anticipation of the Santacruzán screening. One taught their *alaga* how to draw or make paper flowers and bird sculptures. Another migrant-artist recruited her employer to help her decorate her room as the backdrop for her virtual Santacruzán 'reyna' performance.

Art-making also opened the participants to new ways of expressing their care with loved ones. In one of Henrielle's drawing workshops, Cielo drew a picture of a favourite mug, one gifted to her by an employer who she had cared for over several years. The drawing workshop prompted her to reconnect with this previous employer, someone who had subsequently migrated to the US, for a catch-up Zoom chat. Other participants applied their learning immediately, using video calls with their children back home in the Philippines to pass on their newly-acquired art skills. These migrant parents found art-making allowed them to talk to their children for longer and their children were proud to hang 'made-with-mother-online' artworks in their homes.



Alaga

Ward or 'person under the care of.'
Commonly used as a term of endearment by Filipino care workers to refer to the person they are looking after.



Stills from Nathalie Dagmang's short film on the Santacruzán in London, *Dios Te Salve*.

On-site events were organised around Kamustahan's online public programmes. In Taiwan, participants and partners decorated the Serve the People Shelter for Migrants with paper flowers and organised a watch party and salu-salo on the day of the virtual Santacruzán livestream. In other places where restrictions were partially lifted, participants held watch parties and salu-salo in rented accommodation. Some participants watched from their employers' living rooms. Relatives back home watched from their phones and living room, too, often with their extended family.

Art overcoming alienation

The strongest theme emerging from migrant-artists' group discussions was the power of art-making to transcend their feelings of alienation from their host societies. Close behind that was the way in which art-making built connections among Filipinos around the world by engaging them in digitally-facilitated parallel play.

Leeh Ann, a photographer and migrant-artist doing domestic work in Hong Kong, shared her thoughts with our workshop attendees. For her, the importance of making art is twofold. Firstly, photography takes her outside her usual routine as a domestic worker. She enters new spaces and places with a critical, visual eye. Secondly, being creative in those spaces – taking shots with her camera – positions her differently to her Hong Kong hosts. It is her photographic practice that brings her into groups and situations where she finds herself on equal footing with Hong Kong citizens. Below, you can see the image she selected to explain this.

She explains:



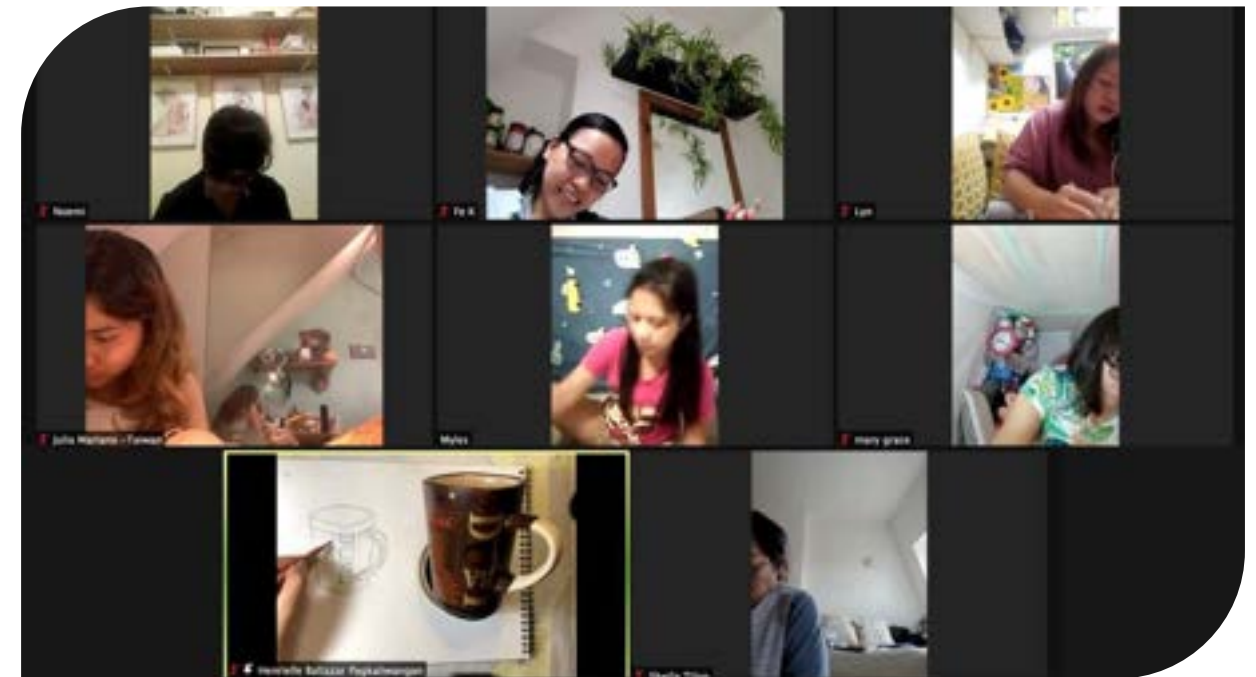
On Sundays, which is the usual day off of domestic workers, even if I'm dressed up nicely, I feel like other people will still sense that 'you're a domestic worker.' It seems like there's always an invisible line separating me from them. Even if I try my best to mingle with them, they'd still find out that I'm a domestic worker and that I don't belong to their world.

This [photograph] was taken in one of the photo walks that I joined when I started photography again here in Hong Kong. What I like about that club is that they don't see you as a 'domestic worker' but they see you as a photographer.

Aware of this dynamic, our professional artist-facilitators consulted our partner advocacy organisations in London, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Philippines to identify ways to elicit individual needs and aspirations for art-making and online workshops. The arts already fit into our partner organisations' advocacies and their constituents' interests and needs during the pandemic. But Kamustahan, being online-only, helped these organisations see new ways to mobilise the arts. One of the most fulfilling experiences for both partner organisations and participants was meeting Filipino migrants from different parts of the world. The digital platform produced a unique kind of comparative, ongoing sharing of experiences. This experience, in turn, enriched everyone's understanding of the common working conditions Filipino migrants face, and the commonalities and differences in migrants' experiences across countries.

Our partners have all expressed interest in working with migrant-artists and arts professionals online to further expand their advocacies and extend their current support networks.

Finally, sharing their stories, hopes and fears online also created a different form of intimacy among our participants. Zoom afforded a level of anonymity which allowed participants, even those who might have been initially reluctant to share their experiences in face-to-face interactions, to feel comfortable expressing themselves in calls and then in public events. With the online format of our Santacruzán, participants were comfortable to interact with audiences behind their character's name and costume.



Drawing as a group during one of the Liham project workshops.

Photo ©Nathalie Dagmang



My Life as a Migrant Worker series,
Leeh Ann.

During the online workshops, everyone was creating art and sharing experiences from within their own private spaces. In meetings, people could often hear other attendees conversing with their employers or co-workers in the background. Some migrant-artists and professional artists would give us brief tours of their living spaces and this, too, became incorporated into our online events, with our spoken poetry performances featuring visits to 'artists' studios'.

Takeaway lessons

Kamustahan did not seek to replicate or provide a substitute for face-to-face activities that our participants were unable to access. We thought that would only remind our participants of what they were being deprived of, and might leave them feeling more disconnected. Instead we explored the potential of online platforms – Zoom calls, websites, social media and chat applications – as spaces that could offer new routes to interact with others through art-making. Though the work focussed on exploring

experiences of lockdown for those working away from home, we found a deeper set of connections. More than the production of artworks as testimony of this experience, our project was sharing spaces of creative action with each other and with the wider public to build solidarity.

Now, as the pandemic may be winding down, our plan is to develop exhibitions and further events to reach a still wider public in the UK. With each iteration of sharing – the artworks they made, their skills learning, space and process – participating migrant-artists found themselves more comfortable articulating their cultural contributions to their employers, colleagues, and host societies, creating a venue to connect, express care and change culture.



Cris Cayat as Prinsesa di Kabanguetan (Princess of Benguet Province) dancing traditional Ibaloy steps in her artist's studio in Hong Kong.

Photo ©Cris Cayat

Deirdre McKay is Professor of Sustainable Development at Keele University in the UK. She is also a former Visiting Fellow at the University of the Philippines, Baguio and Diliman. The author of *Global Filipinos* (Indiana, 2012) and *An Archipelago of Care* (Indiana, 2016), her current collaborative work explores the ways digital cultures shape experiences of migration. Trained in social anthropology and human geography, she has carried out fieldwork in the Philippines and with Filipino migrants in Hong Kong, Singapore, Canada, London and via social media.

Nathalie Dagmang is an artist working at the intersection of art and anthropology. Her recent art / research projects involve a riverine community in her hometown Marikina City, Philippines, communities of Overseas Filipino Workers in the UK and most recently, food vendors and homeless women residing along a heritage street in Manila. She has participated in artist residencies and exhibited her works in various galleries and community spaces in the Philippines, Hongkong, Singapore, Taiwan and the U.K. She currently teaches at the Department of Fine Arts of Ateneo de Manila University.

¹ McKay. (2016) *An Archipelago of Care: Filipino Migrants and Global Networks*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

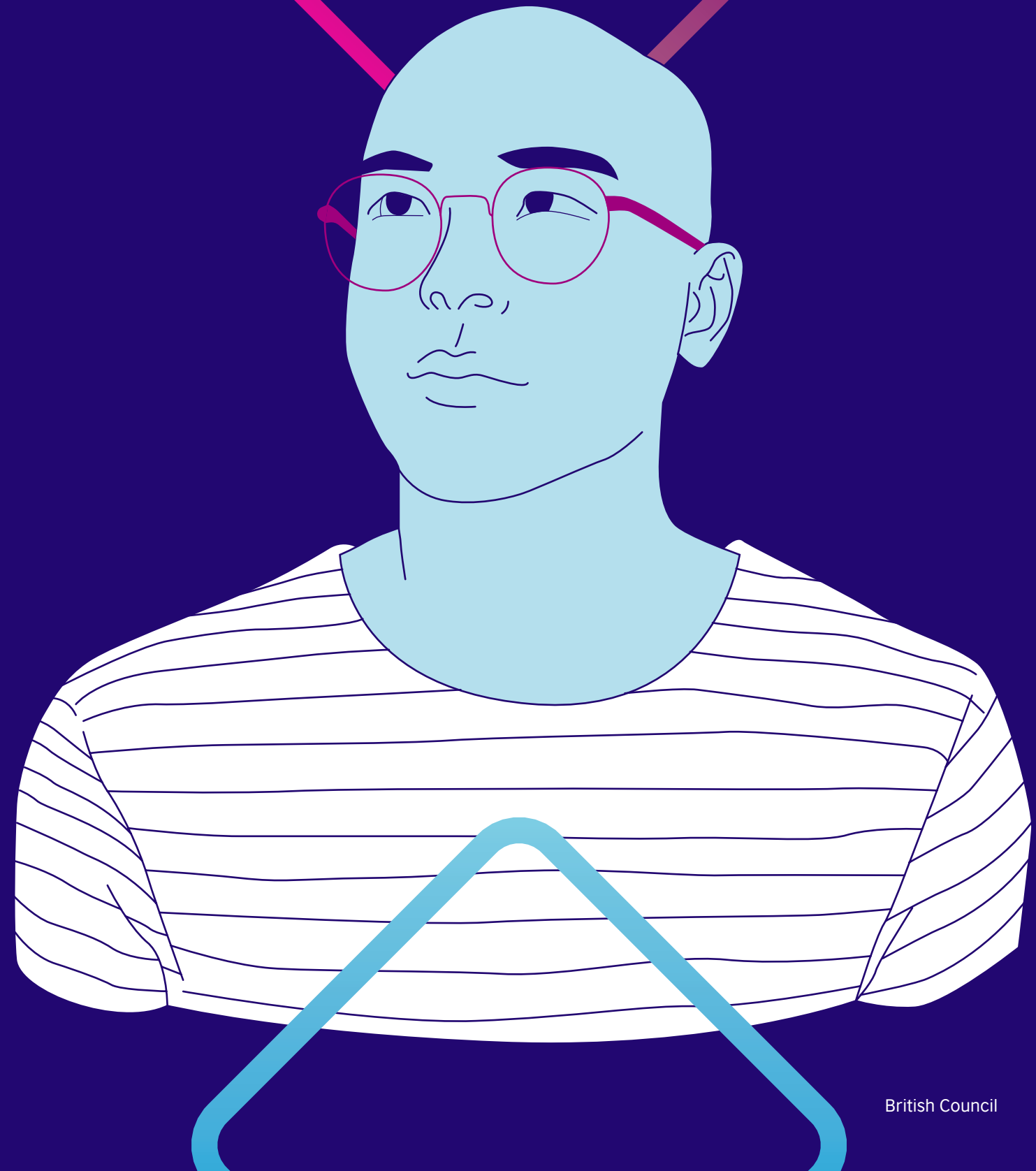
² Ibid.

³ Parry-Davis. (2020) *A Chance to Feel Safe*. Report prepared for Kanlungan, London, UK.

Creating visibility: Pio Abad on institutional navigation

Pio Abad is one of the most renowned Filipino visual artists based in the UK. He has lived here since 2004, studying, working, and today making the country into his home. Here, he is in conversation with Rafael Schacter, discussing his navigation of the art world, both educationally and institutionally, as he approaches two decades in the UK.

Rafael Schacter



Rather than speaking about his art practice itself, the interview explores some of the more prosaic, as well as deeply personal ways he has learnt to work. From exploring the bureaucratic practices of form-filling and funding applications, the pair also discuss the way community has been crucial to Abad's career, as much as the manner in which he has engaged with institutions to further both his own, and other Filipino artists, wider artistic development.

Well, the immigrant story starts with the arrival, right?!

Of course!

But how did Glasgow even come onto your radar?

I was 21, and I think at that point you don't really make decisions with the fullest amount of information, so there was a sense of both serendipity and ignorance. But Glasgow really came into the picture because of my aunt, Pacita [Abad]. I was at the fine arts department of the University of the Philippines for 2 years, and when she came to see me she said that if you want to do this as a career or as a life choice you should try and travel and look at international art schools. And it happens that at that time one of her assistants, Evi Westmore, had done her MFA at Glasgow... I never met her, but she basically changed my life.

Equally, I was drawn to the UK because it wasn't the US. I wanted to find a different conversation or trajectory. Even at 21 that was clear to me. So, I applied to Glasgow and some of the London schools. But London seemed a big space to tackle, and the fees were also more expensive there. Also, there was the Glasgow School of Art building itself. The image of the Mackintosh building really clinched it for me.

So, architecture and affordability.

Yes! But still there was an element of crossing your finger and diving into the deep end. I arrived in September 2004, and, luckily, that was at the height of Glasgow's powers: the Glasgow Miracle, they called it. Artists you saw in people's bedrooms or living rooms

would two years later be nominated for the Turner Prize. But even as a BA student you felt that you were in the middle of an art scene. Much of this was because real estate was so cheap then, so there was a huge grassroots community scene and artists. My studio at that time was only £80 per month, but it was in the same complex where David Shrigley and Claire Barclay had studios. So immediately that sense of possibility really shifted, even in terms of how you would see your own path.

And the possibilities then started opening?

Absolutely. My 2007 BA show was called *Dogeaters Discourse*, a title which was based on a Jessica Hagedorn novel about Manila during Martial Law. That show granted me visibility in the city. I graduated from Glasgow within a scene very willing to embrace what I had to offer. I think part of that was clearly this idiosyncratic visual language you develop during art school alongside this idea of artwork-as-research that was increasingly present at the time, but also there was this history that people didn't know about. And clearly what helped is that I was always the only Filipino, at least in Scotland! There were a few other artists around in London at the time, Maria Taniguchi was just starting her MFA at Goldsmiths, and Yason Banal had just finished his there too. But in many ways this sense of "othering" was strangely beneficial to me.

So, you have affordability, community, you have new horizons, research, singularity...

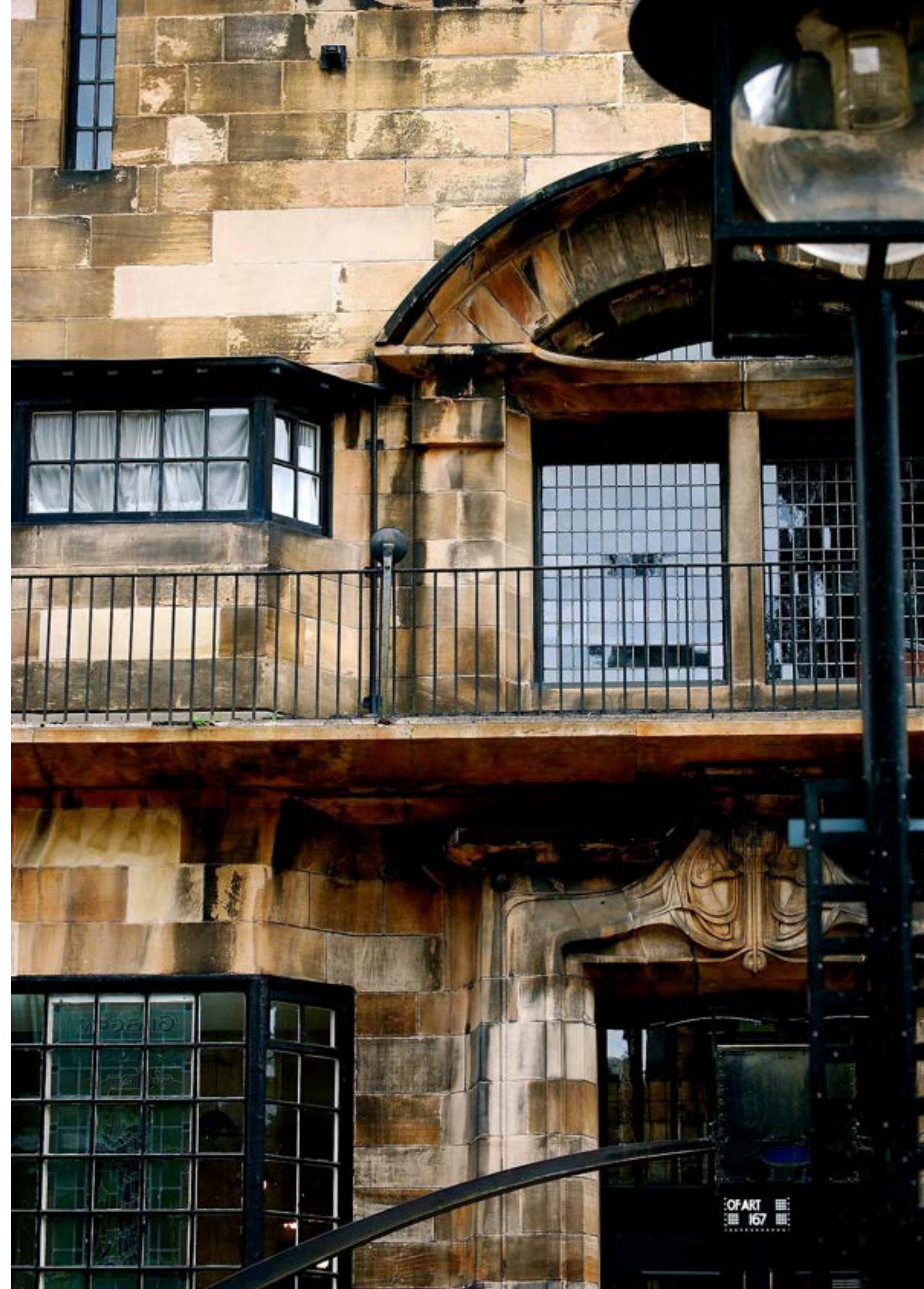
And also funding!

Of course!

Back then, the visa system in the UK was different. You were allowed to stay for two years after you had finished your education. And during this time I was able to access Scottish Arts Council Funding. To be given money to make work was amazing... the first grant was around £4,500.

The facade of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's Glasgow School of Art on Renfrew Street, Garnethill in Glasgow, Scotland.

Photo ©Karen Desuyo.





Pio Abad in his Gasworks studio.

Photo ©RJ Fernandez

And as a recent graduate in Glasgow you could stretch that out!

Totally. I mean I worked stacking shelves at the library and other bits and bobs but there was funding to make work which was so important. And there was space, there were shows you could apply to like Market Gallery, Intermedia, and everyone would go to the opening as the scene was so small. All these opportunities for me to have a practice just wouldn't have happened in London, I don't think.

That makes total sense. So then how did the move down to London eventually take place?

I stayed in Glasgow for the two years after finishing my BA, but with the kind of work I was getting interested in, the context wasn't really there. My wife [Frances Wadsworth Jones] was also in London at the Royal College of Art (RCA) so I was travelling down and starting to get a feel for the city. I applied for the RCA, even though I didn't know how I would afford the fees, but didn't get in. Also, my parents were clear that they wouldn't be able to support me for a Masters. So, the following year I applied for the Royal Academy, mainly because it was free. It's a three-year masters, in the middle of London, as central as you can get, and fully funded... with a cheap bar attached! Again, I don't think it was a super-informed decision, there was a lot of luck of being in the right institution at the right time. But like in Glasgow, it felt that there was a built-in community. There are only 16 students a year. And although from the front, the RA is seemingly the most white, Royalist institution you can ever imagine, for the students in the basement, we felt like the DIY scavengers.

We would suggest who we wanted to teach. In fact, in the final year I led the artist talk series – liaising with the galleries or the artists themselves, welcoming them to their talks and taking them for a drink after. I enjoy getting to understand the structures of institutions and I like to find ways to inhabit them. And that has played a huge role in my journey actually.

I suppose you have to become invested within them to then be able to shape them?

Absolutely. I mean, in hindsight, there were conversations around my work which I would be upset by today. But because I was able to do all of these things, I never really felt othered when studying. I would feel that a bit later, when processing conversations that were taking place during **crits** for example. But that's also what would lead me to this other artistic direction which really came after the RA, which really was about this journey of re-engaging with Manila.

Towards my last year I felt a dissatisfaction with the conversations around my work there... and look, it's predominantly a white institution; my year in particular was also very male, so the dominant conversations wouldn't really have time for the nuances of Southeast Asian history. And while I had both a dissatisfaction with my work and the conversations around it, in the final year, I really began reacquainting myself with the Philippines and regaining that subject matter which I had in my BA.

Isles and islands

And so it was this that led to your final degree show and then onto your Gasworks show?

Yes, so after my MA show I applied to lots of open projects. I was very proactive. I made different open submissions which really helped me out. I fill out forms really well!

Where do you think that comes from?

I have always liked writing. Maybe, coming from a **political family**, I have always been able to express my ideas verbally. It's the nuances of knowing your audience. Whenever I write, and I write a lot these days, I don't write in e-flux speak. I feel there is a generosity in the choice of words... It's storytelling. And I think that's what I've been learning to do: how to tell stories through words as much as through images and forms.

So I went back to Glasgow to do an installation for Glasgow International, which was both important in terms of reintroducing my new practice, but also led me to Robert Leckie. He was the director of Gasworks at the time. He asked for a student visit at the RA, which then led to him offering me a show at Gasworks in 2014. I also applied for funding from the RA when I finished, which I was successful for. I used it to start going back to the Philippines again.

As you'd been away since 2004, right?

Yes, and it had been difficult to go back a lot. So I started going back every two months, which was fantastic. And I got to know **Yeyey Cruz**, who asked me to do a show at Osage Gallery in Hong Kong, which opened the week of the first Art Basel.

And this is the time when the eye of the artworld was really pushing back towards Asia.

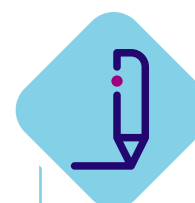
Exactly. And so I was trying to find this community at the end of the RA, as I realised that, while as a school it was great, I had to go somewhere else to expand my interests. And suddenly to be in Hong Kong... it felt amazing. I had found my people!

I suppose in many ways it must have been lonely at the RA, in terms of what you were trying to push towards with your work. And then suddenly there was a whole community who were also figured around this kind of practice.

You realise you are part of a much wider ecosystem. I met Arin Rungjang, this incredible Thai artist, Praneet Soi, an Indian artist based in Amsterdam. And suddenly I realised that my practice may have been an outlier at the RA but it was not an outlier globally. And to be placed in a situation where it really interested people was just hugely eye opening. So, as much as Manila, during that period, Hong Kong was so important.

Who else do you feel has been important in developing your work?

Silverlens has played a big role here but, alongside this, my international presence has mainly been through non-profit institutions. I don't actually have a commercial gallery in London. But Gasworks has really been key, not just as the space of my studio, as has KADIST, Jameel Art Centre, MCAD... It's actually been non-profits that have really enabled the more ambitious side of my work to be possible. And Gasworks also enabled a development that goes past my own work.



Crit

A key art school method in which an artist's work is publicly critiqued by fellow students and tutors.

Political family

Pio's father is Filipino politician and former cabinet member Florencio Abad and his late mother the politician Henedina Abad.

Yeyey Cruz

Director of Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD) Manila

Silverlens

Manila-based gallery that represents Pio's work.

It was them that first brought **Mercedes Zobel** into my projects when she supported the 2014 show. From then we started to develop the annual Outset Residency at Gasworks project which has been incredible. I feel super proud to have been involved to shape that opportunity. So, as much as it has been about creating opportunities for myself, it's also been about trying to find ways of using the structures that I've been involved with to open this field.

*It's hard to imagine how many projects that the Gasworks Residency has opened up, not just **the artists who were involved** but all the projects emerging from the different residencies themselves.*

Yes, exactly. From Martha Atienza's first residency, when we had the Kalampag Tracking Agency film showings, which was packed! And showed films by Shireen Seno, Roxlee, Yason Banal. I guess now that has continued with the **Tate**. Again, I'm really good with forms! I'm really a geek for institutions' procedures. Originally, it was trying to place my aunt's work at the Tate, which allowed me to learn how that works and then continued with that work with Frances.

So these institutional conversations about creating new links – about creating a visibility for Philippine art in the UK – are really starting to take effect. Shireen Seno recently had her screening at the Tate, Pacita is now at Liverpool and Tate St. Ives, so we are slowly pushing forward. Of course, it may take a while for a Filipino artist to have a solo show at the Tate... but there are ways that Philippine art is entering the canon. Not everyone would necessarily see it, but it is happening.



Mercedes Zobel

Leading Filipino and international philanthropist and art patron

The artists who were involved

Martha Atienza, Cocoy Lumbao, Cian Dayrit, Patricia Eustaquio, Mica Cabildo, and Issay Rodriguez

Tate

Both Pacita Abad and Pio, alongside his wife Frances, have recently had works acquired by the Tate



Pio Abad is a Filipino artist living and working in London. Deeply informed by the modern history of the Philippines, where the artist was born and raised, his work uses strategies of appropriation to mine alternative or repressed historical events, unravel official accounts and draw out threads of complicity between incidents, ideologies and people.

He began his art studies at the University of the Philippines (2002–2004) before receiving a BA from Glasgow School of Art in 2007 and an MA from the Royal Academy Schools, London, in 2012. He has had solo exhibitions at Kadist, San Francisco; Oakville Galleries, Ontario; Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow; 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney; Gasworks, London and Jorge B. Vargas Museum, Manila. In 2022, he will have a solo exhibition at the Ateneo Art Gallery, Manila entitled *Fear of Freedom Makes Us See Ghosts*, a survey of Abad's 10-year project examining the legacy of the Marcos dictatorship.

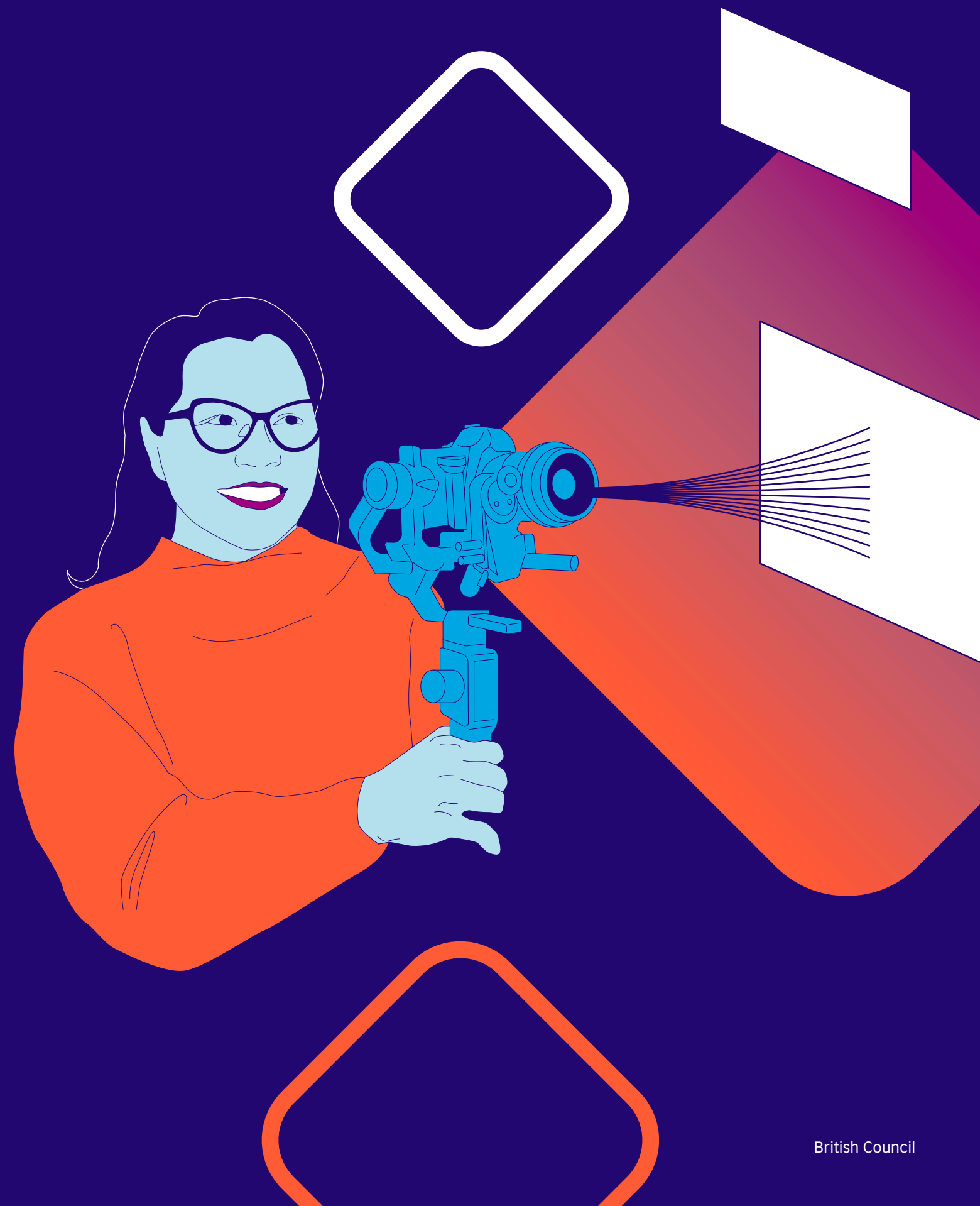
Abad's works are part of a number of collections including Tate, UK; Kadist, Paris/San Francisco and Art Jameel, Dubai. He has also curated exhibitions at Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Manila; Spike Island, Bristol and Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai.

Expanding fields

"How does the world define Filipinos?": Conversation with Baby Ruth Villarama

In this interview, I talk to award-winning documentary filmmaker Baby Ruth Villarama about her experience studying MA Film Distribution and Marketing at Birmingham City University. Villarama and I share parallel experiences as we both moved to the UK for our studies.

Arianna Mercado



In some ways, this conversation reflects our complicated feelings towards the UK, the Philippines, and witnessing the relationship of these two places. Villarama discusses the perceptions of Filipinos among those she met in the UK, her upcoming film *Chasing Dreams* (2022), and opportunities for growth between the UK and the Philippines.

Why did you choose to study in the UK?

Apart from the UK being regarded as a central location for studies, I also really liked how the UK film industry works: it's global, but it's within human scale. The studios are vibrant and I really liked how they go about their impact in their films, especially with documentaries.

Birmingham City University has a good mix of theory and application, and the programme is designed for the cultural impact of films. When I received an offer from the university, I applied for the Chevening scholarship. I think I've applied to that scholarship three or four times ever since I graduated, and finally got it in 2015.

My focus of studies is documentaries, so I was looking for a course that would help not just me, but the community of documentary filmmakers here in the Philippines. I was hoping to, as someone crazy enough to pursue this career, create a constant flow of documentaries and conversations between people, filmmakers, and the artistic community.

Why did you choose to pursue documentary filmmaking?

I grew up watching documentaries. It's a platform where I get to appreciate a culture or human experience even though I'm not from there. For me, documentaries are like seeing a photo album of a nation: you're looking at what happened to a country or to its people. If we don't document our history, then how can we claim that it existed? For example, Magellan's travels have been extensively documented by Pigafetta, but there's not much information about Lapu-Lapu even if we want to know more about him. If we don't document our people and our own identity, then others might define who we are from their respective positions. It's like living in a village and there's no doctor. You have to be that person. I know it's not an easy career to take up, but I just felt like I had to follow my heart towards that path.

On living in and being seen by the UK

What was your experience living in the UK?

It was a mixture of feelings. I was in a transitional period when I landed in Birmingham. My grandmother passed away the same month I got the scholarship. In the middle of her wake, I was fixing my papers and my visa. It felt like I was just floating. When I landed, I was all alone. It was life-altering in a way because all my senses were heightened. There was also this interesting moment of feeling your independence, but at the same time, feeling lonely. You really stretch out your strengths and discover your weaknesses.

I lived in the UK for one year, so it was very short lived. It's funny that when I was there, I fully appreciated myself as a Filipino. I realised how different I was. I was not part of the crowd anymore. In school, I was the only Filipino. And who would really take film business from the Philippines? It felt like I was really counting my steps everyday.

I actually had a similar feeling. When you fill in forms and they ask for your ethnicity, the options are East Asian, South Asian, and then there's Other Asian. You're really made aware of how different you are, in terms of looks and histories. Do you think that this has made an impact on how you make films now?

Definitely. When I was there, people would ask me where I'm from. When I say that I'm from the Philippines, they tell me that their neighbour's nanny is Filipino, and then ask me if I was working as a nanny as well. This type of questioning was constant. It reflected an even bigger question to me: how does the world define Filipinos? This predestined label that some countries have put on us motivated me to tell the stories of our people. We're very proud of our domestic workers. We're very proud of our migrant workers. But people are shocked about me studying film. Why? We have a film industry in the Philippines.

That's so true. I remember that recently, an immigration officer saw my Philippine passport and asked me questions about where I was working. When I said that I was working in the arts, he was surprised to encounter a Filipino who wasn't working at the National Health Services (NHS). Of course we take pride in our domestic workers and nurses, but it also becomes a very narrow point of view of what our culture can offer.

We become homogenous to other people. This perception makes me want to show that there's more to Filipinos than meets the eye. I also make it an effort to address how we can appreciate who we are and gain our own self-respect. It's really tricky because we don't want to oversell it as well. The question is: how can we weave the narrative with all these points that we want to send across?

Were you also developing a film when you were studying?

I was in the middle of making *Sunday Beauty Queen* (2016) when I got the scholarship. I started developing the film in 2013 and I was shooting a little bit when we received a seed grant in 2015. And then I got the scholarship. I was writing my dissertation around May or June and was also editing at the same time to meet the grant deadlines. I had to fly my editor and life partner, Chuck Gutierrez, to the UK.



Still from *Chasing Dreams* (2022).
Photo ©Mark Adkins, Voyage Studios

I'm very thankful and grateful also for Birmingham City University, because they lent us this amazing post-production facility for free because I was a student. Editing in the UK gave us a fresh perspective on how we could put things together and after all of that studying, I could apply what I learned.

Stories of chasing dreams

Can you tell me about your new film, Chasing Dreams?

Chasing Dreams is actually a byproduct of the Connections Through Culture programme of the British Council. They wanted to connect Filipino artists to organisations in the UK to see how we could collaborate together. We partnered with a Birmingham-based organisation called Rise Research, whom I met when I was studying. They know the Filipino community, understood the demographics, and have organised many events. I volunteered with them for one of their film screenings because I wanted to understand how films are distributed in the UK. The programme of the British Council was a really good opportunity for us to collaborate again.



Baby Ruth Villarama on the set of *Sunday Beauty Queens* (2016).

Photo ©Baby Ruth Villarama

Originally, I was supposed to fly to the UK to film and to do research. In the end, we decided to get a UK-based director. It's very awkward for me to direct from the Philippines when the people we want to document live in the UK. I feel like I'm not giving enough justice to the story. Our small film studio Voyage Film Studios and Rise Research decided to help this young, Filipino-British film director, Mark Atkin, and he's been great.

The film is a story about a Filipino nurse working at the NHS who wants to change her career. Although she's proud to be a nurse, she wants to stay home to spend more time with her two kids and follow her true passion to open a spa.

This process has also made us reflect on the big question of how we are living our lives. Are we really living our dream life? Or our inner passion? Or are we just living just to survive? Based on the statistics provided by Rise Research, many Filipinos and other migrant workers in the UK are working to earn and provide for their families. They're not really thinking about themselves. It has its drawbacks, and there's a level of unspoken resentment when you're not allowed to follow your passion. We've been following the case study for a year now. The film actually gave them a reason to try to see if it's even possible to try to chase their dream.

If it's possible to make the spa?

Yes, to make the spa or at least make the transition. Through this process, they met other Filipinos who actually went for their personal dreams. We discovered that there was another Filipina nurse who also resigned to open her spa. She started as somebody who's just carrying a folding bed from house to house, and now she has a spa of her own.

That's amazing.

I know! We didn't know there were other people who had the same dream, we just discovered it while doing our research.

It's actually just a short film, I think about 20 minutes long. But we're hoping that it's something that we can do long term. Maybe we can do a series and collect those stories because I'm sure there are so many more out there.

The film has been an experiment. We're very anxious about what the footage will look like because we're not there. It's up to the UK team to capture the moments based on suggested shot lists, and then we process it here in the Philippines. It's an interesting international co-production. The UK has done co-productions with the US countless times before, and this is a good model for international partnerships between the Philippines and the UK to pursue. Maybe after this, other filmmakers can also have the same opportunity for collaboration.

Moving forward

After having studied abroad for a year, and working with organisations in the UK, how do you see the relationship between the UK and the Philippines? Where do you think there's room to grow and develop together?

For me, it's really about people sitting at the decision table to really go for it and nurture the relationship to grow. The models are there, the talents are there, the artists are there. It's only a matter of creating the right synergy for us to connect the ecosystem for all these artists and players to thrive. As far as the creative industry is concerned, there's so many opportunities to collaborate.

The Philippines has a lot to offer in terms of talents, raw materials, and skills, and the UK can immensely support the Philippines in design, technology, training through project application, and other ways of improving systems.

There's always room for partnership and development if we decide to go for it. I remember Asif Ahmad, the UK ambassador, who was there to shake my hand when I received the Chevening award, sharing on his last day in the Philippines as ambassador, that he imagines a Philippines where the airport is efficient, all flights are on time, and there was no need to bring a car to experience our beautiful country. It's really about cleaning the systems and making sure that these will improve through the right leadership. I'm just grateful that our generation is pushing to change the narrative of our people and our country. Hopefully in the future, we get to share what we're doing from the Philippines to the UK and the rest of the world.



Baby Ruth Villarama is the festival director and co-founder of the Filipino Documentary Society (FilDocs) that created the Daang Dokyu documentary film festival. She's been involved in international co-productions under Voyage Studios for more than 10 years. She earned her MA degree in Film Marketing and Distribution in the UK as a Chevening scholar where her works has been pushing documentaries and independent films to be part of people's conversation.

Arianna Mercado is a cultural worker from Manila currently based in London. She is the co-founder of Kiat Kiat Projects, a nomadic curatorial initiative. Mercado has worked on projects with Cell Project Space, Asia-Art-Activism, Calle Wright, and the Cultural Center of the Philippines. Her writing has been published in Ocula, the Philippine Star, and Ctrl+P Journal of Contemporary Art.



Mapping the Philippines from the United Kingdom

At the British Museum, a pre-1914 warp ikat cotton blanket is kept in storage. It is one of the few examples left of a well-preserved Inlâdang Ifugao blanket from the late 19th century. Ifugao people themselves only have photographs of these exquisitely rendered textiles from that period.

Cristina Juan

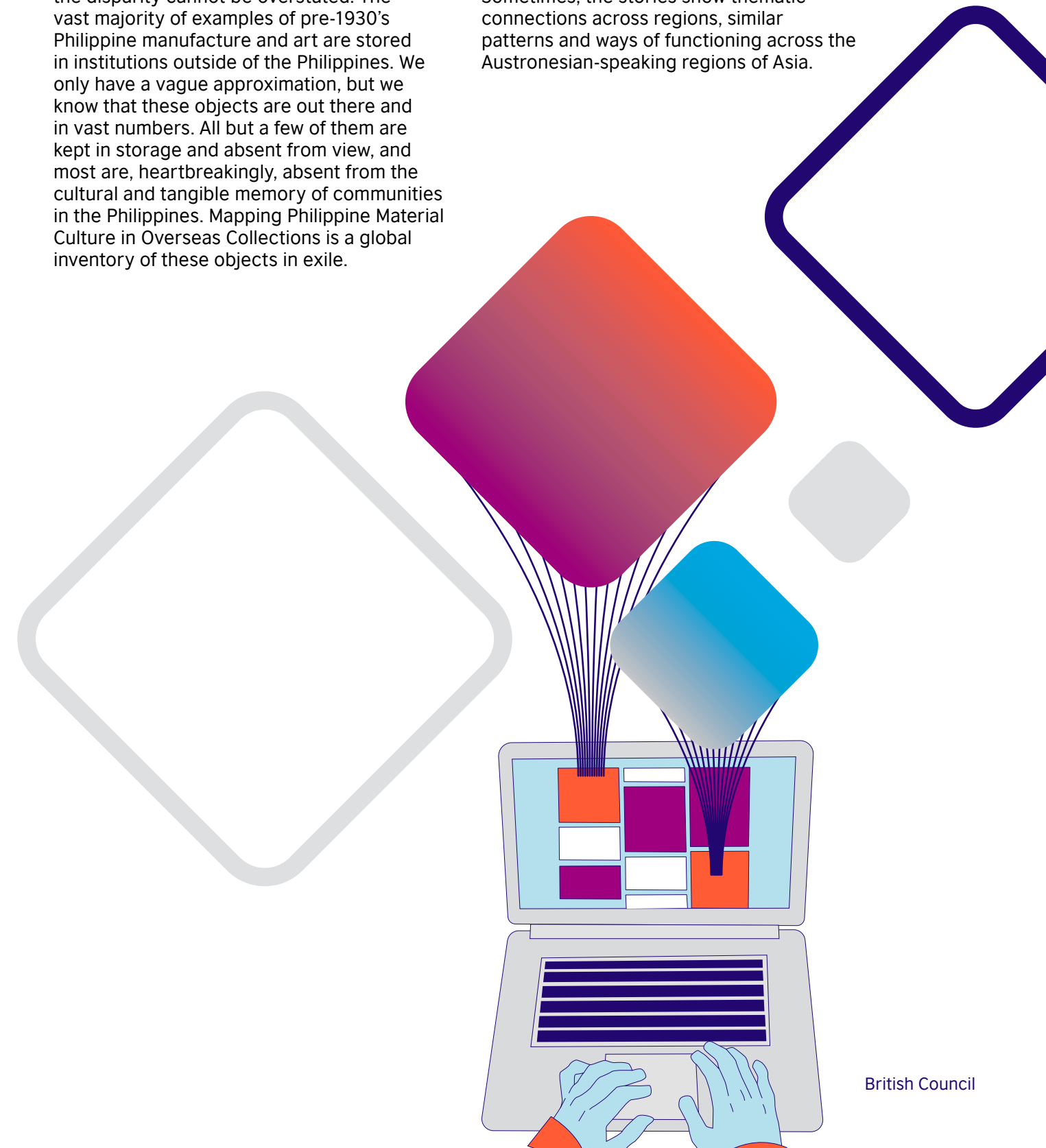


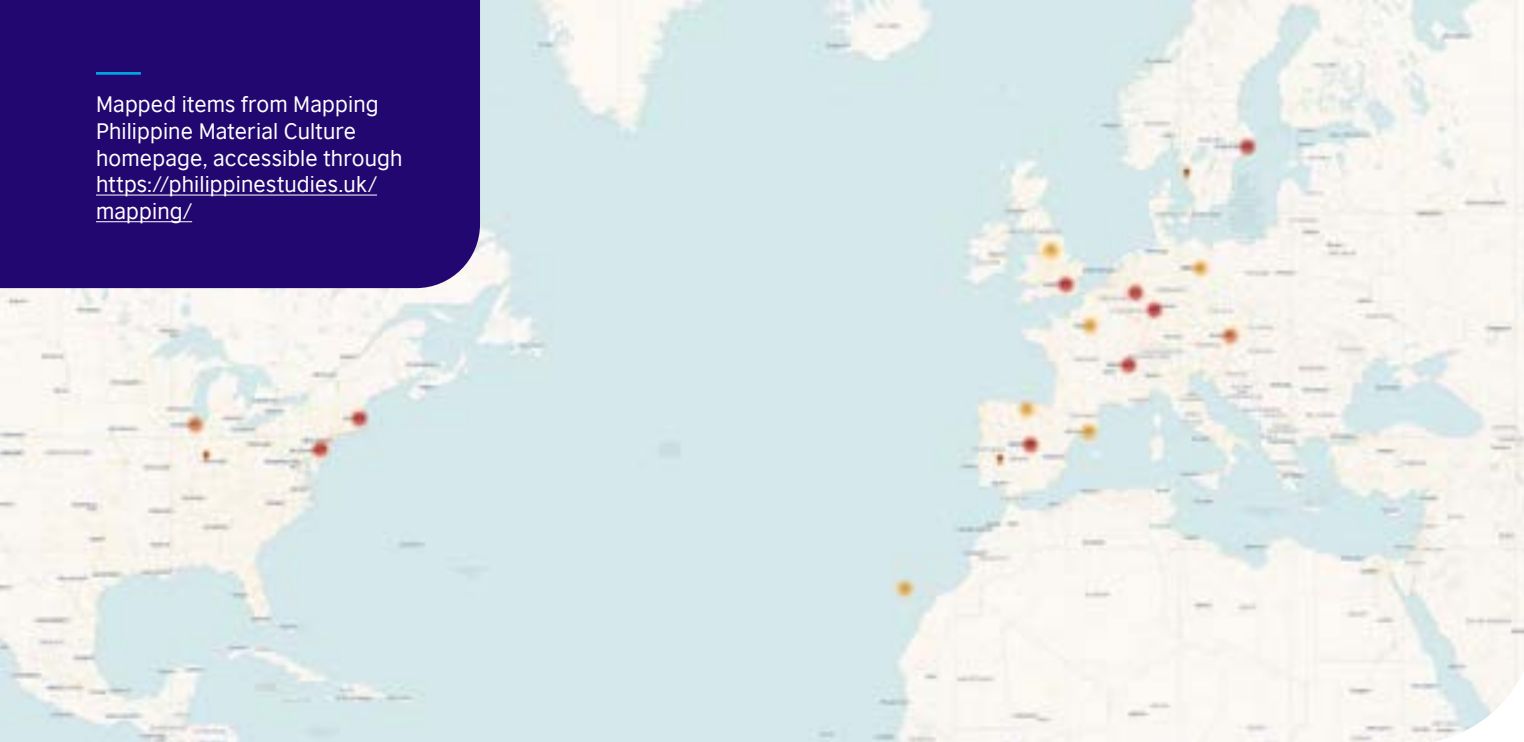
Cloth woven in hand spun cotton. Decorated with warp stripes and warp ikat made by the Ifugao people. Donated to the British Museum in 1954 from the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine.

Photo ©The Trustees of the British Museum

The same can be said of the material culture of the Bagobos. There are more than three hundred fifty pieces of pre-1910 textiles from the Bagobos of Mindanao at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. There are less than twelve at the National Museum of the Philippines. As noted critic Marian Pastor Roces says, the disparity cannot be overstated. The vast majority of examples of pre-1930's Philippine manufacture and art are stored in institutions outside of the Philippines. We only have a vague approximation, but we know that these objects are out there and in vast numbers. All but a few of them are kept in storage and absent from view, and most are, heartbreakingly, absent from the cultural and tangible memory of communities in the Philippines. Mapping Philippine Material Culture in Overseas Collections is a global inventory of these objects in exile.

Beyond the aggregated accession numbers, acquisition dates and foreign generic names, the mapping site is a way to get the objects to tell their individual stories, how or why they were made, the rituals involved, how they were set in motion, purchased or plundered. It recounts the story of the Philippines through its material culture. Sometimes, the stories show thematic connections across regions, similar patterns and ways of functioning across the Austronesian-speaking regions of Asia.





Creating an academic space

Historically, the place of the Philippines in the study of Southeast Asia in the United Kingdom has been marginal. The Philippines has often been seen as an anomaly within the region. Aside from it not being part of the British Commonwealth, academics have excluded the Philippines based on the atypical trajectories of its history, making it either too Roman Catholic or too North American or Latin American. The Philippines also has scant traces of Indic/Buddhist influence, which undergirds many traditional Southeast Asian art and archaeology disciplines.

Several ground-breaking studies starting in the late 1990s have however highlighted the unique historical and cultural singularities of the Philippines as an area of study. For example, the 1998 publication of Benedict Anderson's celebrated *Imagined Communities* used José Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* as a case in point. Scholars have increasingly paid attention to the place of Las Islas Filipinas as an intercultural entrepot on the "edge of both worlds."

A new emphasis on early modern studies on not only the trans-pacific trade but also the role of intra-Asian and European trading networks to the west has engendered a more complex understanding of the multi-directional flows of Philippine intellectual history, alongside goods and artefacts. Recent archaeological and genetic studies and the turn towards the transregional and pan-Asian in new area studies methodologies have created a wall cloud of possibilities for research.

Other global trends, such as the parallel rise of world populism and President Duterte, the tension between state autonomy and Islamic states, and the prominence of social media's role in politics, has made the Philippines a "petri dish" ripe for research. Likewise, issues like climate change, migrant labour and the globalisation of cultural production pushed the Philippines into focus. All these became a confluence of reasons for making a strong case for creating an academic space for the study of the Philippines.

All these academic trends came to a head in 2017 with the institutionalisation of Philippine studies at SOAS (PSS). Functioning as a resource and networking hub, PSS sees its role as a research gateway that works with what is available for its use: the rich repository of Philippine historical and cultural materials in the UK, an academic space that is open to the value of difference, a more borderless world through travel and digital technology, and a Southeast Asian diaspora that redefines the production and reception of Philippine Studies research and cultural creation.

Isles and islands

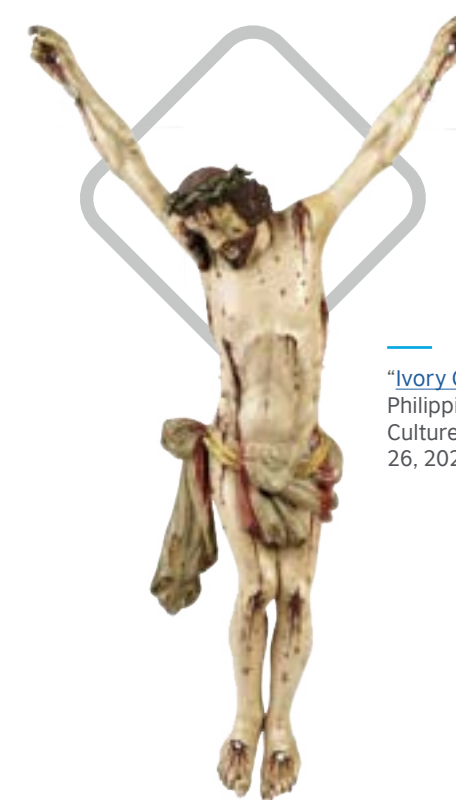
Digital repatriation

Given the convergence of sophisticated information technology infrastructures in the UK along with the rich repository of Philippine objects of knowledge and culture within UK institutions, PSS works on giving free global access to these materials through digital humanities projects. Aside from the Mapping Site, PSS has worked on creating three other digital access points.

[Digital Filipiniana](#) is a collection of open-access textual and photographic Philippine material that are unique to the SOAS Library and Archives. Realising that much of the original metadata was incomplete or wrong, we began to look at different strategies for re-orienting digital access – such as focusing on direct annotation and provenance research, narrativisation through the writing of object biographies, and the co-production of knowledge through collaborative transcription and translation alongside digitisation.

PSS is in the process of digitising the entire collection of the Ifor B. Powell Collection that was donated to SOAS Archives in 1974. The 164-box collection holds photos and extensive private correspondence between Powell and eminent academics and politicians in the Philippines from the period, including Otley Beyer, Harold Conklin, and Carlos P. Romulo, among others.

Another digital portal is the Decolonising South East Asian Sound Archives ([DeCoSEAS](#)), a three-year research and community engagement project funded by the Joint Programming Initiative (JPI) on Cultural Heritage and Global Change. DeCoSEAS is looking at ways to decolonise heritage curation through the improvement of access to sound heritage, the transfer of agency to stakeholders, and the creation of spaces for multiple voices in the dialogue on sound heritage curation. PSS is working to open the BBC sound collections broadcast to Southeast Asia up to the 1950s.



"Ivory Crucifix," Mapping
Philippine Material
Culture, accessed June
26, 2022,

Most recently, and here with a focus on early modern manuscripts, SOAS, alongside Princeton University, is co-leading a digital repatriation project with a Digital Innovations Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in the US and the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK. This project seeks to virtually reconstruct the Library of the Convent of San Pablo's materials. The aim is to approximate how these archives might have been in 1762, before the British siege of Manila. Working across the globe with the technological and design base in the UK, Repatriating a Lost Archive of the Spanish Pacific, is an ambitious attempt at using international interoperability standards and the latest technology in crowdsourced information.

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Jon Cuyson, *Dancing the Shrimp* (*whodoyouthinkyouare?*), 2019, Multivariable installation with paintings, found objects, sculpture, sound, fabrics, text. Dimensions variable.

Exhibited at *Motions of this Kind*

12 April - 22 June 2019.
Brunei Gallery, SOAS, UK
© Agnese Sanvito.

Beyond the academy

Creating connections outside of academia, PSS has been able to engage with the general Filipino population in the UK and beyond. The Filipino diaspora is considered the largest Southeast Asian population in the UK, with [over 250,000 in number and counting](#). PSS and its various projects and programmes have become important points of connection within the community. There are several popular community groups in the UK based on ethnicities and regional affiliations. These groups have formed some of the programme's most engaged participants. We have been building on and nurturing these connections – especially focusing on what is important or relevant to second and third-generation immigrants. From its book talks, to film screenings and various workshops, SOAS has become a recognized hub for Philippine-related events.

***Motions of this Kind* (2019) was the UK's first institutional thematic exhibition of contemporary art from the Philippines. Curated by Renan Laru-an, Merv Espina, and Rafael Schacter, it brought together eleven prominent artists practising in the Philippines, Europe, and the US.**

The Brunei Gallery at SOAS has especially been welcoming to various exhibits that, for the first time in the gallery's 26-year existence, have focused solely on the Philippines. *Motions of this Kind* (2019) was the UK's first institutional thematic exhibition of contemporary art from the Philippines. Curated by Renan Laru-an, Merv Espina, and Rafael Schacter, it brought together eleven prominent artists practising in the Philippines, Europe, and the US. Covering three floors of exhibition space, the show was a wonderful mix of the visual arts, performance and video installations.

Informal Empire, curated by myself and Delphine Mercier, exhibited selections from the SOAS Archival Collections to show Philippine and British entanglements up until the 19th century. Overall, the show forged a unique tableau that evoked a richer, more nuanced vision of the Philippine contemporary art scene.

During the pandemic, the Brunei Gallery also hosted a [virtual exhibition](#) that accompanied the 2020 Annual Philippine Studies Conference on the Visayas. The virtual exhibition brought together artists from all over the Philippines as they explored how texts, objects and performances negotiate, mediate and translate the 'Bisaya' as a collective identifier of culture, language and artistic practice.

Aside from working in the visual arts, SULAT is a creative writing space that aims to provide a venue for collaboration and support of emerging writers of Southeast Asian descent based in the UK. SULAT has sponsored workshops with renowned Filipino writers and poets, a roster that includes the novelists Gina Apostol and Elaine Castillo, essayist and historian Ambeth Ocampo, screenwriter Ricky Lee and the poet Romalyn Ante. Over time, SULAT has fostered a budding group of culture creators, nurturing closer ties to Filipino culture and renewed energy to explore how it might deeply inform their work. With the support provided by the workshops, the fellows have themselves attributed the flowering of their writing careers and have gone on to win several writing grants and awards both in the UK and the Philippines.

Area Studies in a global world

Going beyond knowledge exchange through digital access, PSS works with the infrastructure of universities in the UK and seeks to recalibrate them towards more visibility and representation. The students at SOAS who go into Philippine Studies, do it from within the BA and MA modules for World Languages and Cultures with a focus on Southeast Asian Studies. Through PSS, regular lectures are now incorporated in the curriculum providing SOAS students with knowledge of the unique postcolonial make-up of the Philippines. As a direct effect, more students at SOAS are doing readings of cultural texts, writing final essays and theses on the Philippines. These areas of research have led to a significant increase in the number of students taking Filipino language classes offered at the SOAS Language Centre as they prepare for a year abroad or fieldwork in the Philippines.

Beyond SOAS

Aside from making inroads at SOAS, PSS has been able to expand its reach through the SOAS Library and its wealth of Philippine secondary source materials. As a UK National Research Library (one of only five in the UK), SOAS has amassed the finest collection of learning resources on Philippine language and culture in Europe. The library attracts both students from all over the UK and researchers from around the world. PSS has invested in keeping the library acquisitions up to date and relevant. It also works to increase access through library membership bursaries, and a request reference service for academics both in the UK and in the Philippines.

The same can be said of the sometimes arcane world of academic publishing. From 2017, the Annual Philippine Studies Conferences at SOAS has brought mostly Philippine scholars to London and has given Europe an opportunity to engage with endogenously grounded scholarship.

With PSS guest editorships, the proceedings are being published as special issues in the *Journal of South East Asia Research*. The problem of finding peer-reviewers has been eased by a PSS database of contact information for Philippine scholars. This has resulted in an uptick in the number of articles on the Philippines published at the SEAR.





Digital Filipiniana library, accessible through https://digital.soas.ac.uk/r_phl

Isles and islands

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Creative futures

Though Philippine studies at SOAS has only been in existence for five years, the impact on the community of creative professionals, academics, and Filipino culture enthusiasts has been energising. We are seeing a greater number of collaborations as more people are coming into contact with each other and sparking new ideas for projects in their respective fields. We are always looking for new ways to connect people either through workshops, readings, exhibitions, or our ambitious online offerings.

As we continue to develop Philippine Studies at SOAS as a platform, we plan on using it to bring to light the work of scholars and intellectuals from the Philippines, creating deeper institutional linkages with local universities, especially those from outside of Metro Manila.

We will continue to work with artists, writers, and filmmakers to find funding and opportunities to exhibit and publish their work. We hope that the program will be a place where younger people will find inspiration and even career paths within both the field of Philippine Studies as well as broader studies in the arts and humanities. Our overarching goal is to increase knowledge of Philippine culture in both diasporic communities and those outside them. By providing paths through which people can engage with the culture, we feel these first five years have laid a solid foundation for even stronger growth in the coming times.

Maria Cristina Martinez-Juan has a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of the Philippines, Diliman. As an Assistant Professor at the Humanities Department of the University of the Philippines, Cebu, she taught at U.P. before she moved to New York in 1995, then London in 2013. Currently, she is a Senior Research and Teaching Fellow at the South East Asian Department of the School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics at SOAS, University of London, where she teaches its modules on Philippine Cultural Studies, and Literature. She is also the project head for Philippine Studies at SOAS, a forum for Philippine-related teaching, research and cultural production in the UK and Europe, under the SOAS Centre of Southeast Asian Studies. She is the Principal Investigator for two AHRC-funded research projects in the UK and manages an academic and research programme that includes digital humanities projects, SULAT, a creative writing space for UK-based Southeast Asian Writers, a Philippine-lecture series and an Annual Philippine Studies Conference in London.

Afterword

In many ways this anthology mirrors my own journey. I share many of the writers' sense of discovery of identities, self, and potential through the challenges and opportunities offered by engaging with a different culture, systems, and values.

As the first Filipina to become a British Council Country Director, I find myself in a leadership role right at the dynamic intersection between two cultures. This journey has had its fair share of pain and struggles. It involves the creation of a new 'me': a stronger and more flexible individual, one who can confidently enable new relationships and opportunities. The world is very fluid and reshaping education and cultural connections between the Philippines and the UK demands a great deal of boldness, creativity, open-mindedness, optimism, patience, and continuous learning, all of which have helped me to grow in my role.

The voices in this anthology express tales of redefining oneself within a new culture and environment, coming to terms with one's own identity, and of empowerment. At this (over midway) stage of my life and career, and as a female leader, I feel confident in the knowledge that my work to bridge the Philippines and UK can create a lasting change in people's lives. It has been a unique opportunity for me to work with others at an individual and global level, as a conduit between two worlds that are immensely rich in history and culture.

Cultural relations is about learning from each other, understanding each other's differences, and working together to shape future generations. I am thrilled to see Philippine and UK educational and cultural collaborations break new ground and flourish. Having come from the education sector, I am proud to have been entrusted with the opportunity to play a part in leaving a legacy of new and forward-looking relationships between governments and educational institutions. My sincere hope is that the combined expertise and quality of universities in both countries will create new generations of changemakers by opening doors to international qualifications.

My eight years of work in this field have taught me that differences, complexity, diversity, and the multipolar aspects of our world are to be celebrated, not feared. By working interculturally, we are able to create our own powerful narratives where friction, struggle, insecurity and otherness act as a catalyst for social and cultural change to create purposeful transformation in ourselves and others.

Pioneering change is at the heart of what the British Council does worldwide and it is a source of great pride to me that I can, with my wonderful team, create more spaces for the kind of dialogue and creativity celebrated in this anthology.



Lotus Postrado
Director,
Philippines

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Resources

Abinales, State and society in the Philippines.

Bentcheva, *From Ephemeral Experiences to Lasting Legacies: Discourses on Experimental Art in the Philippines during the 1960s and 1970s*.

CuUnjieng-Aboitiz, Asian Place, Filipino Nation: A Global Intellectual History of the Philippine Revolution, 1887–1912.

Miss Philippines by Rogelio Braga

McKay, An Archipelago of Care: Filipino Migrants and Global Networks.

Kamustahan Projects ([Facebook](#) and [website](#))

Parry-Davis, *A Chance to Feel Safe*.

Whiteheads Ark co-created by Mica Cabildo, Tof Zapanta, and Artblox Asia

