



Pio Abad
1975 - 2015

14 May - 9 July 2016

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MAY 14 - JULY 9, 2016

4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art presents the first Australian exhibition of London-based Filipino artist Pio Abad, 1975 – 2015. While much of Pio Abad's work is concerned with the so-called 'conjugal dictatorship' of former Filipino President Ferdinand Marcos and his wife Imelda Marcos (1965-86), this exhibition expands this historical concern. For 4A, Abad has established a historical framework, which begins in 1975 with the evacuation of United States forces from Saigon, Vietnam, and concludes in 2015 with a body of work that attempts to recalibrate the archiving of several conflicts spanning post-Marcos Philippines to the Balkans conflict of the 1990s.

Pio Abad employs strategies of appropriation and replication to reveal the social and political impact of specific objects usually consigned to the sidelines of history. Underpinning Abad's telescopic practice is an ongoing interest in the social and political narratives that domestic objects play in our lives. Using inexpensive reproduction techniques that contrast with the opulent objects he replicates, the works presented in 1975 – 2015 draw connections between these otherwise disparate historical narratives.

The wallpaper work, *105 Degrees and Rising* (2015) takes its title from the secret radio code used by the United States Army to signal the evacuation of Saigon. In this work Pio Abad conscripts two found visual sources: the ERDL camouflage developed by the US military for the jungles of Vietnam, and the well-known 1976 pinup photograph of American actress Farrah Fawcett. While the original radio call signalled America's final dramatic retreat from its ignominious war in Indochina, Abad's wallpaper proffers an alternative history of authoritarian rule, which is at once aggressive and seductive. As an aggregation and overlay of cultural artefacts, *105 Degrees and Rising* suggests a complex reading of history which acknowledges the sustained colonial influence of the United States across Southeast Asia.

Atop the wallpaper design Pio Abad has installed *Decoys* (2015), a series of CCTV cameras adorned with seashells. Returning to Abad's interest in domestic design, these works echo an aesthetic familiar to many public servants in the Philippines. In 2010 in a successful bid to replace her son, Ferdinand Jr., in the Filipino House of Representatives, Imelda Marcos gave a number of seashell decorated desk clocks to prominent public servants, that included the artist's father, Florencio Abad. Although his father rejected the gift, for Pio Abad the gesture became symbolic of an insidious kind of soft power. *Decoys* redeploys this strategy of camouflage to at once conceal and draw attention to systems of surveillance and control within commonplace domestic objects.

Abad also presents two distinct bodies of work which reflect upon the vernacular and vulgar representation of conflict. *The Collection of Jane Ryan and William Saunders* (2015) continues the artist's interest in domestic design and affordable methods of reproduction through a series of postcard replicas of the seized and sequestered collection of Italian Renaissance paintings owned by Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos. Under the pseudonyms of Jane Ryan and William Saunders the Marcoses had collected over a period of almost 20 years an impressive collection of European paintings using public funds. These works were among the items abandoned by the Marcoses when they fled Malacañang Palace aboard one of Ronald Reagan's helicopters in 1986. As an unlimited edition, the set of 97 prints on postcards attempts to symbolically recover the artworks and make them available for the public, to be enjoyed at the gallery and also at home.

Accompanying the postcards is *Every Tool Is A Weapon If You Hold It Right* (2015), an ongoing series of unique digital prints on silk. As the most recently produced works by Pio Abad, this collection functions as the historical endpoint for the exhibition and considers the ways in which histories of colonisation have been represented both within museological collections and domestic objects. After repeatedly passing by the French leather and accessories store Hermès on the way to his studio, Abad was struck by the seemingly endless cycle of decorative scarves on display in the window. First established in the nineteenth-century in Paris as a horse harness workshop, the brand has since become recognised for its individually screen printed silk scarves, often depicting moments from French history over centuries. From Abad's perspective, these items both literally and symbolically memorialise absurd ethnographic representation. With his own scarves, Abad has drawn on archival objects and images collected since 2010 to produce original designs that bring together disparate social and historical narratives into a broader conversation around cultural remembrance and loss.

Abad choreographs familiar objects and narratives, animating them to initiate a critical conversation on the discourses of singularity, surplus and semblance. He looks at his source material as traces of something sordid, a body of evidence that exhibits morbid symptoms of a possible psychopathology of power. By presenting these discrete bodies of work, Abad attempts to unpack his own interest in the artifice and its claims to originality, whether it is art that is not replicable, or a national leader who found their own narratives of fabrication.¹

1. Patrick Flores, *The Collection of Jane Ryan & William Saunders*, Jorge B. Vargas Museum exhibition notes, 2014.

IN CONVERSATION

4A Curator Toby Chapman in conversation with Pio Abad, 10 May 2016.

Toby Chapman: The exhibition has been developed using the dates of 1975 and 2015 as a kind of historical and conceptual bookend. Can you explain the significance of these dates within the structure of the exhibition?

Pio Abad: I conceived the exhibition as a collection of projects that I have worked on over the past few years, and the history proposed in the title brings together the political and cultural references in my work with the timeline of the production of the work itself. 1975 refers to the year of Operation Frequent Wind, the final phase of the evacuation of American civilians and at risk Vietnamese from Saigon before the city was taken over by the Northern Vietnamese Army. 2015 was the year that the most recent silk pieces were completed. It's quite an absurd timeline, both overarching and overreaching. Merging the references to history and to production is key in how I approach making work. The narratives that I navigate are often the ones that have been repressed by what we would consider official accounts and I often see the work that I produce as a way of materially filling in the gaps, giving physical form to these anecdotes and these under-told histories.

TC: The exhibition in many ways revolves around the wallpaper work, *105 Degrees and Rising* (2015). Although this work has its origins in the history of the Vietnam War, it also draws connections to other historical moments. Alongside this you've presented two other bodies of work which, although are tangentially connected also

have inherent contradictions. What is your interest in presenting these works side-by-side, or indeed, atop of one another?

PA: The wallpaper takes its title from the secret radio code to signal the evacuation of Americans in Vietnam: The temperature in Saigon is 105 degrees and rising. The pattern it appropriates is the ERDL, a camouflage pattern developed by the United States Army specifically for the jungles of Vietnam. This pattern, however, is overlaid with another image: the iconic 1976 pin-up of Farrah Fawcett in a one-piece red swimsuit. The dichotomy of these images is crucial. The '70s was a crucial time in establishing American hegemony, particularly in Southeast Asia. On the one hand, the United States was using military might to physically occupy territory. On the other, the sun kissed image of Fawcett was being conscripted to take over people's imagination – the way they construct desire. I wanted to create this immersive environment where fragments of these two icons colonise a whole space and at the same time continuously disrupt one another – hard and soft power coming together to create something seductive but abject.

The black and white photograph is actually a continuation of this history. It was taken in the private chambers of the Presidential Palace in Manila on the 25th of February 1986. A few hours before, Imelda and Ferdinand Marcos were chased out of the palace and fled aboard one of Ronald Reagan's helicopters for an eventual exile to Honolulu. The Marcoses had been a conjugal dictatorship for 20 years and had pilfered \$10 billion from the national coffers. All this was done with the complicity of numerous American presidents, from Lyndon B. Johnson to Ronald Reagan, who needed Ferdinand as a bulwark against Communism in Southeast Asia.

There's a contradiction common among dictatorships backed by Western democracies: while they sought this support, if not survived off it, they also went to extravagant lengths to present some kind of post-colonial ideology. The painting in the photograph was one of the many works of art commissioned by Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos depicting them as 'Malakas' (The Strong One) and 'Maganda' (The Beautiful One) – the first man and woman from Philippine mythology. According to the most popular version, they enter the world fully formed when a magical bird splits a single stalk of bamboo open, revealing them cradled inside. The Marcoses co-opted and corrupted these figures to suite their own perverse political agenda. This corruption of forms is repeated in the Decoy sculptures where the CCTV cameras, supposedly discrete and authoritative observers are transformed into something effete and decadent.

TC: Another strategy for representation in your practice is to incorporate symbols or facsimiles of objects from a number of archives towards developing your own lexicon. Can you expand on how each of these objects or symbols combine to produce a new narrative?

PA: This strategy of using specific historical objects as motif is perhaps most apparent in *Every Tool Is A Weapon If You Hold It Right*, an ongoing series of silk works that I started in 2012. As with all my work, the series attempts to weave together a density of references. The title is taken from an Ani diFranco song; a rephrasing of Walter Benjamin's 'there is no document of civilisation which is not, at the same time, a document of barbarism' as a pop song lyric. The phrase also reappears as an epigraph in Hardt and Negri's book *Empire*.

The objects in the silk scarves come from an expanding archive of images that I've been collecting, which in turn come from other archives. The provenance of some are maybe more obvious: the shoes are from the Marcos Collection at the National Museum of the Philippines which remains stored in their conservation department alongside ivory tusks and musketry from sunken galleons. I've also appropriated the personal effects documented by the photographer Ziyah Gafic, which form part of the International Missing Persons Archive. There's also a seashell collection and bits of flotsam gathered from Batanes Island in the Philippines, which is my father's hometown. While really diverse, these objects all bear specific histories of loss and degradation.

I see the scarves as contemporary versions of the vanitas still life and by bringing all of these specific histories together and transforming artefact into motif, I'm attempting a more universal narrative but also insisting that these histories of loss are in a state of perpetual recurrence.

TC: These narratives of loss are often presented in affordable or disposable forms of reproduction in works such as *The Collection of Jane Ryan and William Saunders*. What attracted you to this particular narrative and the method of production?

PA: I often refer to my work as 'ergonomic' versions of history. While the work tries to deal with complicated networks of political patronage, corruption and cultural representations, they always come in the form of something domestic – whether it's wallpaper, scarves, CCTV cameras or postcards. The postcards are part of a larger body of work entitled *The Collection of Jane Ryan and William Saunders*, which aims to reconstruct the collection of paintings, jewellery and objet d'art that the Marcoses acquired by plundering the Philippine treasury. Jane Ryan and William Saunders were the false identities used by Imelda and Ferdinand Marcos to register their first Swiss bank account at Credit Suisse in Zurich in March 1968.

The scale of the Marcoses loot is so vast and astonishing in range that it is often only referred to in collectively – loot, plunder, ill-gotten wealth. So much so that over time, it has assumed, in its status as a collective noun, an almost abstract singularity – a single object that is then easier to disregard, to trivialize or to contain within one of Imelda Marcos' stilettoes. One of my main reasons behind this project was to wrest this 'loot' from that collective singularity and confront the public with its unwieldy scale and its terrifying range. The postcard installation developed from this intention. I wanted to emphasise the monolithic aspect of the collection. The postcards are laid out on a ten-metre long plinth in an almost forensic fashion, suggesting a monumental body of evidence. But by their very nature, postcards suggest exchange and by inviting the public to take these postcards I want to choreograph a way for the loot to be reclaimed by the public – for the loot to be democratised, at least in the gallery.



image: Pio Abad, 1986 (2015), black and white fibre based photographic print. Courtesy the artist and Silverlens Gallery, Manila.

LIST OF WORKS

Ground Floor

105 Degrees and Rising (2015), digital print on matte self-adhesive vinyl, 315 x 1912cm. Courtesy the artist and Silverlens Gallery, Manila.

1986 (2016), black and white fibre based photographic print, 73 x 56cm. Courtesy the artist and Silverlens Gallery, Manila.

Decoys (2010 -), ongoing series of dummy CCTV cameras decorated with tropical seashells, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Silverlens Gallery, Manila.

Level 1

The Collection of Jane Ryan and William Saunders (2016), set of ninety-eight postcards, 10.5 x 14.9cm, unlimited edition. Courtesy the artist and Silverlens Gallery, Manila.

Every Tool Is A Weapon If You Hold It Right XXV (2015), unique acid dye prints on silk twill depicting objects drawn from various archives, 100 x 100cm. Courtesy the artist and Cecilia O. Drilon.

Every Tool Is A Weapon If You Hold It Right XX (2015), unique acid dye prints on silk twill depicting objects drawn from various archives, 100 x 100cm. Courtesy the artist Isa Lorenzo & Rachel Rillo.

Every Tool Is A Weapon If You Hold It Right XXIV (2015), unique acid dye prints on silk twill depicting objects drawn from various archives, 100 x 100cm. Courtesy the artist and Silverlens Gallery, Manila.

Every Tool Is A Weapon If You Hold It Right XVII (2015), unique acid dye prints on silk twill depicting objects drawn from various archives, 100 x 100cm. Courtesy the artist and Victor & Camille Genuino.

Every Tool Is A Weapon If You Hold It Right XXVI (2015), unique acid dye prints on silk twill depicting objects drawn from various archives, 100 x 100cm. Courtesy the artist and Silverlens Gallery, Manila.

Every Tool Is A Weapon If You Hold It Right XXX (2015), unique acid dye prints on silk twill depicting objects drawn from various archives, 100 x 100cm. Courtesy the artist and Silverlens Gallery, Manila.

Every Tool Is A Weapon If You Hold It Right XXXI (2015), unique acid dye prints on silk twill depicting objects drawn from various archives, 100 x 100cm. Courtesy the artist and Private Collection.

Every Tool Is A Weapon If You Hold It Right XXXIII (2015), unique acid dye prints on silk twill depicting objects drawn from various archives, 100 x 100cm. Courtesy the artist and Private Collection.

Every Tool Is A Weapon If You Hold It Right XXXIV (2015), unique acid dye prints on silk twill depicting objects drawn from various archives, 100 x 100cm. Courtesy the artist and Private Collection.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Pio Abad (B. Manila, 1983) is a Filipino artist currently based in London. His work, in a range of media including drawing, installation and photography, 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. Abad has received a BA Fine Art (2004) from the University of Philippines, Manila; and a Masters in Fine Art (2012) from the Royal Academy Schools, London. He has a number of solo exhibitions including *A Short History of Decay* (2015), Silverlens Gallery, Gillman Barracks, Singapore; *Some Art Smarter Than Others* (2014), Gasworks, London; *Every Tool is a Weapon if you Hold it Right* (2013), Silverlens Gallery, Manila. He has also participated in group exhibitions such as *CORRUPTION: Everybody Knows...* (2015), curated by Natasha Ginwala, e-flux, New York; *South by Southeast*, curated by Patrick Flores and Anca Mihulet, Osage Gallery, Hong Kong; *Conflict: Art and War* (2014), Contemporary Art Society, London; *Reading Vogue* (2013), 68 Square Metres Art Space, Copenhagen; and *London Open*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London.

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