

MEDALLA PARABLES

Bonner Kunstverein and Museion present *David Medalla: Parables of Friendship*, the first in-depth survey of the late Filipino artist's work to be presented in Europe. This large-scale, two-part presentation foregrounds Medalla's vital avant-garde legacy, reflecting on the spirit, ethos, energy and radicality of his practice. Planned during Medalla's lifetime, the exhibition has been realised in close collaboration with the David Medalla Archive in Berlin, following the artist's untimely passing in December 2020.

Spanning his seven-decade-long career, *Parables of Friendship* presents a body of work that encompasses drawing, painting, collage, sculpture, neon, kinetic art, performance and participatory art. Works from Medalla's vast archive appear alongside loaned pieces and new commissions, with many fragile and previously unseen works that have been specially restored and publicly presented for the first time. Building on the contemporary relevance and urgency of Medalla's practice, *Parables of Friendship* makes connections between the historical strands and legacies of his approach.

Heavily influenced by European art and literature of the 19th and 20th centuries, Medalla travelled to Europe from the Philippines as a young man, arriving in Marseille in 1960, where he began to establish his peripatetic practice. As an active figure in 1960s London, Medalla was instrumental in the short-lived but pioneering and influential Signals Gallery (1962–64), the experimental performance collective The Exploding Galaxy (1967–68) and the politically engaged Artists for Democracy, of which he was chairman (1974–77). In later years, Medalla founded The Mondrian Fan Club, in collaboration with artist Adam Nankervis (1994), and the London Biennale (2000), where processes of collaboration and exchange continued to assert their relevance to his practice.

These moments of intense dialogue were catalysts to his interconnected vision. His work is characterised by openness and freedom of expression, and his approach and ethos – both artistically and politically – are founded on the possibility of a form of exchange that invites engagement and fosters an active exploration of the intersection between art and life. In his art-making, writing and activist work, Medalla maintained an ongoing dialogue with questions of ecology, cultural identity, sexuality and an ethics of practice, with little concern for compartmentalisation or static meaning.

Medalla lived in many places, including London, Paris, Venice, Berlin, New York and Manila, and the experiences of travel, place, transition and flux run throughout his work. It was often ephemeral or perishable, produced using materials that resulted from a particular circumstance or place in which he found himself – a canvas, a napkin, an envelope, a notebook – with his chosen medium frequently reflecting the sincerely free nature of his practice. His instantaneous 'impromptu' performances were similarly transitory, occurring in the moment and simply recorded through writing and photographs. His performative presence – an embodied materiality – was symbolic of self-reliance and the possibility of creating art with little means.

Medalla's work exists in multiple realities, some of them fictional and located beyond a dominant paradigm of the real – a movement between the material and the spiritual. As its title suggests, *Parables of Friendship* is dedicated to affinity and a socially engaged approach, but also significantly to the idea of transcendence. This doubleness lies at the heart of Medalla's practice: an engagement, on the one hand, with the world – with terms of collaboration,

networks and a politics of cohabitation – and of mythology, friendship and play and its transformative potential on the other. For Medalla, the 'desire and pursuit of the whole' necessitated an exploration of difference. His work contains reflections on the paradoxes, both liberating and painful, that reside within cultural identity. Identity in Medalla's work is a multitemporal and multidirectional process – a profoundly experiential and experimental relation to being. The ways in which multiplicity was explored within his practice – with curiosity, criticality and humour – are themselves a part of the spirit and approach that this exhibition seeks to channel and honour.

Fatima Hellberg & Steven Cairns

1 David Medalla, informal talk with students at Chelsea College of Art, London, April 1983, quoted in Guy Brett, 'David Medalla: From Biokinetic to Synoptic Realism', *Third Text*, London, No. 8/9, Autumn/Winter 1989. p.106

David Medalla was a profoundly interdisciplinary artist, poet, activist, writer, philosopher and raconteur, whose work strove to “investigate reality, and bring out its enigmas.”¹ The form of realism that he explored was political, material and social, but also ephemeral, transformative and bewildering – realism committed to the many levels, experiences and fragilities needed to understand an interconnected and plural set of realities. There is a great dedication and humility in this approach, which brings the desire for understanding into confrontation with the limits of the knowable. In this exhibition, a 1984 recording of his performance *Metamorphosis of an Enigma*, a “celebration of friendship and love” is coupled with his photo-collage *Bambi Shitting Dollars* (1989). Despite the earnestness of Medalla’s work, there is an undeniable camp humour in its core realisations – that something simultaneously can be one thing, and another – of the vibration of energy or shimmer around the edges when something is, and transcends its essence.

For Medalla, the moments of ‘spirit’ could happen in the interior and private practice of his mask-making, writing and drawing, as much as in the participatory and socially engaged work. By the same token, once a form had become fixed or rigid, he often introduced a contrary movement or semantic shift. After his work with Artists for Democracy (1974–77), Medalla announced himself as a “Transcendental Hedonist,” changing not so much his own vantage point, as the surrounding’s ability to place or compartmentalise his practice. Part of his recurrent and eloquently formulated suspicion of dogma, could be linked with his own biography and identity. The experience of growing up during, and in the immediate aftermath of, the Second World War in the Philippines, his life as an openly queer person at a moment when this was punished by law, were part of how he came to formulate an ethics without moralism.

There are three recognisable periods of colonial occupation in the history of the Philippines: Spanish rule (1521–1898); American rule (1898–1946); Japanese occupation (1941–46). These shifting paradigms speak both of historical rupture and personal – often intergenerational – trauma, an experience and realisation which Medalla often cites in his writings around his work. From interviews and conversations, it appears that this experience of systemic violence, also contributed to Medalla’s heightened suspicion of languages of domination and power, even when manifested in subtle ways or by individuals and groups self-identifying as being on the “right side of history.”

When starting the process of working with David Medalla in early 2019, his long-term collaborator and partner Adam Nankervis, and the Medalla Archive in Berlin, the first intention for this exhibition was a small presentation of work. Reflecting on his *Cloud Canyons*, Medalla often spoke of works with “atomic beginnings,” that then organically grow and evolve in response to intention, context and resources. The process that led up to *Parables of Friendship* reflects that logic. What developed over time were on one level conversations and research, but also dialogues around the context and approach, and the constellation of collaborators realising the project. Our desire has been to honour the interconnected spirit of Medalla’s work, to approach the shows in Bonn and Bolzano, the publication and associated events as a process of making visible and giving access, and caring for Medalla’s practice. Some of these artworks belong to the more overlooked strands of his output, from his reflections and representations around sexuality and gender, to the ephemeral work on paper – drawings, writings and masks that constituted the largest part of his artistic output.



Bambi Shitting Dollars, 1989, collage on paper

Medalla's practice is part of a series of pivotal art historical moments, from Harald Szeemann's *documenta 5* (1972), Rasheed Araeen's *The Other Story* at the Hayward Gallery (1989), to Okwui Enwezor's *2nd Johannesburg Biennale* (1997). Medalla's practice of self-organising, self initiating and challenging dominant institutional habits and structures also meant that the work played a pivotal role in challenging the Western focus of the art world and its associated mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, whilst actively developing alternative platforms and structures in which works by non-Western artists, poets and thinkers came together. There is also something about the very core of Medalla's thinking which speaks to this moment in profound and urgent ways. His practice was anti-essentialist, yet holistic. Medalla's approach speaks of an ecology of making and being, which is dedicated to unity, without denying difference and change, and a call for a more radical form of inhabiting the world – encompassing both the material and spiritual potential of being. Such an understanding of a politics of identity, speaks of the importance of both the *vita activa* – engaged and material mode of showing up in the world, of the potential of self-organisation and direct action – and of the contemplative, inner life. There is great depth and potential in Medalla's suggestion of being an enigma, even to himself – the bewilderment or even awe in the proposition that we remain in part secret to ourselves.

These thoughts continuously loop back to a certain belief in and hopefulness about the potential of art, "artworks being the substance and sometimes the shadow of our varied and various inspired moments." The philosophy, politics and ethos of Medalla's work continuously return back to an insistence on the immaterial and material potential of the work of art, and as such, this next section is focused on his work from the perspective of a number of strands of his artistic production: cloud canyons, impromptus, his painting practice and masks, as well as the exhibition design for *Parables of Friendship*.

"Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)"²

² Walt Whitman quoted by David Medalla in *Signals* Vol.1, No.1, 1964. p.1



Carte d'Identité, 1972, collage and mixed media on paper

Impromptus



Statuamachia Romana, or Annals of the Talking Statues of Rome, impromptu at the Villa Borghese, Rome, 1980

Medalla's practice encompasses many performative works, staged for audiences big and small. His development of the 'impromptu' as a performative act is unique to his practice and is reflective of his peripatetic nature. Medalla's small scale 'of the moment' works employ the surroundings he finds himself in as the backdrop and context to his performances. In part, experimenting with the notion of the outsider within a Western context; playfully manipulating conventions and customs, histories and contradictions.

A constant traveller, this approach to performative work was responsive to the means and materials available to the artist. His impromptus being inadvertently in dialogue with his environment, curious, finding alternative ways to better navigate the world and its inhabitants. Medalla would often perform these impromptus with collaborators, those he travelled with or those he had long-term artistic collaborations. Conversely, these friends or acquaintances would be his audience, for works transient in nature and simple in their construction. Only occasionally documented in the written word or photography, these performances often happened instantaneously with no record. For Medalla, the experience and the memory of the impromptu formed an adequate record of his work.

Medalla's *Psychic Self-Defense* (1983) sees the artist wearing a trademark paper mask made from the cover of a book of the same name. In one hand, he held a statue of Beethoven and in the other one of Mozart; a pair of stand-in boxing gloves that he thrust at unwitting onlookers. The humour and bizarre irony in the cultural lexicon adopted by Medalla creating a unique situation for those party to his performance, captured in a photograph in front of London's Big Ben. An approach emblematic of his dismantling of social and cultural hierarchies, revealing their inherent absurdity.

The impromptu is one of Medalla's most generous actions, as it creates a framework for engagement with straightforward means. They evoke wonder in everyday experience and underscore the artist's inquisitive nature by embracing the possibility of finding creativity and inventiveness in our surroundings. Medalla's impromptu works further blur the line between art and life for the artist. A dichotomous pairing inseparably intertwined.



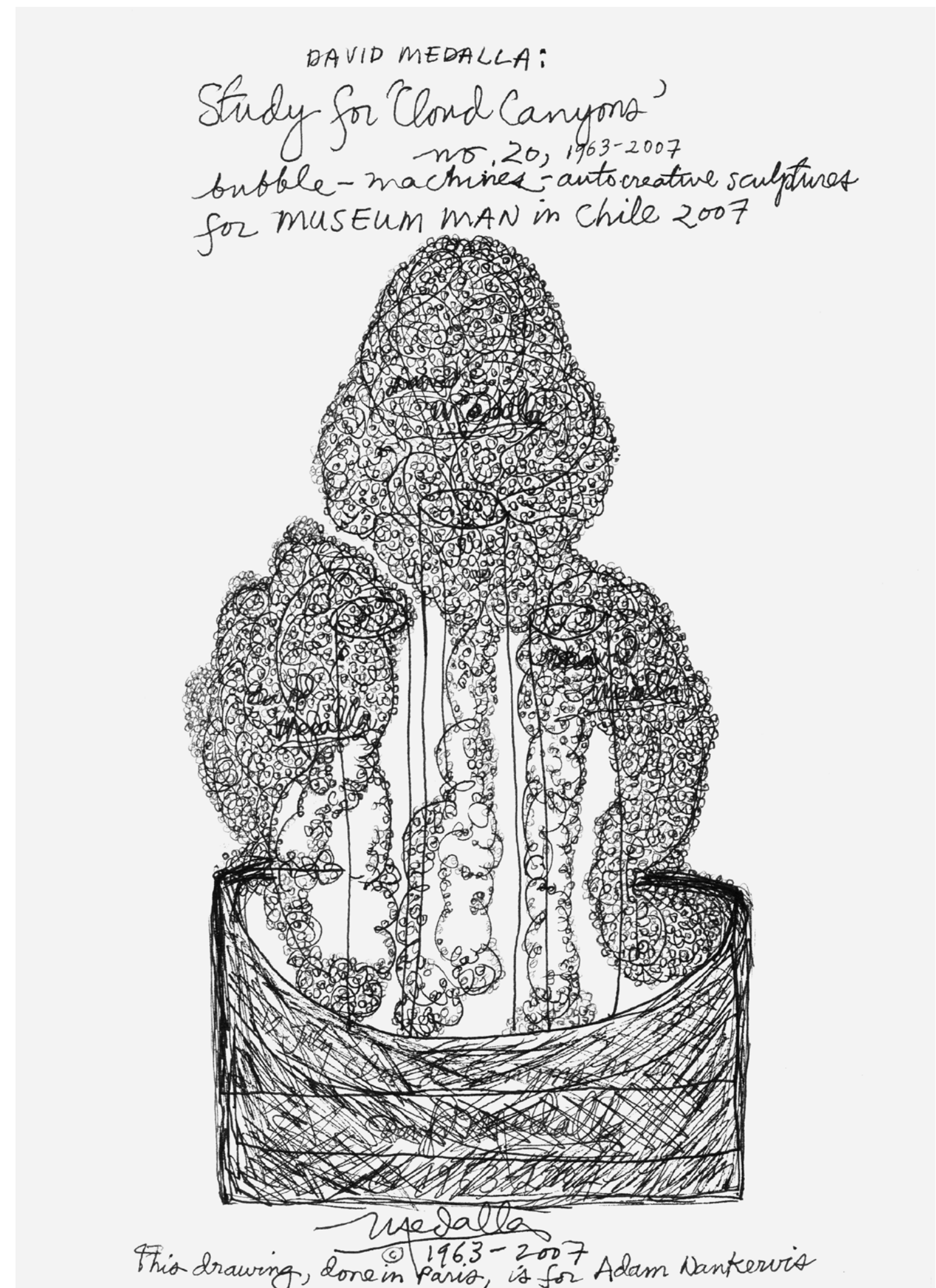
Psychic Self-Defense, 1983, photographic print

Constructed from a combination of pumps and tubes, Medalla's *Cloud Canyons* quietly fizz as they grow soap sud bubbles that slowly spill over in plumes and slumps. Meditative in their action, they require time to observe their slow-moving masses as they ascend and dissipate in unpredictable formations. These, alongside his 'sand' and 'mud' machines, form the core of Medalla's work in kinetic art.

These 'bubble' machines have been a feature of his practice since the 1960s when they originally took on box-like forms expelling foam bubbles; larger constructions featured in *documenta 5* (1972), infused with the politics of the Artists' Liberation Front, where they reached an international audience engaging in Szeemann's experiment in the social and cultural at the fringes of contemporary art. Artist Gustav Metzger makes the early observation that in Medalla's *Cloud Canyons* "A quarter million forms continuously changing, reflecting, growing, disintegrating. Random activity is at present among the most crucial questions in art."³ They challenge the parameters of minimalist art with their organic and unpredictable outputs. Their machinations remained a constant source of experimentation for Medalla throughout his career.

Simultaneously concerned with growth and decay, chaos and order, Medalla's *Cloud Canyons* have, since the 1980s, regularly comprised an array of perspex tubes of varying heights protruding from a round base. The bases and tubes take on a solid chimney-like sculptural form; their bubbles create slow-moving organic white masses that retain the shape of the tubes as they extrude from the tops. They deal in a language of sculpture, subverted by the simple addition of household suds that bring a familiar tactility to the work.

Subtle humour derives from these erect shapes – their comical overflowing nature creating a microcosm of disarray within the sculpture's perimeter and the confines of the gallery. Standing above head height and omitting bubbles in unpredictable patterns and formations, the works create a child-like longing for interaction through blowing or touching the bubbly masses, transcending the hierarchy of the viewer and the artwork. There is a joy in their uncertainty and a humanity in their simultaneously material and immaterial nature. Their uniqueness is experiential in their non-fixity.



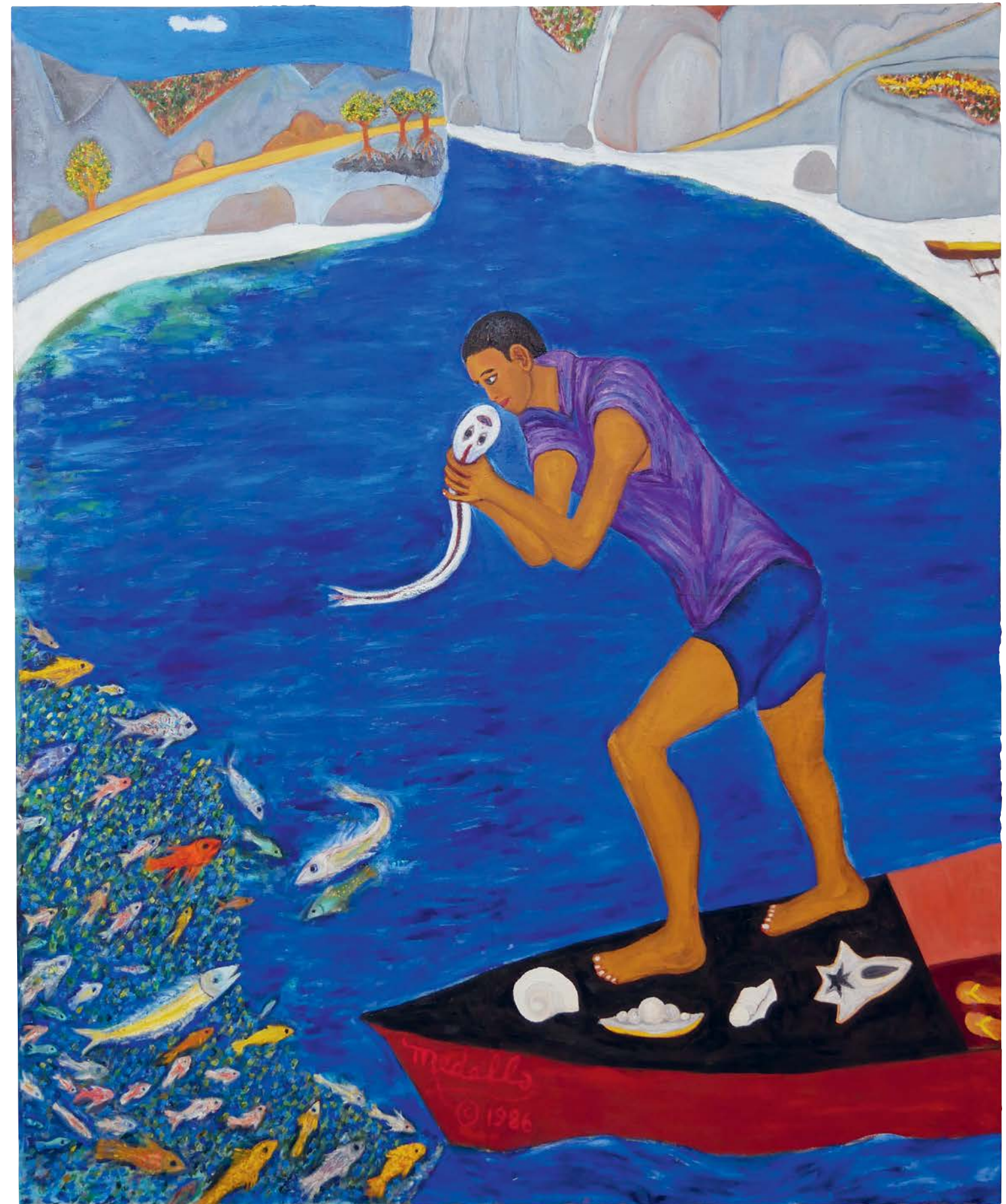
Medalla's figurative paintings speak of longing – longing for place, for youth and often the male form. Using portraiture to connect with his subjects, Medalla has depicted many individuals in pictorial isolation from the 1950s to the present in drawing and painting, both sharing a similar stylistic approach. Like much of portraiture, these works are an indirect route to intimacy, recognition and admiration, one that is commemorated and suspended in the moment, often dated and memorialised in his network of friends and acquaintances.

In his *Luz. Vi. Minda* series (1986), we see men gathering coconuts, fish, nectar and bananas, their bodies suspended in reaching motions across the canvas. The paintings in this series have an astute awareness of the Western gaze at their core. They are at once nostalgic but also complex in their mode of representation. Medalla constructs a landscape from the Philippine imaginary, intertwined with the country's colonial legacy. A collection of over 7000 islands once occupied by European and American forces is pictorially represented in its purest form. Absent is the western iconography so dominant in other areas of his practice. Here he explores notions of identity and the authenticity of experience in the romantic depiction of nature and labour; abundance and self-reliance. At once, these works hark back to youth, a youth in contrast to Medalla's, whose studious boyhood saw him attending Columbia University aged 14.

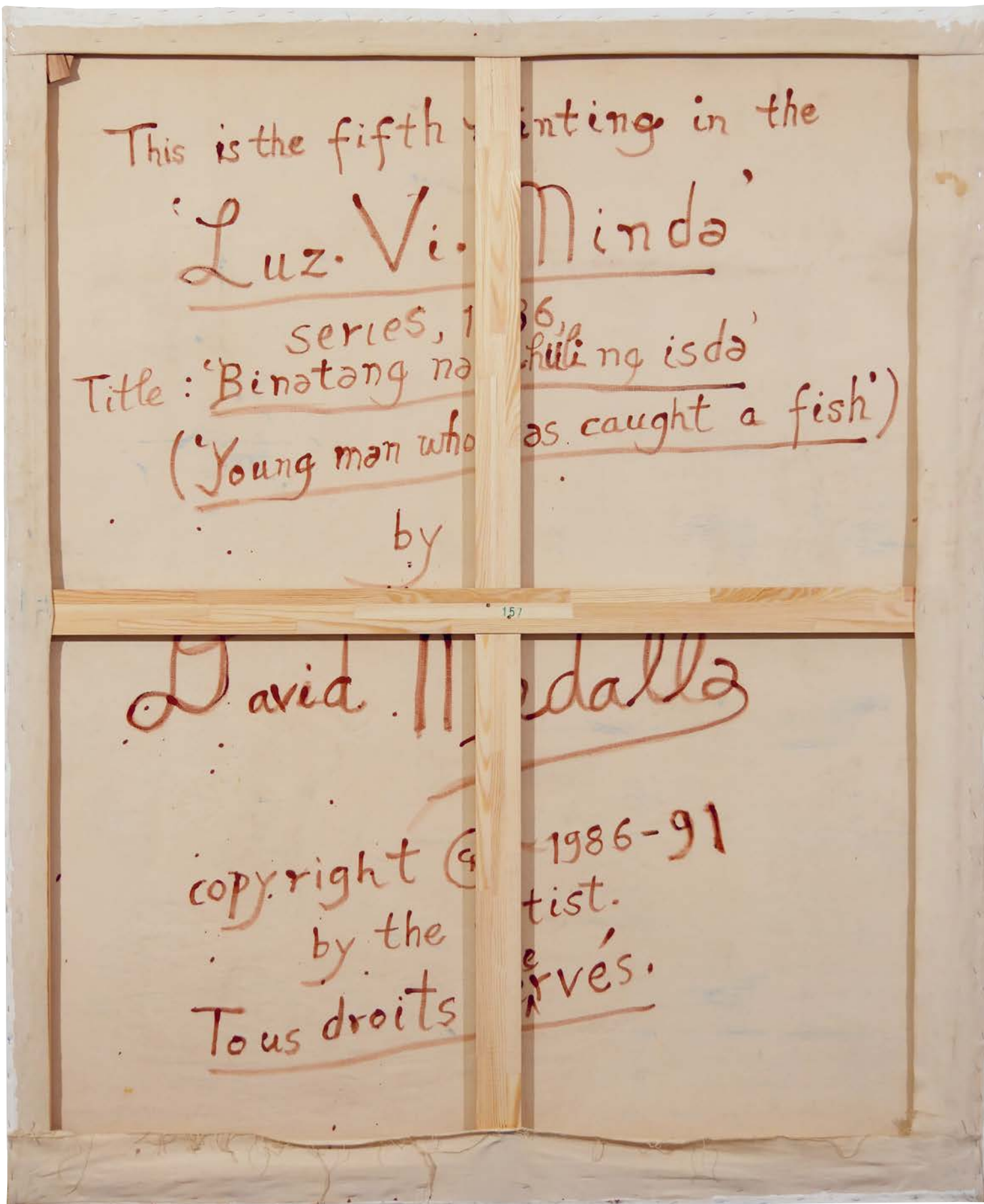
While Medalla's canvases reflect time spent in the studio, where his relationship with the painterly materials flourish in swiftly applied gestures, his more mobile practice of sketching and drawing stays true to the artist's ability to suspend time, to evoke a dream-like state – a reverie that strips back notions of traditional forms, privileging the quick, the instantaneous, the out of proportion and the intuitive. The artist's eye in a distracted dialogue with his subject, often resulting in a disjointed yet more truthful rendering of the moment.



Gast ARBEITERS, 1985, watercolor and biro



Binatang nakahuli ng isda (young man who has caught a fish) no. 5 (Luz. Vi. Minda series) 1986–91, oil on canvas



Binatang nakahul ng isda (young man who has caught a fish) no. 5 (Luz. Vi. Minda series) 1986–91, oil on canvas (reverse)

Masks

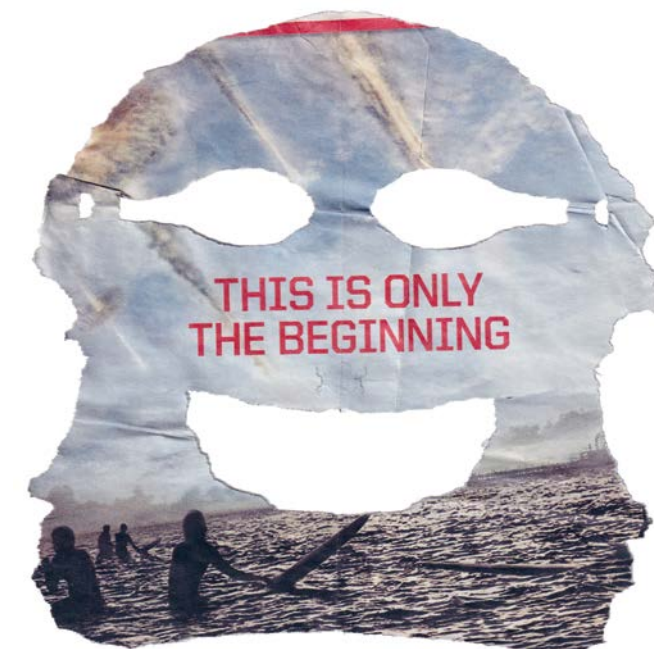


Medalla's use of masks alludes to the paradox of identity, to that of disguise and of performance. Akin to his practice of collaging visas and passports as imagined identity documents, Medalla was acutely aware of the role his identity played in his engagement with the West. His ability to hide behind a mask, often created with a collage-like approach, enabled him to ironically embody the iconography of advertising and Western consumerism. In a 1978 interview with artist Rasheed Araeen, Medalla talks at length about his resistance to himself and his work being assumed within a Western canon, and with the mask this resistance to a fixed identity is clearly met.

In early performative works, including *The Bird Ballet* with the Exploding Galaxy at London's Roundhouse in 1967, the mask is employed for its theatrical possibilities alongside costume to depict 62 real and imagined birds. In works like *Porcelain Wedding* performed in the early 1970s, the use of the mask is more oblique. A layer of clay is applied to two prostrate naked bodies by participants of the performance. The models' newly formed 'skin' was later removed and hardened.

The paper mask is a device that has recurred throughout his career, most prolifically in his later years. Here the simple act of cutting or tearing a magazine or newspaper page in a symmetrical pattern to form eye and mouth holes to be worn or simply held in front of the face momentarily creates a quick and effective transformative device. When hung on the wall, these masks evoke the masks of Greek theatre, while examining them up close the subtle humour of the chosen content of the pages that form the masks appear in direct conversation with his collage practice.

His masks are immediate and engaging, alluding to the possibility of performance, and as such, often incorporated into his impromptus. Medalla's ability to suspend belief in his audiences, while embracing humour in making fun of the discarded and disposable waste of consumption. A profound reflection at times living with limited means. The mask enabled Medalla to take one step further in his ability to shift, adapt and adopt new identities and personas in his constantly shifting world.



Paper masks, various cut paper

The exhibition architecture and design, conceived by performance and visual artist, and theatre director Michael Kleine have been developed in close dialogue with the material and theoretical tenets of Medalla's work, with an emphasis on liveness. In both practices, liveness is understood and enacted through experiences of time and embodiment.

The exhibition-making is in this sense seeking to draw on and give body to some of the material and immaterial strands of Medalla's approach, whilst inhabiting its interest in the threshold. The perspective of time in his practice is, on the one hand, centred around holding or conserving, and a presentness and pull on the other. The tireless collecting of, and reluctance to part from, material culture speaks of the almost mystical ability of matter to be of the present and physically extend and contain its own, and relational, past. On the other hand, there is a great fascination with the possibility for an artwork, and an exhibition, to perform in the present – the choreography of his kinetic sculptures and participatory performances are a delicate dialogue between flow and uncontrollability (you set up a frame, and let it happen). There is an implication there, both in the cosmos of Medalla, as well as in the practice of Kleine, of the works having their internal logic, their semi-autonomous unfolding, but that they ultimately return to the point of the experiential, of what they are doing – sensorially – with the recipient. The practice of imagining the viewer contains the potential of transformation. An artwork, or show, might move something, returning us to ourselves shifted or changed. This can be humble, but is ambitious at its core. It also opens an important space of negotiation – the experiential being inevitably plural, layered and in dialogue.

To attend to such a rich and multifaceted practice as Medalla's means both following strands of contradiction and departure, and allowing for the strands to partially settle into their own containers and frames, with an attuned awareness that the boundaries are permeable, connected and seeping. Such a method speaks of an understanding for subversion: elevated gestures with simple materials; the simple address coupled with precious framing; slippages between profanation and awe, tipping points which greatly preoccupied Medalla. In a similar logic of interconnection and difference, is the looping of the epic and the mundane, of art and life (and the at times wondrous connection between the two):

I personally believe that the invisible is the totality of what we call life in all its manifest forms: the unity of microcosms and microcosmos. We apprehend this unity only at certain inspired moments. These moments come to us in random ways: by the way of memory (whereby we get in touch once more with our past) and by the way of intuition (whereby we bridge into our future). Because we live only in the moment, 'past' and 'future' will always be invisible to us.

Artworks can sometimes be the substance and sometimes the shadow of our varied inspired moments. These moments can come to us in dreams, reveries or during our awakened hours, they can be self-generated or they can be provoked by external factors: by an object, a person or event...

I believe our capacity to generate inspired moments (or be inspired by the moment) contracts and expands in proportion relative to,

4 David Medalla, 'Some Reflections on the Random in Art and Life' unpublished text, Rotterdam, cited in Guy Brett, *Exploding Galaxies: The Art of David Medalla*, Kala Press, London, 1995. p.19

consonant with, our ability to love and our individual 'luck' to be loved or unloved.

By opening my mind to the random and chance events of existence, I have avoided, in the practice of my art, the cul-de-sac of formalism. In art, formalism substitutes atrophied schema (empty formulae) with for the immediacy of the inspired moment, the free flow of dreams and reveries, and the fragrance of memory. In life, formalism imposes dogmas, in place of adventure and risks.⁴

FH & SC

David Medalla in conversation

This interview first appeared in unabridged form in *A Fruitful Incoherence: Dialogues with Artists on Internationalism*, edited by Gavin Jantjes in association with Rohini Malik, Steve Bury, Gilane Tawadros, published by Iniva in 1998.



16 David Medalla with his chela 1970, year unknown, collage, mixed media

Your life and your work centres around the word 'mobility', the peripatetic nature of you being here, there and everywhere as an artist. Fixity is the last word one would associate with the art of David Medalla, as you're constantly in a cultural, geographic and art historical 'in between'. Would that be a good description of what you are?

This life that you've shared between the Philippines, Europe and America, seems to have a central thread running through it. The references you take are often European and they spring from literature. You could start with Proust, Mallarmé, Daphne Du Maurier, Rimbaud or even go back further to Thomas Aquinas. You said once that you came to Europe to retrace the footsteps of Rimbaud. What is this fascination with Europe and with literature?

America and Europe again!

I want to return to the word 'mobility and also to 'transformation'. Words which I connect with your practice. Transformation through mobility is so much part of what you do and what you expect the audience or participants to do. In other words there is something you expect of us.

Yes, I think that's fairly accurate, it's very Heraclitian. Heraclitus believed, in contrast to the Athenian establishment philosophers Plato and Aristotle, that everything is in a state of flux. That's also close to certain concepts in Indian philosophy and Chinese Daoist thinking. So yes, that's quite true. My mobility is partly out of choice because I like travelling, meeting different people, knowing different cultures. It's also out of necessity, I still carry a Philippines passport and that means, being a so-called Third World citizen, you're not given very long periods of stay in most countries. I was lucky I suppose because through relations in England, I was able to get a permanent residency here and, because I also lived and studied in the United States of America when I was a young boy, I can go back and forth to the USA for unlimited periods of time. In other countries they would give me a three month visa and then they'd say move on, and that's why I moved from Spain to Italy, France, Germany, Holland, all over Africa and Asia.

Well, maybe it's because I have just a tiny bit of European in me. The fact that I have a bit of Spanish and a bit of English blood, that's the exotic in me. Now if I were English and had a little bit of Indian blood, I would be very interested in Jaipur and places like that, right. So maybe my interest comes from that. But I did come across Rimbaud very early on in New York. I saw his photograph and read his poetry and I just loved it. He and Walt Whitman were my two aesthetic influences. I used to say to my friends, "Whitman is my guru and Rimbaud is my hero."

Well the Philippines is European, you see. It was the first and last colony of Spain. Although it is in the Pacific and just off the coast of mainland Asia, its culture is basically Hispanic. It's eighty-five percent Roman Catholic and about five percent Muslim, and then it was under Spain for three hundred and fifty years. Christianity is a strong thing that you can't just eradicate from a people. Then it was under the USA for fifty years, so our lingua franca actually is English, although we have some twenty languages because there are seven thousand islands. We grew up knowing a lot about Anglo-Saxon culture. We grew up reading T.S. Eliot, I had a lot of Filipino friends who were reading *The Wasteland*, and we had this idea that "Oh it's wonderful to come to England!" Little did we know that England, London, was a wasteland. T.S. Eliot was actually telling the truth when he talked about how awful some parts of London were in his time. It's changed because there are a lot of foreigners now in London, you and I are two of them. London has become more ... glamorous!

It's a dialogue. I think the one thing I love about philosophy, whether it's Eastern or Western, is that it's dialogical. For example, you have the famous Socratic dialogues and the Buddhist ones. One of the latter I used with my friend John Dugger and the group Exploding Galaxy as the basis for performances we did in the open air on Parliament Hill in London in

1968. This was a dialogue called *The Questions of King Milinda*. Milinda was Menander, a Greco-Baktrian king who asked a famous Buddhist monk called Nagasena “What is identity, what is a being, what is it composed of, is it the hand, or the head, or the heart, or the leg?” Nagasena had to answer this and his answer was very curious. It was like a meeting of Eastern and Western concepts. The Western viewpoint is to divide things into specific categories. The non-Western viewpoint is that everything is really one cosmic whole, so identity does not reside in a specific part, but in the inter relationship of the parts.

When you asked what do I expect from people, I expect a simple dialogue. The reason why it seems that my work has so many references to Western culture is because those things that I did in the West are the ones that have been documented. But I did a lot of things during my three visits to Africa. I also lived in India, Nepal, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Malaysia. In those places the work that I did was totally ephemeral except for one or two things that were photographed by chance. But they were just as valuable to me as for the people I encountered there, because they related to what I saw there. To give you an example of this, recently I was in Texas. Now that's not Asia but it's just as exotic as any place for me,



Title unknown, 1984, collage and mixed media on envelope

And would you say that the way you've approached life is based on an internationalism which is not about institutional fixity?

and the one thing that I enjoyed there was meeting and working with the Filipinos who lived there and the Tejanos and Tejanas – the Mexicans who ruled Texas before US colonisation. I created performances with people who were either in jails or people who were in jails which have become museums. Being a state full of banditry, Texas jails are their greatest monuments! Some of them are beautiful structures and I did these wonderful events in them, so there was an inter relationship. At the Mexic Arte Museum in Austin, I did a performance with masks, which I have done everywhere, including Rotterdam and Paris, but in Texas I did it in a Texan way with line dancing. During my performance I distributed pages of the *Austin American Statesman* and invited people to make paper masks which they wore as they danced to live music played by young Texan musicians.

I am mostly an optimist, but I have this feeling that we may be entering a new Middle Ages. With the new information technology, what is a happening now is that the mega-corporations are economically more powerful than single states with the exception possibly of the major industrial states: America, Japan, Germany, etc. These mega-corporations can actually control people's lives. This happened in Europe in the Middle Ages, kings were only kings in name but the real power was in those religious corporations like the Dominicans, the Franciscans, the Augustinians, the Benedictines and the Knights Templar, who had control of very big sectors of the economy. I think that's happening to the arts too. In the Middle Ages artists actually travelled. For example, an artist wasn't known for just being French but as a great maker of spires, he would be working in Norfolk, or in southern Spain, and they would say “Juan de Ollanda”, you know John of Holland “who is working in Spain.” That is really what is happening to artists now. Most of us, although we may be based in specific countries and come from elsewhere, we do have to find different venues, markets, or audiences for our work. It has become like that, and there's a positive side and I think also a negative side because there will be greater emphasis on people who are more packagable and marketable. It happened in the movie industry. In the past, most countries in the world had some form of movie industry which produced a wide variety of films geared to their national interest, but now they have to gear themselves to this bigger market with the exception, maybe, of India, where there is a big internal market for Indian films. Now most countries have to conform to Hollywood marketing strategies. A French director makes a certain type of film and Hollywood then makes its version of it. I think this may be happening to some artists. Perhaps there are great artists from Cuba and then the international art dealers say well that's quite interesting but let's get somebody else to do that type of art because it will be easier to market, that's the negative side of this internationalism.



18 *The Bodhisattva, The Fox, and David Medalla*, 1990, collage and mixed media on paper

Because mobility is so much part of your life and your work, and you've never settled long in any one place, do you have a notion of home?

The other thing that you've mentioned which comes to mind is that you see the artist as a questioning shaman'. I think that's very important because it distinguishes your position from what I call the Beuysian position, where he sees himself as the shaman mediator.

You also say that your art is dialogical, meaning that there has to be a common language for discourse. There's something you expect the audience to be, you expect them to be prepared to engage in a conversation. But are these dialogues predominantly about culture or are they about almost anything? Do they step outside of culture? I think they do.

What happens when they do? In other words what is the role of the participants in your pieces?



20 *A Stitch in Time* at Art meeting Place, London, 1974

Home is where your friends are and luckily for me I do make friends everywhere because necessity sometimes finds me totally poverty stricken. I'm very strange in that way, I have a roller-coaster life, sometimes I have lots of money and sometimes I have none.

Beuys emphasised the idea of survival, his art was a form of personal biography, a *very* individual thing. My biography is not like Beuys', who was shot down as a Luftwaffe pilot during the Second World War. I had happy memories as a child, I had wonderful sex as a boy, I have been very lucky in my friendships and have good friends everywhere. I want my art to be a form of hope, a kind of good fortune. Like a church would order a beautiful altar piece to increase the harvest, something like that. In the Philippines, they'll have a typhoon and an entire fishing village will be gone and yet, once the winds subside, people start singing and dancing. Maybe that's the only thing they can do to cheer themselves up. In one sense I'd like my art to be like that, to be a token of good fortune or a solace in bad and miserable times.

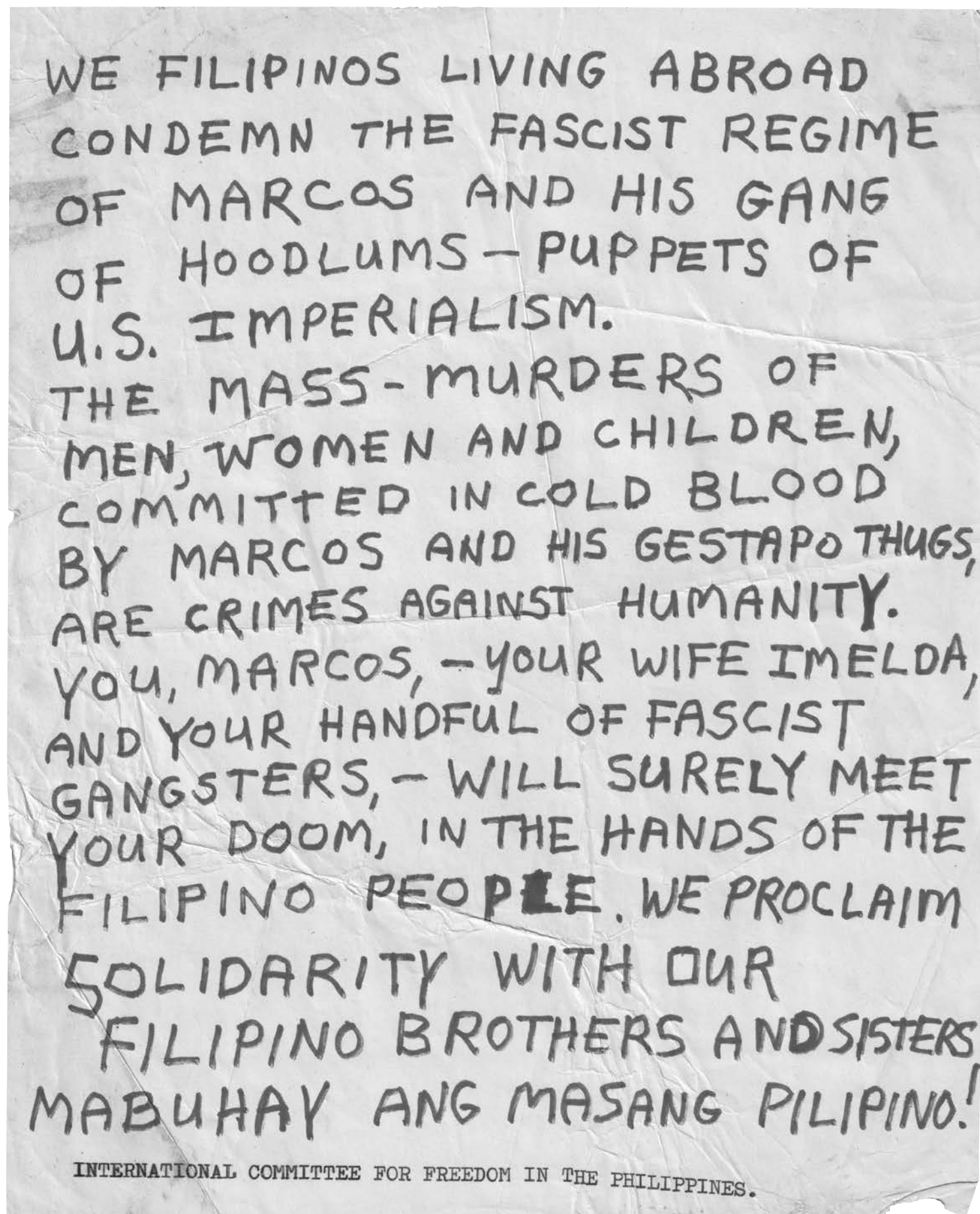
Oh yes, they do, they do.

Well there are two kinds of participants you know. Those that already have an artistic language, who I sometimes involve in my performances, but then on the other hand you have ... I'll give one example, *A Stitch in Time*, which is very dialogic. I want to emphasise that none of my art comes from outside of me, it must first be subjective before it becomes objective, in other words I cannot go out there and say "Oh I'm going to make an artwork about an aeroplane" before I'd even been inside one. *A Stitch in Time* started in 1968, I had two lovers who by chance arrived in London at the same time. One was going back to California and the other was going to India, and in those days you had even longer waits in airports. I had to see both of them at the same place and I had nothing to give them. I had two handkerchiefs, this is how it started, and I had some needles and thread and I'm very bad at stitching things by the way, I couldn't even stitch a button, so I said "Hey listen, just in case you get bored along the way why don't you just stitch things", because I understand that if you do some needlework it's very therapeutic and waiting for aeroplane flights becomes less boring. I gave each a handkerchief, and at first I sort of embroidered my name and the date and love and all that, and I didn't see them again, neither the lovers nor the handkerchiefs, for many many years. Then one day I was at Schiphol airport in Amsterdam and there was a young, very handsome,

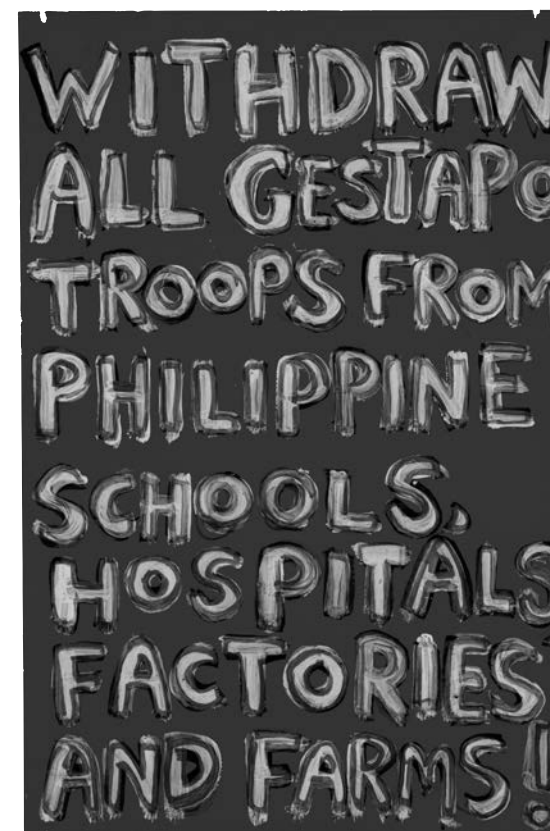


21

Title unknown, 2017, ink pen on cloth sail of a decorative sailing boat



We will rebuild our country — 10 times more beautiful, c.1970s, mixed media collage on card



tanned Australian who was lugging something which looked like a very crazy sort of totem and it looked very interesting. He said “Somebody gave this to me in Bali and you can stitch anything on it”; it had become a strange and wonderful column of my *Stitch in Time*. I looked at the bottom of it, and it was my original handkerchief. The people had stitched things onto it vertically because it was so small. I said to him “You know, I think I know the person who did this”, but he had to go and catch a plane, so I haven’t seen that work again. Things were stitched onto my original handkerchief like bones and Chinese coins, all sorts of things. After that I started to make different versions of *A Stitch in Time* in different places.

It coincided with my Marxist period when I was looking at historical conditions more and more, because when I was in India I was horrified by the gap between poverty and wealth; it was so extreme, that I wanted to find out what were the historical conditions for this, and Marx was one of my best guides. I enjoyed reading him and Engels, about the way societies create technologies and the way technologies give birth to societies. Artists never think in those terms, I didn’t anyway. I was thinking in terms of form and beauty and composition etc. So I started to do works based on things like the beginning of industrialisation or the beginning of pottery: I made works like *Porcelain Wedding*, and *International Dust Market*. *A Stitch in Time* reflected a higher form of industrialisation: the age of the cotton mills. It came from personal experience and I recently revived the concept again. In Paris, where I installed it at the Musée d’Art Moderne, many of the young people would go to the toilet and take polaroids of themselves naked and stitch them on, and then I think somebody kept taking them off because they were terrified that the museum might be closed for pornographic reasons. In Texas, some people would stitch an enormous marijuana joint, the size of a large cigar, and then another would stitch a hundred dollar bill and pick up the marijuana joint. Recently I put up another version of *A Stitch in Time* in Cornwall at the *A Quality of Light* exhibition at the Tate St. Ives. In the first few days, because St. Ives is very Methodist, many people were stitching prayers on it, quotations from the Bible and things like that. One lady put a beautiful fish and then an explanation that this was the symbol for Christ. That was the first week, but by the second week the tourists started coming in and now they put nothing but tourist things that they’ve picked up everywhere: hotel brochures, restaurant menus, railway and bus tickets. So you see there is a dialogue, but it begins to be more and more like a choral symphony because you can look at what people have stitched, and begin to realise that in one sense it refers to a specific time and place, a specific person, then you see the densities and the diversities of people. In many cases they just take things out of their pockets, and the things they take out are fascinating because there are two kinds. On the one hand something they want to get rid of, like an old ID card,

and on the other hand something that they treasured, like a small photo of their lover or friend or of themselves. One guy stitched a quotation from Gandhi which he had found in Bangalore and kept in his pocket for years. This little text from Gandhi was something he treasured. I remember from the sixties and seventies some totally insensitive people who would light cigarettes and burn little holes with cigarette butts on the suspended cotton sheet, but actually it became quite an art work because somebody would start with just one little hole and then somebody else would add to it and then before you knew it you had a Fontana or an Yves Klein in miniature.

Looking at all the different strategies you have used over the past thirty odd years, you personify a critique of the institutionalised and the hegemonic notions of European art that exists in our gallery structures. Do you see yourself in this role?

No, not deliberately, because I've never put myself in any ideological position either for or against those things, because those things are just phenomena. I'm not a pluralist in the sense that I cannot make a distinction between a proper Michelangelo statue and a Michelangelo statue key ring. I actually do see the difference, but I use the key ring in order to subvert the notions we sometimes have about those great icons of art. Unfortunately when real art is there it accumulates a miasma of readings.

Institutions also permutate, but they take longer because they have I think, if one accepts Marx's idea that they are superstructural things to maintain the powers that be. To go back to this thing that I said earlier, the fact that we're entering a new Mediaevalism. Fewer and fewer people go to churches and temples, etc., but more and more go to art galleries. They have become a kind of temple too, which was the original intention; the museum was for the muses, but now it's not only a temple, it's also a shopping area, you know they go shopping now in some of the best public art galleries. Now the museums are for the musers.



The caption according to D.M.: David Medalla and Adam Nankervis beneath the letter 'M' written in smoke in the sky above Manhattan, August 29th, 1994. Photographed in Long Island City by John Arnold. The letter 'M' stands for 'Medalla' & 'Mondrian'. C-print

Selected Bibliography

David Medalla's personal writing was prolific, comprising poetry, fiction and non-fiction throughout his career. Here we summarise some of the sources of Medalla's published non-fiction writing and interviews focusing on his practice referenced in the preparation of this exhibition.

Editor

Signals, Issues 1–10, Ed David Medalla, 1964–66. The international broadsheet-format bulletin of the experimental Signals gallery comprised 10 issues published between 1964–66 edited by David Medalla; featuring writing, poetry and texts on artists featured in the galleries exhibition programme by the artist and other contributors.

Articles and other published writing

'This page is part of your environment – now read on', *International Times*, March 13–26, 1967. pp.7, 9

Introductory letter, 12 *dancepoems for the cosmic typewriter*, dsh, 1969. pp.3–4

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'Signals', catalogue for *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Postwar Britain*, Hayward Gallery, 1989. pp.115–118

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'David Medalla on Parables of Friendship', Appendix II, Guy Brett, *Exploding Galaxies: The Art of David Medalla*, Kala Press, London, 1995. pp.204–206

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David Medalla interviewed by Hermine Demorlane, *International Times*, Dec 1968. p.8

Art and Artists: Actions and Performances, Vol. 7, No. 10, Issue 82, Jan 1973, pp.25–38

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Interviewed by Steve Rushton, *Everything*, 1995. Online

A Fruitful Incoherence: Dialogues with Artists on Internationalism, Ed Gavin Jantjes in association with Rohini Malik, Steve Bury, Gilane Tawadros, 1998. pp.92–109

Interviewed by Purissima Benitez-Johannot, *The Life and Art of David Medalla*, 2012, pp.223–246

Interview with Nicholas James, *David Medalla: Works in the World*, 2013

Born in Manila in 1938, Medalla moved at the age of 14 to New York where he was admitted as a special student at Columbia University on the recommendation of American poet Mark van Doren. There, he studied ancient Greek drama with Moses Hadas, modern drama with Eric Bentley, literature with Lionel Trilling, philosophy with John Randall and attended the poetry workshops of Léonie Adams. In New York, David met the American actor James Dean and the Filipino poet José Garcia Villa who encouraged Medalla's early interest in painting. In the late 1950s he returned to Manila and met the poet Jaime Gil de Biedma and the painter Fernando Zóbel who became the earliest patrons of his art.

In the early 1960s he moved to the United Kingdom and co-founded the Signals Gallery in London in 1964, which presented international kinetic art. He was editor of the *Signals* news bulletin from 1964 to 1966. In 1967 he initiated the Exploding Galaxy, an international confluence of multimedia artists, significant in counterculture circles, particularly the UFO Club and Arts Lab. From 1974 to 1977 he was chairman of Artists for Democracy and director of the Fitzrovia Cultural Centre, both in London. In 1994 he founded the Mondrian Fan Club in New York with Adam Nankervis, and in 2000 the London Biennale, the idea for which occurred to him while he was on a boat en route to Robben Island, off Cape Town, South Africa, during the *2nd Johannesburg Biennale* in 1998.

Medalla's work was the subject of the solo exhibition *Anywhere in the World*, curated by Guy Brett, at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, in 2005. His work was included in the Harald Szeemann-curated exhibitions *Weiss auf Weiss* (1966) and *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* (1969) at Kunsthalle Bern, and in *documenta 5*, Kassel (1972).

Important group exhibitions featuring the artist's work include *How Art Became Active: 1960 to Now at the Tate Modern*, London (2016); *Other Primary Structures* at the Jewish Museum, New York (2014); *Art Turning Left: How Values Changed Making 1789–2013*, Tate Liverpool (2013–14); *Thresholds*, TRAFO, Szczecin (2013); *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, Fondazione Prada, Venice (2013); *Une exposition parlée*, Jeu de Paume, Paris (2013); *Migrations*, Tate Britain, London (2012); *À la vie délibérée, Une histoire de la performance sur la Côte d'Azur de 1951 à 2011*, Villa Arson, Nice (2012); *Art and the 60s: This Was Tomorrow*, Tate Britain, London (2004); *Happiness – A Survival Guide for Art and Life*, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2003); *Pulse: Art, Healing and Transformation* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2003); *Century City*, Tate Modern, London (2001); *Force Fields: Phases of the Kinetic* at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona and the Hayward Gallery, London (2000); *Century City* at the Tate Modern, London (2001); *Live in Your Head: Concept and Experiment in Britain 1965–75* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (2000) and the Museu do Chiado, Lisbon (2001); *Micropolitiques* at Le Magasin, Grenoble (2000); *Force Fields* at the Hayward Gallery, London (2000); *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979* at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and MAK, Vienna (1998), and Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (1999); *Transforming the Crown: African, Asian and Caribbean Artists in Britain 1966–1996* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (1997); *Live/Life* at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (1996) and the Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon (1997); *L'Informe* at the Centre Pompidou, Paris (1996); *FluxAttitudes* at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (1992); and *The Other Story*, curated by Rasheed Araeen at the Hayward Gallery, London (1989).

The artist participated in the *8th Asian Pacific Triennial*, Brisbane (2015); the *9th Mercosul Biennial*, Porto Alegre (2013); the *16th Sydney Biennial*, Sydney (2008); *Performa 07*, New York (2007); and the *2nd Johannesburg Biennale*, with Adam Nankervis, the Mondrian Fan Club (1998). The *57th Venice Biennale* (2017), solo Arsenale, Mondrian Fan Club with Adam Nankervis, Giardini.



David Medalla Parables of Friendship	Curated by Fatima Hellberg and Steven Cairns Exhibition design and architecture Michael Kleine	Bonner Kunstverein Team Fatima Hellberg, Director Susanne Mierzwiak, Curator Günter Maria Wagner, Technical Manager Anna-Lena Rehbach, Project Assistant Emilia Thiel, Financial Management Cennet Maggiarosa, Curatorial Assistant Ligaya Brendel, Membership Administration Gitte Lindmaier, Director's Assistant Heike Kirchhoff, Head of Artothek	Project team Museion, preparatory phase Bart van der Heide, Director Cristina Ferretti, Director of Administration Manuela Inderst, Accounting Brigitte Unterhofer, Head of Organisation / Publications
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Berlin

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