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Partecipazioni Nazionali
SEA OF LOVE
Philippine Pavilion
DAGAT NG PAG-IBIG



SEA
OF
LOVE

Philippine Pavilion

DAGAT
NG
PAG-IBIG



Commissioner:
National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA)

in partnership with the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA)
and the Office of Senator Loren Legarda

Jon Cuyson, Artist
Mara Gladstone, Curator

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Mara Gladstone and Jose Mari Cuartero, editors

SEA OF LOVE

JON CUYSON
Artist

MARA GLADSTONE
Curator

DAGAT NG PAG-IBIG

Philippine Pavilion



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CULTURE AS INFRASTRUCTURE:

COMMISSIONER ERIC B. ZERRUDO, PhD
Chairman
National Commission for Culture and the Arts

BUILDING THE NATION'S NARRATIVE BACKBONE

Infrastructure is often understood in physical terms: ports, highways, airports—visible networks that enable the movement of goods and people. For an archipelagic nation like the Philippines, maritime infrastructure has always been essential. Our seafarers power global trade; our ports connect our islands to one another and to the wider world.

Yet there is another form of infrastructure that is less visible but equally vital—cultural infrastructure.

Cultural infrastructure encompasses not only institutions and artistic production, but also the systems that safeguard memory—our traditions, languages, archives and the built heritage that anchors communities to place. Historic churches, ancestral houses, civic structures and cultural landscapes form part of the material memory of the nation. They stand as enduring witnesses to movement, exchange and resilience across centuries of encounter.

Sea of Love / Dagat ng Pag-ibig at the 61st International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia represents a continued investment in this national foundation. Just as maritime labor sustains global systems, cultural labor sustains identity. One enables commerce; the other ensures meaning.

Since the Philippines returned to the Venice Biennale in 2015, participation has not been viewed as an isolated event but as part of a long-term commitment to cultural presence. Through transparent open calls, independent juries, and inter-agency collaboration, the National Commission for Culture and the Arts has worked to build an ecosystem in which Filipino artists and curators engage the world on equal footing.

This approach reflects the logic of the archipelago. The Philippines is composed of many islands, diverse, decentralized and distinct, yet bound by shared waters. Our cultural life functions in much the same way. Artists, scholars and institutions operate across geographies while remaining connected by a shared responsibility to steward the nation's cultural inheritance. The selection of Manila-based artist Jon Cuyson and curator Mara Gladstone reflects this dynamic, one of rooted local practice in conversation with global discourse.

For the NCCA, stewardship means ensuring that these stories travel with integrity. It means safeguarding cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, while creating spaces for contemporary expression. It means supporting artists who engage with memory, migration, labor and the histories embedded in the landscapes and structures we inherit.

In nation-building, roads and bridges enable mobility. Heritage structures anchor continuity. Culture, in its many forms, enables coherence. It is the medium through which people understand themselves and present themselves to others.

As the Philippines continues to engage the international community, we recognize that cultural diplomacy is sustained by consistent policy, collaborative processes and a deep belief in the plurality of Filipino voices. The Philippine Pavilion is part of an evolving framework that affirms the Philippines as both contributor and interlocutor in global contemporary art. Culture is the infrastructure of meaning—the foundation upon which a nation remembers, creates and moves forward.

THE SEA AND

HON. SENATOR LOREN LEGARDA

Project Principal and Senator
Republic of the Philippines

THE SHAPE OF A NATION

To live in an archipelago is to understand movement. The sea surrounds us, separates us and connects us. It reminds us that boundaries are never absolute, that distance can also be a bridge. For the Philippines, the ocean has never been an abstract geography. It is a constant presence—one that quietly shapes how we think about responsibility, community and governance.

The sea teaches patience. It reminds us that forces larger than ourselves must be approached with humility and care. It teaches risk, because life on the water requires preparation, courage and trust in one another. Above all, it teaches reciprocitythat what sustains us must also be protected.

These lessons are not philosophical abstractions. They are embedded in the lives of millions of Filipinos. Our nation is home to one of the world's largest communities of maritime workers. Filipino seafarers navigate vessels that move global trade across oceans. Their labor sustains international supply chains, supports national economies and anchors families across generations. Their work unfolds far from public attention, yet it carries profound significance for the Philippines and for the world.

To recognize them through *Sea of Love / Dagat ng Pag-ibig* at the 61st International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia is, therefore, not only an artistic gesture. It is an affirmation that maritime identity is inseparable from our national story.

The ocean also reminds us that environmental stewardship and human welfare are inseparable. The waters that sustain maritime livelihoods must themselves be sustained. Protecting marine ecosystems safeguards fishing communities and coastal settlements. Advancing climate resilience protects the shorelines where many Filipinos live and work. Supporting maritime labor strengthens a social fabric that extends far beyond our coasts.

For an archipelagic nation, environmental responsibility is not an abstract policy priority. It is a practical necessity tied directly to economic stability and human dignity. Protecting our oceans is inseparable from protecting Filipino futures.

Our presence at the Venice Biennale reflects this understanding of continuity and collective responsibility. Since the Philippines returned to this global platform in 2015, the intention has been to sustain a cultural presence that grows over time—one that allows Filipino artists to participate in international conversations while remaining grounded in lived realities at home and across the diaspora.

This Pavilion embodies that shared effort. It reflects the artist's engagement with memory, labor and the movement of people across seas. It reflects the curator's perspective shaped by transnational dialogue. It reflects the sustained commitment of cultural institutions and diplomatic partners working together to support Philippine participation in global cultural platforms.

Such initiatives remind us that cultural presence is not created through singular moments but through sustained collaboration and vision.

For Filipinos, the sea has long shaped resilience. It has required adaptability in the face of storms and openness to distant horizons. These qualities continue to inform how we engage the world—steadily, thoughtfully and aware of the responsibilities that accompany our interconnected lives.

In Venice, a city historically shaped by maritime exchange, the Philippines offers a story grounded in lived experience. We honor those whose work often unfolds beyond public view, and we recognize their contributions as part of a larger narrative of nationhood.

Culture is one way a nation expresses its dignity among others. Through it, we remember who we are, what sustains us, and the futures we must protect together.

INTRODUCTION

MARA GLADSTONE

The catalogue for the Philippine Pavilion for the 61st La Biennale di Venezia Arte serves two purposes: as exhibition record and as conceptual framework. It features installation views, rich artwork details, film stills and thoughts from an international community of experts, including historians of art and politics, anthropologists and scientists. Our catalogue traces how maritime actors and fisherfolk generate networks across global waterways, turning the vast ocean into a place of kinship, highlighting their resilience amidst challenges at sea. Jon Cuyson's immersive installation is entwined in this narrative with its horizon of paintings, sculptures and films that are quietly yet firmly connected across media. The pages here offer contexts to understand the complexity of life at sea, while unfolding as a work that allows us to positively vision the ocean as a diasporic place for hope and love. Jon's artworks, on view in *Sea of Love / Dagat ng Pag-ibig*, do the same.

The textual journey begins in the book design itself, thoughtfully rendered by Los Angeles-based designer Jessica Fleischmann of Still Room. The silvery finishes, watery fonts and graphic layout respond to the artist's aesthetic approaches. Flipping through the pages, we sought a sense of movement akin to that of ships on the sea, and perhaps, we hope, the experience of physically moving through the exhibition.

Organized in four parts, the essays are striking in how they respond specifically to Jon's work and the broader project about maritime life that threads through every author's area of expertise. Several writers took this opportunity to connect to a new discipline by loosening their writing with self-reflexive interventions, poems or moments of personal history.

In the first section, "Sea of Memories", Jon Cuyson introduces his practice and this exhibition in a conceptual biography that traces his lived experience as an artist, international student and queer man. Historian Kris Alexanderson understands the legacies of colonialism and global capital as inextricably tied to the oceans, and thus to Filipinos; but she also reads these waterways as sites for subversion. Anthropologist Eulalio Guieb recounts moments of bonding and longing in his past research and finds poetic parallels in Jon's project.

"Sea of Migrants" situates the people and objects that move across waters. In this section, Roderick Galam elegantly explores the complex understanding of being and relation to place for a seafarer, and advances an understanding of diaspora removed from land. After all, "their nomadism is what keeps them 'rooted' in the Philippines," he writes. Kale Bantigue Fajardo provides a historical literary context for his ongoing research into seafarers, identifying how boats and life on water generates a distinctly Filipino masculinity—a gendered identity that he explores in his own research. If ships signal goodbyes and returns, Anthony Ocampo and Alfonse Chiu consider their own stories with Filipino vessels of care—the balikbayan box and the remittance. A person can be a balikbayan, and a balikbayan box serves as their proxy. This joy-filled container is sent home with treasures from abroad. Remittances similarly sustain and often enrich families and communities in the Philippines.

Scientists from the Marine Science Institute (MSI) at the University of the Philippines-Diliman present two aspects of their ongoing research in maritime ecology in the third section, "Sea of Marine Life". Lilibeth Salvador and her team share how mussels face challenges underwater through powerful biological tools for survival. Machel Malay meanwhile explains how MSI archives of specimens are connected to essential research on our contemporary ecosystems. Together, these contributions illustrate how living systems and archived histories contribute to our knowledge of mussel ecology then and now—in a sense, where we have been and where we are going.

In the final section, "Sea of Art", comparative literary scholar and exhibition research associate Jose Mari Cuartero considers Jon's practice in the context of Filipino cultural and political histories. Finally, I offer insight into the development of the exhibition over the last three years as not simply a presentation of artwork, but as a representation of Jon Cuyson's larger practice; and the many influences that have shaped his way of seeing, being and creating.

Like one of Jon's paintings, the texts individually offer fragments of research. Collectively they form a dynamic constellation of ideas around the iconic figure of the Filipino seafarer. Our catalogue is not meant to be comprehensive, but instead offers portals for further inquiry into maritime labor, diaspora, family and identity within our sea of love.




NCA-012420-20582
SOUTHEAST





What if the sea is not a place, but a condition we live within?

I grew up in the agricultural province of Bulacan, surrounded by rice fields rather than coastlines. The horizon of my childhood was composed of wide expanses of green broken by canals and flooded paddies that mirrored the sky. Water was everywhere, yet it was contained and arranged in careful grids that made the land productive. It moved slowly through soil rather than across open distances. The sea belonged somewhere else. And yet the sea was never entirely absent. It appeared indirectly in stories of relatives leaving to work abroad, in the quiet knowledge that ships departing Manila carried Filipino labor across oceans, and in the understanding that departure itself was woven into everyday life. Even from inland landscapes, the sea shaped imagination. Because of this distance, the sea first existed for me as an imagined space rather than an actual one. It was a surface onto which ideas of elsewhere, departure, and possibility were projected. Before I understood the sea as labor, trade, or ecology, I understood it as distance and a horizon that suggested other lives, other places, and other versions of oneself. In this sense, the sea was not only geographic; it was always imaginative.

One of my earliest memories of encountering the sea directly comes from childhood visits with my grandfather to Manila Bay. We would walk along the breakwater and watch cargo ships fixed across the horizon while he guessed where they had come from, perhaps Japan or Hong Kong, sometimes places even farther away. Near the rocks along the seawall, small shells clung to the concrete edges where water met land. I remember crouching down to examine them closely, fascinated by how they held fast as the tide shifted around them. At the time I did not yet understand the vast systems of labor, trade, and migration those ships represented, but the image stayed with me: vessels drifting across distance, and small living forms gripping the surfaces that resisted the tide.

Years later, as a teenager helping my family with our import and export business near the North Harbor of Manila, I encountered the port again from another vantage point. There, dockworkers, porters, and page boys moved between ships, cargo, and water in rhythms tied to the tides themselves. It was there that I began to understand the harbor not only as infrastructure, but as a place where labor, movement, and desire quietly intersected along the edge of the sea.

Sea of Love / Dagat ng Pag-ibig grew from these entanglements of memory, movement, and maritime life. For many Filipinos, the sea is not simply a landscape but a condition. It carries migration, commerce, and the networks that sustain global circulation. It is also the medium through which longing travels between those who leave and those who remain. The installation brings together painting, film, and sculptural elements into a single spatial field. Rather than functioning as separate disciplines, these media operate as interconnected systems. Painting forms the structural framework, producing a spatial environment that viewers can move through, rather than observe from a distance. As bodies circulate within the space, surfaces shift, reflecting, opening and redirecting circulation. Resin-cast mussels, shells and fragments gather along these edges like tidal residue, suggesting processes of accumulation shaped by time and flow. Film introduces duration and drift, with images of ships and water unfolding in rhythmic sequences that extend the installation beyond its physical limits.

The horizon becomes both subject and structure. In Venice, where water shapes the city's architecture and history, the horizon is always shifting. Within the pavilion it appears fractured and porous. Freestanding panels scaled to the dimensions of shipping containers form a perimeter that reflects and refracts bodies moving through the space. Their surfaces recall weathered ship hulls or metallic skins marked by salt, friction and travel. The installation does not present an image of the sea; instead it constructs an environment that behaves like one: fluid, reflective and unstable. In Venice, a city whose history is written through ships, trade and water, the sea is not scenery but structure, and this work enters that history from another shore.

Running through the installation are moving images from my film works, including the *Kerel Trilogy* and *Sea of Echoes*. These films follow the fictional figure of Kerel, a queer Filipino seafarer who drifts across time, coastlines, and maritime histories. Around him unfolds an intimate constellation of characters: Mutya, his trans lover, and Nanay Cleo, his shaman mother. Kerel is not a fixed protagonist but a vessel through which intersecting narratives of labor, migration, masculinity and vulnerability circulate within oceanic worlds. His journeys echo my own passages across geographies based on years spent living, studying and working overseas, all translated into a fictional register where personal memory drifts alongside maritime history. The sea in my work is, therefore, both material and imagined, at once a site of labor and migration, and a surface onto which fantasies of elsewhere, desire and distance are projected.

For many Filipinos, the sea is inseparable from labor. It carries the movements of seafarers, migrants and overseas workers whose lives unfold across distance while sustaining families and economies at home. In the mussel farms of Manila Bay, bodies descend and resurface within similar systems of survival, working quietly within the rhythms of tide, harvest and trade. *Sea of Echoes* extends this terrain, where the sea becomes a listening surface and memory moves through water, labor, and sediment.

Over time, the mussel also became a way for me to think about how I work. Mussels attach, cluster and filter; they survive by holding onto moving surfaces and drawing sustenance from what flows past them. I began to understand this not only as a metaphor, but as a method or an approach to making work through accumulation, sedimentation and relation. Images, objects, sounds and memories gather slowly, forming patterns through time, proximity, and repetition. I think of this approach as Mussel Thinking: a way of working through attachment, accumulation, and relation rather than through singular gestures or fixed forms. Throughout the work, the mussel returns as both material and companion. It appears as cast form, trace and memory. Mussels attach, cluster, and filter; they gather where surfaces meet turbulence. They do not conquer the sea. Instead they persist

within it, holding fast to the shifting architectures that sustain them. In this sense the mussel becomes both witness and metaphor, an organism that filters the sea yet cannot speak. Fiction, like the mussel, operates through accumulation rather than declaration, allowing submerged histories of labor, migration and care to surface indirectly.

The shells along the Manila Bay breakwater have stayed with me all these years. They offered an early glimpse of another way of being in the world, one that holds fast not through force, but through attachment, proximity and quiet endurance. *Sea of Love* does not attempt to represent the sea. Instead, it invites us to inhabit its conditions, where bodies move across distances shaped by labor and migration, memory gathers in traces, and belonging emerges within unstable systems of movement and care. If there is a horizon here, it is never fixed. It shifts with each movement of the viewer, reflecting and dissolving at once. What remains are points of attachment and small acts of persistence along a shifting surface, like mussels holding their ground in water that never stops moving.

We do not live beside the sea. We live within its movements, its distances, and its histories.






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I want to hear them again.






What's the difference between
miscommunication and misunderstanding?









Sea of Echoes

Sea of Echoes is an experimental film set within the mussel farms of Cavite, where the everyday rhythms of aquaculture unfold along the shifting waters of Manila Bay. The film is narrated through a feminine voice attributed to the mussels themselves, reflecting on labor, environmental change, and the recurring movement of people who leave and return across the sea. Rather than following a traditional narrative, the film observes the repetitive cycles of harvesting, sorting, and cleaning mussels while the voice reflects on pressure, filtration, and endurance. Through underwater imagery, long takes, and sparse narration, *Sea of Echoes* situates human labor and marine life within the same ecological and economic systems.

The film forms part of Jon Cuyson's broader body of work exploring maritime histories, migration, and oceanic memory, where the sea is approached not as landscape but as a site of accumulation, movement, and transformation.

SEA OF ECHOES





Director's Statement

Sea of Echoes emerged from my long-term interest in coastal communities shaped by seafaring, migration, and maritime labor. In many parts of the Philippines, the sea is not only a geographic condition but a structure that organizes family life, work, and imagination. People leave by sea, return by sea, and measure time through absence and return.

In this film, I chose to shift perspective away from human characters and instead imagine a voice emerging from the mussels themselves, organisms that survive by filtering what passes through the water and by clinging to unstable structures. This approach comes from what I call "Mussel Thinking," a way of understanding survival through filtration, endurance, and adaptation rather than control.





The film focuses on the everyday life of a mussel farm in Cavite: harvesting, sorting, cleaning, and waiting. These repetitive gestures mirror larger cycles of labor and migration that shape Filipino life across generations. The feminine voice of the mussels reflects on movement, environmental change, and the quiet pressures that accumulate over time. Rather than telling a linear story, *Sea of Echoes* is structured around rhythm, repetition, and duration. I wanted the film to feel as if it were filtered through water, where memory, labor, and history move slowly, overlap, and transform.

SEA OF ECHOES









SEA OF ECHOES









SEA OF ECHOES



Kerel (Sea of Love)
Trapped in a cargo ship during the lockdown, Kerel, a gay Filipino seafarer escapes through his memory, and recalls his complicated past, present, and future self.

KEREL (SEA OF LOVE) KEREL (SEA OF LOVE)





Director's Statement

The hybrid experimental documentary fiction film is an evocation of the complexities of personal and national identity prescribed by one's memory. The film mixes archival images with texts, filmed and found footage to weave the complex narrative from the perspective of a gay Filipino seafarer stranded at sea, confronted by Chinese ships while recalling his past, present, and future relationship with himself, his lover, his family, and his country.

KEREL (SEA OF LOVE)



Mutya
Set in the present, the film tells the story of Mutya, a self sacrificing transgender woman who works as a gardener at a resort south of Manila. She takes care of the visually impaired mother of her OFW (Overseas Filipino Worker) seafarer boyfriend, Kerel.

The film is anchored in their intimate phone conversation, which may or may not be real, and becomes a catalyst for the manifestation of their individual anxieties and desires culminating in a dream-like visual journey.

M U T Y A M U T Y A





Director's Statement
Mutya is a hybrid experimental short film that questions our understanding of physical, emotional, and psychological distance. Through a fictionalized conversation between a transgender resort worker and her seafarer boyfriend, the film investigates the complexities of intimacy and relationship entanglements amidst economic and personal challenges.

M U T Y A

M U T Y A



Ang Panaginip ni Nanay Cleo
Nanay Cleo's Dream
Envisioning that her seafarer son is in danger, Nanay Cleo, a visually impaired Babaylan or a Filipino pre-colonial shaman, summons her power to protect him at all costs.

ANG PANAGINIP NI NANAY CLEO NANAY CLEO'S DREAM





Director's Statement

The film dramatizes the internalized psychological anxieties experienced by families separated by economic circumstances. The experimental docu-fiction film focuses on the fears of a visually impaired mother and Babaylan, a pre-colonial Filipino shaman, who awakens the spirits of the land to protect her overseas seafarer son whom she witnesses to be in danger from sea pirates in her visions. The hybrid film combines pre-colonial texts (baybayin), and filmed, archival, and actual footage of Filipino seafarers at work in their container ship being attacked by sea pirates.

ANG PANAGINIP NI NANAY CLEO NANAY CLEO'S DREAM













Part 1

SEA OF MEMORIES

OCEANHEART
(For “Uji” + “Ka”)

my grief and love for her
feels
o c e a n l c
deep, immense,
sacred, spiritual
e t e r n a l

how is it that my transpinoy
h e a r t
has the capacity to hold
the P a c i f i c?

i don’t fully understand it
but I experience and embody it
everyday

the waves are constant
always with me

i try to relax with the riptides
but there are days
i tumble hard
remembering the forest
where we broke

sometimes i hold my breath
other times i am grateful that
the ocean can feel like a lake
f o r g i v i n g
& p e a c e f u l
and when I remember
to calm and slow
my breathing
my chest
rises and falls
as it does because
I am a l i v e

I think to myself
perhaps all of this
is what makes me a
f i l i p i n o
seaman
s i y o k o y[1]

KALE BANTIGUE FAJARDO

CROSSCURRENTS

Editors’ note: This essay is an excerpt from the author’s 2011 interdisciplinary ethnography *Filipino Crosscurrents: Oceanographies of Seafaring, Masculinities, and Globalization*, which has been an important resource in the development of this exhibition.

A LITERARY ANCESTOR: DR. JOSE RIZAL[2]

In the seminal 1897 novel *Noli Me Tangere* by celebrated Filipino author Dr. José Rizal, Rizal critically and imaginatively suggests how to read Filipino masculinities and maritime space. In *The Noli*, as the novel is commonly called in the Philippines, Rizal describes a fishing expedition. The character Ibarra, a Mestiso who has just returned to the Philippines after spending seven years in Europe, and Maria Clara, a Mestiza and the biological daughter of Father Damaso, a Franciscan Spanish friar and a native woman, along with several of her female cousins, her sweethearts, friends and chaperones, go boating and fishing at a lake in preparation for a large outdoor feast in the woods. It is in a bangka, or boat, that Ibarra first encounters Elias, a mysterious and capable native boatman. Rizal describes Elías:

“Their boatman was silent, remaining apart from all this merriment. He was young, with an athlete’s body and quite interesting features, large sad eyes, and a severe cast to his mouth. Long, black, unkempt hair fell around a muscular neck. Through the folds of a shirt fashioned from dark tacking one could make out powerful muscles on his strong naked arms, which helped him manipulate, like a feather, the oar that served as the tiller to guide the boat.”[3]

Here, Rizal beautifully, and I would add homoerotically, encapsulates the significance of boats and maritime space in the creation and embodiment of Filipino masculinities. Rizal as a male/man writer imagines, visualizes and acknowledges the boatman's powerful masculinity and manhood, precisely through Elias's dynamic relationship to his boat, oar and ultimately, the water.

As a self-identified queer and trans(man) Filipino American (immigrant) writer, like Rizal, my narrative analysis and theorizing also include homoerotic moments and sensibilities—erotic in the broadest and most inclusive sense of the term that black lesbian feminist scholar Audre Lorde proposed.[4]

Later on in *The Noli,* Rizal writes about the dialogue between Ibarra and Elías, who we subsequently learn is an Indio [native] outlaw who fights for the common tao, or people. The two men ride and talk in Elías's bangka before sundown into dusk on the lake where "there are no witnesses," to exchange their social and economic viewpoints, as two differently situated Filipino men, and their differing strategies for social change/social justice in the Philippines. In sum, Ibarra represents the masculinity and manhood of landed mestizo elites—perhaps, the less corrupt kind—while Elías represents Indio masculinity and manhood, although because of his specific life history, Elías is an educated Indio, unlike most natives during Rizal's time. Ibarra primarily believes in expanding education for natives and gradual political reforms, whereas Elías believes in a more urgent and far-reaching agenda, including "radical reforms in the armed forces, in the clergy, in the administration of justice. . . respect for human dignity, more security, for the individual, less force on the part of the armed forces, fewer privileges for the body of people who abuse [the common people] with impunity."[5]

In this important maritime and lacustrine scene of *The Noli,* Rizal highlights the centrality of maritime spaces (boat, lake) and activities (paddling) in the production of Filipino masculinities and manhoods. Indeed, Rizal precisely spotlights these spaces and everyday practices. Quite importantly, he also engages with the Filipino notion that native/Philippine society can be understood or imagined as a boat. The Filipino word for society or community is barangay, which is associated with balangay, a large outrigger canoe or boat with or without sails. Filipino writer-artist Nick Joaquin suggests that natives and their ancestors migrated to the Philippine archipelago, sailing or paddling with their kin and clans. As a result this precolonial maritime history, maritime notions and sensibilities are central to understanding community and identity in specific Philippine contexts.[6] This is not a universal origin or arrival story; it cannot and should not be applied to all heterogenous Filipino/a/x communities based in the archipelago or the diaspora. Moreover, while Filipinas (women) were also present in the boat during the fishing expedition, Rizal showcases two specific kinds of Filipino masculinities and manhoods, suggesting Rizal's more masculinist rather than proto-feminist imaginative and political orientations.[7]

In short, Rizal narratively theorizes that Filipino masculinities are heterogenous, not homogenous; and he powerfully imagines them as differently situated and in tension as a result of race, class, political beliefs, and relationships to place. Ibarra has recently returned to the archipelago after living abroad and, in contrast, Elías is a native and a seasoned local. Although Rizal does not fully address sexuality as an important axis of difference in this boat scene, what is important is that Rizal understood and theorized sex/gender, that is masculinities/manhoods, as intersectional, heterogenous and differently situated. He also shows the effects of colonialism on different masculinity formations. Taking great inspiration from Rizal's thinking and narrative theory of Filipino masculinities and maritime space, in this ethnography I tried to approach and write about Filipino masculinities with a Rizalian sensibility and optic by analyzing the beauty, complexities, contradictions and political differences among and between particular kinds of maritime and migrant masculinities and manhoods. This is articulated through discourse, or embodied and created through everyday practices in postcolonial, neocolonial, neoliberal and global contexts in the Philippines and diaspora.

CROSSCURRENTS FRAMEWORK

First, rather than privileging a more land-based or geographic cultural framework, I develop and use a water-informed and inspired *oceanographies of culture* approach that highlights *crosscurrents as oceanic or maritime border zones,* for example, oceans, seas, port cities, ports, ships, bays, rivers, currents, maritime routes, shipping lanes, choke-points and monsoon winds. Differently situated people (because of race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship and differences in immigration status) move in and through these kinds of crosscurrents through travel, seafaring, shipping and other migrant and immigrant practices.

Second, since mobilities are central to crosscurrents border zones, that is, ships and boats dock in port, but then they depart and sail to other oceanic or other maritime border zones, crosscurrents also refer to *oceanic or maritime trajectories of seafaring, sea-based migration, maritime trade* and *global shipping.*

This kind of ethnographic focus is useful because of different and overlapping histories, narratives, and practices of power and identity that operate in and help to constitute the crosscurrents. For example, in the Philippines and its diaspora, indigenous/native/precolonial histories, narratives and practices of seafaring, masculinities and globalization overlap, flow into, and counter those practices and histories in other global maritime zones in the United States, Spain, Japan and Singapore. Crosscurrents border zones are, therefore, critical locations to ethnographically analyze because they can powerfully illustrate and reveal the relationships, dynamics, and tensions between different social actors, knowledges and power.[8] In this context the ideologies and political economies in an archipelago nation like the Philippines, which also has a sea-based diaspora working in the global economy, are distinct. While my book does not address all the examples of crosscurrents border zones previously listed, I suggest these examples here to indicate possible future research directions and locales.

Third, as a result of focusing on oceanic or maritime border zones and sea-based mobilities and trajectories, crosscurrents refer to *alternative temporalities and spatializations of globalization.* So, instead of imagining globalization through crisscrossing jet streams of air travel or interconnected networks of digital communications and finance that hinge on global cities—the dominant trope and space of globalization today—I chart alternative, lesser-known, working-class and migrant Filipino geographies and oceanographies of globalization.

Fourth, crosscurrents also refer to how differently situated Filipinos, from seamen, nation-state and corporate officials to seafarer advocates and ethnographers, imagine, narrate and experience heterogenous sea-based Filipino masculinities through everyday cultural practice and discourse.

Finally, I engage with the feminization of Filipino male or men's labor in this book. If there exists a feminization of Filipino global migration, it refers to how more Filipino women than men out-migrate, as well as how Filipino men are sometimes feminized by European or white men due to racism, white supremacy and/or orientalism. Indeed, it is precisely because of the feminization of Filipino global migration that we need to continue interrogating Filipino and Asian masculinities. Processes of feminization affect multiple genders and as a result of the on-going circulation of feminizing narratives, it is important to analyze the cultural politics of Filipino masculinities to see how these gendered identities are shifting, consolidating and becoming naturalized in the context of neoliberal capitalism, neocolonialism and Philippine nationalism.

Notes

1 A siyokoy is a Filipinx "merman," but the bodily configuration is reversed from the standard mermaid or merman figure. That is, the siyokoy is a fish above the waist, while human man/masculine human below. Some people think siyokoys are bad/evil because they are creatures associated with drowning. I do not subscribe to this cultural logic, as I imagine good siyokoys also exist! I like siyokoys and I appreciate their amphibious anatomy and lifestyle. To me, a siyokoy has similarities with seamen, both spending a lot of time at sea, but they also have lives either on land or in coastal areas.

2 Kale Bantigue Farjado, *Filipino Crosscurrents: Oceanographies of Seafaring, Masculinities, and Globalization* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

3 José Rizal, *Noli Me Tangere (*Penguin Classics, 2006), 142. Originally published in 1897, Rizal's novel radically ignited and helped to propel the indigenous Philippine revolution against colonial Spain in the late nineteenth century. It is a foundational text in Philippine Studies and is part of the national curriculum.

4 Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotics: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (*Crossing Press, 1984).

5 Rizal, 320.

6 Nick Joaquin, *Manila, My Manila (*Bookmark, 1999).

7 Rizal politically supported the women of Malolos (Bulacan) who were involved in anti-Spanish colonial resistance and wanted more access to formal education in Malolos. Rizal was, therefore, not entirely masculinist or anti-proto feminist during his time. See José Rizal, *Letter to the Women of Malolos (*Bureau of Printing, 1932).

8 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism (*Vintage Books, 1978); Michel Foucault and Colin Gordon, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977 (*Pantheon Books, 1980).



OCEANS: A POLITICAL WORLD IN MOTION

KRIS ALEXANDERSON

Modern history is usually written on land. We narrate the rise and fall of empires through capitals and colonies, trace revolutions through cities, and imagine sovereignty as something anchored in territory. Oceans appear as the spaces in between—blue expanses on the map that separate "real" places. Yet, the sea has been one of the central environments in which modern political and economic power has been organized.

During the late-nineteenth century, the shift from sail to steam transformed the ocean from a realm governed largely by wind and season to one structured by timetable and infrastructure. Steamships regularized movement: they followed fixed routes, connected predictable ports of call, and in the age of European imperialism, made long-distance rule materially possible. In the Philippines, Manila became a crucial Pacific node, first under Spanish rule and then, after 1898, American colonial administration. In those years, the ships connected the archipelago to circuits of trade and migration, linking Southeast Asia to the Indian Ocean, Europe, Middle East and Americas.

The technological shift did more than accelerate travel. It also reorganized political space. The ship was not merely a vehicle—it was a floating jurisdiction. As motors slowly replaced stokers during the first half of the twentieth century, vessels flying national flags extended legal authority across international waters. Onboard life condensed empire into a confined and highly regulated environment: officers and crew were divided by rank and nationality; passengers by class; and documentation such as passports, passenger lists, health inspections, quarantine stations and surveillance reports rendering movement legible and governable for both shipping companies and ruling states.

Yet, the sea resisted total control. The same networks that carried cargo, passengers, and crews also carried ideas that helped destabilize imperial power. Ships were bounded worlds but also porous ones, shaped by multilingual informal exchanges: sailors carried news of strikes and revolutions from one port to another; passengers encountered reformist and anti-colonial currents that reshaped their ways of looking at the world; and students absorbed nationalist and socialist debates before returning to Southeast Asia after studying abroad. Maritime circulation generated what might be described as a floating public sphere—one that exceeded territorial boundaries. In other words, the sea fostered both imperial authority and its critique and ships amplified the political imagination of an increasingly diverse global population.

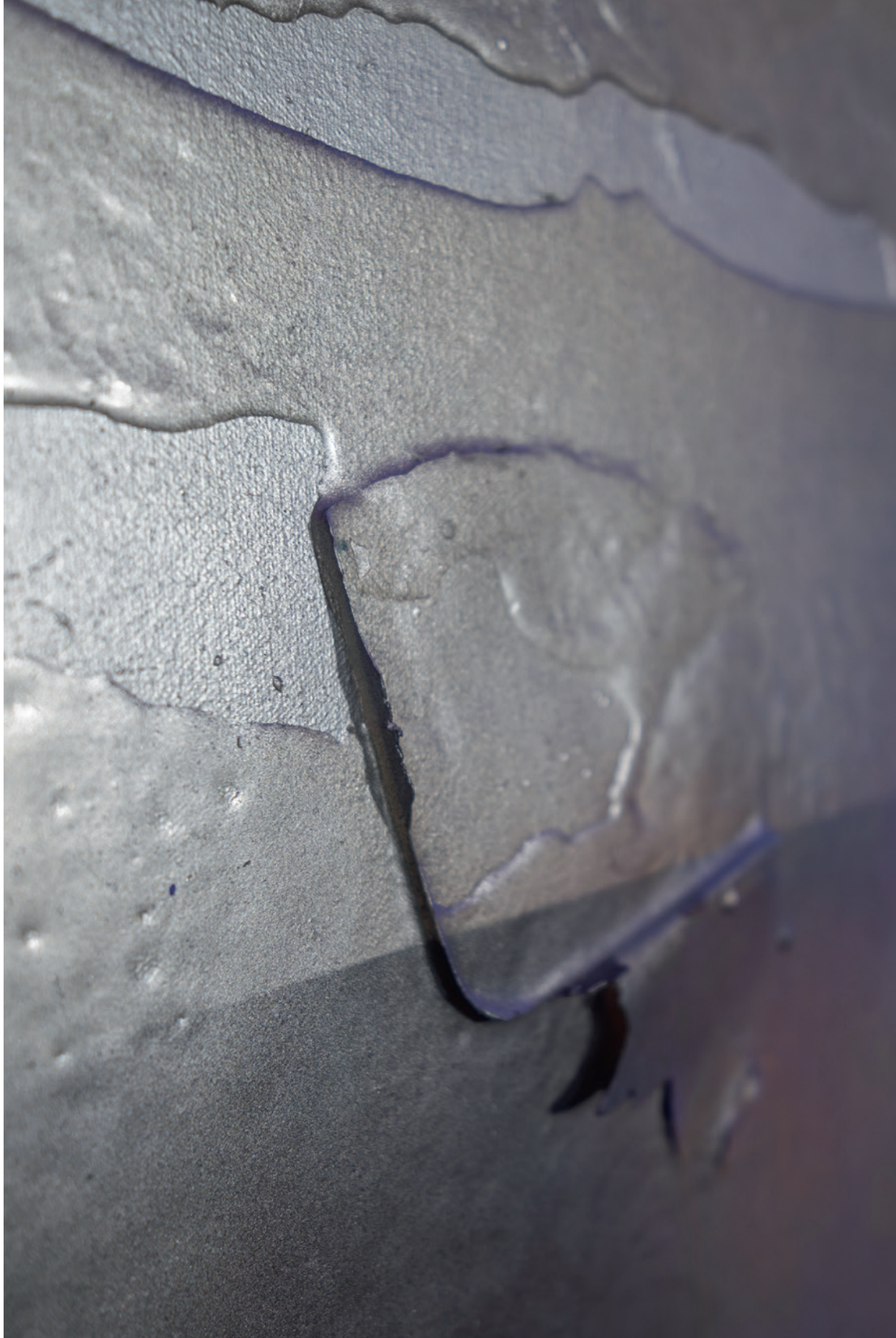
The mid-twentieth century transition, from empire to nation-state, did not diminish the importance of maritime space. As global trade expanded after World War II, decolonizing states sought to build national fleets and regulate maritime labor. The proliferation of flags of convenience allowed vessels to be registered in jurisdictions with favorable regulatory regimes, often distinct from the nationality of owners or crew. From the 1960s onward, containerization intensified these dynamics. Standardized cargo units revolutionized global trade, dramatically reducing port time, and integrating maritime transport into tightly synchronized supply chains. Ports became hyper-efficient logistical hubs, while ships themselves grew into floating warehouses overseen by digital systems of tracking and coordination. The port of Manila, one of the busiest container ports in the world, is an example of a hyper-efficient hub in which cranes, data and finance converge.

The Philippines, after gaining independence in 1946, became increasingly significant not only as a port of call but as a supplier of maritime labor. During the 1970s and 1980s, labor export was formalized as a state policy, and the government institutionalized overseas employment programs, such as expanding maritime academies and aligning training with international standards. The result was the emergence of the Philippines as a one of the world's leading sources of seafarers. Today, Filipino mariners constitute a substantial proportion of crews aboard tankers, bulk carriers, cruise ships and container vessels. These vessels are registered under diverse nationalities, owned by multinational firms, and insured in distant jurisdictions, while sailing under flags of convenience that allow companies to minimize regulatory and labor costs.

Despite these changes, modern container ships resemble earlier steam and motor ships in a few ways. First, container ships are floating societies organized by hierarchy and contract. Crews work for months at sea under legally complex arrangements. Filipino seafarers integrated into global recruitment networks play a central role in sustaining this system. Their labor links coastal communities in the Philippines to the infrastructures of global capitalism. Second, maritime space remains governed by fragmented authority and uneven protection. The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated the continuing political character of this maritime order. As supply chains strained but did not halt, thousands of seafarers were unable to disembark due to border closures. Many were Filipino, serving extended contracts to ensure the continuity of global trade. These experiences highlight one of the continuities of shipping from the nineteenth century until now—goods circulate freely, workers do not.

Across the long twentieth century, oceans have functioned as structured political worlds. Ships enabled empires to project sovereignty across water. Maritime routes transmitted dissent as well as authority. Containerization embedded oceans within digital systems of global exchange. The Philippines floats at the center of these histories—first as a colonial port integrated into Pacific networks, and today, as a central provider of maritime labor in a globalized world. The nation's political history has unfolded, not only within territorial borders, but across decks, docks, and shipping lanes.

To understand oceans as political worlds is to recognize that they are neither empty nor neutral. They are structured environments produced by technology, law, capital, and labor. Reimagining the ocean as central to modern life challenges deeply ingrained assumptions about where politics happens. It invites us to see ships as sites of governance and labor, ports as infrastructural hubs of power, and sea routes as corridors of both control and creativity. The blue on the map is not empty space. It is a domain in which modern authority has been projected, contested, and continually remade.



EVOCATIONS OF

EULALIO R. GUEIB III

MEMORIES[1]

Everything about Jon Cuyson's exhibit is silently confrontational. His works navigate the dangerous state of quiet retirement, unmoving in the curation of the artifacts of the contemporary, yet profound in its paradox of inertness in movement. Amidst the intimidating stillness is a quaint sense of movable transience, a silent recalling of the reluctant diaspora of inerasable generations of seafaring, fishing, and anchoring—a palimpsest of itinerant senses of becoming. The images are insidious stabs that puncture the heart of a nation running aground.

Everything about my anthropological research is a testament to shifts and transitions. . . My ethnographies explore how resources shape the configuration of power and wealth in the Philippines. I look into how rights to resources and places constitute processes of marine resource management and rearrange relations between and amongst individuals, households, local and national social institutions. My work highlights the tenuous processes of reconfiguring everything that is political in the ecology of island communities and coastal villages.

Everything about Jon's images is always a reference to profound ellipses of the material and the mental. Rough waves disappear into emptiness, leaving a softness in the horizon. Salty water, violently splashing against protruding rocks, scatters into the air as misty sprays or violently spreads over openings of shore rocks that allow the tempered waters to rapidly run the course of their cavities. Coconut shells are washed ashore after a storm, some still drifting, dancing with the currents, buoyant in their fullness. Rusty iron gates, portals, aisles, and hulls of ships are reminders of their steeled voyages into treacherous storms in the open seas. Sturdy ropes and cables hang loosely from shafts, unmoved by pulleys. Metal anchors lie prostrate on the seafloor, exhausted by strong currents, like an act of humble submission to forces beyond the mechanics of its own physics. Durable fish nets, thrown onto floors and stuck on walls, are a delicate entanglement of finely knitted nylon that bears their wear and tear from years of resistance to sea currents when cast to collect schools of fish.

Everything about the images that I capture in my fieldwork is always a reference to profound ellipses of the material that inhabit the mental. . . It was the perfect color temperature for landscape photography that any artist would want to capture: the mellow golden light of the sun that had crept in after the squall, the soft green background glistening with drops of rain collected by the leaves of mangrove trees, the restrained color of the horizon swaying between gloom and glow. But I decided not to take photos of this seascape. There are moments that are best captured through the aperture and lens of the mind, and stored in the film of memory. And that was one of those moments. Immersion in the feeling evoked by that moment was enough.

Everything about Jon's art is a metaphor of the contrary images of the experiential. The images—visual and aural, curated and filmic, honest and representational, fictional and real—are grounded and constructed in processes that bear the link between peoples' places and histories; and the link is in the quotidian, generally unnoticed in their casual dailiness but which has been made apparent in Jon's curation of the everyday world of the maritime.

Everything about the metaphors of islands that I had visited is a lament. . . In the past, some villagers of one of my research sites, unfortunately, had failed to return to the island, like the father of the village chief at the time of fieldwork. He narrated to me how he lost his father during a thunderstorm. They were at sea when, suddenly, a blinding flash of white light from the skies gobbled up his father, snatching his body away from their boat. A scary image flashed in my mind upon hearing his story: the lightning bolt was the sudden, impetuous arm of a cunning and hotheaded God. The village chief did not see his father again, but his mother, he said, had never wavered in her faith in God and had never let a day pass without praying for God's mercy, for the safe journey of her husband to the otherworld.

Everything about Jon's artistic representations is an invitation. The images are an invitation to the evocations of memories, of faint traces of everything that could be stored. The collected memories are then unloaded onto ports, dockyards, or beaches.

The evocation of memories secures a sanctuary for remembering not the past but the present, then eventually released from the debilitating treachery of trepidations about everything that is connected to maritime places and auricular spaces—inhabited by humans as placelings, and in which humans, nonhumans, and the more-than-humans explore navigations of intersections, punctuated by sudden bursts of violent squalls of rain and wind.

Everything about my ethnographic representations is an interrogation of places that I view as works in progress. . .. I chalked up in my mind an image of a constant barrage of strong winds shaking their islands, lifting the islands from the earth or the sea, perhaps sending them to fleet across the skyscape. I also imagined the sun drenching the islands with a scorching heat that would dehydrate the land, exhaust the sea, dry up their groundwater or suck the moisture from heavy cloud, wilt the mangroves, and leave fish and corals gasping for breath on the parched seabed.

Everything about Jon's works is in a state of flux, like an on-going project, but left undone. It is in the unconcluded that I sense how Jon's art resonates with the many realities of fishing villages that had embraced me with a welcome of home: sneaking winds, oscillating waves, changing seasons, drifting islands, dying reefs, ebbing and flowing tides, transiting schools of fish, agitating markets, negotiating marine rights, and people leaving villages and coming home. *These villages have been designed partly by nature, and mainly, by the social arrangements of people in relation to their natural environment. These communities are about the manifold social interests and community alliances that shape their morphologies and biographies of the people.*

Memories in Jon Cuyson's art no longer reside in their evoked state of nostalgic being. Jon turns memories into collective acts of courageous becoming against an adversarial nation-state that has lost its moorings.

Note

1 The words in italics are revised excerpts from my previously published articles, and dissertation: Guieb III, Eulalio R. "Batasan Island: Dance of the sands on the beachhead in the season of the monsoon winds." *Espasyo: Journal of Philippine Architecture and Allied Arts*, 4, (2012):14-30; Guieb III, Eulalio R. "Community, marine rights, and sea tenure: A political ecology of marine conservation in two Bohol villages in central Philippines." (PhD diss., McGuill University, 2009); Guieb III, Eulalio R. "Jandayan Island: Symphony of dry winds in a time without rain." Kritika Kultura, 26, (2016): 772-790.





Part 2

SEA OF MIGRANTS

KABAYANG MARINERO: CONCEPTUALIZING SEAFARERS AS PART OF THE PHILIPPINE (LABOR) DIASPORA

RODERICK G. GALAM

Filipino seafarers are an important part of the Filipino labor diaspora. However, their inclusion is based on conceptualizations of a Filipino diaspora predominantly drawn from land-based labor migration. Building on the work of historians David Camroux and F.V. Aguilar who included seafarers in their reflections on the Filipino diaspora,[1] this essay considers how Filipino seafarers might be conceptualized as diasporic, highlighting both their unique characteristics as sea-based migrant workers and those they share with the rest of the Philippine labor diaspora.

The recognition of the existence of a Filipino diaspora is recent. Not until the inclusion of Robert Lawless's entry on Philippine diaspora in *Encyclopedia of Diasporas*, published in 2004, did we "see a Philippine diaspora drawn into a pantheon of diasporic communities."[2] However, by 2015, there was "still no widespread recognition of a Philippine diaspora; there [was] even a denial of its status as a diaspora." Following Aguilar's question on "what 'unique characteristics' do diasporas possess," I reflect on how seafarers might be considered part of the Filipino diaspora. McKay squarely located Filipino seafarers within the Filipino labor diaspora, but did not clarify the characteristics that make them such.[3] Camroux rightly asked how the "literally 'landless'. . . sea-based workers" might be situated within the Filipino diaspora,[4] a question that points to the unique characteristics of seafaring labor that define their being part of the Filipino labor diaspora.

The first characteristic of seafarers is that, unlike land-based migrant workers, they do not reside in a destination country. Rather, they live and work aboard a foreign-flagged ship, the equivalent of working in another country.[5] The ship, however, is a mobile territory, making seafarers nomadic. Camroux noted that "if one of the characteristics of a diaspora is to be nomadic, then Filipino seafarers could be seen to meet this criterion."[6] How might their nomadism be characterized? Scholars have drawn attention to the physical and social isolation of seafarers.[7] In contrast, Markkula argues that seafarers are entangled with the outside world through "global economic, political, technological, and social webs."[8] These two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Out at sea, seafarers are physically and socially distanced from places, services, and people. Nevertheless, this isolation could be compounded by decisions of shipowners on, for instance, the (un)availability of internet onboard, impacting on seafarers' connectivity, which could be linked to shipping capital's decision to prioritize profit over seafarers' wellbeing. Seafarers' access to digital connectivity is differentiated by salary, which is dependent on rank and nationality.[9] Seafarers' isolation is also linked to how nationality structures relations onboard: how they relate to the ship, to work, and to their co-workers, which are conditioned by contracts that are in turn determined by seafarers' nationality.[10]

The second characteristic that distinguishes seafarers is that the relationality of 'homeland' and 'host land' does not apply to them. Unlike land-based migrants who experience attachment to and alienation from their host lands, seafarers' attachment remains exclusively with the Philippines. Attachment to a ship is absent. As Turgo noted, seafarers are at sea "not to make friends but to earn money. Thus, . . . while everyone maintains very friendly interactions . . . , socialities are often contractual."[11] Camroux correctly pointed out that if a characteristic of a diaspora is "to have a 'here' (a host country) in reference to a 'there' (a lost home), then situating sea-based workers as part of a diaspora is much more problematical. Sea-based workers, as the ultimate sojourners, are not localised other than in the Philippines."[12]

The absence of a host land leads to seafarers' third distinguishing characteristic, which centers on the idea of return. Aguilar argued that "members of the labor diaspora do actively nurture the notion of return."[13] This idea of return has a problematic status when applied to seafarers. They might entertain the concept that they are no longer working as seafarers, but this is not the same as "coming back home" and doing so for good. It is also fundamentally linked to the nature of seafaring labor migration. Filipino seafarers are hired on a per-voyage contract (which, for many, could be as long as nine months). Therefore, the length and degree or intensity of their

absence from the Philippines is mitigated by an enforced 'unemployment', such that their sense of having been 'away' from the Philippines does not have the same density for seafarers as it does for land-based migrant workers who might be unable to go home as regularly as seafarers. The combination of these annual and long stays in the Philippines and not residing in a host land prevents their return from gaining an aura of finality, which the return of land-based migrant workers possesses or evokes. Paradoxically, their nomadism is what keeps them "rooted" in the Philippines.

So far, I have discussed characteristics of seafarers that distinguish them from land-based migrant workers. What do seafarers have in common with the latter? It is worth bearing in mind that the increasing, albeit gradual, recognition of a Filipino diaspora in the Anglophone scholarly community in the early 2000s resulted in part from the recognition of the significant amounts of remittances from Filipino migrant workers and the growing prominence of remittances globally, which were outpacing Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) "as a source of wealth and . . . of development assistance for developing countries."[14] In 2019, the 470,000 seafarers on board ocean-going vessels, who comprised about five percent of the 10.2 million Filipinos living and working overseas, remitted US $6.5 billion. This amount was 21.6 percent of the total overseas Filipinos' remittances of US $30.1 billion.[15] If the recognition of the existence and status of the Filipino diaspora partly owes to their role in national development, then seafarers are eminently qualified as members of this Filipino labor diaspora.

Aguilar argued that "a form of diaspora consciousness is formed among migrant workers as they sojourn overseas."[16] Seafarers see themselves as overseas migrant workers, going through as they do state mechanisms and processes that construct them as migrant workers, sharing experiences with land-based migrant workers that enable and facilitate the development of a shared and collective consciousness. Frequently, it is difficult experiences and inadequate assistance from the Philippine government which give rise to feelings of being recognized only for their remittance contributions, that foster bonds with other Filipino migrant workers.[17] Finally, Aguilar, interrogating the US-Philippine axis that has dominated the Filipino diaspora, also argued that the global scale of Filipino dispersal must be considered, for without it, "the notion of a Filipino diaspora is weakened."[18]

Among the Filipino labor diaspora, seafarers are the most dispersed. They work on vessels that crisscross the globe and on ships whose owners are located at a global scale, and this is significant "not only in terms of foreign currency exchange, but more fundamentally with respect to increasing worldwide economic integration."[19] It is precisely shipping's globalization that allowed Filipinos to work in international seafaring and that makes their nomadism so global in extent. However, they are localized only in the Philippines. With only the Philippines as their point of reference, their experience of migrancy and return is certainly different from that of land-based migrant workers. Despite this, seafarers do not only have a self-recognition of their being overseas workers and imagine themselves as part of a huge collective of Filipino seafarers, a consciousness that is historically informed,[20] but they also see themselves as part of a larger body of overseas Filipino workers.

Notes

1 See David Camroux, "Nationalizing transnationalism? The Philippine state and the Filipino diaspora" in Les Études du CERI, no. 152 (2008), 1-39; FV Aguilar, "Is the Filipino Diaspora a Diaspora?" in Critical Asian Studies, no. 47:3 (2015), 440-461; and FV Aguilar, *Migration Revolution: Philippine Nationhood and Class Relations in a Globalized Age* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2014).

2 Camroux, 8; and R. Lawless, "Philippine Diaspora," in eds. M. Ember, C. Ember and I. Skoggard, *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: Immigrant andRefugee Cultures Around the World, Vol. 1 Overviews and Topics* (Springer, 2004), 244-253.

3 S. McKay, "Filipino sea men: Constructing masculinities in an ethnic labor Niche," in Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, no. 4 (2007), 617-633; and
S. McKay, "Filipino sea men: Identity and masculinity in a global labor niche," in eds. Rhacel Salazar Parrenas and Lok C.D. Siu, *Asian Diasporas: New Conceptions, New Frameworks* (Stanford University Press, 2007), 63-84.

4 Camroux, 13.

5 H. Sampson, "Beyond Borders: The Regulation of the Living and Working Conditions of International Seafarers," in eds. E. Boris, H. Gottfried, J. Greene, and J. Tham, *Global Labor Migration: New Directions* (University of Illinois Press, 2023), 223-239.

6 Camroux, 13.

7 V. Aubert,T*he Hidden Society* (Transactions Press, 1982).

8 J. Markkula, "'Any port in a storm:' Responding to crisis in the world of shipping," Social Anthropology, 19:3 (2011), 297-304.

9 R. Jensen R (2020). "Fragmented digital connectivity and security at sea", *Marine Policy*, 130 (2020), 104289, https://doi.org/10.1016/j .marpol.2020.104289

10 Markkula.

11 N. Turgo, "Tales of the sea: Seafarers' sense of place in the management of socialities and safety culture at sea," in Asian and Pacific Migration Journal, 33:1 (2024), 150.

12 Camroux, 13.

13 Aguilar, 454.

14 Camroux, 9.

15 *United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Review of maritime transport 2021: Overview* (United Nations Organization, 2021).

16 Aguilar, 451.

17 R. Galam, *Women Who Stay: Seafaring and Subjectification in an Ilocos Town*, (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008).

18 Aguilar, 445.

19 H. Sornn-Friese and C. Hansen, *Landlubbers and seadogs: the case of labour mobility in the Danish maritime sector in a time of accelerating globalisation* (Copenhagen Business School Press & Nytfra Samfundsvidenskaberne, 2012), 192.

20 K.B. Fajardo, *Filipino Crosscurrents: Oceanographies of Seafaring, Masculinities, and Globalization* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).



GIFTS THAT GO

ANTHONY CHRISTIAN OCAMPO

THE DISTANCE

Balikbayan (bälik'bīən)
Noun

1. A Filipino visiting or returning to the Philippines after a period of living in another country.

For much of the 20th century, the Philippines endured economic devastation due to America's colonial exploitation of its natural resources and human labor, as well as to two major wars involving the United States. In the 1970s, President-turned-Dictator Ferdinand Marcos launched an aggressive economic development strategy that would shape the country for generations to come: labor emigration. He established government organizations and policies pushing Filipino citizens to secure job opportunities—such as nurses, nannies, teachers, seafarers, and construction workers—that are unavailable at home. The migrant worker, whether in the United States, the Middle East, or East Asia, became known as the "balikbayan".

The government's popularization and celebration of balikbayans—a portmanteau of "balik" (return) and "bayan" (country)—was about, as sociologist Robyn Rodriguez put it, "stretching the boundaries of national belonging and national duty."

For Marcos and subsequent administrations, who frequently referred to balikbayans as "modern day heroes," this new identity harnessed the economic potential of Filipinos who emigrate. Today, more than twelve million Filipinos, about a tenth of the country's population, live and work outside the archipelago. Annually, they send more than $30 billion in remittances, or about 10% of the country's GDP.

Not included in this estimate are non-monetary goods sent by immigrants via balikbayan boxes, large two-by-two-by-two-foot cardboard boxes containing clothes, canned goods, cookware, toiletries, towels, purses, perfumes, electronics, and more. Untaxed. Through door-to-door freight forwarding companies and brief visits to the mother country, Filipino immigrants across the globe send close to five million boxes home each year.

Each box has its own story.

For Filipino immigrants, balikbayan boxes hold multiple meanings. The emotional and symbolic aspect of sending boxes means as much, if not more than, its economic function. When I visit my parents' house, there is always an unopened balikbayan box being curated by mom. Much of its contents—canned meats, cookware, shoes, sandals, towels, duffel bags, and of course, chocolates—are items that our family back home in the Philippines can finally access and enjoy. The boxes move unidirectionally, from Los Angeles to the Philippines, but the emotional exchange goes both ways. "We want to share the blessings of whatever we're getting here in America," my mom told me recently. "It makes them happy. It makes me happy too."

When I was in graduate school, my research focused on Filipino immigrants who, like my mom, sent balikbayan boxes back home regularly. For this research, I worked part-time for a balikbayan box company, picking up boxes all throughout LA. There was one woman whom I'll never forget—Perlita, a 60-year-old caregiver who lived with an elderly American widow in the Hollywood Hills.

When I walked into her bedroom to pick up her box, Perlita was jumping on top of her box like a trampoline, trying to condense the 7-inch-high overflow so she could tape the box shut. As I carried her box to the van, I caught a look of pride on Perlita's face, and so I took the opportunity to strike up a conversation.

Perlita said that she was sending these boxes to her son because he was getting married in a few months.

"He has a good job," Perlita says, proudly. "He works in television."

"Wonderful," I say. "Will you be attending the wedding?"

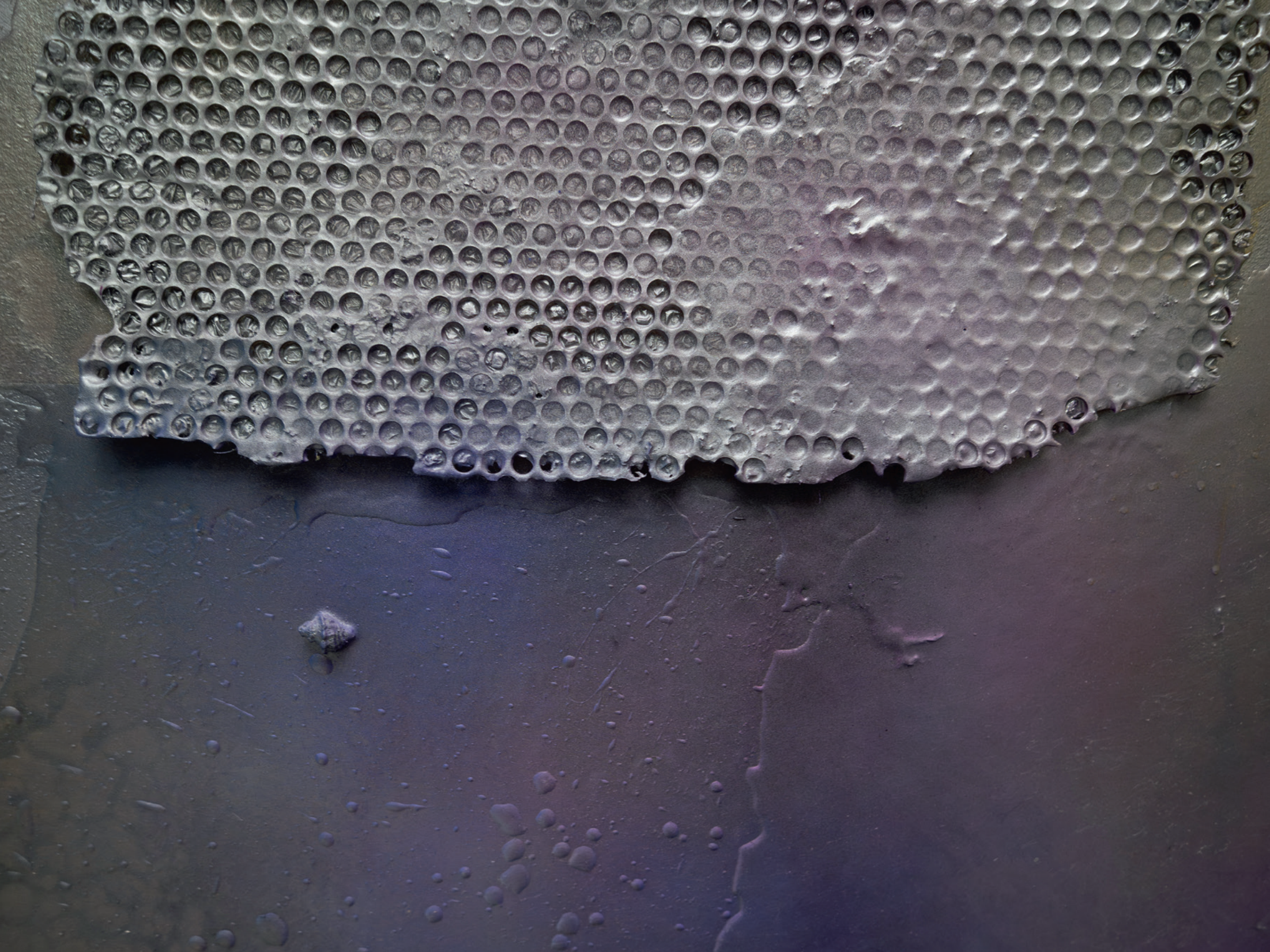
I saw the excitement in Perlita's face dissipate. "It's too far," she said. "And too expensive."

Expensive. In that moment, I wonder how much migration has cost Perlita, her son, their relationship. As I loaded the box in the van, Perlita's expression shifted back to one of pride.

Over the course of my research, I see the same sequence of emotions in the Filipino immigrants I encounter: exhaustion (putting together those boxes is hard work), exhilaration (knowing their labor and love will pay off in the eyes of their loved ones), and then emptiness (yearning for the family thousands of miles away).

Balikbayan boxes are the ultimate illustration of love. At the same time, they're a ritual drenched in heartache. Still, they are what keep families tethered across time and space. A contract that the love for each other is still there, even if separated by an ocean, by worlds apart.





WHAT THE

ALFONSE CHIU

CURRENTS CARRY

In February 2025, the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas published an announcement that personal remittances from overseas Filipinos had grown to an all-time high of US$3.73 billion in December 2024, a three percent increase from the year that was observed in remittances from both land-based and sea-based workers.[1] Cumulatively, foreign remittances to the Philippines in 2024 constituted over US$38.34 billion,"[2] close to ten percent of the GDP. For a country with more than a hundred million people in it, and which was once the world's second largest exporter of laborers, the Philippine remittance economy remains one of the most significant in the world for the combination of its scale and ubiquity, sustaining, by some accounts, nearly half of the Philippine domestic population. Here, the spaces of labor presuppose the typology of the economy. Female-presenting workers are usually involved in care work, ranging from domestic labor to primary care nursing, that take place in predominantly interior and domestic spaces, entwining physical and emotional labor; male-presenting workers have historically been embedded as purely physical laborers across various service and logistical sectors in interior and exterior spaces.[3, 4]

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. . .with it into the surfs: footsteps; packed bags; portable bottles of favorite condiments; cables and power banks; a lover's token, handkerchiefs and lingerie and a desperate stolen kiss, then three more, a retaken picture of a throbbing ache, a half-empty bottle of lube; a parent's blessings, an eternal worry of whether the weather is fine, of a belly kept empty because it was too busy to keep another's full, the tenderness of grocery shopping, a string of rosaries, a table set with an extra plate; a child's yearning, impressions of bright eyes and the simple anxiety of unknowing, a pixelated smile on a small screen; an unmarked date. The uneasy dreams of a nation. The horizons of a forever future.

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Within the global labor market, one of the most significant contributions that Filipino men as a labor class collectively make is through the shipping industry, in which they constitute between a third to a quarter of all seafarers worldwide.[5] As the largest single provider of maritime labor in the world, the narrative construction of the 'Filipino seafarer' has historically drawn on tropes that collectively serve as an origin story—natural aptitude as a consequence of being members of an archipelagic nation that closely relied on the sea for livelihoods and transport; the long history of Filipino labor being present on foreign vessels from the Spanish colonial era to recent US occupations; and the socialized Filipino dispositions of cheerfulness and tenacity that enable high-intensity and collaborative forms of work.[6] Regardless of mythology, the rationale for the pursuit of seafaring as a vocation remains predominantly economic: wages earned on board international vessels are drastically higher than shore-based employment options. As an economically significant actor, the Filipino seamen in that creation myth shares a similar ontology as the mythos continually built around them to ensure compliance for particular forms of social futurity and reproduction: to be responsible, firm and stoic even in the face of discrimination by foreign employers; to "endur[e] hardships in silence" as "ambassadors of faith, and channel Filipino 'natural' values of flexibility, sociability, pliability and hard work."[7]

———

A provocation: if the movements of financial capital can be understood as a rheology of desire, can we thus imagine the affective mechanisms of remittance as a tidalectic of intimacy?[8] *Be water, my friend. Know what is the current that pulls the ship and soaks the paddy. Tell me: what does the sirens' song sound like to you when at night you have settled into that amniotic cadence of your rocking bunk? Are you hard or are you crying; do you still dream? Can you imagine the warm weight of your lover pressed upon your groin, their breaths a wet instruction on the nape of your neck? Do you think of the coarse scrape of your parents' hands upon your shoulder as they take your*

jacket off and massage the taut knots of your delicate ambitions? What about the slippery clutches of your first dog, slobbering against your chest and face, the dumb stink of him lingering like a beloved toy. Do you seek anchorage or do you roll with the waves? Tell me: how long does it take for you to learn your sea legs and how long does it take for you to forget it?

———

At its core, remittance is an architectural act. Remittance capital buys land; it buys bags of concrete and bundles of tiles; it raises walls and settles ceilings; it feeds builders and draftsmen; it furnishes houses and barangays inhabited by nothing but hope and wait in particular times.[9] More importantly, it makes space—the household budget is a score that choreographs the potentials of togetherness through birthday gifts, Christmas presents and monthly transfers. Settled bills and unsettled sentiments, can we understand accounts and ledgers as moral documents? As deeds to the building of futures iterated from something not quite like speculation but devotion? The architectonics of conviviality is premised upon care the way that the foundation of foundations is built upon an applied understanding of engineering physics, not rebars. I want the economy to revert to an ecology to a household, a kin(g)dom as a unit of measure for how bodies may move in and with each other. I want housewives and husbands to be the economists for the tender taxes of their faraway partners; I want to bank trust and trust land; I want to learn the etymology of *padala*, knowing that to give and to carry must be the same, an oceanic generosity for an oceanic people. I want to remember and re-inscribe that at its core, remittance is an architectural act.

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To reprise the most sincere of riddles, and to hear its response:

Why, surely, it must be love.

Notes

1 Defined as "cash sent through banks and informal channels as well as remittances in kind", personal remittances are computed as the sum of "net compensation of employees, personal transfers and capital transfers between households" which includes reasons such as for the construction of residential houses without anything of economic value being supplied in return between resident-receiving and nonresident-remitting households. See also Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, "Personal Remittances Reach a Record High of US$3.7 Billion in December 2024; Full-Year Level of US$38.3 Billion Highest to Dat," 17 February 2025, https://www.bsp.gov.ph/SitePages/MediaAndResearch/MediaDisp.aspx?ItemId=7426.

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Part 3

SEA OF MARINE LIFE

BENEATH THE SURFACE:

JOSHUA ALLEN C. CANLAS
MICHELLE MARIE T. OCHOA
LIILBETH A. SALVADOR REYES

SILENT THREATS AND STORIES FROM THE MUSSELS

Traversing through coastal waters in the Philippines, one may find long bamboo poles wedged through the seabed. Surrounding them are rows of makeshift buoys, connected by ropes submerged in the water. Beneath the surface, mussels are being farmed. These shellfish anchor themselves on the ropes, exposed to the motions of the waves. Over time, they become abundant, nourished by unseen organisms suspended in the water.

Drifting in these waters are microscopic organisms called phytoplankton and microalgae. Despite their size, they play a key role in the marine food web, forming the foundation on which higher-order organisms depend for sustenance. They are ever-present in the waters—carried by the waves, propagating in the presence of nutrients and sunlight. These photosynthetic microorganisms, often overlooked, produce more oxygen across the entire earth's waters than the usually credited terrestrial plants.

The fates of phytoplankton are varied. Some drift with the currents, while others are filtered and consumed by more complex organisms like shellfish and fish. Others can lie dormant for years as "cysts" in the sediments, waiting quietly beneath the seabed. This cyclic exchange between water, plankton, and shellfish has long sustained life along the coast. But now, these same waters bear the marks of human presence, interrupting natural cycles long established by nature.

Over the past decades, the world's coasts have changed in many ways. In the Philippines, the mariculture industry has expanded to feed the growing population and reap the economic benefits of its marine resources. As demand increases, the mariculture industry intensifies, and more organic material enters the surrounding water.

The emergence of new structures such as fish pens, cages, rafts, and buoys, as well as the expansion of land reclamation activities, drastically reshaped how the water moves. Impedance to the water's flow leads to the accumulation of uneaten feeds and waste, gradually enriching the water with unnatural concentrations of nutrients that provide ideal conditions for phytoplankton to proliferate.[1] Their exponential growth can develop into what we call as harmful algal blooms, or HABs.

One major concern surrounding HABs is the potential to produce toxins in the water. When filter-feeding organisms like mussels consume these toxic organisms, these may accumulate in the shellfish tissues over time. While the shellfish themselves remain unharmed, humans who eat contaminated shellfish can fall ill and experience paralytic, amnesic, and diarrhetic poisoning.

As though toxins aren't concern enough, HABs are also occurring more frequently and in newer places, posing a growing challenge for coastal ecosystems. Natural dispersal via storms and currents moves these organisms across regions, but human activities amplify their spread. Expansion of shellfish farming may transport shellfish produce and broodstock from affected sites to new mariculture areas. Ships may also move these HABs species across seas through ballast water, releasing them into distant waters where they can establish new populations.[2] In some areas, cysts may have already been present in sediments lurking in the seabed, with reclamation and coastal developments resuspending them and creating the potential for new blooms.

At the same time, these waters transport pollutants like plastic debris. Some pieces are large and visible, while others are small enough to be taken in by marine organisms. What enters the sea does not simply pass through—it settles, accumulates, and moves through the food web. These plastics can become new microenvironments[3], carrying unwanted organisms and turning debris into quiet carriers of biological threats. Together, these human-driven changes raise growing concerns not only for marine life, but also for food safety and the communities that depend on these organisms.

Turning to local waters, these combined pressures help explain why HAB events have become increasingly significant in the country. The 1950s saw the early days of mussel farming in the Philippines with established farming stations in the coastal waters

of Manila Bay, particularly in Binakayan, Cavite. The introduction of mussel farming has since been adopted across different regions in the Philippines in the mid 1970s.[4] In the decades that followed, major mussel farming stations faced challenges due to the unusual occurrence of HABs in these areas. It was observed that algal blooming events have significantly increased throughout the 1990s and 2000s, with a noticeable increase in occurrence and duration of the HABs.[5] The incidence of these blooms, once rare outside of Manila Bay, have since become a regular occurrence throughout various regions in the Philippines.[6]

Some phytoplankton species associated with these bloom events are notorious toxin producers. The *Pyrodinium bahamense* algal bloom of 1983 in the Samar and Leyte regions of the Philippines gave rise to the first reported cases of paralytic shellfish poisoning among Filipinos.[7] Investigations showed that the illness was tied to the consumption of mussels contaminated by the *Pyrodinium* bloom.

During the 1983 blooming event, widespread patches of red and orange in the water were observed across vast coastal areas. With such striking discoloration, “Red Tide” became the popular term among Filipinos for a toxic algal bloom. However, this is a misnomer, as the term is technically caused by dense phytoplankton and does not always equate to threat to humans.[8]

There is no visual indicator that such blooms produce these toxins. Even when the water appears calm and colorless, the silent threat of a toxic algal bloom can still be present. This is why monitoring is essential. HAB monitoring efforts in the Philippines are regularly conducted by the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), popularly known as their “Shellfish Bulletin.” Because the toxin threats remain largely invisible to the naked eye, mussels play a key role in these efforts to assess the safety from toxin contamination. Collected mussel samples are analyzed for the level of toxins they might have accumulated, providing a warning of potential risks that lurk in the water.

Indeed, the lives of marine organisms, from phytoplankton to mussels, are deeply intertwined with the waters that surround them. Water, by nature, is dynamic, constantly shifting in response to the physical, chemical, and biological processes that regulate life beneath its surface. While some changes arise from natural processes, the rapid expansion of human activities tips the scales towards imbalances in the marine environment, leading to unintended consequences on the marine ecosystem. Beneath the surface, mussels and other marine organisms silently carry the traces of these changes and serve as witnesses to threats that often go unseen. This reminds us that what lies beneath the surface continues to affect the lives of organisms and communities that depend on the sea.

Notes

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BEARING WITNESS OR,

MACHEL D. MALAY

THE COMPULSION TO DOCUMENT

What is unseen is unappreciated. What has no name practically does not exist. Artistic practice brings new perspectives to the unseen, overlooked and unappreciated facets of our existence. Natural history research can do the same. While the *Sea of Love / Dagat ng Pag-ibig* exhibit focuses our attention on the invisible travails of Filipino seafarers that keep the global economy running, natural history museums likewise bring light to the hidden lives of sea creatures that keep the planet functioning. Corals and oysters build immense reefs that become homes for other creatures and that help protect shorelines. Worms and sea cucumbers burrow in sediment and bring oxygen and nutrients deep into the seabed. Mussels and sponges filter-feed and in the process, clean the water. Crabs and seastars pry open tasty clams and then become food for larger predatory fish. Coralline algae release chemical cues that signal to baby corals where it's safe to settle. Floating microscopic algae capture sunlight and spark explosions of life in the open ocean. And seagrasses form vast green meadows that lock in atmospheric carbon dioxide and help mitigate climate change. To borrow the words of biologist E.O. Wilson, these creatures—nameless and faceless to the general public—are "the little things that run the world."[1] And our knowledge of the intimate details of their lives can be traced back to the work of natural history museum scientists.

We, who work with natural history museums, are helping to rehabilitate specimen collections: shells, corals, crabs, sponges and worms have been sitting in pickle jars or dusty shelves for decades. We dust off the dry shells and give the pickled specimens new jars and preservatives. We decide what specimens get to stay on the shelves, and which are no longer redeemable and need to be discarded because of long neglect. We photograph the specimens to be kept and give them permanent, trackable accession codes. Then we need to verify if the species identifications are correct, if they need correcting, or if a new name needs to be proposed for a newly-discovered creature. This can be a long and arduous process, akin to detective work. We then carefully enter all the data, including where, when, and how they were collected, into a custom database. These data can then be published in the form of checklists and shared with global data repositories, and the specimens become accessible for other scientists to study.

It may seem like dull, routine work. We take care of the old specimens, loan them out, produce lists of names and albums of photos. Some liken it to glorified stamp-collecting, suitable only for researchers with a compulsion for hoarding and classification. Yet it is not merely about hoarding specimens and archiving data. Specimen by specimen, datapoint by datapoint, we are helping to build the national and global database of our ocean planet.[2] A global pointillist picture of marine biodiversity.

Others would consider us heartless, because we collect and display once-living organisms. Yet museum scientists are passionate defenders of nature. We have come to know these creatures intimately, from their living behavior to their skeletal microstructures. And we bear witness to their incremental-then-dramatic changes. We hold the material evidence of creatures the planet has lost, how their sizes have shrunk, how their seasonal rhythms have been disrupted by climate change, how their bodies hold traces of manmade chemicals, and how indigenous species are replaced by newer arrivals. Consider the humble filter-feeding mussel: archival specimens have been compared to modern samples to record how microplastics have increasingly contaminated their gills as well as our coastal waters.[3] The common mussel species are changing as well. Museum records can be used to track the spread of a new invasive species that is crowding out the established Asian green mussel, forcing mussel farmers to adapt to the new arrival.[4] Yet most seafood lovers are unaware of the new invasive species, and only care about what lands on their plates, not the extra effort now needed to culture them.

What is unseen is unappreciated. By giving names to the little creatures, we honor these invisible workers of ocean ecosystems. Museum archives hold the material evidence that link us to our past.[5] By caring for specimen collections from generations past, we bear witness to the inevitable changes—and document humanity's role in shaping the planet's future.

Notes

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Part 4

SEA OF ART

THE KALEIDOSCOPIC DECOLONIAL WORLD:

JOSE MARI B. CUARTERO

JON CUYSON AND HIS PRACTICE OF ABSTRACTION

The kaleidoscope is a way of looking at the world through a kind of phantasmagoria.[1] In the kaleidoscopic work of the artist Jon Cuyson, one discovers an optical rearrangement of patterns and an infinite permutation of symmetries. The kaleidoscope is a display of a world order that keeps changing within the persistence of capitalism to globalize itself across the world, in which artists like Jon Cuyson grapple with such force by perpetually making art.

This essay considers Jon Cuyson and his practice in relation to biography, Philippine art history, contemporary art, and the nation-state. Hailing from Bulacan, at the outskirts of the metropole, and moving to Baguio in the late 1980s and Manila in the 1990s, he intermittently travelled to New York and city capitals in Europe. By the turn of the millennium, he became a student at Skowhegan and Columbia University. Across such road networks, Cuyson evolved in his ideological and artistic vision by being located at the crossroads of political activism, artistic semiotic warfare, and circulation of transnational forces of placemaking. With the directions that led Cuyson to forked paths, his biography, artistic practice, and art history can be described as a kaleidoscopic world, culminating at the interstices of competing global political stakes, power shifts, and discursive rearrangements.

Cuyson is a biopolitical subject of the twilight between the zeitgeist of the tail end of the Cold War era, and at the same time, the globalization of art history and visual culture, specifically through modern art, abstraction and minimalism. His history is paved by the emergent nexus between the urban and rural, while navigating the dialectic between the local and global. Growing up in a family whose livelihood was built on transporting tires through shipping containers, it allowed him to glimpse the maritime networks of globalization, while simultaneously being immersed among shipyard workers.

In his paintings and films, different textures, gradations of colors, and dissimulation of boundaries, edges and certainties position Cuyson's practice amid the plasticity of our reality in the firmament. The instability brought by military conflict was transformational for creative practices in the Philippines. Consider the history of modern abstraction in the Philippines from the perspective of the Crucible workshop led by Purita Kalaw, which emphasized "the need to portray life's tensions and conflicts, like the horror and devastation of the recent war" after observing that "painting Amorsolo-like pastoral visions of the Philippine countryside had reached a dead end."[2] Gatbonton and others depict the modern period as defined by those who "insisted on the reality, not of objects and subject matter, but of relationships" and that "the way line, color, shape, texture and space interact—establishing points of movement and rest, tension and relaxation," compelling them to value the ""plastic reality," rather than realistic representation."[3]

More recently, the curator Patrick Flores offered a concept called an "elusive edge," which captures "how the Philippine artistic ecology and intelligence decisively responded to the abstract aesthetic, conversing in both its international and vernacular registers."[4] Cuyson's installation holds a dialectics that morphs yet holds onto a world that keeps on changing, mutating in kaleidoscopic turns. Our focal points expand, making our vision almost as if circumnavigating an existing world, not unlike seafarers and their maritime experience.

The seafarer of Cuyson's films is understood through the character Kerel, a cultural translation of Jean Genet's novel, *Querelle*, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's movie with the same title. Cuyson develops a moving image where Querelle inhabits the nationalist linguistic intervention of Kerel by deracinating the name's spelling from its European orthography and in turn, infusing our anticolonial orthography, which is the "K" from the Katipunan revolution. With this linguistic shift, Cuyson transforms the queer heteronormative characterization of Kerel into a story of what artist Isola Tong calls "trancestral gathering," which expands the kinship of Kerel through the following films: a transwoman in *Mutya* who is his beloved, the shamanic mother in *Nanay Cleo*, and eventually, the mussels speaking in his most recent film, *Sea of Echoes.*

In his cinematic world, Cuyson allows us to feel the textures of the ocean just as his abstract paintings lay the shorelines, the islands, the shipping vessels, and the containers. To borrow from Flores, this is a way of decolonizing abstraction, which is also the "spirit of abstraction that resists representation but permeates the becoming," a form of "absorbing the history of colonial pedagogy, the process of re-appropriation of both native and alien form," and thus, transforming such an aesthetic into a "transformative idiom that overcomes colonial binarisms."[5] Fundamental in the colonial world of binarisms is the divide between human and nonhuman, land and water, us and them. As Cuyson continues to paint the world in abstraction, we are flooded by the concreteness of his fragmented systems in which we discover textures, stories, people, mussels, colors, and objects in a perpetual movement, rearranging themselves and the world, endlessly decolonizing patterns, orders, relations and symmetries where we do not subsist on hierarchies but histories of movement towards love and its possibilities.

Notes

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3 Gatbonton, 118.

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5 Patrick Flores, "Abstract Bind, Philippine Form" (unpublished), 13.





Buoyed by the slow rhythms of ocean time and bayanihan, the Filipino culture of community and care, *Sea of Love / Dagat ng Pag-ibig* traces the human gestures of memory and survival through a story told from four perspectives — the sailor, his lover, his mother and the sea of echoes. Immersive and suffused by light, sound and reflection, Jon Cuyson's installation channels the psychic phenomena of a life lived on an ocean. The loves and longings of the seafarer and his family move along with Cambrian and maritime histories of the ocean to humanize the Philippine labor that fuels the waterways of global commerce.

The exhibition situates our story through a spatial system of twenty paintings, four films and sculptural flotsam, forming an abstract panorama in a quadrilateral arrangement. The paintings and films converge and propose varying meanings as one moves through the space. Perhaps the washes of color evoke an ocean horizon, and our visitor moves through the space like a ship adrift at sea. You may feel surrounded by walls, not unlike being held within a shipping container or a maritime vessel, with occasional portals looking outwards. One might pause to sit and become a castaway on her own island.

Over the past three decades, Manila-based artist Jon Cuyson has worked with painting as an operating system, using its mutability as a method, a conceptual frame and queer intervention. The paintings presented here comprise his largest works to date, and every painting on canvas is also its support structure. The paintings double as sculptural walls, each panel wrapped entirely in canvas. Using the square as a unit, his nod to minimalist practices, the artist creates a visual language based on iterations of color, geometry and form, both negative and positive. The twenty panels reflect one another in their shared and carefully regulated lexicon, as if each one were a unique attempt to build a new signifier to encompass a shared thought or point of view. Rectilinear openings in the panels offer new vantage points and provocations to see past and look through, as the installation invites viewers to circulate along its interior skin and

trace a path across its outside. Circular portals provoke the viewer to explore spherical frames on the space and the monitors, mirroring the portholes of ships and the scopes of the spyglass. Blinds appear on a panel, suggesting an enormous window or a reimagining of spatial privacy. The result is a dynamic minimalist remix of the architecture of containment (the ship, the home) and a radical contortion of the ontological positionality of outside and inside, here and there, sea and self.

In this system, the artist embraced the shipping container as a universal motif of the global commodity. The entirety of the *Sea of Love* exhibition—its paintings, wall panels and sculptures—fits within a single 40-foot shipping container. This was by design, for efficiency and economy; but its practicality also has a conceptual backbone. By filling the universal volume of a global shipping container precisely with his sculptural paintings, Cuyson has designed a creative unit perfectly in sync with the commercial goods escorted by the Filipino seafarers across the waterways of the world. Once this global unit arrived in the harbor of Venice, it made its way to the warehouses of the Arsenale, a former medieval naval fortress, where the volumetric mass expanded outwards from the shipping container, to form the quadrilateral panorama encompassing the *Sea of Love.* The inside is now visible, the interior is now free. The performative qualities of Minimalist art practices of the twentieth century reconfigured the power center of our relationship to monuments. We now understand minimalism's allure, not for its embrace of pure forms, but rather for the ways in which it demands movement from its audiences. As one moves around the art object, the artwork's site no longer holds the meaning—the meaning comes from our embodied experience with the work; and that meaning shifts as do we. For Cuyson, fracturing, puncturing and reconstituting the monolith in fragmented but connected forms is a queer provocation.

As the installation shifts between painterly geometric abstraction, cinematic ecologies of self and environment surface. Mists of paint and lush filmic scenes of figures, faces and forests coexist with sounds and textures, its fluidity akin to waves. Paintings whose scale nods to the configuration of shipping containers are broken with portals of darkness and clouds of light. Shapes circulate, cling and gather like the byssal threads of mussels on a ship.

Cinematic fragments appear and dissolve: found footage from the lost 1917 black and white film *Cleopatra*; YouTube videos of piracy at sea; excerpts from sailors' personal videos; and digital chats broken by unstable telecommunications. Clustered like mussel networks, these film fragments form an intimate epic, illustrating how oceans and waterways have long been used as metaphors for journeys of the heart.

Within this cultural imaginary the Filipino sailor has been a quiet observer, continually at work. Seafarers move through global economies that rely on their labor, yet rarely register their lives beyond function. For many Filipinos, the sea is less a romantic horizon than a site of separation, a passageway marked by prolonged absence, risk and endurance. In the exhibition the absence of loved ones is marked with cast-resin sculptures of everyday objects. Toothbrushes, combs, hangers and a karaoke microphone ascend to the surfaces of the canvases or are nestled in corners. These personal items are a traveler's essentials, the basic elements of self-care. The ocean collects and archives these things, not unlike the sedimentation of debris and history in mussel biology.

The collective consciousness of mussels here emerges as both a protector and proxy for the seafarer and his family. Speaking as one voice and many, mussels filter memory as they filter water, carrying sediments of forgotten crossings, submerged sovereignties and ecological transformations. Alongside this ancient wisdom from the oceans, Filipino histories of movement and archipelagic thinking recognize expanses of water as roads that guide us. The wayfinding techniques of our seafaring ancestors are embodied knowledges that connect us to other creatures, as do flows of care. Nanay Cleo reflects on her love by using shamanistic magic to help her son. The romance between Kerel and Mutya, the trans beloved, unfolds into Mutya's tender gift to save his mother's vision, and so delaying her own personal transformation. The name Mutya is a deep Tagalog word describing the beauty of a beloved or cherished one. More importantly, Mutya suggests a figure that is not fully fixed, part human, part symbolic and part mythic. Such entanglement expands how we define desire, complicating notions of masculinity and celebrating *kalinga, aruga* or *malasakit*, the many ways we care for others. In *Sea of Love* queer love exists alongside

familial love, just as it bears witness to the quiet moments of humanity that fuel the vast maritime industry.

Filipinos comprise one of every three seafarers on global waters today, and have for centuries been an indispensable yet invisible force in the movement of global capital, commercial and cultural. Their hands have moved almost every artwork in the Venice Biennale. At sea, fast time dissolves, and so do Cuyson's cinematic environments. Slow time guides the boats and the pace of everyday life, expressing the continuity of existence; just as the artist's painterly gestures link the moving images to material surfaces. Experienced through Jon Cuyson's distinctive poetic sensibilities—structured and graphic but organic, enveloping yet open—*Sea of Love* claims oceans as hopeful, transgressive spaces for kinship, being and belonging.



BIOGRAPHIES

Kris Alexanderson is Associate Professor of History at University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, where she teaches courses on world history, maritime history, and the history of science and technology. Her first book, *Subversive Seas: Anticolonial Networks across the Twentieth-Century Dutch Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), is at once a history of global maritime networks connecting Southeast Asia to port cities in East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe and a ship-level history of the everyday lives and political struggles of colonial subjects traveling across the world's oceans.

Alfonse Chiu is a writer, designer, curator and founding director of the Centre for Urban Mythologies (CUM). They work across art, architecture, performance and cinema, a research-based practice. They excavate subterranean processes and infrastructures, while underpinning capital and ideological flows within the post-colonial tropical belt, with a focus on South/East Asia and the Pacific Rim. They hold a Masters of Environmental Design from the Yale School of Architecture, and are presently the Editor of the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai.

Jose Mari Cuartero is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of the Philippines-Diliman, and the research associate for the Philippine Pavilion at the 61st Venice Art Biennale 2026. His research has been anchored on the folklore archive of Isabelo de los Reyes, a polymath thinker of the late 19th-century Philippines, which emboldens him to engage in an interdisciplinary dialogue with fields like contemporary art, curatorial practice and comparative literature. His art writings regularly appear in an online newspaper, CoverStory.

Jon Cuyson is an interdisciplinary artist and filmmaker whose practice spans across installation, painting, sculpture, photography, artist books and moving images. Rooted in queer and postcolonial ecologies, his work engages the sea as a living archive, a shifting field through which memory, labor, migration and desire circulate and transform. Through material processes and narrative construction, he creates immersive environments and hybrid cinematic works that trace transoceanic histories and the intimate geographies of the Filipino diaspora. His evolving framework, called Mussel Thinking, is a mode of thinking and making that is grounded in filtration, attachment and interdependence, which provides structures and articulations of the relations between bodies, materials and environments. He is the featured artist of the Philippine Pavilion at the 61st Venice Art Biennale and is based in Manila.

Kale Bantigue Fajardo is an Associate Professor of Transnational and TransPacific Asian American Studies in the Department of American Studies and the Director of the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. Fajardo is a Co-Editor-in-Chief of *Blue Humanities*, the author of *Filipino Crosscurrents: Oceanographies of Seafaring, Masculinities and Globalization*, and a Co-Editor of *Q + A: Queer Voices in North America*. He is working on a second book project which analyzes regional U.S. American literary and visual texts that address the figure of the Filipino maritime worker in Coastal Louisiana and the U.S. Pacific Coast. In this book, *Another Archipelago,* Fajardo advocates an engagement with Blue Humanities approaches in Critical Filipinx Studies and Asian American Studies.

Roderick G. Galam is a Senior Lecturer of Sociology at Oxford Brookes University, United Kingdom. He has expertise in the sociology of migration, work, and youth, with a focus on Filipino seafaring labor in the global maritime industry. His current book project is a sociolegal study of the protection of the rights of Filipino seafarers working in foreign-flagged ships.

Mara Gladstone is a curator and educator committed to create transdisciplinary, welcoming spaces for art that nurture connections between people and the environment. She has organized exhibitions, public art, programs and publications at Desert X, Palm Springs Art Museum and J. Paul Getty Museum in partnership with community leaders and civic agencies. She holds degrees from the University of Rochester (MA, PhD) and Brown (BA) and is a dual citizen of the United States and the Philippines. She is the curator of the Philippine Pavilion at the 61st Venice Art Biennale and is based in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Eulalio R. Guieb III is a maritime anthropologist, literary writer, experimental filmmaker, video documentarist, and audio artist. He holds a PhD in Anthropology from McGill University in Montreal and teaches Critical Cultural Studies of Media in the Department of Broadcast Communication at the University of the Philippines-Diliman. He is a member of the executive committee of Ugnayang Pang-AghamTao (UGAT/The Anthropological Association of the

Philippines). He also serves in the board of Daluhay (Daloy ng Buhay/ Flow of Life), a national NGO based in Baler, Aurora, and engages in development work based on a reef-to-ridge ecosystem framework for artisanal communities and indigenous peoples in the North Philippine Sea Bioregion.

Maria Celia ('Machel') Malay is a Professor at the Marine Science Institute, University of the Philippines-Diliman. She is broadly interested in marine invertebrates, including their diversity, evolution, ecology, conservation, and importance to humans. She currently focuses on establishing the nascent research museum of UP-MSI for species discovery, collaborative knowledge-building and the promotion of bioliteracy.

Anthony Christian Ocampo is Professor of Sociology at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona in California. He is the author of *Brown and Gay in LA: The Lives of Immigrant Sons* and *The Latinos of Asia: How Filipino Americans Break the Rules of Race*, which have been featured on NPR, NBC News, Literary Hub, and in the *Los Angeles Times*. He is an Academic Director of the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity and the co-host of the podcast *Professor-ing*. He has received fellowships from the Ford Foundation, Jack Jones Literary Arts, Tin House, and the VONA/Voices of Our Nations Arts Foundation.

Lilibeth A. Salvador is a Professor and the Deputy Director for Instruction at the Marine Science Institute, University of the Philippines-Diliman. A chemist by training, she obtained her PhD in Pharmaceutical Sciences–Medicinal Chemistry at the University of Florida. Dr. Salvador has worked extensively on marine natural products purification, structure elucidation and biological activity assessment. Her research focuses on discovering natural products from marine organisms and monitoring emerging and existing toxins from harmful algal blooms. She is the curator of the Marine Natural Products Legacy Collection at UP-MSI. This collection comprises over 5000 marine microorganisms, 6000+ extracts and fractions, and over 100 pure compounds from Philippine marine organisms.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is our privilege and honor to extend our deepest gratitude to the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, the Department of Foreign Affairs, and the Office of Senator Loren Legarda for the opportunity to bring this project to audiences at home and abroad. We thank our colleagues at the Philippine Arts in Venice Biennale Coordinating Committee and the jurors Mayumi Hirano, Manny Montelibano and Victorino Mapa Manalo for selecting our proposal, trusting in our vision, and working diligently to bring the exhibition from the printed page into reality.

We are grateful to all of the collaborators who have contributed to this project since its beginning in 2019. The number of people involved over many years reflects the strength, creativity, and interconnectedness of Filipino communities across oceans, a core message of the exhibition itself. We extend our appreciation to all of the creative partners, organizers, installation teams, audiences, and colleagues from the Philippines, Italy and beyond—past and present—who have helped make this moment possible.

Our research led to rich contextual conversations with scholars from around the world, and we are grateful to have had so many thought partners along our journey. We acknowledge the contributions of Jomar Cuartero, Kris Alexanderson, Kale Bantigue Fajardo, Alfonse Chiu, Roderick G. Galam, Eulalio R. Guieb III, Maria Celia Malay, Anthony Ocampo, Lilibeth A. Salvador, Joshua Allen Canlas, Michelle Marie Ochoa, and Patrick Flores. Special thanks to Jessica Fleischmann for conveying our project in a visual identity that threads their many ideas together.

Maraming salamat to Philippine Airlines, the travel partner of the Artistic Team of the Philippine Pavilion, and to the LEF Foundation, for making possible this publication and collateral public programs in Europe, Asia and North America. Thank you to Bloomberg Connects for providing this project with a robust audioguide, and to the thoughtful work by digital producer Sarah Giovanniello. Programs and publications allow us to engage with audiences around the world and extend the reach of our project beyond the exhibition's timeline.

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The artist and curator send further gratitude to our bayanihan: John and Melinda Jones; Oscar and Teresita Bay and family; Arthur Nies; Joanne, Jennifer, Maryjane and Julian Cuyson; Jay and Martin Block; Lindy Castillo; Hubert Untal; Bernadette and Michael Gladstone; Max, Violet and Rex Finneran; Bean and Alan Finneran; The Pollitts; The Lemoncitos; The Villenas; Rita Gladstone; Bayanihan Desert; and Edwin Ramoran.

Finally, we acknowledge our heart and home, the Philippines and its people. On the archipelago and in the diaspora, Filipino resilience and cultures of care inspire endless admiration.

—Mara Gladstone and Jon Cuyson

ARTISTIC TEAM

ARTIST Jon Cuyson
CURATOR Mara Gladstone
RESEARCH ASSOCIATE Jose Mari Cuartero
PUBLIC RELATIONS
Thomas Brown Communications
GRAPHIC DESIGN
Jessica Fleischmann, Still Room

THE W/HOLE HORIZON

2026. Twenty paintings, mixed media shaped canvas panels, resin, acrylic and wood with cast resin sculptures.

WORKSHOP LEAD William Crauz
Jaysaree E. Sabanal
Kiven Rasco
Jeneil Candelario
Anthony Velleza
Marlon Mandia
Abelardo Crauz Jr.
Movie Manzanas
Arnaldo Cabiguin
Randy Catin
Roger Miras
Romeo Altiche
Angelo Ian Galleo
STUDIO ASSISTANT
Ricardo Vicente Soriano

Take the audio tour of *Sea of Love / Dagat ng Pag-ibig* on Bloomberg Connects.

Bloomberg Connects

SEA OF ECHOES

2026. Digital video in black and white finish with sound. Tagalog with English subtitles.
RUN TIME 9 minutes 30 seconds

Soliman Cruz AS Joel
Jo-Ann Morallos AS Jo Ann
Ethan King AS Ethan
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY (UNDERWATER)
Ivan Sarenas
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY Selene Almeron
CAMERA ASSISTANT Roman Tamayo
PRODUCTION DESIGN ASSISTANT Ricardo Soriano
PRODUCTION MANAGER Karen Pajar
LOCATION MANAGER Exequiel Fernando Jr.
PRODUCTION ASSISTANT Raquel Acosta
SANDMAN Marcelo Hilado
HEAD SETMAN William Crauz
SETMEN Anthony Velleza, Marlon Mandia, Jaysaree E. Sabanal, Abelardo Crauz Jr.
Mussel Farm Barangay Digman: Cloui Muñez, Paul Ponio, Jhoross Muñez, Jacob delos Reyes, Renato Acora, Chriscenry Grabello
SAFETY OFFICER / MEDIC Eric Arnulfo
EMT Leandro Valiente Jr.,
Ms. Grace Morales / AGM Services
UTILITY Jaysaree E. Sabanal
ASSISTANT LOCATION COORDINATOR
Robert Cuevas
BTS Maria Lourdes Luna
DRIVERS Randy Belisario, Gilbert Balquin, Carlo Santos
SERVICE VEHICLES Joy Brigola
CATERER Lorenzo Miguel Cuevas
CAMERA & EQUIPMENT Ivan Sarenas, Serene Almeron, Parallax Studio
City of Bacoor, Cavite and Hon. Mayor Strike B. Revilla, Allan G. Chua, OIC-Agricultural Services
Barangay Sinbanali
Bacoor, Cavite and Caridad B. Sanchez
Barangay Digman Bacoor, Cavite and Edwin Gawaran, Lin Gawaran
Philippine Coast Guard, Bacoor and Tanza, Cavite and Commander Egypt Apolonio
COLOR GRADING Selene Almeron
EDITORS Klarisse Purugganan, Jon Cuyson
MUSIC Per Billgren
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY Jon Cuyson
PRODUCED BY Everyday Productions

KEREL (SEA OF LOVE)

2021. From the Kerel Trilogy. Digital video in black and white finish with sound. Tagalog with English subtitles.
RUN TIME 14 minutes 30 seconds

Jal Galang AS Kerel
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY Ivan Sarenas
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR Maai Avendaño
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY Jon Cuyson
PRODUCED BY Everyday Productions

MUTYA

2021. From the Kerel Trilogy. Digital video in black and white finish with sound. Tagalog with English subtitles.
RUN TIME 8 minutes 10 seconds

Josh Serafin AS Mutya
Gab Ansomo AS THE VOICE OF Mutya
Jal Galang AS Kerel
Irma Adlawan AS Nanay
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY Odyssey Flores
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR Maai Avendaño
PRODUCTION MANAGEr Karen Pajar
PRODUCTION DESIGN TEAM Gab Torres, Shania Sumergido and Richard Santos
SOUND Gian Arre
STILLS Selene Almeron
SOUND DESIGN Klarisse Purugganan
EDITORS Klarisse Purugganan, Jon Cuyson
LOCATION MANAGER Godwin Alvero
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY Jon Cuyson
PRODUCED BY Everyday Productions

ANG PANAGINIP NI NANAY CLEO
NANAY CLEO'S DREAM

2021. From the Kerel Trilogy. Digital video in black and white finish with sound. Tagalog with English subtitles.
RUN TIME: 11 minutes

Irma Adlawan AS Nanay Cleo
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY Odyssey Flores
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR Maai Avendaño
PRODUCTION MANAGER Karen Pajar
PRODUCTION DESIGN Gab Torres, Shania Sumergido, Richard Santos
SOUND Gian Arre
STILLS Selene Almeron
SOUND DESIGN Klarisse Purugganan
EDITORS Klarisse Purugganan and Jon Cuyson
LOCATION MANAGER Godwin Alvero
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY Jon Cuyson
PRODUCED BY Everyday Productions

A NOTE ON THE DESIGN

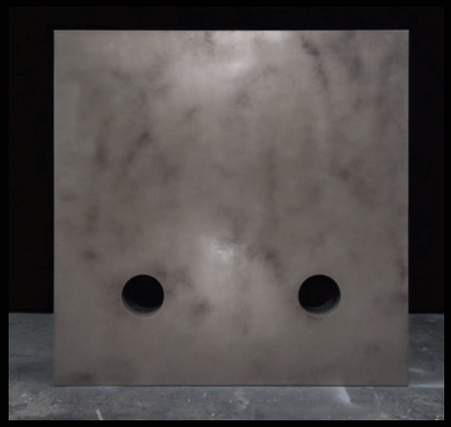
Sea of Love's visual identity expresses the centering, grounding power of love (both familial and romantic), the water and waves of the ocean and other bodies of water, and the structure and constraints experienced by workers on container ships. It also points to the four cardinal directions found on a compass (North, South, East, West), referencing tools of navigation across international waters. A secondary symbolism can be found in this positioning of the titles and authors' names: the cross and the place of Catholicism in Filipino culture.

The identity is always clean and balanced. Typefaces are an expressive, decorative all caps type treatment (FK Raster Grotesk Smooth) for the main title and a clean sans serif for secondary type. FK Raster Grotesk Smooth is slightly condensed and squared off, which references the markings on the ends and sides of shipping containers. Title treatments create movement with a changing space between horizontally justified type in the "East" and "West", left and right, positions depending on the length of the two words. The books footers also use this justified treatment, so that some titles have much space between words and the words of other titles are very close together, echoing the ebb and flow of the sea's tides. The simple color palette is drawn from the silvery tones of Jon Cuyson's artworks.

Together these elements communicate the minimalist yet rich aesthetic of Jon Cuyson's work. They are always presented with restraint and sensitivity, and a bit of empathetic, strong, and respectful magic.

—Jessica Fleischmann, Still Room





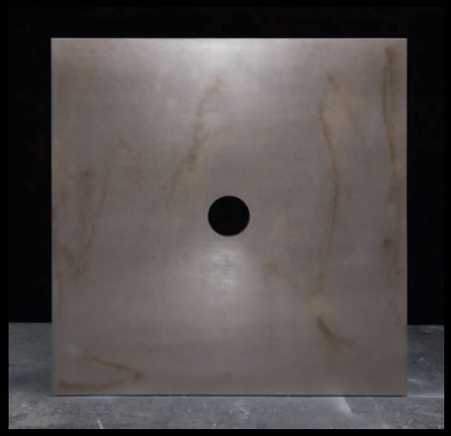




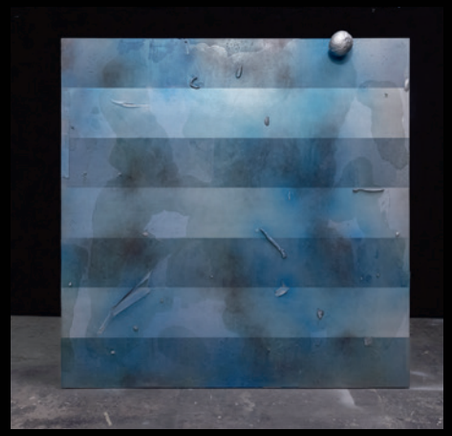
JON CUYSON:
SEA OF LOVE / DAGAT NG PAG-IBIG
THE W/HOLE HORIZON











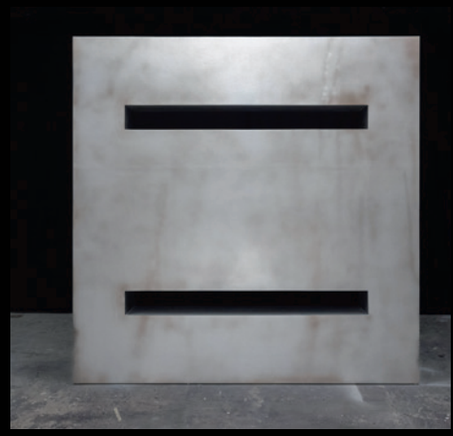










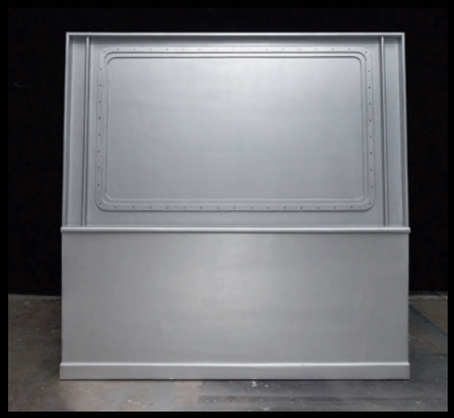


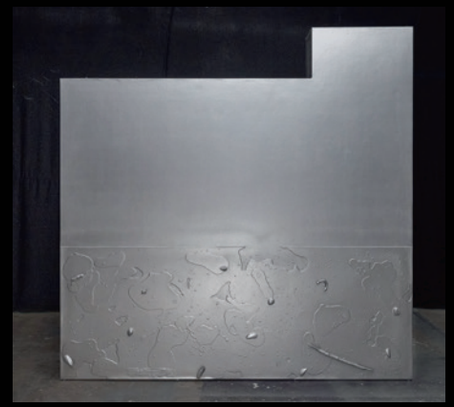












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Project Management: National Commission for Culture and the Arts through the Philippine Arts in Venice Biennale Coordinating Committee

Philippine Arts in Venice Biennale Coordinating Committee
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