

GINA OSTERLOH

ANONYMOUS FRONT

Jan 21 – April 8, 2012

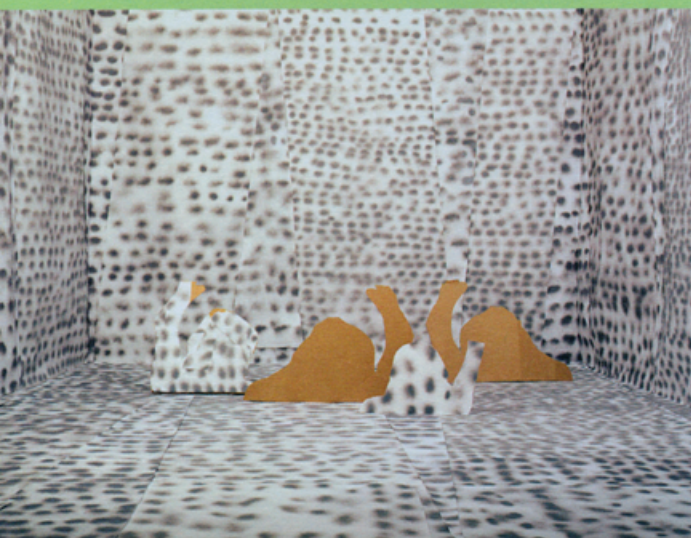
Curated by Julio César Morales

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Interview with the Artist

Julio César Morales: You began as a graffiti artist over a decade ago, and have since developed a complicated and diverse practice with photography at the center. How do you see a connection with your performances for the camera and the anonymity of street graffiti?

Gina Osterloh: In terms of anonymity, no. However, in terms of investigating repetition—specifically slippage through repetition, hiccups in hegemony, and repetition in terms of mimicry—absolutely. I am also interested in repetition and mimicry as a basic building block of language. Since I was involved in graffiti some time ago, it's easier for me to see the connections now. Besides formal concerns such as color, it introduced me to working with a grid structure (now I have the grid on the ground glass of my 4x5 camera), as well as the importance of representation and perception through the photograph. Then it was often about "the flick" or the photo of the piece, not the piece itself, which would circulate. It wasn't until very recently when I made works such as *Wide Group Dynamic* and *Anonymous Front* (Group Threshold) that a conscious awareness of graffiti's influence entered the work. I was very excited to introduce the primer gray spray paint dot pattern into these works. Even in the final prints, I decided to go with an inkjet process instead of a richer C-print. It's uncanny how the spray of the inkjet rendered the spray of the dots more accurately.



Collapse #2, archival pigment photograph, 2010, 20" x 20"



Blank Attempt, c-print, 2008, 11" x 14"

JCM: Can you describe the progression from your early work, such as *Somewhere Tropical*, to the more recent "Body Prop" series?

GO: *Somewhere Tropical* started as a response to portraiture—a frustration with portraiture's innate ability to capture, summarize, and name its subjects. It also started with an infatuation with the Los Angeles landscape, and the landscape my mother would describe of the Philippines, of growing up in the tropics. Each was always viewed through a filter of sorts, whether the polluted LA skyline, stories, or film. *Somewhere Tropical* became a psyche wall, a prop in itself, but also something very real. At first my use of camouflage was quite literal, i.e. I would put on camouflage pants (also referencing my mother's history of war, as a child in WWII in the Philippines). In the early photographs, I used military camouflage as a way to fracture the thevisual field, especially in the cases where the overall pattern becomes a set for a portrait. In the end however, I realized the poetics of military camouflage are overused and too familiar. I wanted to take the language of camouflage beyond military reference.



JCM: To what extent does the idea of the gaze influence your work and how then does camouflage function?

GO: From *Somewhere Tropical*, I created the "Turquoise Room" series. Again, thinking of my infatuation with the clichéd LA sunset landscape and the tropics, it was about a visceral, yet indeterminate relationship between the body and a color field. The set, the room became a color field. Camouflage is really just repetition; it is mimicry, the copy. But the copy, or response, is never perfect. Through repetition or sameness, difference emerges. In the most pared down sense, what does the line between a gesture and non-gesture look like? Camouflage is also a strategy of anonymity. Again in portraiture, it is a way to disrupt subject identification. Close to this strategy is my use of the blank—the blotting out, turning away, masking of the face, or entire figure. *Body Prop* asks for the repetition of the anonymous throughout the visual field, from corner to corner of the picture plane—on the walls of the room.

JCM: The 1990 Louvre exhibition, *Memories of the Blind*, curated by Jacques Derrida explored issues of vision, blindness, self-representation, and their relation to drawing, while offering detailed readings of an extraordinary collection of images. Was the exhibition or essay an influence on your new work, and if so, how?

GO: I can only hope so, at least in discourse. Derrida's accompanying essay to the exhibition (a book-long essay without chapter breaks) is a massive undertaking of drawings and representations of the blind; the gesture of the blind hand; depictions of hand gestures also addressing the gaze, i.e. Medusa mostly from the Louvre collection; metaphors of the blind through Greek mythology and the bible; drawings and paintings such as *Christ Healing a Blind Man* by Theodule Ribot and Lucas Van Leyden; meticulous writing about every gesture, turn of head, posture in each work. Derrida writes on questions of visibility: who is seen, the seer, the gaze, memory, and the self-portrait.

In terms of my photographs, I am interested in Derrida's poetics of the mask, the gaze, the seer, who is seen, the signifying space between the seer and the blind. In terms of the *New Vision* video, I am interested in Derrida's metaphors of blindness from the perspective of the writer, seeing through hands, fingertips as eyes. With this said, in *New Vision*, one of the main objectives of the project is for the blind to speak; for the blind to be seen. In many ways the film (a visual project) is still for a seeing audience. However, the voice of the blind is the basis, the structure of the film. In contrast to my photographs, which address perception and identity through the most pared down forms of visibility, and which borrow strategies of abstraction, *New Vision* addresses perception and identity through the real; real accounts of blindness, physical blindness. All of this is embedded within labor. Massage therapy is a state-recognized, very respectable profession for the blind in the Philippines; yet it is one of the only ones.

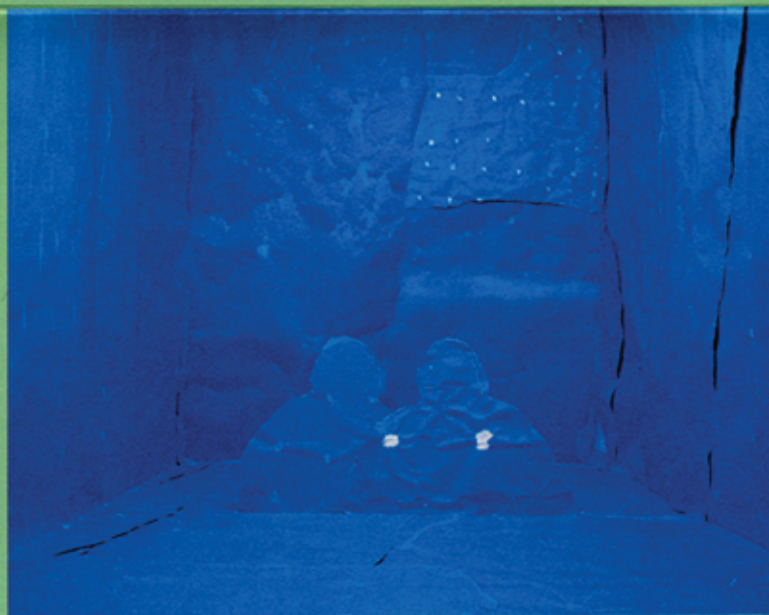
MAGTANONG KA

Paola Santoscoy
Director of El Museo Experimental El Eco, Mexico City

Magtanong Ka, or "magta," is the Filipino word for the English verb "ask." Taken from one of the lines of Gina Osterloh's most recent video works, *magta* serves here as an entry to this artist's inquiry into visible and invisible forms of difference. Manila's tropical cityscape is the setting for *New Vision* (2012), a collaboration between Osterloh and a blind massage therapy cooperative with the same name, founded in 1996. Located in a four-story building on Don Pedro Street in the Singalong neighborhood, New Vision constitutes a terrain for the investigation of the notion of collectivity as well as the multilayered meanings situated between spoken and physical languages.

Osterloh interviews the blind members of the cooperative (in both group and individual sessions) in an attempt to prompt an enunciation of perception via blindness, or according to her, as a way of addressing issues of identity and perception through "the signifying space between the seer and the blind." Personal and historical memory intertwine as we listen to their responses, and the presence of Spanish and English words in Tagalog comes across as a testimony of this country's complex colonial history—first dominated by Spain until the 19th century and later by the United States until the end of the Second World War, when the archipelago finally obtained its independence. What initially seems like a straightforward documentary approach soon becomes a broader exploration of the way we perceive space, the way we conceive identity, and the roles we play in society, all central issues in Osterloh's artistic practice.

In *Anonymous Front*, *New Vision* is paired with a series of photographs taken in room-size constructed paper sets. Previous works by Osterloh featured the artist's body portrayed within artificial environments built to resemble a generic tropical landscape and utilizing the L.A. color palette as clichés of idealized places (*Somewhere Tropical*, 2006).



untitled (double figures, sun, bleach marks), archival pigment photograph with uv laminate, 2011, 11.5" x 14.5"

In contrast, in her new series of photographs, abstracted versions of the body are being displayed in different monochromatic, painted sets. Here, space and bodies collapse, questioning the contours of that which constitutes a body, and by extension a collective body—flat paper-cut silhouettes substitute the body, becoming anonymous and thus escaping societal conventions and categorizations: a strategy for the bodies to remain unnamed. Alongside the photographs and the video, the constructed set is positioned within the exhibition space functioning as a three-dimensional element articulating a connection between the abstracted sets of the photographs and the real-life environments presented in the video.

Returning to *magta*, when the artist asks massage therapist Mang Rudy how he navigates or survives in a city like Manila, he responds: "We ask the people on the street for help on how to get around..." So here the blind are able to get around with our friend *magta*. Trusting *magta*, trusting the other, means letting go of ones fixed perceptions and fixed ideas about how to navigate a predetermined space, and ultimately, how to navigate life. By presenting different—and somewhat inverse—approaches to the way we perceive / treat / read space, Osterloh's works allow for a particular politics of visibility to emerge, where the visual and spoken presence of the bodies that constitute her works complicate the spectator's own bodily presence and experience of mutuality. The result is a combination of the abstract and the real as well as the contours of what can be seen, thought, and conceived.



New Vision, HD video still, 2011

Artwork shown on front: *New Family*, archival pigment photograph, 24" x 30"; *Paired Family Members*, archival pigment photograph, 2011, 24" x 30"; *Single Family Member*, archival pigment photograph, 2011, 24" x 30"

All works courtesy of the artist, Francois Ghebely Gallery, Los Angeles and Soverlent Gallery, Manila.

SOAR THE SEARCH FOR MEANING
This program is organized around YBCA's Big Idea.