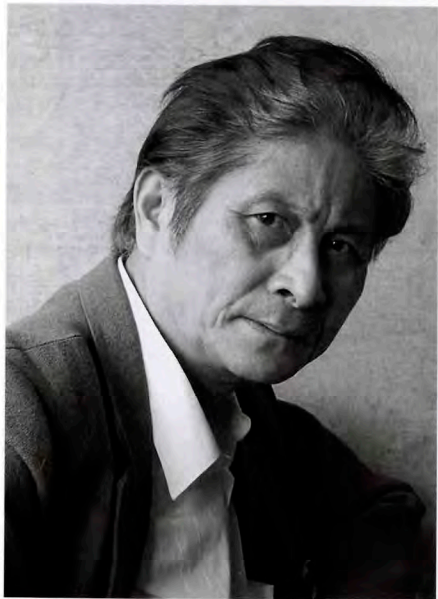


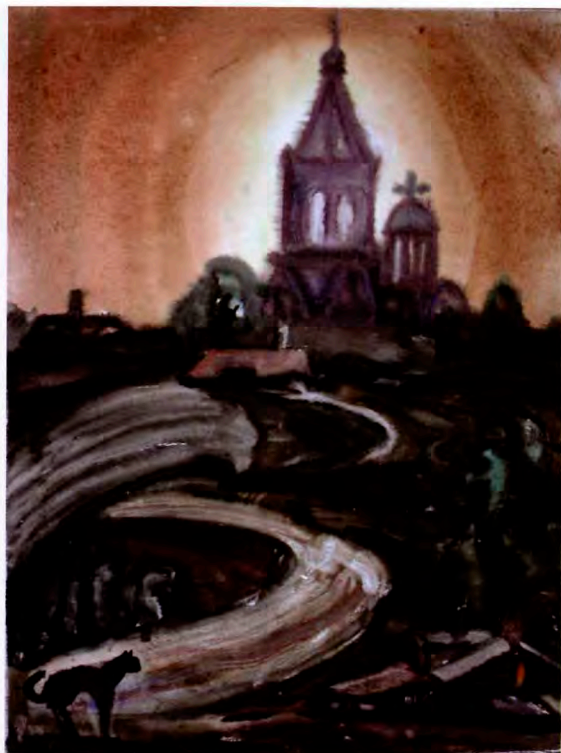
and finally for China. Thirty-odd years passed between the revolution and what Zhuang describes as "a sudden flash" in the 1980s—that moment at mid-decade when, after a few years of gestation, the movement known as *Xing Xing*, or "Star Star," came to prominence and China's art scene burst open. "It was like a door opening wider and wider," Zhuang recalls.

But opening onto what? For many younger artists it seems to have opened onto a kind of nothingness, a blank space, an absence—a hole in the evolution of an artistic tradition. To listen to these artists today, it was both freeing and frightening all at once. For Zhuang and those of his generation, it was the former and scarcely at all the latter. For the door opened upon a tradition to be resumed, with which to reconnect—not the ancient tradition of calligraphy and landscapes rendered on scrolls and fans, but the pre-1949 tradition wherein China had sought its modern self and artists their modern selves by combining all they had been exposed to—the Chinese of it and the Western of it, the old and the new. These were the threads Zhuang picked up in his 50s, and it is the grasping of them that distinguishes Zhuang's generation from those that have followed.

For the one, we might say, China's opening has left them lost, while for the other it has left them found. The work coming from Zhuang and his cohort tends to be quieter, less assertive, and less sensational—it is less in a hurry, if you like, and by its nature it seems to be shy of the spotlight. But it is valuable in the way Taro Okamoto described value. And it is as much about contemporary China,



Zhuang Hongxing.



Zhuang Hongxing, *Russian Night*, 2007, watercolor on paper, 53 x 41 cm.

and being a Chinese artist in the early-21st century, as anything a Feng Mengbo or a Bai Ming is producing. There is an interesting relationship between the work of these different generations: The technical accomplishment is not the same, notably in the newer media. But in the end the work of the older generation makes possible the work of the younger.

"What strikes me about Zhuang's work is its portrayal of a certain world," says Fang Jun, a critic who knows Zhuang's work well. "It evokes a movement, one that goes from fullness and completion to loss, and it does this, importantly, by combining 'Eastern' and 'Western' modes of expression."

Zhuang is perfectly fluent in ticking off those influences from the West that accompany Chinese tradition in his own work—among them Cezanne, Matisse, Munch, de Kooning, and the German Expressionists. And he is generous in his approval of many younger artists active in the Beijing art scene. But Zhuang does not shy away from the suggestion that what is lacking in the work of many young artists—including some who studied under him—is a fertilizing relationship with tradition and the past of Chinese art. Indeed, when he speaks of tradition, it is perfectly clear that what he means is the 20th-century tradition involving both Chinese practice and Western influence. It is background and foreground, if you like, both being part of China's modern artistic landscape.

The series that may best reflect Zhuang's work, wherein all his influences are most effectively deployed, is *Vestiges*. Certainly it is the most fully realized of Zhuang's efforts. Ironically, the pieces that comprise it are among his least experimental. Some of the later work (*Jingzi* is a good example) is more adventurous by way of composition and sought-after effects. But the *Vestiges* pieces tend to render the figure many of them share in a singularly detached, almost existential fashion: She is part of her surroundings but distinct from them; the environment framed by the borders of the painting contains and cannot contain her. A piece such as *Xia De Zheng Wu* (*Summer Noon*) (1990) captures the effect almost perfectly. It is arguably one of the purest expressions of intent, method, and meaning Zhuang has ever achieved.

The *Vestiges* series is to be valued for one other of its attributes. It is utterly lacking in hesitation. The artist is wholly sure of himself. It is interesting to note the chronology in this respect. *Vestiges* is the first extended series Zhuang executed after he found his feet in the mid- to late-1980s. He may have been more than 50, but that is an unhappy accident of history. There is vibrancy in these pictures we ordinarily associate with youthful artists enjoying that first flush of accomplishment and the suggestion of mastery.

The point brings us back, one final time, to Taro Okamoto. Puzzling over the confusion felt by his contemporaries, he observed, "We somehow lack confidence in the past and the present, and we also lack the energy that will propel us into the future...." The key question here is confidence—knowing where one stands along the vast continuum of any serious artistic tradition. Not so many contemporary Chinese artists possess this quality as Zhuang does. It is a question of being connected—to a past and therefore a future. It causes the thoughtful viewer to distinguish between frenetic activity and what Okamoto called that propelling thing, artistic energy. Δ

Notes:

- 1 & 2. Okamoto, Taro, *My Contemporary Art*, Tokyo: Shincho-sha, 1963. For this term I thank Rustom Bharucha, a Calcutta writer, who coined the word in *Another Asia* (Oxford, 2006) and who uses it often in conversation.
3. The term was invented during the Meiji era precisely to designate what counted as official tradition amid Japan's wholesale modernization.

Photography Rising

Around Asia the growth of photography has been very strong over the past decade. While China seems to dominate the contemporary photography art world, other countries are also making significant headway. This is the case with contemporary Filipino photography.

By Gina Fairley

Curator Blair French wrote in 1998, "The final unknowability of anything more coherent than photography's fragments leads me in search of more points of entry to all the things photography is, and can be."¹ Overlay that sense of fracture French describes with an art scene shaped by endemic stratification and one is faced with the difficult task of navigating contemporary photography's trajectory in the Philippines.

Much has been written about the conceptual framework that brought photography to the forefront of the international contemporary art dialogue in the late 1970s, ushered in by a post-modern focus and the collapse of traditional media. It was a redefining that would place photography within the world's art museums as large-scale photo-art; its endorsement causing a ripple that hit auction houses during the late-1990s with hammer records for photographers such as Cindy Sherman, Andreas Gursky, Helmut Newton, and Nan Goldin. Between June 1997 and June 2002, prices for contemporary photography in America rose by 140%, making it one of the fastest-growing segments in the art market and, with rising prices boosting turnover tenfold over the same period, it was a dawning of a new era for contemporary photography.² Hollywood even picked up on the trend with its cult film *Fur* (2006) starring Nicole Kidman as the American 1960s photographer, Diane

Arbus. So where was Filipino photography at this time of its global acceptance?

The late 1990s in the Philippines was focused elsewhere. It was the pinnacle in an alternative art scene that favored conceptually styled installation with a kind of Filipino make-do aesthetic fuelled by an under-30s set and back-issues of *Art in*

America. It was a time that also marked the international celebration of Filipino socio-political art as the darling of the biennale circuit, from the *Havana Biennale* to the *Sao Paulo Biennale*, the *Asia-Pacific Triennial*, and beyond, further endorsing the tenant of figurative painting within the Filipino art scene. While photography's status was on a hot trajectory elsewhere, trying to unpick its 'acceptance' locally is one symptomatic of a ten-year lag.

Photomedia and video installation were the preferred flow ushered through the mentorship of artists such as Roberto Chabet, Cesare Syjuco, Lani Maestro, Gerry Tan, and David Medalla. Photography remained in the realms of journalism and advertising, notwithstanding deeply celebrated, but unable to make the leap on its own. To date, photography—vintage or contemporary—has not entered the tomes of Filipino art history. Similarly, a survey of Filipino photography has yet to be curated, although this will be remedied early 2009 with an exhibition and substantial catalogue produced for the Ateneo Art Gallery by curator/photographer Isa Lorenzo, the brainchild behind the Philippines's only Gallery/Foundation devoted to photography and its contemporary derivatives, Silverlens. Opening in 2004, Silverlens's dynamic program along with an increasing inclusion of photographers in the benchmark events, *The 13 Artists Award*, *Ateneo Art Award*, and *Nokia Art Prize*,



Lena Cobangbang, *Terrible Landscapes Series*, 2005, color photograph, 76.2 x 50.8 cm. Image: Courtesy of Ateneo Art Gallery and the Artist.

took a further leap in shifting the local mindset this June, with first exhibition of contemporary Filipino photography presented by the National Art Gallery.

One can argue that there have been more exciting shows in the medium locally, one just has to turn to Silverlens's program or MO space's exhibition *Shoot Me* (2007), curated by Roberto Chabet and MM Yu, than this exhibition, curated by Patrick Flores and entitled *Swarm in the Aperture: Recent Photography in the Philippines*. However, its context was liberating. By using the visit of the Japan Foundation's touring exhibition of contemporary photography masters, *Counter-Photography: Japan's Artists Today*, this juxtaposition with an emergent local scene was foremost about the medium's endorsement within the power-set and a gentle joining of dots from the long history of photojournalism, ethnographic archiving, and photography's "faithful representation of the real" to a broader embrace of the medium.

Just walk through the exhibition from Tommy Hafalla's faux-historic piece, *Baliwon Paracela, Mountain Province*, a silver-toned print in a traditional wood frame of an indigenous tribesman taken in 2006; to Vj Villafraña's urban ethnography of *The Gangs of Baseco* (2007), which intersects the grunge fashion of now with the reality of shanty life; to Nana Buxani's staged *Italian Village, Batangas* (2007), a domestic portrait in the style of American Joel Sternfeld or Malaysian Simryn Gill. There is a curious bounce across this rather disparate group of photographs, such as the tattoos of Hafalla's tribesman with an urban version in Villafraña's gangs—both images are staged to deliver a message. Buxani's 'reality-TV-style' portraits engage viewers and Wawi Navarroza's surreal self-portraits are equally confronting in their gaze. Flores presents a subtle slide through photographic genres to arrive at an image of contemporaneity, all within the comfort and endorsement of the Museum.

Silverlens used a similar approach awarding its first curatorial grant to Jose Enrique Soriano for his 2007 *Five Photographers* project—an historical expose on the "Golden Age of Filipino Photojournalism" that pinpoints the moment, in his opinion, that acknowledges creative and cultural content as well as an ability to record. He cites it as an exhibition at Gallery Indigo in 1969. Of the seven grants awarded that year by Silverlens—Ringo Bunoan, Poklong Anading, Steve Tirona, Terry Berkowitz, and Conrado Velasco—it could be argued that all explored documentation within a contemporary reading except two: Valasco in his conceptual *String Theory* series and Tirona's advertising spoofs, *The Imelda Col-*



Wawi Navarroza, *Still Missing (You)*, 2007, archival pigment ink color photograph on artist premium canvas, 32 x 48 inches. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

lection. Photography's old role of relaying on 'the real' remained the foundation upon which to explore new dialogues within the medium.

One local was overheard within the Japanese photography masters exhibition at the National Art Gallery saying, "...this is the real stuff." The notion of "real," using her context as the imprimatur of endorsed international art with a kind of hero-cult popularity in the Philippines, and "real" as the conceptual foundation to the medium's undermining in 21st century digital technology, is a delicious pun and springboards to Filipino photography 'now.'

Photography writer Brian Appel makes the observation, "The world's first



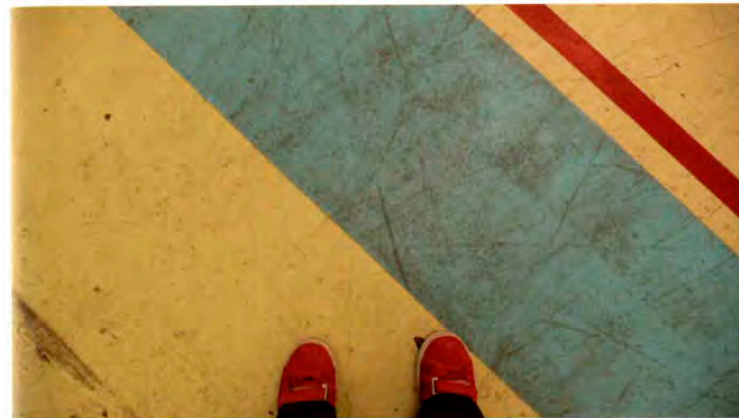
Tommy Hafalla, *Baliwon, Paracela, Mountain Province*, 2006, Varigram toned silver print, wood frame, approx. 50 x 40 cm. Photograph by Gina Fairley with permission by the National Art Gallery.

publicly traded photograph that broke the US\$1 million barrier ironically was not a vintage work by a classical photographer. Instead it was a 4 x 6 foot Ektacolor print whose conceptual and political subtext eschewed the notion of truth ...and threw a question mark on the traditional role of authorship.³ This brings us full-circle back to the notion of institutional endorsement that allows a kind of entry point for accepting 'the new.'

Appel was talking about American Richard Prince's *Untitled (Cowboy)* (1989), a rephotographed image of an American advertising icon, the Marlboro man, sold in November 2005 at Christie's New York for US\$1,248,000. It debunked the myth of photography as a purveyor of truth, focusing on the artificiality of the image. It is an easy leap to Steve Tirona's images of Imelda Marcos, caught within advertising, social-survey, and contemporary art. As Appel says, "The sheriff of the traditional photography market had been shot."⁴

Six months later at Sotheby's New York, a monumental photograph by German Andreas Gursky doubled that price. It was *99 Cent* (1999), an image of a discount store, its display engorging the viewer with super-saturated color and detail. It gave birth to a new kind of photo-reality. That same year Silverlens Gallery was preparing to reopen its doors as the Silverlens Foundation, a local milestone that would have an equally monumental effect in shifting the collecting psyche and photographic genres locally.

To help illustrate this time-slide between a local and international shift, I refer to Tirona's image of artist Jayson Oliveria standing in front of a sari-sari corner store. It was the invitation image for the exhibition *Will Work 4 Food* (2008), a project initiated by Malaysian curator Adeline Ooi



Christina Dy, *Curtains Matching Carpet*, 2007, installation view at Silverlens Gallery, photo-derived, site-specific charcoal and video projection, dimensions variable. Photograph by Toni Cuesta. Image: Courtesy of Silverlens Gallery.

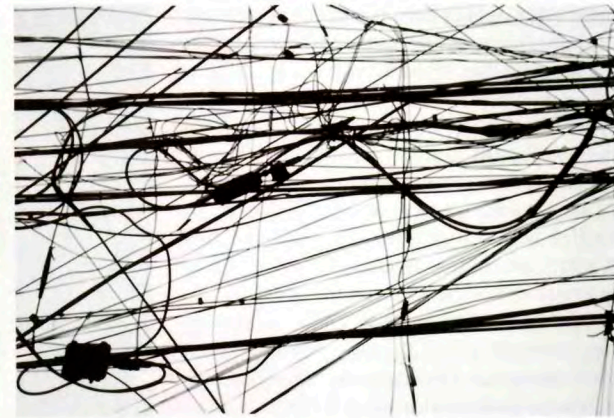
to document "the players" in the Filipino alternative art scene of the late 1990s. Some five years after this project was shot we saw it exhibited. Time allowed it to slip from its former agenda of documentation into the newly burgeoning realm of contemporary photography in Manila, artfully hung and playing off the architecture of the gallery. These were the spaces that were dominating the scene in 1999 when Gursky's image was taken. What strikes me about Ooi's choice of Tirona's image of Oliveria is, like Prince's Marlboro man, it uses our prior knowledge to heighten our reading of the image. Place Tirona's image alongside Gursky's *99 Cent* store and we are again offered a joining of dots through its hyper-saturated flat reality ushering in a local buzz surrounding the medium.

Flores describes photography in the Philippines as a "post-colonial situation [contesting] the mode through which it has gained recognition as medium."⁵ Is that post-colonial of the American trend of contemporary photography and a global appropriation of its 'style,' especially given the Philippines's entrenched specter for all things 'American,' or is it a more literal political unshackling: a post-colonial Philippines that looks beyond US alliances in a search for its own voice through the view-finder? He continues, "How its capacity to reveal is at once the technique to conceal and ...give a truthful depiction of everyday life in the same vein a desire to play out a fantasy of the self and the other, the photographer and the photographed. It is, therefore, at once radically empirical and irreducibly allegorical..."⁶

One only has to recall the famous image of

Ninoy Aquino's assassination at the airport upon his return from exile to know photography's ability to shape contemporary histories in the Philippines. As the image takes on folkloric power with time, one ponders where it sits now: as journalism or art? Roland Barthes famously referred to the photograph as "flat death," a piece of paper inhabited by the dead.⁷ An interesting artist playing with these notions is Wawi Navarroza. Her *Still Missing (You)*, 2007, is an appropriation of Frida Kahlo's painting *La Mesa Herida (The Wounded Table)* (1940). It uses the framing of art history and painting traditions updated with 21st century digital technology to create a surreal vision that weaves between real time and allegory. At what point does the portrait transcend the sitter to become artwork?

Poklong Anading's duratran installation, *Anonymity* (2006), is a further illustration of this point. While he is a prolific artist working across media, this award-winning series was a timely reapplication of 'Filipino identity' using photography. The idea of 'truthful depiction in everyday life' and that sense of allegory Flores discussed moves to the street with Anading. Just as Anading's sitters are rendered anonymous by the flare of sunlight off a mirror covering



Rachel Rillo, *Manila*, 20008, Ilford warm-tone silver-gelatin fiber print, image size: 5 x 8 cm, paper size: 28 x 36 cm, edition of 5. Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Silverlens Foundation.

their face, metaphorically it is the ping of a lightbulb—a switch turned on.

Traditional photography has long pictured the urban reality. Writer Brian Dillon recently commented on the Tate Modern's exhibition *Street & Studio* (2008), "Street photography in the middle of the twentieth century is almost wholly concerned with this dialectic of the seen and unseen ...This sense of the city beatified by light, of a stillness that expresses both the aspirations and the solitude of the individual."⁸

Unlike Richard Avedon and Philip-Lorca diCorcia, the examples Dillon cites, Anading falls into a long local history where the object and street take on an ethos describing the Filipino psyche. Contemporary photographers MM Yu, Poi Beltran, Mawen Ong, Rachel Rillo, Christina Dy, and Kidlat de Guia, among others, use this tradition as an entry point to their own expression or post-modern take on the object within space. While pointing to the tenet of landscape they move beyond the traditional frame engaging collage, cropping, double-exposure and installation, techniques employed to incite a deeper translation of place.

Beltran repeatedly returns to the street in her work, albeit it trawling Manila's city dumps for once-cherished objects or capturing the collective energy of Filipino religious festivities, her images of 'the everyday' are charged in a way that is beyond a Western visualization. They are totally Filipino. Her works strip away the cancerous bittersweet sentimentality prevalent in most Filipino social realism and replaces it with a critical mirror suited for a medium like photography.

MM Yu's work reiterates this point. A talented



Steve Tirona, *Jayson Oliveria*, shot in 2005; printed in 2008, archival pigment inkjet photograph, 107 x 165 cm. Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Silverlens Foundation.

artist who swings between abstract painting and photography, perhaps it is this split that allows her the separation from photography's tradition to record. Her street images won her the 2007 *Ateneo Art Award* with the exhibition entitled *Thoughts collected, recollected*, an installation of photo-books posing as sculptures on a shelf. It is an earlier series, however, that caught this writer's attention. Intuitive art-making is everywhere in the Philippines. In the tradition of found objects, the found images of her *Memoirs* (2001), made before digital technology hit Manila, carry a history and aesthetic thumbprint. In a Filipino make-do way she winds the film back into its spool for reuse and superimposes new images over the exposures. The initial shot is chosen as a 'background' framing the random over-shots. These compound images sit between chance and control, paralleling their layered flashes of memory, deflecting pathos. This work will tour to UTS Gallery Sydney and La Trobe Visual Art Center, Victoria, along with her later series *x* (2003), flawed studio portraits as metaphors of failed idealism and concepts of 'beauty,' in the exhibition *Beyond Frame* later this year.

Two further photographers engaged with an urban dialogue are Rachel Rillo and Lena Cobangbang. Rillo's *Manila* series of urban wires and cables, knotted and intersecting in anarchy, offer an interesting engagement with scale. Like a still life they are an examination of an object, vaguely documentary and yet firmly sutured to a contemporary art reading through their presentation, floated on an over-size matt to diffuse tensions within the work. She is



Poi Beltran, *Untitled*, 2008. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

among a camp of Filipino photographers, such as Isa Lorenzo, Neal Oshima and Wawi Navarroza, technically adroit and pushing the boundaries of the medium.

In diorama-like staged environments, Cobangbang similarly drags documentation into a contemporary application. Her seminal series *Terrible Landscapes* (2005) reconstructs newspaper stories using food; a staging of narrative not dissimilar to that used by David Leventhal or Australian Elaine Campaner. While this series will be shown at the 2008 *Singapore Biennale*, Cobangbang's latest work, which is a direct progression from her *Terrible Landscapes*, will be launched in Sydney in *Beyond Frame* (October 2008) and at Silverlens in 2009. It again uses food but styled in a 1950s 'good housekeeping'

genre to describe Manila urban-scapes. She plays off domestic idealism against global gentrification, development, and her interest in architecture.

Cobangbang's work was positioned among 12 artists from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines (Cobangbang, Tirona, and Anading) exploring the current and emerging approaches to photography in the region in the exhibition entitled *CUT: New Photography from South East Asia* curated by Valentine Willie Fine Art, February 2008. Clearly, she has quickly defined herself at the forefront of contemporary Filipino photography and its growing visibility regionally.

Filipino-American photographer Gina Osterloh offers an interesting example from the opposite perspective. Talking about this flow between American genres, regional markets and local trends, Osterloh returned to Manila after growing up in America. While her exhibition *Shooting Blanks* at Green Papaya Art Project is only her second solo, it created a ripple locally that resulted in her inclusion in Flores's National Art Gallery show, a Silverlens Foundation Grant, inclusion in the California Museum of Photography and *Galleon Trade* at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, and *Beyond Frame*. It is a curious example of the earlier discussed notions of imprimatur from abroad.

Like Cobangbang's work, Osterloh uses the diorama but expands it to life-size paper rooms that perform the function of a stage for an anonymous figure or papier-mâché dummy, which is then photographed and presented as lambda prints. It is a psychological space where the body is absorbed, sinking into the paper environment, rendered anonymous and blinded by paper patches. It explores contemporary ideas of displacement and cultural identity.



MM Yu, *Memoirs* (detail), 2001, C-print installation, dimensions variable. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

When placed alongside Wawi's *Frida self-portrait*, Tirona's images of Imelda Marcos, and Cindy Sherman's psychological portraits of self within various environments, Osterloh works have a place within a Filipino post-colonial nationalism.

A discussion on the object, self, and environment in Filipino photography cannot go by without the mention of Ringo Bunoan. Cobangbang's and Rillo's notions of the object caught between aesthetic triviality and documentation is played out more fully by Bunoan, whose exhibition entitled *Pillow Talk* (Silverlens, 2008) surveyed ten years of work using the pillow as poetic metaphor. Assuming the role of diarist, Bunoan's journey traces a kind of binary history: a personal story and one that spans photographic practice locally over the past decade. Included were the series *In the same breath* (2003), photographs of tombstones of people who shared the same anniversary of her mother's death placed on a circle of pillows; *Sleepwalking* (2004), a pilgrimage to all the apartments where she had lived, documenting her pillow in front of each, and *Two Years of Sleep* (2006), a cathartic installation of the cotton from the pillows on which she slept during a two-year sabbatical in Nepal. Bunoan's *oeuvre* has contributed greatly to expanding the expression of photography within the Philippines.



Gina Osterloh, *Mute Rash*, 2008, Lambda print, 81.3 x 101.6 cm. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

There are, of course, other artists worthy of mention in a dialogue about contemporary Filipino photography. What is important in the context of the Philippines is to give photography a voice outside of contemporary installation that happily appropriates the photo, or a definition that falls back on local history of photojournalism and ethnographic documentation to weight the medium.

This pulling through of perceptions to current definitions and dialogues is happening at double-speed in the Philippines. From this writer's perspective, the accessibility of digital photography in recent years has catapulted the medium's acceptability and current surge of practice, reflected across Southeast Asia. The onus,

locally, is upon artists and curators to enforce this difference rather than fall into the muddy territory where photography is blurred as photo-media in a hip milieu. It is a threat that could stifle photography's development before the medium has a chance to grow solid roots in the Philippines. The National Art Gallery's recent endorsement, alongside the *Ateneo Art Award* and the activities of Silverlens Foundation help promotion of this demarcation and ensures contemporary photography's future. And with Filipino photographers being placed in major exhibitions abroad—*Singapore Biennale*, *CUT*

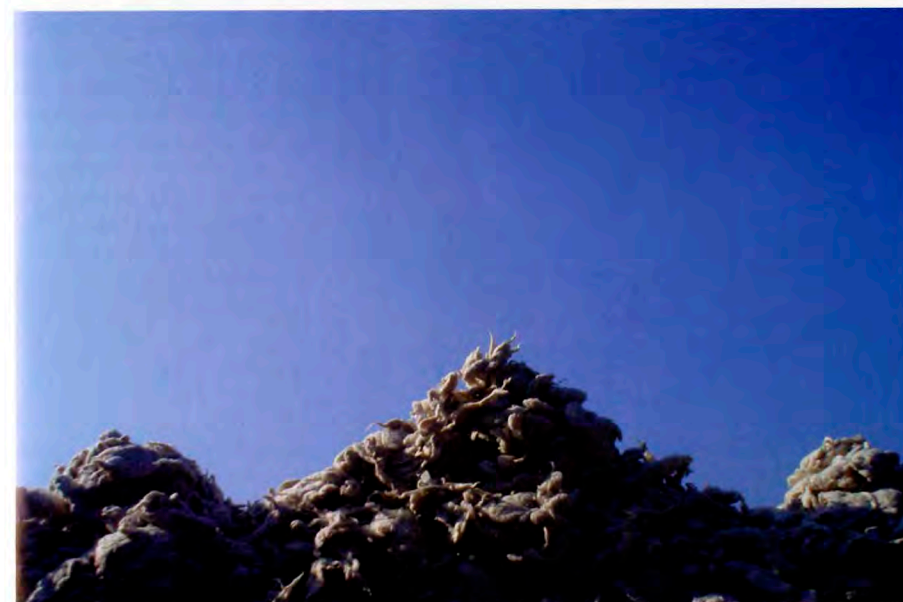
in Malaysia, *Galleon Trade* in the United States, and *Beyond Frame* in Australia—it is this awareness, internationally, of the diversity within Filipino art that is exciting.

Returning to the opening quote by Blair French, "...in search of more points of entry to all the things photography is, and can be," the answer is in the peripheral zones where Third-World make-do and tech-piracy opens the medium to a whole new range of expression. Sitting outside, but not entirely disconnected from global trends, the Philippines offers an interesting entry point to a discussion on contemporary photography today. Δ

Notes:

1. Blair French: "Out of Time: Essays between Photography & Art", published by Contemporary Art Center of South Australia 2006; introduction, pg. 8.
2. http://www.artmarketinsight.com/en/art_article.aspx?idform=4&from=T&id=2.
- 3 & 4. Brian Appel, "Contemporary Photography: Truth & the Burden of Reality" published by I Photo Central, 2006, http://www.iphotocentral.com/collecting/article_view.php/16/20/1.
- 5 & 6. Patrick Flores, "Swarm in the Aperture: Recent Photography in the Philippines", essay for National Art Gallery for the National Museum of the Philippines, June 2008.
7. Carina L Evangelisa, summary, *The Silverlens Foundation Photography Grant: History, Portraiture, Installation and Still Life*, 2007.
8. Brian Dillon, "Street & Studio", *Art Review*, UK, Issue 22 2008, pg. 85.

Australian arts writer Gina Fairley is a roving contributing editor for Asian Art News and World Sculpture News.



Ringo Bunoan, *Two Years of Sleep*, 2007, duratrans and cotton, dimensions variable. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

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Nakarra, 2008, acrylic on canvas,
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Hong Kong artist Tong King Sum.

Cover: Nan Qi, *Salute No.5*, 2007, ink and color on paper, 124 x 98 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of The Luxe Museum, Singapore, and the Artist.