

## BROOKLYN RAIL

### ArtSeen

# Stephanie Syjuco: *Native Resolution*

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Stephanie Syjuco, *Afterimages (Interference of Vision)*, 2021. Photogravure printed on gampi mounted on Somerset black 280 gram cotton rag; re-edited photographs of an ethnological display of Filipinos from the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy Catharine Clark Gallery.

ON VIEW

**Catharine Clark Gallery**

March 6 – April 10, 2021

San Francisco

Stephanie Syjuco's most recent exhibition at Catherine Clark Gallery, [\*Native Resolution\*](#), exemplifies Susan Sontag's statement that "photographs, which fiddle with the scale of the world, themselves get reduced, blown up, cropped, retouched, doctored, tricked out."<sup>1</sup> Working with archives at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History and the National Museum of Anthropology, Syjuco desecrates colonialist photographs that aim, as Hito Steyerl argues, to "[measure] the resolution of the world as a picture."<sup>2</sup> She photographs early 20th-century ethnographic images and reproduces them as photogravures crumpled and mounted on cotton rag, pixelated ink jet *Headshots*, digital collages, and photo composites. Syjuco disrupts the situatedness of pixel-perfect photographs and recuperates Filipinx bodies un-homed and made digestible by American imperialism. Her works create what Fred Moten calls a dehiscence at the heart of the institution, whose history and self-definition reenact colonial violence.



Stephanie Syjuco, *Afterimages (Obstruction of Vision)*, 2021. Photogravure printed on gampi mounted on Somerset black 280 gram cotton rag; re-edited photographs of an ethnological display of Filipinos from the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy Catharine Clark Gallery.

In the series *Afterimages*, variously subtitled *Interference of Vision*, *Deflection of Vision*, *Field of Vision*, *Interruption of Vision*, and *Obstruction of Vision*, all 2021, Syjuco photographs photos of Filipinos and the “Philippine Reservation” from the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, prints them as photogravures on gampi paper, crumples them, and mounts them on Somerset black 280-gram cotton rag. Working with Mullowney Printing to produce and disfigure her photogravures—undoing a laborious and expensive process, Syjuco refutes and ironizes the United States’ fabrication of the Philippines, then a recent colony, as the primitive past that foils American progress. The gampi paper that betokens American sophistication is made out of bast fiber sourced from the Philippines: the original photogravures used to justify the US civilizing mission are born from a culture that the US relegated as barbarous. Syjuco strategically folds the photogravures to protect the sitters’ faces from unsolicited attention and to intercept the proliferation of trauma. Recalling Audre Lorde’s poem by the same name,

Syjuco's *Afterimages* forestall ethnographic images' entrance into the viewer's eyes and the enduring damages that they etch.



Stephanie Syjuco, *Pileup (Eastman)*, 2021. Hand-assembled pigmented inkjet prints on Hahnemuhle Baryta, 48 x 36 inches framed. Courtesy Catharine Clark Gallery.

The denial of legibility is also central to *Headshots (Witnesses)* (2021), whereby Syjuco enlarges and pixelates her photographs of a tourist pamphlet of the “Philippine Reservation” to create life-sized portraits of the Filipinx subjects.

Syjuco, by rephotographing exoticizing images from the World's Fair and abstracting them to jagged geometric arrangements, armors each *Witness* with the deficiency of a colonial vision that identifies (as inferior) without understanding. The knife-edged pixelation of the *Headshots* is not formed *ex nihilo*, but is the reversal of a mechanical gaze that refuses to register the humanity of Filipinx bodies. The pointed indistinctness and aggressive inscrutability of their faces cut into the panopticon and slice gazes that gawk and spectacularize. Demonstrating that "objects can and do resist," the *Witnesses* avenge their preclusion from an agential personhood.<sup>3</sup> Hung at head height, they practice what Simone Browne calls "sousveillance" and reveal the seams that open at the center of American regimes of truth.<sup>4</sup>



Stephanie Syjuco, *Headshots (Witness 1)*, 2021. Pigmented inkjet print on Hahnemuhle Baryta mounted on aluminum, 13 x 13 inches. Courtesy Catharine Clark Gallery.

Syjuco obfuscates the ethnographer's lens in *Pileup (Eastman)* (2021),<sup>5</sup> a photographic collage that simulates the mountainous amount of materials in the

Smithsonian archives. The Kodak Eastman camera points in the same direction as the Homemade Filipino Gun and the Handmade Filipino Percussion Pistol—each shutter click a gunshot, as evinced by the audio in *Block Out the Sun* (2021), her single channel video. In *Pileup (Eastman)*, Syjuco causes the camera-gun to misfire by enlarging and pixelating it. The Kodak Eastman camera loses the precision of its aim as its materiality becomes blurry and suspect. Not only is Syjuco’s use of a low-resolution image a disarming gesture, but it also defies institutional authority—whose control over intellectual property is wagered through the granting or withholding of high-resolution images. Syjuco creates her *Pileups* from the periphery because she cannot trust the institution that labeled Filipino national hero José Rizal as a “man (Philippines?)” to read Filipinx bodies. The miniaturized Rizal peeks furtively from behind an image of the Percussion Pistol, evidencing the archive’s prioritization of instruments of violence and its myopia to Filipinx humanity. Syjuco shares in a [conversation with Glenn Adamson](#) that the photograph *The Ending of Two Filipino Sharpshooters—a rice field near Imus* (ca. 1900-1910) in *Pileup (Eastman)* is almost indecipherable because it is a scan of a microfilm of a now lost glass negative. This “poor image,” à la Hito Steyerl, is a victim of a visual imperialism that treats Filipinx bodies as commodities and booty easily dislocated, transferred, and extinguished. The archive relegates Filipinx deaths as non-events.<sup>6</sup> Their murders are not acknowledged as murders, but a burden that the white man must bear.

How do we, as people of color, situate our bodies in a fragmentary and low-resolution history that consistently obscures and annihilates bodies like ours? How do we carry cultural memories of dehumanization in the flesh? What are we to glean from archives that offer us only colonial ruins? How do we find a home when the only thing “native” to us on this continent is our immutable exoticization and victimization? Syjuco answers these questions with tenderness in two inkjet prints, *Double Portrait (Available Light)* (2021) and *Soft Body (Fragmented)* (2021). In *Double Portrait*, Syjuco holds up a glassine-wrapped ethnographic photo taken at the 1904 World’s Fair by the Gerhard Sisters. Her shadows, cast by the lights in the archive, inhabit the face of the spectral Filipinx subject. Syjuco imagines the Filipinx sitter’s un-lived future. Her face has embodied theirs for a century. I join in Syjuco’s multiplication when the glass frame protecting the inkjet print reflects my face onto the image. Syjuco’s shadow takes on my face, not at all because we, as Asian women, are fungible, but because we have and will survive.



Stephanie Syjuco, *Soft Body (Fragment)*, 2021. Pigmented inkjet print on Hahnemuhle Baryta mounted on 3mm E-Panel, 19 1/2 x 28 3/4 inches framed. Courtesy Catharine Clark Gallery.

*Soft Body (Fragments)*, a digital photo composite of clay pottery shards found in the Philippines and sourced from the Smithsonian's Freer and Sackler Galleries of Asian Art, references the unrecognized and unrecognizable bodies living in the archives. While the earthen shards—the broken outlines of our ancestors and our inherited histories—may not be restored to wholeness, we, through our subversions, glitches and refusals, shall obscure and destabilize the scale by which wholeness is measured. We shall turn clay into tissue. When photos of our bodies threaten to become forensic, as on the night of the Atlanta, Georgia mass-shooting on March 16, 2021, we will hold each other, and in that overlaying of bodies—that shadowy and diaphanous embrace, that translucent promise of *being*—we will blossom.

1. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 3-4.
2. Hito Steyerl, [How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File](#), 2013.
3. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.

4. Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
5. Syjuco's *Pileups* (2021) echo her earlier hybrid photo installations [\*Dodge and Burn \(Visible Storage\)\*](#) (2019) and [\*Neutral Calibration Studies \(Ornament + Crime\)\*](#) (2016), which make use of images downloaded from museum databases and the internet and borrow visual vocabulary from image post production to evince the doctoring inherent to the American construction of history.
6. Saidiya Hartman, "Dead Book Remains," *Grief and Grievance* (New York: Phaidon Press; New Museum, 2020), 117.

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<https://brooklynrail.org/2021/04/artseen/Stephanie-Syjuco-Native-Resolution>