

Stephanie Syjuco



Going Green: Artist Chroma-Keys in on White Political Narratives

Published on August 7, 2018 By Ericka Shin

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"The Visible Invisible: Plymouth Pilgrim (Simplicity), Antebellum South (Simplicity), and Colonial Revolution (McCall's)" / Courtesy of Stephanie Syjuco; Photo by Jin Zhu

What can historical garments tell us about today's political climate? Berkeley Art Practice professor Stephanie Syjuco has some ideas.

This November, Syjuco will present a selection of her projects at the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C. Her works have typically dealt with global issues, but lately she has turned her attention to the political and social drama unfolding across the U.S. stage.

One of only four artists chosen for this year's Renwick Invitational exhibition series, Syjuco has approximately 1,000 square feet to show how her work is "Disrupting Craft"—this year's theme.

She has been working with the gallery's Fleur and Charles Bresler Curator-in-Charge, Abraham Thomas, who described the process as "wonderful."



Stephanie Syjuco in "Cargo Cults: Head Bundle" 2016 / Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery

"I've always loved working with contemporary artists on projects, whether that's an exhibition or an installation," Thomas said over the phone. "There's nothing that quite beats working through it with a really talented artist and really getting excited about their ideas and their thinking and their research...and helping them present what it is they want to present in an exhibition."

Syjuco's immersive exhibit will be centered around her 2016 project "Neutral Calibration Studies (Ornament + Crime)," an eclectic, three-dimensional "still life" that explores the marks that empire and colonialism have left on even seemingly innocuous cultural objects. But it's her most recent and never-before-displayed project, also to be featured at the Renwick Gallery, that has been generating a lot of buzz. Called "The Visible Invisible," it features handmade dresses from significant time periods in U.S. history—but with some twists.

The garments are cut from an eye-wateringly green fabric, the same used in video production for a technique called chroma key—or more colloquially, green screen. Her choice to use this material was no accident. "If you make it out of the chroma key green color, what you're essentially saying is that almost anything can be projected onto it," Syjuco explained.

Syjuco uses this fabric metaphorically, exploring how the U.S. has long "projected" a skewed narrative onto its own history by assuming whiteness as the default identity. This "invisible default," as she calls it, is an unspoken but powerful standard to which everyone in the U.S. is expected to aspire. As Syjuco will tell you, history is shaped by those who tell it.

“The Visible Invisible” not only critiques the predominant, white narratives; the project also brings to the forefront stories that traditional U.S. history *doesn't* tell—those of marginalized communities. She pointed out this duality through the double meaning of the word “fabricate.”



Patterns used for the garments / Courtesy of the artist, photo by Jin Zhu

“You could look at that term as being negative, right? Which is that, ‘OK, if everything’s fabricated, that means it’s fake,’” Syjuco said. “And the other way to look at it is to take the power back, is to fabricate it ourselves. And that doesn’t mean to fake it—it just means to literally—to make it ourselves, to write our own stories, you know, to build the world that we want to see.”

Syjuco purposely created these garments based on historically inaccurate dress patterns mass-produced for history enthusiasts today. This additional layer to what she calls her “historical reenactment” comments on the inauthenticity of mainstream U.S. history.

Of course, the question of authentic versus inauthentic narratives is not just something of the past. “All the racism and all the political problems that existed back then still exist today,” Syjuco said. “We just have different vehicles for pushing the fake news.”

At first glance, her decision to focus on the oppression of marginalized communities through the garments of white women might seem strange. But [52 percent](#) of white women voted for Trump in the 2016 election, against their own interests and at the expense of marginalized peoples. This, Syjuco believes, is an act of complicity meant to uphold white power structures—something that often gets swept under the rug.



Work in progress: "The Visible Invisible (Civil War)," 2018 / Courtesy of the artist, photo by Jin Zhu

"I could be making, say, traditional Filipino dresses, but I don't think—I don't feel like doing that right now," Syjuco said. "I want to refocus on the thing that most people don't want to acknowledge."

Freelance writer and curator Sarah Archer, whom Thomas invited to join this year's selection panel for the Renwick Invitational, described "The Visible Invisible" as "magical" and "spooky."

"It's the uncanny, that thing that seems familiar, but totally different, as in a dream," Archer wrote in an email to *California*. "That feeling of familiarity reframed is what I'm hoping that visitors will take from her installation."

From an art aficionado's perspective, Syjuco's work is groundbreaking for defying traditional notions of craft. Craft rose to prominence as an art form during the Industrial Revolution, with crafts artists favoring the handmade over the mass-produced. As a contemporary artist working with what she calls both the "analog" and the "digital," Syjuco imbues the art of craft with a sense of innovation.

Thomas agrees, pointing to Syjuco's use of the "conceptual toolkits of craft to make these very incisive comments and explorations of repressing issues around social practice and cultural identity."

Syjuco, an immigrant herself, is no stranger to questions of cultural identity. Born in the Philippines, she was only three years old when she came to the U.S. with her family as part of the Filipino diaspora. And being a U.S. citizen isn't a responsibility Syjuco takes lightly.

"I'm an immigrant to this country, but I'm also a naturalized American citizen, so I own this country as much as anybody else, as much as any other American," Syjuco said. "And I have to kind of grapple with this idea of my role in its creation—now and in the future."

These are exactly the complexities that Thomas had in mind when he chose "Disrupting Craft" as this year's theme. "I felt that it was an important time to recognize that in that realm of craft, there have been a lot of artists exploring these very thorny, pressing issues," Thomas said.

And where better to have this dialogue than right across the street from the White House, at the Renwick Gallery? Its geography alone makes for an interesting juxtaposition.

For Syjuco, too, the physical location in which her "historical" garments are to be displayed is significant. "The Smithsonian Museums [house] American history through objects and art," Syjuco explained. "I wanted to have these inaccurate—these beautiful but really inaccurate—American items in there to, not necessarily confuse the viewer, but to just kind of insert that idea that these are stories we tell."

Although Syjuco uses her work to call for change, she warns against relying entirely on art and encourages active participation as well. Outside of her art practice studio, she leads banner-making workshops and creates graphics for organizations.

"Instead of asking if art can be political," Syjuco explained, "I think another question is, how can one be political in both art and their larger lives?"

Syjuco is currently working on more garments for "The Visible Invisible." While the Renwick Gallery can only accommodate three—a pilgrim dress, a Revolutionary War-era dress, and an antebellum South dress—she wants to expand the project.

Which raises the obvious question: Would Syjuco ever consider projecting something onto her green-screen fabric? Though the light and shadow on the dresses would make digital projection difficult, she hinted at other plans for the project, saying she'll "do something different." For now, all she promises is that "it'll be weird-looking."