

Stephanie Syjuco



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## An interview with notMoMA artist Stephanie Syjuco

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Social practice artist Stephanie Syjuco talks about her work, notMoMA, which is on view in the *Marvels* exhibition. She will give an artist talk on [June 26](#).

**Marvels' presentation of notMoMA is a piece of social practice art. Can you explain what social practice art is?**

Social practice art can loosely be defined as work that involves the engagement or collaboration of people as a primary "medium." This may sound a bit vague because it can take many different forms, and artists have different goals for their projects. But generally speaking, it centers on relational negotiation, public participation, or group activation in order for the work to exist.



**What was your motivation in creating this piece?**

Many of my projects involve public participation to create or build the final work. I see this collective effort as both a socially and politically engaged process because it encourages people to take agency in creating something together, as opposed to being a passive observer of an artwork.

In 2010 I was invited to create a project by Professor Squeak Meisel with the assistance of his Beginning Sculpture class at Washington State University, Pullman. As a working artist and teacher myself, I have always been curious about how young artists emulate famous artists in order to eventually find their own voices. I was also starting to get involved in museum exhibitions and have more relationships with larger art institutions, and the hierarchies of who gets shown or curated into exhibitions brought up a lot of questions about access and power. Many art students, especially those that live in rural agricultural communities, don't get to see these artworks in person, and I wanted to emulate that experience for them. notMoMA became a way to

bring the students into the conversation by having them act as fabricators or “remakers” of iconic artworks. I also knew their skill sets might still be in the beginning stages and I thought it would be interesting to see how they would rise to the challenge of making versions of these rather famous works. In the end, we brought an amazing facsimile of a priceless art collection to a remote university far from Manhattan—all with their efforts.

The resulting exhibition in 2010 was a success and the artwork was subsequently “acquired” by the Portland Art Museum via a donation from a social practice class at Portland State University (how that itself happened is actually quite complicated, but essentially the class used their course funds to buy the instructions to create notMoMA, and then donated it to the museum to test the museum’s capacity for owning an ephemeral artwork that was essentially a set of instructions that they would have to activate in order to ever show it). It’s quite a commitment on everyone’s parts to do this, and I appreciate that PAM is putting the collaborative effort into making the artwork happen again!

### **What do you think that high school artists bring to the process?**

High school students have the whole world in front of them—they have boundless vision. However, they are also still negotiating their place in the world and looking to see where they fit in—grappling with their value systems as young artists. I remember feeling like I was underestimated when I was that age, and that I could accomplish so much if people would just let me. notMoMA was originally conceived with college students in mind, but having high school students activate the work brings up larger issues of what their aspirations are and what they perhaps see themselves mirrored when they emulate and improvise upon an iconic artwork.



**What are most looking forward to when you see the exhibition in person?**

I'm interested in seeing the students' improvisations and tweaks upon the artworks. The works are never exact (how could they be?) and I love the small liberties and different choices the artists take in making their versions. The work becomes as much about them as it is the "original" and their personalities show through.

**What do you hope that visitors will take away with them, or learn after seeing the exhibition?**

That contemporary artworks can actively involve a larger community in their production and that it can take many unexpected forms.

**Anything else you care to add?**

I want to thank the many supporters and participants of this project, from the initial Sculpture class at Washington State Pullman, the Portland State Social Practice class that voted for this project, and the Portland Art Museum, C3:Initiative, Gresham High, Jefferson High School, and Reynolds High School, the curatorial team and the many others that helped make this happen. Projects like this can't exist without the support of others, and that collective spirit is at the crux of my social practice projects.

Article Link: <https://portlandartmuseum.org/interview-with-stephanie-syjuco/>