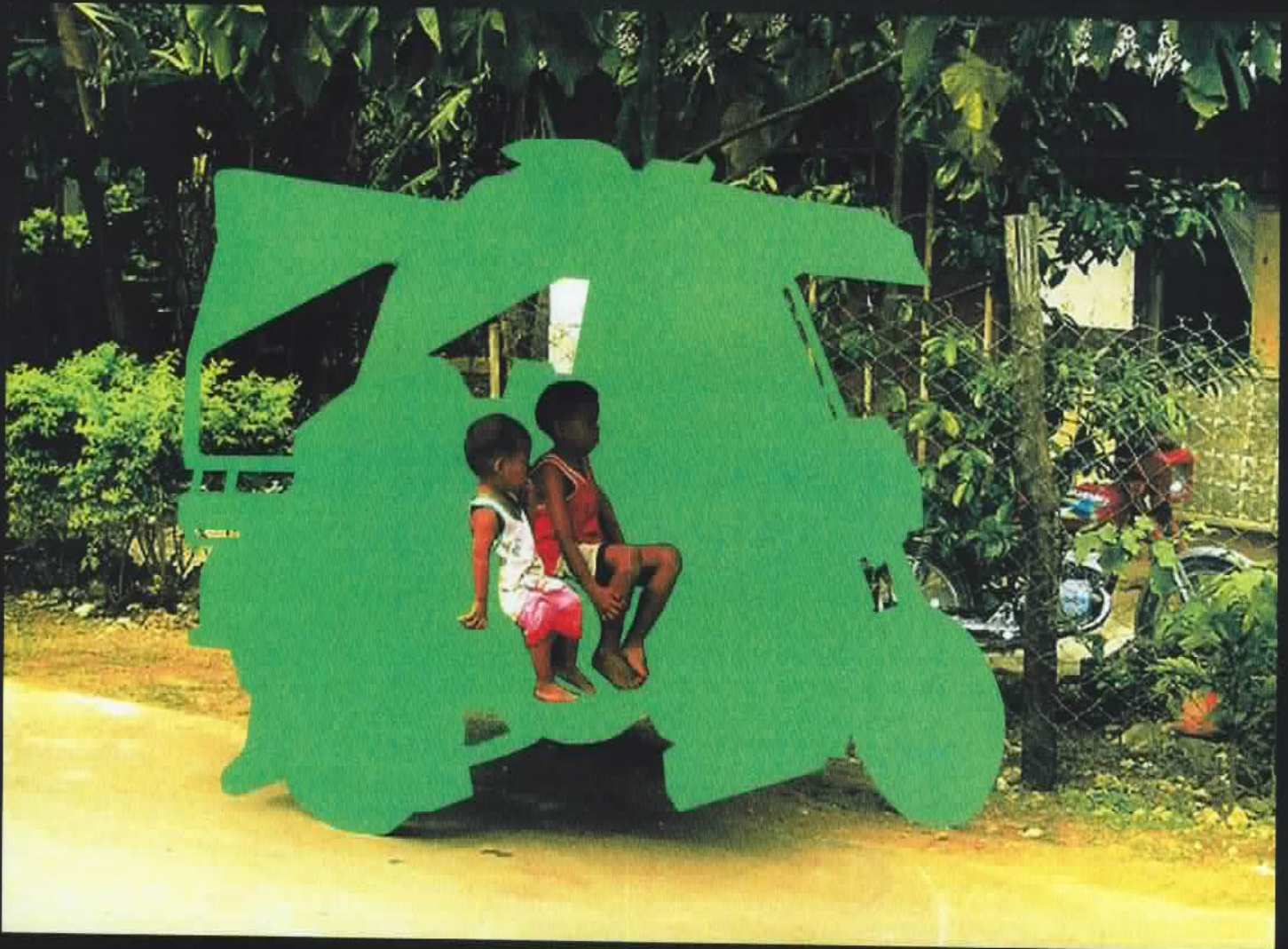


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Stephanie Syjuco 'Blows Up'

THE BLACK MARKET SERIES

Jan
Christian
Bernabe

The cultural state of being neither here nor there, of belonging to no distinct, delineated, or defined cultural identity, is a ripe departure for my work. (Stephanie Syjuco, *Bay Area Art Now*)

As a Filipino artist working in the United States, Stephanie Syjuco is inspired by globalisation and the global exchanges of capital, commodities and bodies. The economic consequences on the lives of Filipino migrants wrought by colonial and postcolonial relations between the Philippines and the United States also influence her work. Syjuco explores Filipino diasporic identity created by transnational forces that have driven migrant labourers from the Philippines to the rest of the world. This identity configuration inspires an expansive and expressive conception of the Filipino diaspora in which Syjuco ambivalently locates her existence. Syjuco notes that her own identity is marked as being neither 'here' nor 'there' (Johnstone and Aboud 246). That is to say, she posits an interstitial identity defined as 'the state of being "between" things' (5).

Meena Alexander frames migrancy as an integral component of postcolonial literary production when she observes, 'Migrancy, a central theme for many of us in this shifting world, forces a recasting of how the body is grasped, how language works' (1). Alexander's statement resonates deeply with Syjuco's artwork, especially her figural and symbolic configurations of 'bodies'. Syjuco places the psychological and somatic conditions of postcolonial migrancy at the core of much of her work. Migrants are depicted within the global mechanisms that inform the recognition and representations of their bodies within the contemporary moment. Syjuco's figurative and conceptual scrutiny of 'bodies' is evident in an early collection of paintings from *Portrait Series II* (1997). The economic inequalities, which are often the hallmarks of postcolonial geographies and facilitate

the movements of migrants globally for work through licit and illicit channels, influence the political and intellectual character of her artwork. They guide the artist's formal strategies that give rise to the work's visual language.

In *Portrait Series II*, Syjuco uses green chalkboard paint on black mat boards that are individually framed and grouped together to create an assemblage of cell-like formations (see Figure 1). Much like bacterial generation in petri dishes, the cellular bodies represent unencumbered growth and the predicaments that might arise when growth and overpopulation cannot be contained.¹ Placed within the context of postcolonial migrancy, I read the *Portrait Series II* as allegorising the experiences of migrants caught within the web of global labour markets. Unimpeded, the green clusters continue to expand outwardly. And as demand for cheap labour increases, the clusters ultimately surpass the demands of transnational economies. Paying attention to Syjuco's intellectual investment in global economic processes that shape migrant experiences, the green growths, I argue, index migrant bodies, while the colour green furthermore symbolises American currency — simply put, the paintings conflate migrant labourers and their the monetary value in the present moment. *Portrait Series II* is Syjuco's early attempts to create a conceptual and symbolic repertoire grounded in postcolonial economic realities. Thus, we might read the *Portrait Series II* as predictive of the dangers of a continuing reliance on migrant labour from former colonised spaces or developing nations, such as the Philippines, that are caught within the often exploitative structures of transnational economies.

Indeed, the Philippines loom large in *Portrait Series II* and throughout Syjuco's oeuvre. She notes 'I had this idea in the back of my mind that these objects I was making were an extension of what was being made in the Philippines' (Spalding 13–14). Her work asks how globalisation has influenced the legibility and, indeed, the visibility of Filipino migrant bodies. The circuitry of capital, products and people



Figure 1. Stephanie Syjuco. Portrait Series II, 1997. Chalkboard paint, frames, overall 144 in wide. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

has created, as Syjuco notes, Filipino bodies who are 'the world's best "undercover agents" in that they seem to be everywhere in the world and yet completely invisible' (4). Syjuco's artwork relies on an artistic repertoire that unsettles the ways that Filipino bodies are represented and known historically and certainly within this frenetic moment of globalisation. The past is never far away from the present in Syjuco's artwork.

The *Black Market Series* (2005) is composed of digital prints created from nine images found on the Internet that Syjuco has digitally blacked out or redacted. In some of the prints the uneven contours of the redactions indicate the speed at which Syjuco has erased the objects within the frames, while in others the black redactions monopolise large areas leaving only the human figures visible. When exhibited, the digital prints are displayed alongside asymmetrically shaped black sculptural objects that Syjuco calls 'blobjects' (18) (see Figure 2).²

The *Black Market Series* visualises what Lisa Lowe calls 'the emergence of a global or transnational economy', an economy which has relied on Filipino migrant bodies for cheap skilled and unskilled labour throughout all sectors of the global economy (xxii). Syjuco's work explores the ways in which these Filipino bodies circulate and work within spaces and moments (the interstices) of capitalist production, distribution and consumption from a productive vantage point — as a diasporic Filipino artist who is guided by a postcolonial feminist politics. Moreover, Elaine Kim remarks on the possibilities afforded to Asian American artists who embrace their habitation within these spaces: 'Location on the interstices of Asia and America ... makes it possible to view the world from several different vantage points at the same moment' (50). Indeed, Syjuco's work speaks to the political possibilities of an aesthetics shaped by and from the interstices.

Interstitial Vantage Points

Born in 1974 in The Philippines, Syjuco and her family moved to San Francisco when she was three years old. At the age of ten, her family moved to Japan before returning to San Francisco two years later. These back-and-forth movements influenced Syjuco's thinking about Filipino and Filipino American identities and cultural practices which, she

understood, were tied to the colonial and postcolonial histories of the Philippines and the racial and ethnic diversity of the islands.³ Syjuco recalls, 'In my adolescent years, even up until recently, I was confused by my inability to be recognised by Filipinos and Filipino Americans as "one of them"' (5). Disheartened by the 'mistranslations' of her racial identity, Syjuco continued to probe the means of entry into either Filipino or Filipino American communities (8). She travelled using a Philippines passport until 2000, but still felt denied 'entry into the secret undercover world of the global Filipino underground', lacking 'the right passwords, the right accent or inflection due to my Americanization' (5). Moreover, because of her physiognomic appearance, a result of her racially and ethnically mixed background as a 'chinoy' (or Chinese-Filipino), Syjuco acknowledges an ambivalent, if not conflicted, relationship to the Filipino American community and, in a larger sense, the Philippines as a whole.⁴

Syjuco, through the inability to situate herself within the two communities, found herself at an interstitial location giving her the autonomy and distance to create art. It is within this space or diasporic positioning that she transformed herself into a 'secret agent', a tactic that, ironically, permits her entry into the global community of Filipinos despite her ambivalence. It is from this location that Syjuco is able to read her own lived experiences against the experiences of Filipino migrants and other inhabitants of developing global geographies. The cultural state of being 'neither here nor there' encompasses a psychic quality as much as it does a geographic imperative. Created in 1996, *Pacific Theater of Operations*, a series of ten cross-stitched portraits, captures Syjuco's struggle with the ways in which personal and official histories are intimately connected and produced (see Figure 3). The portraits reflect a negotiation of her affective and spatial distance to the Philippines from her diasporic vantage point. In the series, Syjuco recreates World War Two battles that took place in the Philippines.⁵ Movements of troops are denoted by red and black cross-stitched arrows, some point at each other, while others are directed towards unknown territories or oceanic spaces. While the portraits double as maps of battles from historical moments in United States-Philippines relations, they also capture tactical mappings of Syjuco's inner struggles because of her distance to the people, landscapes and histories of her country of birth. Thus, the arrows not only point



Figure 2. Stephanie Syjuco. Partial installation view of *Black Market* exhibition at James Harris Gallery, Seattle, WA. Pictured are two framed chromogenic lightjet prints, 15 in × 20 in from the *Black Market Series*, 2005; digital images hung with 'blobjects'. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

to actual military actions, but also direct the viewer to spaces embedded with personal, psychic battles. The portraits enable Syjuco to confront her country of birth, yet also evidence 'her pretty tenuous' connection to the islands through the portraits' fragmented, dotted and disjointed lines (Everman 9).

Critiquing cinema produced in the Philippines, Rolando Tolentino observes, 'it lays bare the geopolitics of the visual in order to render the almost invisible working operation that make both visibility and invisibility possible' ('Introduction' vii). Syjuco's interstitial interventions in her artwork are premised precisely on making visible the 'taken-for-granted' aspects or invisible qualities of globalisation. In *Pacific Theater of Operations* she attempts to map the affective and psychological trajectories of postcolonial subjects, including the artist herself.

'Blowing Up' the Black Markets

The *Black Market Series* consists of nine enlarged prints. Eight of the images display market scenes in nondescript locales in the Philippines. In each of those eight images Syjuco has digitally redacted areas. She blackens out only the commodities being bought and sold, leaving behind

anonymous Filipino bodies in the act of shopping for or selling goods. The blackened spaces bring new meaning to 'black markets', commonly associated with the sale of illicit goods. The images leave the viewer to speculate on what lies underneath, or even behind, the blackened areas.

To be displayed with the *Black Market Series*, Syjuco created black sculptural objects, wrapping unknown objects of different sizes and shapes with papier mâché and painting them with a glossy black finish. The newly formed abstract and asymmetrical shapes or 'blobjects' strip the objects of their original identities and values in terms of consumer culture, transforming them into unknowns. The interplay of the two-dimensional images with the three-dimensional black sculptural surfaces captures her vision of 'blowing up' the flattening effects of globalisation within the context of visual production and reception in the digital age on multiple levels. That is, the speed at which images get produced and circulated has promoted a psychic detachment or desensitisation, a flattening of the images' affective potential, due to their ubiquity in the globalised digital moment.

The *Black Market Series's* conceptual framework is created from the use of familiar objects, mediums and conventions.

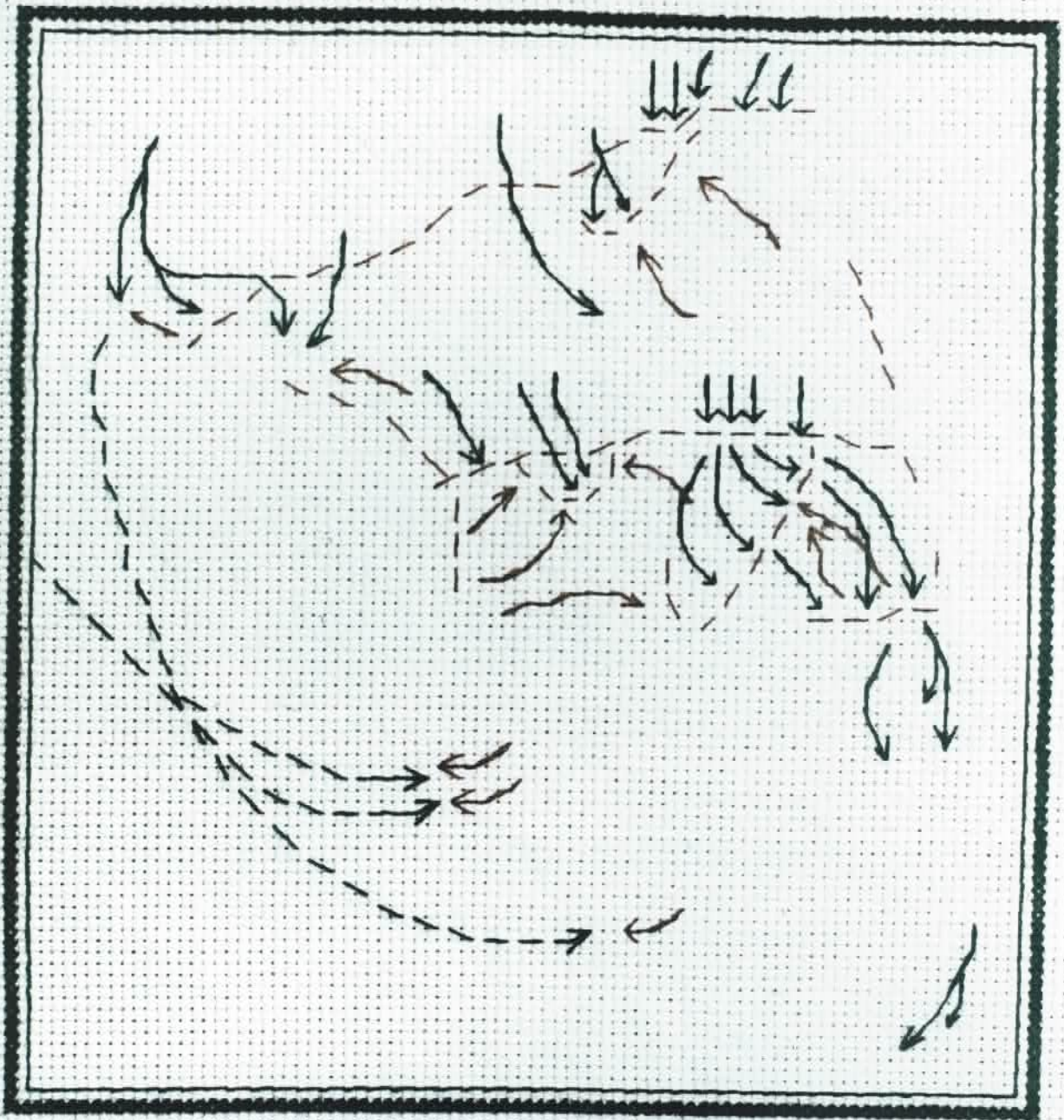


Figure 3. Stephanie Syjuco. Pacific Theater of Operations: Bataan and Corregidor, 1996. Cross-stitch panel, 10 in. × 13 in. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

Syjuco reconfigures how we understand their functions as well as our affective attachments to their visual surfaces. Her preoccupation with flattened representations and their mobility within transnational economies converge, for example, in *Pacific Super* (2004), a piece that foreshadows the conceptual terrains in the *Black Market Series*. *Pacific Super*, a digital photograph, is an image of an assortment of Asian food products arranged to precisely mirror the popular destination of Stonehenge in the United Kingdom (see Figure 4). *Pacific Super* exhibits the popularity of Asian goods sold in Western countries but, more aptly, draws a connection between the global circuits of

commodities – be they the products bought in Asian supermarkets or the Asian bodies themselves – to economies of travels. If Stonehenge entices tourists to visit, the Asian goods that compose 'Stonehenge' in the digital photograph redouble feelings of attraction and consumption. The photograph conveys how both Stonehenge and Asian-ness are objectified, desired and consumed. But, more importantly, the work represents the deep entanglements between Asia and the West, both interdependent on each other in this globalised era.

The conceptual framework of *Pacific Super* allows it to transcend its inherent two-dimensional flatness, a strategy



Figure 4. Stephanie Syjuco, *Pacific Super*, 2003–2004. Fuji lightjet print, 40 in × 30 in. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

also used in the *Black Market Series*. Syjuco is aware that Filipino bodies are read as primarily migrant labourers, especially given the immense Filipino presence throughout the world. As one critic notes

Judging by the airport lines, it would seem that Filipinos have developed a special ability to navigate between homeland and foreign shores with greater ease and flexibility than natives of most other nations. (Friis-Hansen et al. 28)

It is exactly the 'ease' and 'flexibility' of Filipino mobility that have fixed Filipino migrant bodies to specific types of labour throughout the world. These conceptions of Filipino labourers have engendered reductive and often negative connotations of their professions. Thus, their mobile global presence has invariably shaped the contours of their representation and legibility.

Filipinos have established themselves within all sectors of transnational economies — within sanctioned channels of labour and production but also within illicit and stigmatised professions. Regarding Filipino female labour, Rolando Tolentino remarks

[they] have been integrated into the circuits of transnationalism in various ways: as sweatshop factory workers in multinational corporations within the national space, and as entertainers, domestic helpers, nurses, and mail-order brides in international spaces. ('Bodies, Letters, Catalogs' 49)

Syjuco plays with the dualities of official and unofficial, visible and invisible tensions that drive the Philippine economy and sustain the circuits of transnational labour and goods from the islands to the rest of the world. What you see is not necessarily what you get in Syjuco's oeuvre.

The formal choices in the *Black Market Series* offer an important gendered critique of the ease with which flattened images of Filipino bodies are produced and distributed within an age of new media technologies such as the Internet. The Filipino bodies captured in the *Black Market Series* are overwhelmingly women, as makers, sellers and buyers of goods. A few men and boys are pictured, yet the images themselves present the marketplace as a highly gendered space.

Rather than photographing the scenes herself to ascertain the images' veracity, Syjuco culled images of marketplace scenes from the Philippines from the Internet. The Internet becomes for Syjuco an important archive which she returns to frequently and represents a type of global 'collective collection' — a repository of material that may or may not be true' (Gaston). Her vision of the Internet as a 'collective collection' denotes its reach and its power to solidify racial, ethnic and class distinctions. It is with a sense of purpose and direction that Syjuco uses images found on the Internet to highlight the affective dimensions of image production and curation on the Internet, especially as they relate to formations of race, ethnicity, gender and class within the Philippines and the Filipino diaspora. In her appropriation of digital images online, Syjuco re-inscribes the spaces found within the images of the *Black Market Series*, notably the marketplace scenes, as gendered economic spaces.

While Syjuco admits to an internal struggle with submitting entirely to a Filipino or Filipino American identity, her work demonstrates an ironic attachment to the people and locales in the market scenes. The *Black Market Series* does not show 'a distance that she cannot overcome', as one critic notes, rather the opposite (Hackett np). Syjuco injects her presence into the images and succeeds in connecting her life to those pictured in her work. She confirms this connection by acknowledging how different her life could have been: 'I



Figure 5. Stephanie Syjuco. Black Market (Basket Woman), 2005. Framed chromogenic print, 20 in \times 15 in. Included as part of the Black Market Series, 2005. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA.



Figure 6. Stephanie Syjuco. Black Market (Display Table), 2005. Framed chromogenic print, 20 in \times 15 in. Included as part of the Black Market Series, 2005. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA.



Figure 7. Stephanie Syjuco. *Black Market (Girl Holding)*, 2005. Framed chromogenic print, 20 in × 15 in. Included as part of the *Black Market Series*, 2005. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA.

chilling idea to me that in another life I could have wound up on the production end of my own consumerism' (Johnson np). Although it is easy to recognise the distance between the artist and her country of birth in her work, this does not negate her connection to the systems that have shaped the very identities and practices captured in these images. Syjuco confidently takes a Filipino diasporic and feminist position from which the series emerges. She says 'I considered myself a self-imposed "factory worker", producing multiple forms of the same product on a home-made assembly line' (6). Her work re-establishes the Filipino artist as migrant labourer, a strategy that enables her to critique the regimes that drive transnational economies. The nine images and the 'bobjects' reflect the repetition in the production of artwork as commodities, inflecting their production with a factory-line sensibility.

Syjuco's work harnesses the inherent properties of depth of digital images. The quality of digital images relies on the arrangement of binary data (zeros and ones) within a bitmap grid composed of pixels. Bitmaps containing a larger number of pixels can be printed or viewed on a large scale, whereas bitmaps with fewer pixels (low resolution), when enlarged, often reveal the square pixelations. The more bit-data each pixel houses, the greater its depth of colour. By enlarging or blowing up the images in the *Black Market Series* to 20 by

15 inches, Syjuco reveals the limitations of the images' pixel count. The visible, non-redacted areas in the images appear blurred and the integrity of the objects and bodies is obviously pixelated. Weston Teruya observes that Syjuco is able to 'exploit the low resolution of her downloaded sources to develop a provocative space for new narrative possibilities' (247). The digital images thus possess an inherent conceptual depth that informs Syjuco's political message.

In their original form, the images in the *Black Market Series* signify the immediacy of creating and distributing images in the digital age. They capture the everyday realities of the Filipino migrant 'Other'; images like those in the series permeate the internet for a range of reasons: social networking sites, personal blogs or even images left stored on servers unattached to any particular websites. The internet has become a primary culture-producing engine. Whether sensational or everyday snapshots, they are often glanced at without a moment's thought. Digital images saturate the internet and inspire global vernacular modes of digital production engendering a reception premised on detachment and ennui. As one critic of the *Black Market Series* aptly observes, 'globalized consumption is so boring' (Mudede np).

The use of digital images conveys the internet's global reach but also confronts the material and political consequences of the immediacy of the cyber-present,

especially as it relates to the production of visual literacy. The *Black Market Series* demonstrates that, even in a highly digital and connected contemporary moment, digital images can transcend the flatness of representations which lead to the detachment of the viewing public. Syjuco demands we reconsider the production and consumption of digital images, especially the ways these processes have the potential to disempower the bodies represented and ossify racial, gender and class hierarchies. The pixels in her images are more than just binary data that create visibility, they are used to get beyond the flatness of digital visual production.

The Politics of Auras in the Digital Age

The popularity of digital image technology has largely replaced 35mm photography though much of the receptive impact and cultural significance of digital visual production are remarkably similar to its film-based predecessor. Take, for example, Walter Benjamin's notion of photographic modernity as the catalyst for what he calls the emergence of 'the age of mechanical reproduction', which ultimately liberates artwork from the ritualistic constraints of society, noting in particular 'that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art' (221). The 'aura' alludes to a culture that reveres the uniqueness of artwork and which sustains class hierarchies. Benjamin believed in the impact mechanical reproduction could have on visual production and reception to transform art practices from ritual into politics (224). This theory dovetails unexpectedly with Barthes's notion of the 'unary image'. He says 'The unary Photograph has every reason to be banal' (41). Simply, unary images (for Barthes, news images and pornography) reinforce a feeling of cultural cohesion among viewers, premised on their predictability (*ibid*). But Benjamin and Barthes's views on the consequences of mechanical reproduction of the photographic image ultimately conflict. For Benjamin, the liberation of the aura promotes a politicisation based on the democratisation of images, but Barthes argues that this results in a proliferation of images steeped in banality, therefore inspiring an emotive detachment due to their ubiquitous nature.

As a hyper version of Benjamin's concept, the digital age has succeeded in removing the auras from images through sheer ease and speed of visual production. However, for Syjuco, this digital moment has inspired a critical and conceptual art praxis that hinges on precisely their necessity, indeed their re-inscription. Syjuco actively seeks out the 'aura' in her digital work, premised upon a conceptual framework aimed at re-classifying quotidian practices and products with alternative ways of thinking about their conventional functions. Syjuco's re-inscriptions are situated within a political vision of transgression. The artist's digital images exceed those to which the viewer is inured, as a way to produce affective and spatial connections that would otherwise be compromised in the globalised digital age. Rather than looking at digital images in a detached manner then, Syjuco finds ways for the viewer to linger on her digital images, inspiring emotional and intellectual investment in her work.

The *Black Market Series* moves the viewer into what Barthes has called 'the subtle beyond' (57). It is a subjective and yet potentially collective space extending outside the delineated

boundaries of the images to a place where critical meditation can occur. Reflecting on 'the subtle beyond', Barthes notes 'it is there that I animate this photograph and that it animates me' (59). In Syjuco's work the importance of the notion of being present and, therefore, visible seems to be contradicted by her use of the process of redaction. But it is exactly through the black erasures that the images gain depth and volume, both of which give the digital images their auratic and meditative potential. Syjuco literally blows up the digital images through redaction; and she does so, not only for the viewer to see the images enlarged, but also for them to imagine the feel of the process of redacting. A tactile element in the *Black Market Series* exists to connect the viewer to the artist's digital cursor and, ultimately, to her presence within the work. The redactions also highlight the significance of the spatial presence of the 'blobjects' displayed within proximity of the digital images.

The redactions in the image *Black Market (Boys Market)*, for example, are created with cursory strokes that convey a swiftness of motion and immediacy of thought. What remains in the image are Filipino boys surrounded by scribbles of black — erasing the goods to be sold. Even though Syjuco's strokes appear carefree, her authority is focused and maintained. In contrast, the objects in the baskets in *Black Market (Basket Woman)* are redacted thoughtfully, ensuring all the goods being sold are blackened out without compromising the outlines and integrity of the hands and arms within the frame (see Figure 5). Likewise, there is a noticeable ease to the redactions of large areas of space in *Black Market (Boy Vending)*, *Black Market (Display Table)* and *Black Market (Array)*, signalling perhaps the use of a larger eraser tool to redact the numerous goods (see Figure 6).

The qualities of Syjuco's redactions are grounded in the dichotomies inspired by the reality of the black markets in the developing world. The absence of regulatory measures and proprietary control over consumer goods fuel local black market economies. On one hand, the prevalence and dynamism of black markets in countries like the Philippines capture the ease in which black market goods are acquired and sold, whether authentic or counterfeit. In black market spaces found in the Philippines, where authentic or brand-named goods exceed the reach of the majority of Filipino consumers, the production and sales of counterfeit goods exceeds the sales of authentic products. Thus, Syjuco's careful finessing of the redactions around the Filipino bodies in her prints suggests a connection to the attention to details that producers, sellers and buyers of goods within black market economies scrutinise and respect. Transnational economies have inspired counterfeit black market systems where goods are judged by their visual surfaces. Will the goods pass muster? Will the people driving black market economies be caught? The quick redactions in *Black Market (Boys Market)* point symbolically to the swiftness of covering up and hiding goods from the authorities, evading the institutional constraints that will cost them their livelihoods. The integrity and compositions of the redactions themselves offer the viewer windows to contemplate the visual stakes associated with black market systems in spaces like the Philippines.

The redactions in Syjuco's work reveal the socio-political and economic trajectories of the black markets. In *Black Market (Girl Holding)*, however, Syjuco departs radically from

the redaction techniques employed in the other images. Individual strokes are abandoned as Syjuco redacts much of the image's surface area in one seemingly swift and effective digital execution. She leaves behind a smiling girl with only her arm, hand and finger visible (see Figure 7), caught in the act of 'holding' as the title suggests. But what she holds is left for the viewer to imagine. The extent of her redaction in *Black Market (Girl Holding)* and the ease of erasure continues to symbolise the ubiquity of local black markets in the Philippines and elsewhere. This image, in particular, moves the viewer into a conceptual terrain that connects Syjuco's work to the very people who produce black market goods. She becomes a Filipino migrant labourer who works the black market system and sells black market goods. Like her counterparts in the images, Syjuco must convince the viewing public, indeed the artworld, of the value of her art and, most importantly, entice patrons to buy her work. In *Black Market (Girl Holding)*, the Filipino girl's smiling face reflects Syjuco's own labour and subversive joy in working and creating products within the rarefied art world. There is an amusement shared between the artist and the smiling girl in convincing their respective patrons to buy their wares.

What pervades in black market economies like those pictured in Syjuco's prints is the creative act of resistance embodied by the unsanctioned act of producing and selling counterfeit goods. Like the goods that she erases, the redactions become tangible commodities despite their seeming absences in the digital images. The redactions are not just empty voids, but hearken to a physicality and presence that at first glance appears to be missing from the images. On closer inspection the voids gain presence through their absence. Syjuco takes on the role of a migrant labourer in her attempts to convince her viewers of the value of her work, indeed the value of her redactions (intellectually and monetarily) in order to make a sale.

The artist connects herself precisely to the smiling girl because both hold on to goods that constitute their livelihoods, indeed their survival. What they hold on to allows them to challenge the politics of consumption and representation within the globalised present. Syjuco notes,

The adage is true that 'capitalism stops at nothing' and I guess the trick is to see if it is at all possible to work within its constraints to turn it upon itself. (Gaston 14)

What better way to confront the flattening and paralysing effects of the globalised digital age than to visually blow up the black markets.

Coda: *Green Ride*

The ninth image from the *Black Market Series* stands out for its thematic departure from the market scenes. In *Green Ride* two children are riding in an unknown vehicle (see cover image) and this time the redactions are in green. Again, the redaction inspires the viewer to meditate on the significance of the space. The children stare forward, as if anticipating movement outside the image's frame, a space in the beyond that generates anticipation.

Why the colour green? Why the departure from the market scenes? And are there clues to what the redacted object is? The green edges outline the object without a stray scribble and without compromising its integrity. The deft handling of the object highlights its importance. The vehicle appears to be a tricycle, a ubiquitous mode of transportation in the Philippines. Much like the redacted goods in the market scenes, the tricycle has become a commodity to be bought and sold. If the redacted goods in the market scenes point to modes of survival in transnational economies, the redacted tricycle is symbolic of economic mobility — the colour green, reference to wealth and status.

Although the redacted tricycle and goods in the market scenes reflect the impact of transnational economies in the developing world, the tricycle also directs attention to the undercurrents of knowledge production that guide Filipino visual production. It speaks of the legacies of modernity in the Philippines and the historic and symbolic movements of Filipinos across temporal, spatial and intellectual topographies. The tricycle symbolises, moreover, Syjuco's vision of moving the viewer — and the larger Filipino diasporic community — into hermeneutical terrains that are grounded in the language of conceptualism. Observing that 'there is a dearth of writing exploring issues of conceptual art practice and its reception within the Filipino community', Syjuco offers her own conceptual framework through her digital images (18). Indeed, the *Green Ride* becomes a symbolic vehicle that transports the viewer to the subtle beyond.

The *Black Market Series* captures a politics and aesthetic shaped by the contemporary globalised and digital moment. Rising from each of the digital prints is Stephanie Syjuco's articulation of the global and digital forces that have ensnared Filipino bodies. Her work also captures the constraints engendered by the historical relationship between the Philippines and the United States; and yet it is exactly these constraints that permit her to envision a future laden with possibility and corporeal presence within the diasporic space of the 'here' and 'there'. Alongside the children on the tricycle in the *Green Ride*, Syjuco stares into the distance, directing us to the creative and conceptual possibilities within the globalised and digital present.

Notes

- 1 Jeff Baysa, one of the curators of the 1998 *At Home & Abroad* exhibit, offers an important detail in Syjuco's *Portrait Series II* that only those who attended the exhibit first-hand could have experienced: 'the black matting under the glass is reflective' (Friis-Hansen et al 54). The reflective properties of the pieces implicate the viewer in the frame as participant or accomplice to the growth of the cellular bodies which are framed.
- 2 For this article, I focus only on the *Black Market Series* prints and the accompanying black sculptural objects shown at the James Harris Gallery in Seattle.
- 3 The Philippines was colonised by Spain from the mid-sixteenth century to the late nineteenth century. The American colonisation of the Philippines started after the defeat of Spain by the USA during the Spanish American War in 1898 and lasted until 1946.
- 4 I use the word 'conflicted' and 'ambivalent' to describe the relationship to Filipinos and Filipino Americans deliberately.

- because of her comments about her 'chinoy' racial and ethnic background which prevent her entry into either community. While I think Syjuco's commitment to addressing the politics of globalisation and their effects on representations of Filipinos as well as others in the developing world is evident in her artwork, her conceptions of Filipino race and physiognomy – 'many Filipinos and Filipino-Americans have darker complexions and wider, flatter noses, looking more like Thai or Indonesian' (24) – run the risk of essentialism, the very thing her visual projects seem to confront and challenge. See endnote #7 in her MFA thesis in which she describes the incongruities between her 'chinoy' appearance vis-à-vis the physical appearances of what she considers encompass the majority of Filipinos and Filipino Americans (21).
- 5 The Philippines played an important role for both Japan and the USA during World War Two. Japan began its occupation of the islands in 1941 after declaring war on the USA, who succeeded in liberating the Philippines in 1945.

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