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Stephanie Syjuco

Syjuco discovers the colors of 'neutrality'

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"Cargo Cults: Cover-Up" (2016), a photograph by Stephanie Syjuco

There is a technical concept in photography and film of “neutral gray,” a tone that most of us would perceive as halfway between black and white. Stephanie Syjuco wants you to know that, physics aside, images are never neutral.

Born in the Philippines — first a colony of Spain and then of the United States — Syjuco has shown in her work a continuing interest in the kind of cultural subjugation that inevitably accompanies colonialism. That would include both historic, military imperialism and the current form of, mostly, economic neocolonialism. Rather than preach or harangue, however, she brings to her art a sense of humor and an acute understanding of the often barely visible remnants of those systems.

In “Neutral Calibration Studies (Ornament + Crime),” a tightly structured exhibition at Catharine Clark Gallery, Syjuco examines the notion of neutrality from, literally, various angles. A large installation in the central room is a sculptural paradox: a three-dimensional structure built up, you soon realize, mostly of overlapping cutout pictures, propped up together on a platform. The images become characters — some human in form, others not; in flat monochrome, black-and-white or full color; ranging from life-size to minutely reduced — all actors together on a stage.

From the entrance it seems substantial. Walk around to backstage, though, and you see how flimsy it all is: a child’s toy theater; the proverbial Potemkin village. From the rear, everything is coated with paint of the same 18 percent gray — neutral gray.

The falseness of it all so blatantly exposed. What were those actors purported to be? The exotic. Oriental. Ethnic. Worn-out words for tattered notions of difference, matched here by the artist’s choices of found examples and images of sculpture, carpets, furniture, plants. Visual material that once had authentic cultural value, stripped of spirit and genuine function, demeaned by its ubiquity in inhospitable settings, lifted from Internet posts and auction sites, recopied from loss-y reproductions.

A Roman bust, likely based upon a Greek model. Statuettes from ancient Egypt, Africa, Central America — or, perhaps, the dime store downtown. Charlotte Perriand, reclining on the lounge she probably designed for Le Corbusier (he of the invented, meaningless name) and for which he received credit. Fakes faking fakes.

Arrayed around the central installation are individual photographs, these produced by the artist rather than appropriated, that fall into two categories. In the main room are images of orchids — exotic flora to most of America — sprayed with more of that gray paint, in an apparent attempt to “neutralize” them — which in this case, of course, would also starve them of air, killing them. Their subtly colored blossoms are signs they still survive, for now.

The other grouping of photographs consists of self-portraits of the artist, attired in what appears at first to be some sort of native dress. It’s all mall-bought, geometrically patterned clothing — with Gap and Charlotte Russe price tags still attached — set off by jewelry fashioned from digital cables and bungee cords. Syjuco titles the series, appropriately, “Cargo Cults,” a reference to one particularly bizarre effect of colonialist adventure in some parts of the world.

Haphazardly piled on the floor are black-and-white photographs on cloth — pixelated images of rugs from various cultures (or imagined cultures), stolen online, blown up to their original size.

The artist employs an alternate strategy in a video work, in a final gallery, that again references Le Corbusier. Here, she alters a digital model of the architect's Villa Savoye to cover the stark white walls of the strictly Modernist residence with, a wall text tells us, folk textile patterns from former French colonies; street sounds from Algeria, Morocco and Vietnam make up the soundtrack.

Every photograph, the artist and theorist Allan Sekula wrote in a seminal 1975 essay, "is a sign, above all, of someone's investment in the sending of a message." To invest, of course, is not only to make a conscious calculation, but also to gamble. Those messages we are sending may, if we are lucky, communicate what we mean. At the same time, as Syjuco points out in this deeply engaging exhibition, we may also be saying a lot more than we intend.



Left to right: "Neutral Orchids (Phalaenopsis + Dracaena sanderana)" (2016), a photograph by Stephanie Syjuco and "Cargo Cults: Head Bundle" (2016), a photograph by Stephanie Syjuco



"Neutral Calibration Studies (Ornament + Crime)," a mixed-media installation by Stephanie Syjuco at Catharine Clark Gallery