



Sanggawa, **Sanggawa, Second Coming**, oil on canvas, 80 x 238 inches. Photograph: Courtesy of the artists, R1998.1.33.

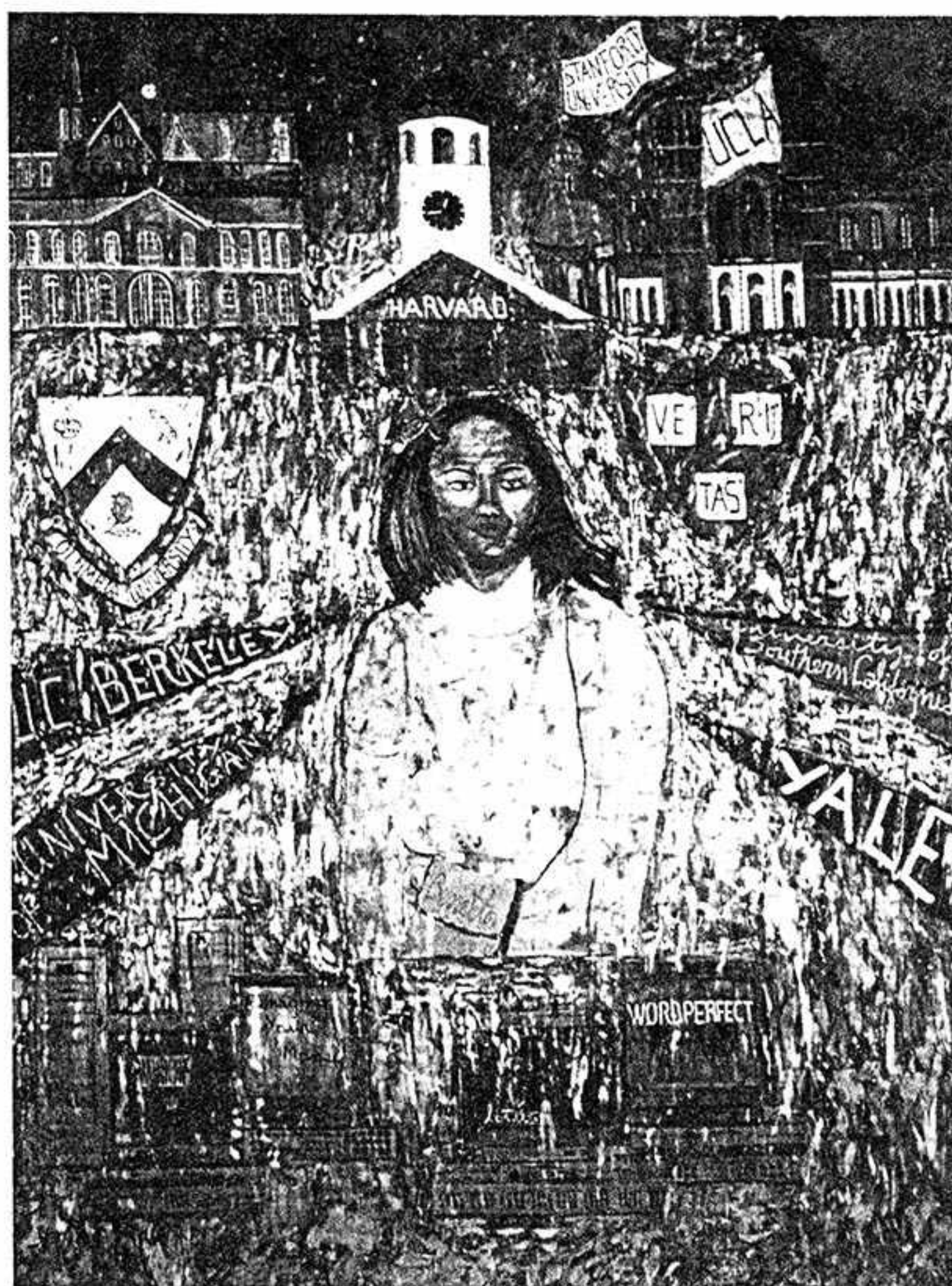
Home And Away

Contemporary Filipino art is one of the richest and most dynamic in all of Asia. In the year of the 100th anniversary of the nation's Independence it is not only timely but utterly fitting that a major show should be dedicated to the nation's contemporary artists.

By Reena Jana

Although billed primarily as "the first major U.S. exhibition devoted exclusively to contemporary Filipino art," *At Home and Abroad: 20 Contemporary Filipino Artists* at San Francisco's Asian Art Museum is more than a survey of today's most recognized and up-and-coming artists born in the Philippines. The show presents over 50 works that range in theme from the plight of indigenous peoples to economic diaspora, from Spanish colonization to Martial Law to the effects of Westernization on the Philippines. And the works are made in a wide variety of media and styles by known artists such as Manuel Ocampo and rising stars such as Alfredo Esquillo, Jr., 26, whose remarkable realist compositions, like the 1996 triptych *Daang Ligid Krus (Maze)* and *Golf Plan* provide a lucid look into the labyrinthine psyche of today's Filipino.

The exhibition, organized by director Hal Fischer of the Asian Art Museum Project and by an international team of



Pacita Abad, **How Mail Lost Her Accent**, 1991, acrylic, oil, and collage on stitched and padded canvas, 94 x 68 inches. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist.

curators—Corazon Alvina, director of the Metropolitan Museum in Manila; Dana Friis-Hansen, senior curator, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston; and Dr. Jeff Baysa, a Honolulu-based independent curator—conveys a complex focus that goes deeper than presenting work by a group of artists who all happen to be born in the Philippines. The show reaches beyond tokenism to address, in a subtle and effective manner, the challenge of coping with hybridity and pluralism, perhaps the most pressing cultural challenge of the late-1990s.

At Home and Abroad is clearly presented to its audience as a visual celebration of the Philippine Centennial. Yet the show achieves its resonance by carefully and effectively expressing the tug-of-war between alienation and acceptance experienced when attempting to blend not only East and West, but the ancient and the modern as well.

"My participation in this endeavor was dependent on whether the art could interest a general audience, and I think

that the Filipino experience has parallels for many Americans, in terms of migration, colonization, urban culture, urban problems, etc.," says Friis-Hansen, signifying the truly international appeal of the exhibition. "Yet, of course these artists viewpoint is uniquely Filipino. Those who take the time and thought to get beneath the surface of these artworks will find the effort worth it."

Featured are paintings, sculpture, and photography, installation, fabric-based artwork, and video. Much of the work is figurative, such as the sprawling painting *Second Coming*, a colorful depiction of the 1993 papal visit to the Philippines, by the artist collective Sanggawa; some are abstract, such as the stark *Portrait Series II*, an installation consisting of framed, oddly shaped empty photo mats, by Stephanie Syjuco, 24; some don't appear "Filipino" in any way, such as the poetic, highly personal, relic-like assemblages by Alan Valencia. Work was selected revolving around five particular themes: the political system of the Philippines; the struggles of the nation's indigenous peoples; diasporic movements to more prosperous nations; the Westernization of the Philippines; and the powerful influence of Hispanic Catholicism on the islands' multi-faceted culture.

"A general theme, 'what it means to be Filipino today' became the focus. We decided to highlight the current and future generation of artists, as in the Philippines there are so many exhibitions focusing on the past," says Friis-Hansen. "We selected artists who were making original, personal, and powerful statements about history, identity, and self in relation



Anna Fer, *India and Illustrada*, 1993, oil on canvas, 90 x 114 inches. Photograph: Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Manila, R1998.1.1.

to their Filipino experience."

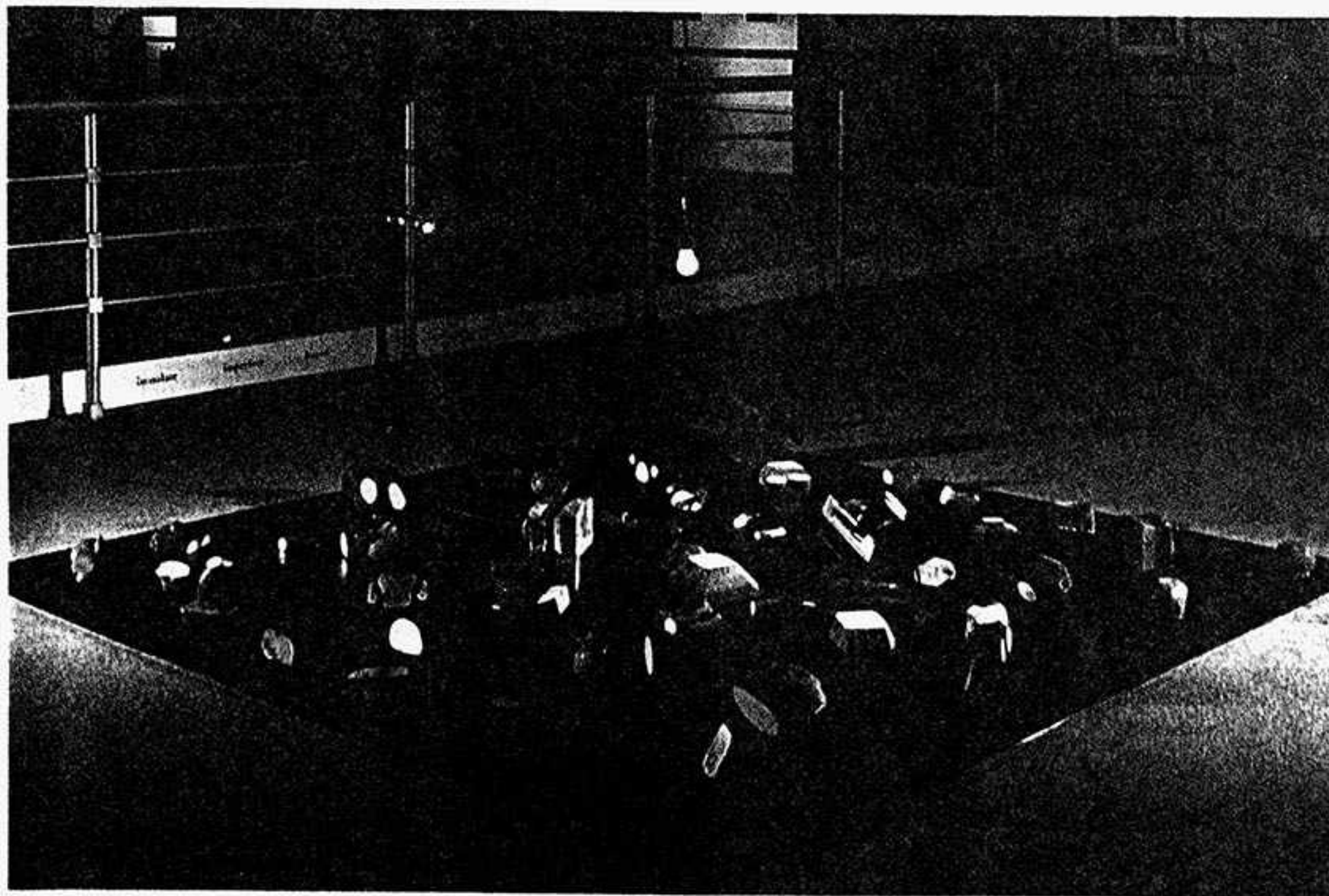
But this is not just another show about identity politics. "Another element was to make an exhibition that was coherent without being boring, but would provide the visitor an approachable, engaging experience with art and ideas and history that many of them have never known before," says Friis-Hansen.

"We wanted to include a wide range of work, but we didn't want this to be an historical show," says Dr. Jeff Baysa. "We wanted to address universal themes in any culture. The idea of the expatriate is eternal, as people are always emigrating."

Some of the names on the roster of artists will be familiar to those who track the rhythms of contemporary Asian art; the mix of both the known and unknown provide the viewer with a spectrum of distinctively Filipino perspectives. The internationally recognized Pacita Abad, who divides her time between Jakarta, Indonesia, and Washington, D.C., for example, is rightfully included. Her highly textured, richly hued trapunto works—created in a style that Abad herself invented, in which she sews and stuffs her canvases—provide a witty commentary on the displacement felt by Filipino immigrants in the United States, and are inspired by real people.

"I didn't start these as an 'immigrant series'," she says. "These are just people I know. I wanted to illustrate the reality of domestic workers in the Washington, D.C. area and the notion of Asians as 'model minorities' in the U.S." Abad's *I Thought the Streets Were Paved with Gold* is a heartbreaking visual symphony that depicts Filipino working low-paying jobs as plumbers, laundry workers, house-painters, fast-food servers, or assembly-line workers, in a dizzying mix of brushstrokes and simple, flat renditions of figures.

Manuel Ocampo's striking signature images, which garnered major attention in the 1993 exhibition *Helter Skelter: LA Art in the 1990s* at Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art as well as raised controversy at *Dokumenta IX*, provide a sense of tragicomedy. The drama of his vision, exemplified in arresting images such as *Abstract Painting (Deus Ex Machina)*, featuring skeletons, a giant question mark, a regurgitating man, and



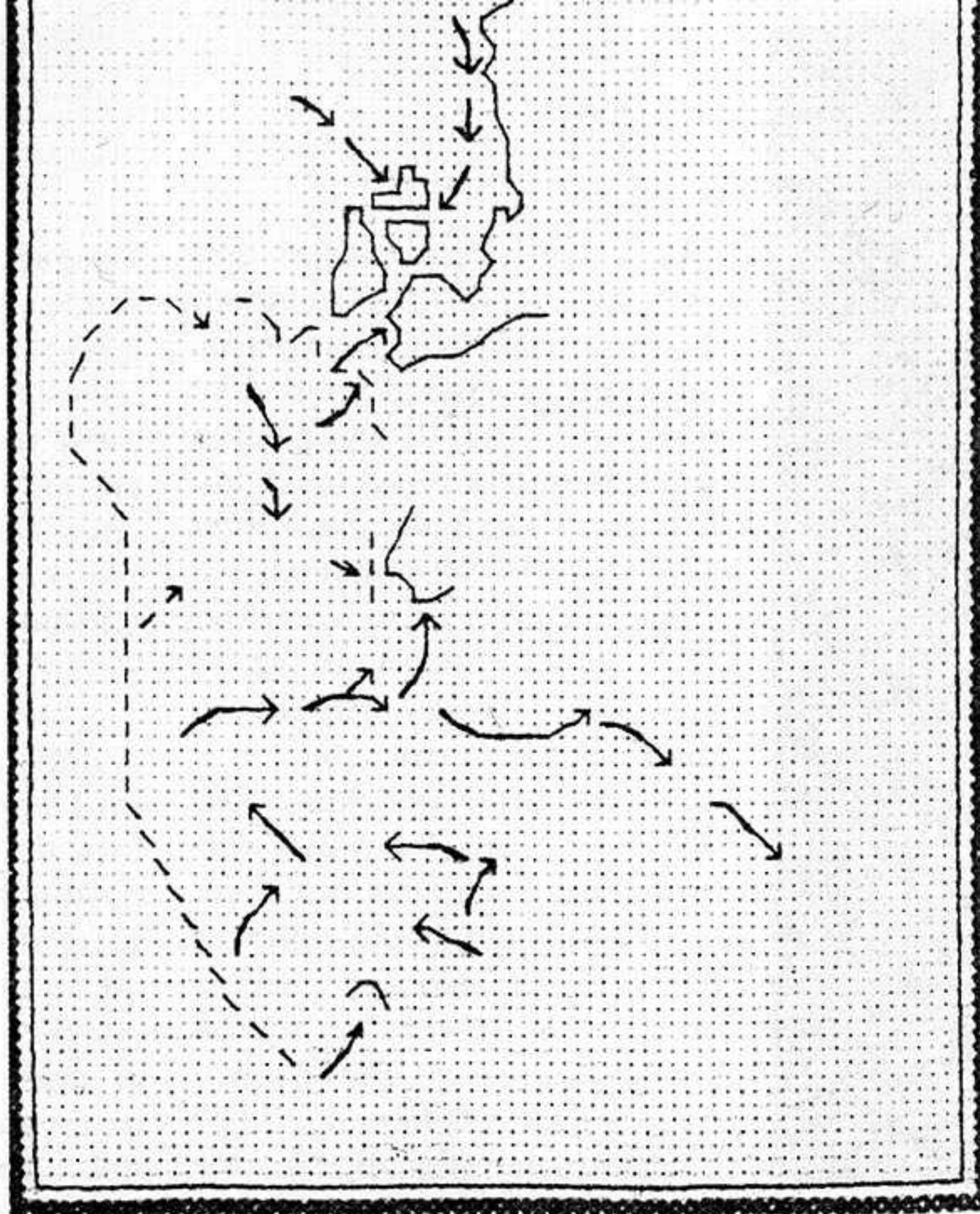
Gaston Damag, *Display*, 1998, floor installation (steel, incandescent bulb, ifugao idols), 48 x 96 inches. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist.

bloody smears of red paint, or *Die Kreuzigung Christi*, which presents a horseman in Ku Klux Klan hooded robe amidst a landscape of religious symbols, abandoned buildings, and liquor bottles, simultaneously disturb and engage the viewer, pulling them into narratives that comment on both the atrocities and absurdities of colonialization and religious conversion.

Other recognized artists included in *At Home and Abroad* are Nunelicio Alvarado, who played an instrumental role in developing a community-based group called "The Black Artists of Asia" in the 1970s, and Santiago Bose, known for his paintings that explore the effects of the colonialist presence on indigenous peoples. Alvarado's paintings, which generally depict, in a distinctive folk style, the plight of *sakadas*, or Visayan workers. He presents flatly rendered figures in dramatic, densely packed compositions, in which exploitation and discomfort are expressed on the visceral level, through jarringly bright colors and a graphic style of presenting visual elements such as daggers and barbed wire, in *Hulat Suweldo (Waiting for Salary)*; a skull and a bleeding heart, in *Tiempo Muerto*; or a circle of lecherous hands and tongues threatening a young girl as in *Maid in Negros Goes Global*.

Bose, who also deals with the plight of the indigenous peoples of the Philippines, does so in a more figurative style than Alvarado, calling to mind more Western painting strategies. His *Contemplating Dios and Vermeer*, for example, recalls the vanitas style of European still-lives. His *Remapping the Colonized Subject* fuses a Rembrandt-esque approach to portraiture along with a graffiti-like hand to express the complications of de-colonialization and preservation of indigenous roots.

Roberto Feleo's maquette for *Bukidnon Creation Myth*—able to stand as a sculpture in its own right—is a striking



Stephanie Syjuco, *Reconquest of the Philippines 1945, 1996*, cross-stitch panel, 12 x 10 1/2 inches. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist.

physical essay that communicates not only a sense of the indigenous aesthetic but also a folk spirituality, one that has been so overshadowed by Catholicism. Constructed from sawdust and white cement, *Bukidnon Creation Myth* conveys the story of the beginning of the earth from the point of view of the Bukidnon people of the southern Philippines. A *banting*, or circle of brightness—depicted as if a cartoon drawing of a sun—is the focal point; in the myth, this *banting* served as the starting point for life. A part-human, part-bird being, *Agtayabun*, stands atop the *banting*; the myth indicates that he is a peacemaker. Underneath the *banting*, Feleo presents human figures emerging upside-down from amorphous structures.

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porary deconstruction of indigenous ideals. "My work is more minimalist," says Damag of *Display*. "But this still has the sense of an offering to the gods." A female perspective on the interplay between indigenous culture and Westernization is provided in the paintings by Anna Fer (Ana Policarpio Ferrazini). *India and Illustrada*, for example, presents two female figures in a face-off: on one side of the canvas, it is a Filipina in colonial dress, juxtaposed with images of a church as well as a woman bowing to a priest who looks down upon her; facing her is a Filipina who is bare-breasted, her arms covered in tattoos. In the center of the canvas is a figure, rendered in red hues, sliced in half by a cross-tipped sword. In

a simple visual language, Fer conveys the dichotomous identity of the Filipina—a symbol, perhaps, of the Philippines as a nation, "tamed" by the Spanish and Catholicism, robbed of her natural elegance and wisdom.

Brenda V. Fajardo also concentrates on the identity of the Filipina by addressing the experience of female overseas contract workers or "OCWs." Her *Pilipinas* series of pen, ink, and tempera compositions



Manuel Ocampo, *Die Kreuzigung Christi*, 1993, acrylic and collaged color xerox on canvas, 70 x 107 1/2 inches. Collection of Tom Patchett.

based on the form of the tarot card, present scenes of OCWs as migrant workers, scantily clad "entertainers" in Japan, overworked domestic helpers in Hong Kong, exploited factory workers in Taiwan. Another work presents a Filipino family crying over the casket of an OCW who has returned home dead. These tableaux communicate the realities of risk in the OCW's pursuit of a "better life."

Work by Lordy Rodriguez, Jose Tence Ruiz, and Lani Maestro deal with the themes of displacement and diaspora. Rodriguez creates maps that are governed more by emotion, memory, and longing than actual longitude and latitude. His *State of Quezon*, for example, includes American metropolitan areas such as Seattle, San Francisco, and different boroughs of New York City, placed fantastically within the proximity of cities in the Philippines such as Cebu City and Baguio City. The result is a disorienting mental journey that mimics the artist's own varied path across time zones, oceans, and customs.

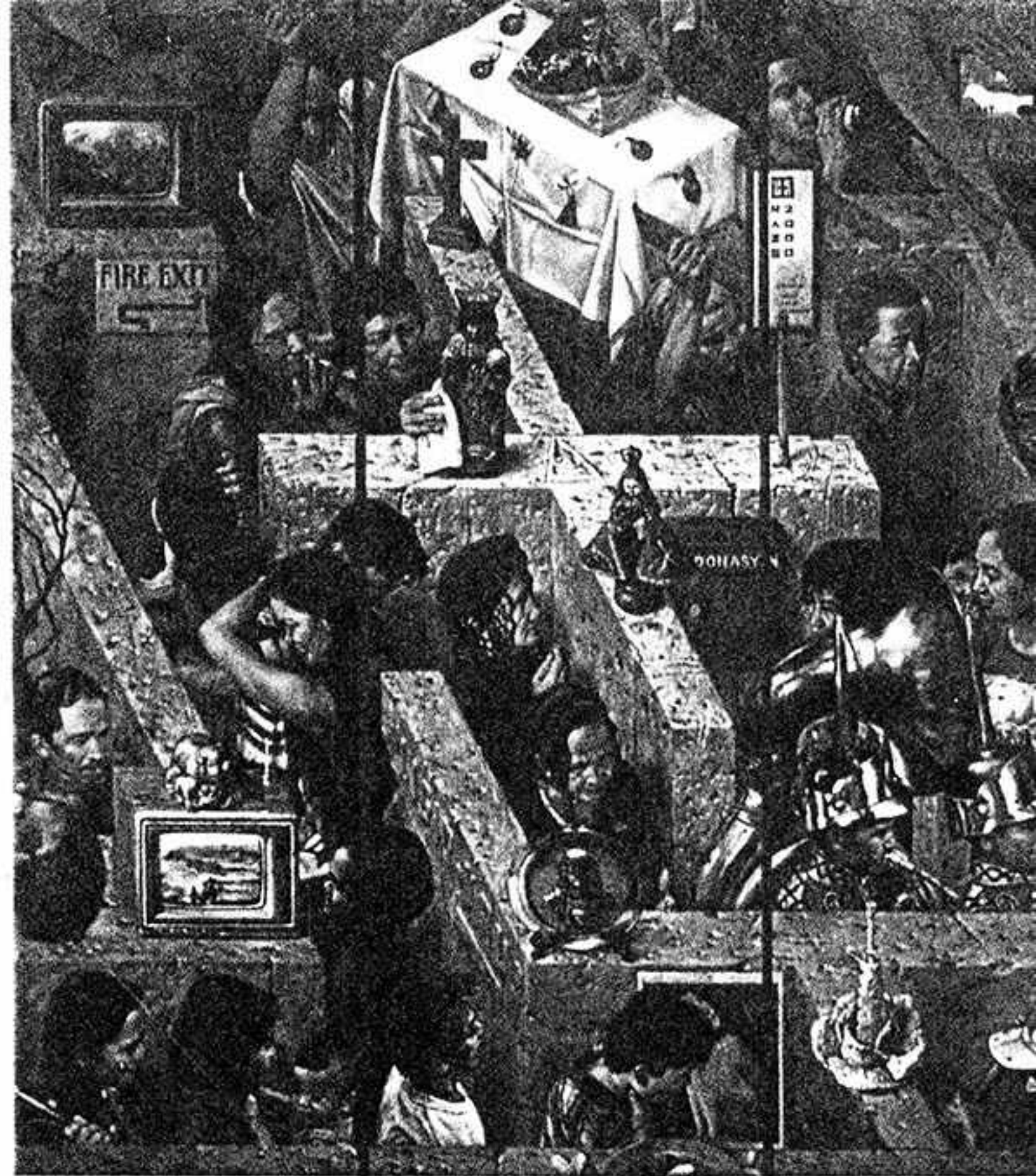
Ruiz and Maestro offer some of the more abstract work in the entire exhibition. Ruiz's *Door to Door*, a sculpture consisting of a series of brown cardboard boxes opening to reveal another box encased inside, like a Russian babushka doll.

The boxes recall those commonly used by Filipino expatriates to carry or to ship gifts back to the islands; the seemingly unending spiral beginning with one large box and ending in an impossibly minuscule version of the standard cardboard packing box conveys an extreme degree of desire to ship goods—or people or dreams—overseas.

Maestro's video and audio installation, *a voice remembers nothing*, featuring dual TV images of waves and the sound of names being read aloud, expresses a sense of perpetual motion, of arriving and of leaving, washing up on new shores. Although neither Ruiz nor Maestro directly reference Filipino cultural iconography, their work lends itself well to the larger thematic goals of the exhibition.

Elmer Borlongan, Clodualdo (Dindo) Llana, Mark Justiani—all in their early 30s—do directly reference Filipino culture, but it is the culture of today, rather than that of colonial times or pre-colonial era. Borlongan's *Kubli (Hide)* and *Kumot (Blanket)* depict street children in the Philippines in a style that recalls that of the Norwegian Expressionist Edvard Munch; his *Gabay (Guide)* is a hauntingly surreal scene of a person driving with an alarmingly life-like, life-size sculpture of an armless Christ in the passenger seat, a rosary hanging from the rear view mirror. Llana's paintings, rendered in a cartoon style, use traditional Filipino dishes and culinary terms as political metaphors: *Pork Adobo*, for example, plays on the "pig" image of today's greedy, overweight politicians. In Justiani's mixed-media works, such as *Edukado (Educated)*, featuring a graphic image of a man in suit and tie holding an umbrella and juxtaposed with the American/Filipino flag colors of red, white, and blue, the artist utilized stainless steel jeepney parts and stickers to convey the cleverness and creativity of jeepney owners and operators and their unwitting creation of a uniquely Filipino street art.

Paul Pfeiffer and the team of Reamillo & Juliet—all in their 30s as well—also present a fresh look at Catholicism on today's cultural landscape. Pfeiffer's striking sepia

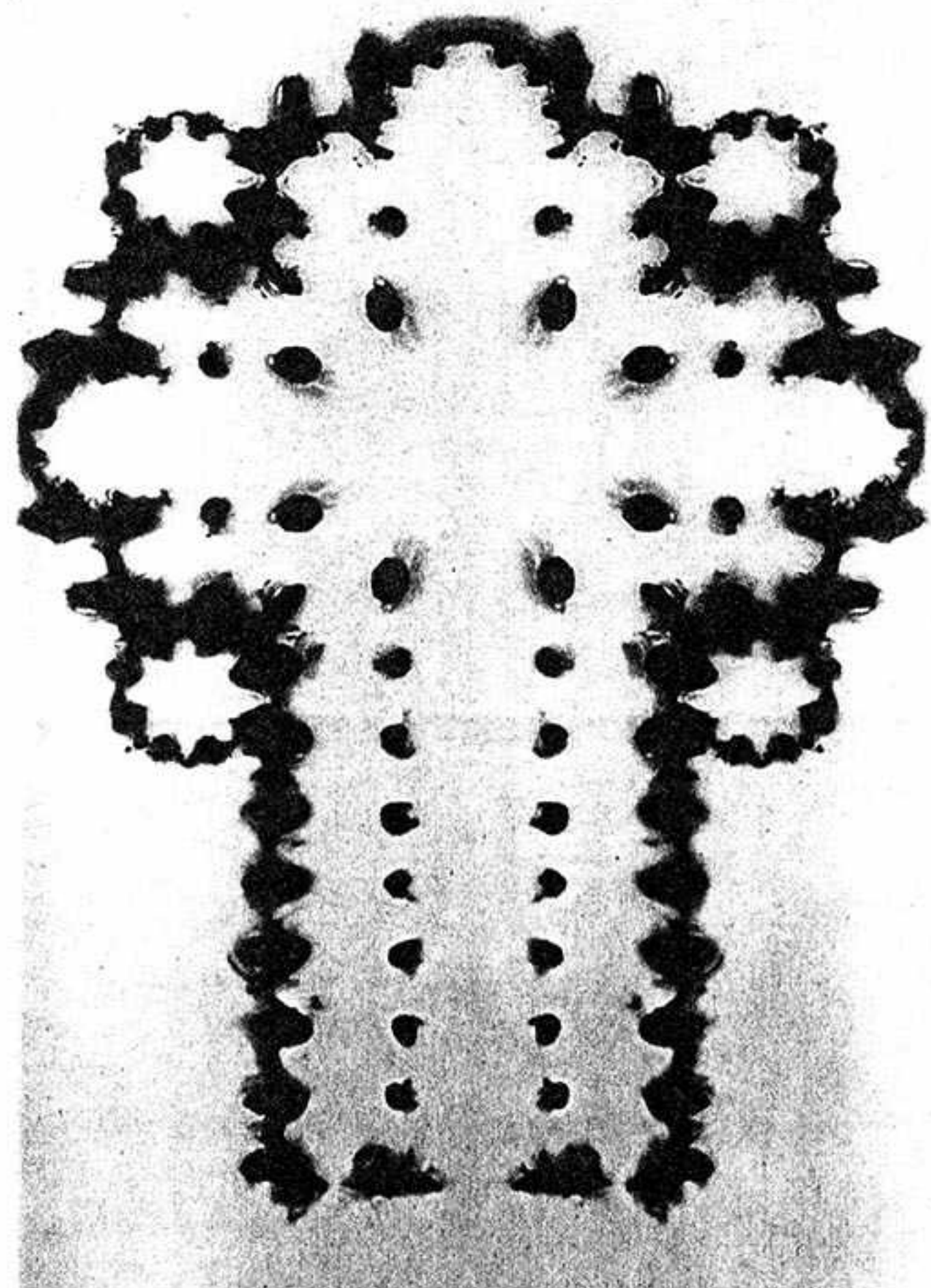


Alfredo Esquillo Jr., Daang Ligid Krus (*Maze*), 1996, oil and sawdust on canvas, 60 x 72 inches. Collection of Claude Taya, R1998.1.16.

prints on mylar, such as *Vitruvian Figure (After Pavia Cathedral)*, appear to be classic floor-plans of cathedrals, churches, chapels—but on closer inspection, the viewer notices that all corners and crevices depicted are actually digitally manipulated images taken from gay pornography as well as ethnographic photographs. Reamillo & Juliet's *Humayo ka, Satanis, sapagkat ito ay nakasulat. Wala kang ibang sasambabin kundi any Panginoon mong Diyos, at tanging Siya lamang and iyong paglilingkuran (Get thee hence, Satan, for it is written. Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve)* presents children's bedsheets emblazoned with characters from popular Walt Disney cartoons, such as Mickey and Minnie Mouse, used as bases for collages that include images of American currency and crab shells printed with religious imagery and Bible text.

Presented in a year when the world recognizes the 100th year anniversary of Philippine Independence, *At Home and Abroad* clearly deserves the spotlight. Scheduled to travel to the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston, Texas, and then to the Metropolitan Museum of Manila in the summer of 1999, the show is one that its organizers have designed to make a significant impact beyond the context of the Centennial—and even beyond themes of cultural pluralism and hybridity. "We hope it's an educational tool," says Dr. Jeff Baysa. "Perhaps other major Asian art museums will show contemporary work along with traditional art now, too." A

Reena Jana is a contributing editor for Asian Art News and World Sculpture News based in San Francisco.



Paul Pfeiffer, *Vitruvian Figure (After Pavia Cathedral)*, 1997, sepia print on mylar, 72 x 36 inches. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist.