

## The Allegory of the Cave

by Jason Dy, SJ (2018)

*Swallowed up by an unforgiving mountain and surrounded by darkness, the boys and the coach lost all sense of time. Fear, perhaps even terror, would no doubt have crept in.*

- Helier Cheung and Tessa Wong, "The Full Story of Thailand's Extraordinary Cave Rescue" in *BBC News Asia*, online, 14 July 2018

*Now, my plan is still a bolder one... Let us be franker than Mr. Chamberlain; let us audaciously present the whole of the facts, shirking none, then explain them ... This daring truthfulness will astonish and dazzle the Person Sitting in Darkness, and he will take the Explanation down before his mental vision has had time to get back into focus.*

- Mark Twain, "Person Sitting in Darkness"

*The Bravest - grope a little -  
And sometimes hit a Tree  
Directly in the Forehead -  
But as they learn to see -*

*Either the Darkness alters -  
Or something in the sight  
Adjusts itself to Midnight -  
And Life steps almost straight.*

- Emily Dickinson, "We Grow Accustomed to the Dark"

In his studio, during the conceptualization and production of a new body of work for his solo exhibition *The Allegory of the Cave*, Philippine contemporary artist Leslie de Chavez has handwritten the text in all caps: "TO THE PERSON SITTING IN DARKNESS – MARK TWAIN" using black pen ink on white paper. And he tacks it on the right corner of a wall covered with gridded Manila paper.

Reading the anti-Imperialist essay of American writer Mark Twain 'To The Person Sitting in Darkness,' de Chavez conducts his own inquiry on the situation of his country described as "sliding back to another dark period"<sup>1</sup> by the Filipino lawyer and columnist Joel Ruiz Butuyan. The other dark era that Butuyan refers to is the Martial Law period in the 1970s.

The sculptural assemblage entitled *Memoir of a Traitor's Love (Alaala ng Pag-ibig ng Isang Traydor,* 2017) portrays the excesses and opulence of the Marcos regime as hinted in the portrait of the reclining woman painted on a drapery-like surface completely covered with gold leaf. This work becomes a historical hinge of the other works in this exhibition. Here, de Chavez references the missing painting *The Marchioness of Santa Cruz (La Marqueza de Santa Cruz,* 1805) of the Spanish artist Francisco Goya that became part of the Marcoses' collection in the 1980s after it resurfaced through a London art dealer. Utilizing this historical context, de Chavez presents a dilemma of art patronage to support the political agenda of Marcos' *New Society (Bagong Lipunan)*. Though portraying this past to prevent others from revising historical events, de Chavez focuses really on the current state of affairs of the Philippines.

### **In the Shadows**

The handwritten text on the wall in de Chavez' studio is taken from the title of Twain's critical essay published in 1901. Twain intended the essay as a critique of the US' imperial expansion in the guise of benevolence, civilization, and liberty as evidenced by the Philippine-American war from 1899 to 1902. Initially, he was enthusiastic about the war that William McKinley waged to free Cuba from Spanish oppression. In his letter to friend Joseph H. Twichell dated June 1898, Twain wrote: "I have never enjoyed a war—even in written history—as I am enjoying this one. ... It is a worthy thing to fight for one's freedom; it is another sight finer to fight for another man's. And I think this is the first time it has been done."<sup>2</sup>

However, the enthusiasm of Twain turned sour after reading the Treaty of Paris of 1898 that concluded the Spanish-American war. The agreement did not at all offer liberty to the Philippines from Spain but only transferred the colonial power to the U.S. for the sum of US \$ 20,000,000.00. Resorting to the US' double-standard approach, the sale re-echoed how the US government previously dealt with Cuba. Twain wondered: "There must be two Americas: one that sets the captive free, and one that takes a once-captive's new freedom away from him, and picks a quarrel with him with nothing to found it on; then kills him to get his land."<sup>3</sup>

In employing the text from Twain, de Chavez does not only share his disillusionment with how governments offer empty promises of progress, equity, and peace to their people left in the darkness of unfulfilled dreams, inescapable poverty, and unjust structures. This is the situation of the people in the shadows that de Chavez is reflecting on and engaging in his works. His small triptych of dark and dreary landscapes provides a visual setting of this shadow enveloping people in desolation, despair, and destitution. de Chavez also strongly sees the need to uncover the lies permeated by the system so as to reveal the truth of the people's situation.

In his visit to the District Penitentiary of Lucena City, de Chavez was given the permission to photograph the silhouettes of two hundred detainees, male and female equal in number. <sup>4</sup> With the consent of the detainees, the artist together with his crew captured the unique profile of the subjects (*stadium*) sitting against the white light glowing as their shadows' haloes. Though the subjects are anonymous, the disturbing element (*punctum*) of each portrait is the penetrating darkness that draws the viewer in. This suggests the mysterious depths of the incarcerated person. As an artist, de Chavez wonders about the identity, history, and story of these persons "who came under the dark circumstances in their lives or how this darkness brought light to their lives."<sup>5</sup>

de Chavez's engagement with the detainees at the Lucena penitentiary using photographs that explore anonymity and individuality is akin to the project of the French artist Christian Boltanski although their contexts are different. Growing up in the post-World War II era, Boltanski is interested in exploring memories and mortality in his appropriated photographs and large-scale installations of human clothing. In his early work *Detective* in 1955 when he was eleven years old, Boltanski gathered photographs of sixty-two children around his age from the Mickey Mouse Club. According to him, "They had each sent in the picture that, according to their opinion, represented them best: smiling and well-groomed or with their favorite toy or animal. They had the same desires and the same interests that I did. Today they must all be about my age, but I can't learn what has become of them."<sup>6</sup> This is perhaps the feeling of de Chavez as he left the penitentiary thinking that some inmates can be his age. He will never know what brought them to prison as well as what will become of them. The photographs he has taken are not just silhouettes of two hundred people. They have become mysterious figures in his consciousness as well as in his viewers whispering varied woes and hopes as they remain locked behind bars lingering in the shadows.

Yet whatever circumstances they are in, in installing the photographs in a pyramidal arrangement, de Chavez wants the viewers to consider the capitalist society's structure of social inequality that affected the detainees he had met. The display of some shirts donated by the detainees in exchange for new ones is a subtle invitation for the viewers to "wear" the shirts so as to be under the skin of their former owners. Some of them may be drug dependents who voluntarily handed in themselves in the hope of being rehabilitated so as not to be victims of extra-judicial killings in the Philippine government's war against drugs. But once in prison, they are faced with the reality of congested prison cells, inadequate facilities, and lack of rehabilitation program. This is also the unsettling (abject) reality that this photographic installation work entitled *To The Persons in Darkness* (2018) attempts to uncover.

Like Twain's anti-imperialist writings having "potent political impact,"<sup>7</sup> de Chavez's works also have a potent socio-political impact for a country that struggles with another oppressive regime that disregards the value of human rights after the Martial Law era. Under Rodrigo Duterte's current regime, the House of Representatives approved a meager Php 1,000.00 (around US \$ 20) budget for the Commission on Human Rights as depicted in the work *Fifty-fifty* (2018). As suggested by the hundred pieces of ten-peso silver coins carried in the two resin casts of Mr. Duterte's head, his presidency bears the burden of such a decision emasculating the Commission so as to prevent it from probing into the abuses of human rights in the country. De Chavez rightly investigates this decision. For how can any just government afford to allocate such a paltry amount to investigate and resolve violence and killings in the country?

As more news on government corruption and violence in society mount, de Chavez's digital counter installation with 60 grams of piled newspapers entitled *Every Drop* (*Bawat Patak*, 2018) asks the temporal questions: how long can people bear the situation of violence, until when will people tolerate the assaults against women, farmers, contractual workers, and the poor, and when will people wake up from the illusion of a strong republic offering relative peace and order? Unlike Boltanski's *Last Second* (*Dernières Seconde*, 2014) that ticks until his last breath, de Chavez's digital counter counts the many seconds that the people will have to endure their difficult situation. Here, in both works, there is an urgency to struggle for life even if one is aware of the impending mortality.

The struggle against time while being in the shadows is dramatically portrayed in the actual experience of the twelve Thai boys and their soccer coach (Wild Boar Soccer Team) trapped inside the Tham Luang Cave in the Chiang Rai Province of Thailand. BBC Asia news correspondents Helier Cheung and Tessa Wong have summed up the nine days entrapment before they were found on 2 July 2018: "Swallowed up by an unforgiving mountain and surrounded by darkness, the boys and the coach lost all sense of time. Fear, perhaps even terror, would no doubt have crept in."<sup>8</sup>

Sympathetic to the situation of the people in the shadows, De Chavez has intelligently employed Twain's text as a personal quest on how to respond to the persons in darkness through his paintings, photographs, assemblages, and installations. He accedes to Twain's approach that is satirical with frankness and "daring truthfulness" to the "Actual Thing," the real motivation in the war, which is disguised as "Blessings of Civilization".<sup>9</sup>

The other work of de Chavez that explores the idea of being in the shadows is *Déjà Vu* (2018). It is a brass engraving of the text directly quoted from Twain's final sarcastic suggestion to the imperial forces "to stand ready to grab the Person Sitting in Darkness, for he will swoon away at this confession..."<sup>10</sup> However, the frank confession of the deceit, betrayal, and debasement is intended not to cast away the shadow from the persons sitting in darkness but more so to keep the "business" of imperial expansion going. Perhaps, this scheme may be familiar in the promises of politicians during their electoral campaign. Many voters succumb to these promises of order and progress, accepting of the "frank confessions" of their candidates' "human faults." De Chavez translates the quoted text in popular Filipino *jejemon* language to subvert the empty promises and frank confession into utter incomprehensibility; thus, making them irrelevant to the reality of the people.

## **Blinding Light**

While most of the works deal with the situation of persons sitting in the darkness, some explore the experience of encountering the light – both elemental and existential.

The encounter with elemental light can be gleaned from the actual experience of the Wild Boar Soccer Team. Imagine the surprise of the team with a sudden glimmer of light from the murky dark waters. After several days of search through the cave's narrow, murky, and dark passageways, two British experts on

cave rescue, John Volanthen and Rick Stanton found the survivors. As reported, “Soon, the light from John's torch illuminated an electrifying sight - the boys emerged from the darkness, coming down the ledge towards him.” Immersed for days in immense darkness, their eyes must have needed to readjust considerably to the unexpected flash of light. This experience provides a contemporary backdrop to de Chavez’s reading of Plato’s ‘Allegory of the Cave’. <sup>11</sup> In the thinking of the ideal society by examining the virtues of justice, truth, and beauty, Plato philosophizes human existence as a journey from being chained in illusions and falsity to the search for the truth of reality through gradual acclimatization of one’s interior gaze. Employing his teacher’s way of discursive learning, the ‘Allegory of the Cave’ is a conversation between Socrates and his older brother Glaucon. Most of their dialogue focuses on the idea of liberation from the darkness that can be divided into three stages – resistance of the light, acclimatization to the light through its varied reflections, and encounter with the source of light.

There is initial resistance to the light where there is a lack of true insight into the situation of being kept in darkness. The light is a painful encounter to the eyes. The shadows cast by the objects against the fire or rays of light are construed as “real.” Socrates and Glaucon acceded to this opposition and even confusion.

Socrates: And if someone even forced him to look into the glare of fire, would his eyes not hurt him, and would he not then turn away and flee [back] to what which he is capable of looking at? And would he not decide that [what he could see before without any help] was in fact clear than what was now being shown to him?

Glaucon: Precisely.<sup>12</sup>

De Chavez understands this difficulty of encountering the factual truth and of the reality (or as Twain calls it, “Actual Thing.”). Ignorance can be an indifferent but convenient response. Like what the 18<sup>th</sup> century English poet Thomas Gray pointed out in his poem, *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College* (1742): “Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise.”<sup>13</sup> De Chavez captures this resistance and ignorance in an installation entitled *What We Don't Know Wont Hurt You* (2018). It is an assembly of one ton of white sand from Philippine shore, a two-channel video of his performance of vacuuming white sand that resemble the Philippine archipelago, a military ammunition metal case, and two used shovels. The assembly is complex and we rather not know which reality it is referring to. We can only surmise that it can point to the tension of negotiating the process of land reclamation and entitlement.

Aside from resistance and rejection, there are other ways of dealing with light. The typical route is acclimatizing oneself with it. Plato suggests first looking at the shadow cast by the objects (as well as the faint rays outlining them). The second is gazing at the reflection of figures and objects on the water. And third is seeing the things in themselves – human figures, objects, sky, stars, and moon. Eventually one discovers the sun that illuminates everything with its light. In Plato’s Theory of Forms, this acclimatization is the metaphoric process of how one deals with the physical realm of the changing world as shadows of the true *form*; that is, the unchanging ideals that transcend time and space.

In the installation work *Oro, Plata, Mata* (2018), the nine concrete steps inlaid randomly with silver coins seem to suggest this step-by-step process of achieving Plato’s ideal form of a society governed by justice,

truth, and order. In the platonic dualism, an ideal society cannot be achieved in this world. But the ideals of a just, true, and harmonious society can be used as guiding vision of the society and the corresponding virtues that its leaders and people may adhere to. However, as suggested in the misplaced steps strewn on the floor, the installation looks at how societies like in the Philippines digress into corruption, violence, and human abuses. Unlike coins considered to have good luck charm when buried into the structural foundations of houses,<sup>14</sup> taxation money is not effectively managed and is misused for personal gains of some government officials leaving many in poverty and dwelling in shanties. Following the Filipino belief in the numbering of steps according to *oro* (gold), *plata* (silver), and *mata* (death), the step-count should not end up in *mata*.<sup>15</sup> Here, there is the decision of the household to choose what will be progressive to one's family well-being. When government officials choose the *oro* and the *plata* for themselves and their cronies, their people receive what they do not deserve—*mata*.

Thus, in his paintings with the technical virtuoso of the Italian High Renaissance appropriating the combined styles of *chiaroscuro* (high contrast of lights and shadows) and *unione* (harmonization of lights and shadows), de Chavez conceals quoted texts embedded in a layer of gold leaf. Like in the painting of a figure with his hands covering his face, de Chavez conceals the words of Plato on the experience of blinding light. But one may wonder if the figure really cannot bear the truth of the situation of the society he is in or if he is in shame of the darkness revealed in broad daylight?

### Seeing in Darkness

Faithful to the platonic descent of the enlightened, de Chavez's body of work presents a way to see through the darkness. But one can only see in the dark when the person has interiorized a spark of light from the *source* outside the cave. His eyes may be filled with darkness according to Plato but the inner light will guide a person to face the ridicule of others still sitting in darkness. He may not even convince them to move out of the shadows of ignorance, arrogance, or falsity. They may even threaten to kill him and to poison his ideas.

De Chavez is too aware of the burden and risk of standing for the light of truth and decency. In his artistic practice, he holds on to the flame of truth shared with him by curator Bobi Valenzuela. He mentored de Chavez after seeing the young artist's potential as a credible artist who would not be trapped in repetitive works for quick fame and easy money. This confidence encouraged de Chavez after he did not make the final cut of twenty-two emerging artists for Valenzuela's Young Artists Discovery Exhibition series in 2000, culminating in a show at the Ayala Museum. The mentoring sessions led to Valenzuela's curating of de Chavez's first solo exhibit entitled *Bahid* (Stain) in 2003 at the Kulay Diwa Galleries. Valenzuela's confidence in de Chavez was validated by the respected art critic and historian Alice Guillermo who concluded that he "(came) out strong at the forefront of his generation" after viewing his premiere show.<sup>16</sup>

Part of the personal archives of de Chavez is a hand-written journal of Valenzuela on curatorship that he bequeathed to his disciple/mentee. Perhaps, having this journal afforded him some light to see in the dark. Valenzuela's idea of the transformative aspect of art that humanizes the artist has become de Chavez's praxis as an artist and as a human being. For Valenzuela:

The noblest, ultimate aim of art is to transform us, human beings, to be better fine human beings able not only to empathize but also to grasp and understand the aspirations, dreams of our people, their heartaches and disappointments, their hopes and frustrations.<sup>17</sup>

This sense of having an interior light or a guiding vision is captured by de Chavez' other large painting with embedded text quoted also from Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave' on the persistent search for goodness by the those who struggle for righteousness. As suggested by the figure's gesture of opening wide its mouth with both hands, the struggle to search for what is true and good necessitates a prophetic role of interior transformation and external proclamation through praxis. The gold leaf illuminating this painting recalls the gold covering naves of Byzantine Churches that shimmer due to the light illuminating their darkened interiors.

Reading the book *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910* by Filipino historian Reynaldo Ileto, de Chavez also sees this light (*liwanag*) that transformed the interiority (*loob*) of the peasants who struggled against the Spanish colonial regime such as that in 1841 led by the native (*indio*) Apolinario de la Cruz a.k.a. Hermano Pule from the town of Lucban where de Chavez grew up. Ileto asserts that the passion narrative of Christ's paschal mystery like the *Pasyon Pilapil* was "a social epic of the nineteenth century Tagalogs and probably other lowland groups as well"<sup>18</sup> that enlightened them to pattern their communal struggles against the colonizers. Though a religious narrative, the *pasyon* provided the peasants a worldview of their struggle for liberty. For Ileto, they saw the Passion as providing them with their own narrative for their transition from "darkness to light, despair to hope, misery to salvation, death to life, ignorance to knowledge, dishonor to purity..."<sup>19</sup> Through their rituals, allegiance to the confederation, and inspiring persona like Hermano Pule, the members willingly offered their earthly lives for freedom and for heavenly rewards.

Completing de Chavez's body of work is a tiered installation entitled *Bangungot sa caluwalhatian sa langit na cararatnan ng mga hangal* (Nightmare to the peace in heaven that will be attained by the fools, 2018). This titled is informed by the third hymn used during the ritual-prayer of the confraternity (*cofradia*) founded by Hermano Pule albeit in a negative sense, that is, the false heaven of the fools.

This may be the artist's commentary on those who remain resistant to the truth offered to them and continue to live in the illusion, if not delusion, that what they know is *the* "truth" and how they live is "holier" than others'. Even if the dagger of truth suspended in the branches of the consequences of the past would pierce their delicately woven pattern of illusion and superstition, they still mount their protests with clenched fists resembling a sandy mountain of bones. Unlike other persons in the shadow who are freed from the shackles of ignorance, this class of persons sitting in the darkness have comfortably entrenched themselves in their deathbed because of their arrogance, indifference, and stubbornness.

In this exhibition de Chavez investigates the underlying culture that imprisons people in the darkness of violence, apathy, and death as well as points to the current movements against this kind of culture. Like the satirical anti-imperial writings of Twain, he has created a body of work that become a sarcastic yet intelligent

commentary on the dark situation of the society he is in. Revisiting the popular revolutionary movement from his locality in Quezon province, among them, the 1841 peasant struggle against the Spanish colonial regime led and inspired by the native hero Hermano Pule, de Chavez has embedded in his own works the narratives of the fatal struggles toward emancipation, empowerment, and enlightenment. Re-reading Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave,' he attests to the possibility of moving out of the shadow of darkness into the blinding light of truth and thus of walking toward to the light of reason, decency, and empathy. In this way, de Chavez sparks, or at least attempts to, in his audience the light to see through the dark times.

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<sup>1</sup> Butuyan, Joel R. "Another dark period in Philippine history: Inquirer columnist." *The Strait Times* 19 March 2018. Web. 12 August 2018. [www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/another-dark-period-in-philippine-history-inquirer-columnist](http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/another-dark-period-in-philippine-history-inquirer-columnist).

<sup>2</sup> Zwick, Jim. "Introduction." *Mark Twain's Weapons of Satire*. Manila: Popular Book Store, 1992. xx. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Twain, Mark. "Person Sitting in Darkness." *Twain's Weapons of Satire*. Manila: Popular Book Store, 1992. 33-34. Print.

<sup>4</sup> In his letter of 18 July 2018 to the regional director of the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology, de Chavez expressed his intention of doing an exhibit dealing "with the idea of 'Liwanaag at Dilim'", and how Liwanaag at Dilim "shapes or have shaped our beings."  
with <sup>5</sup> De Chavez, *op. cit.*, 18 July 2018

<sup>6</sup> Boltanski, Christian quoted by Gumpert, Lynn. "The Life and Death of Christian Boltanski." *Lessons of Darkness*. New York: New Museum, 1988. 58. Exhibition catalogue.

<sup>7</sup> Zwick, Jim, *op. cit.*, 1992, xix

<sup>8</sup> Cheung, Helier and Wong, Tessa. "The Full Story of Thailand's Extraordinary Cave Rescue." *BBC News Asia* 14 July 2018. Web. 12 August 2018. [www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44791998](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44791998).

<sup>9</sup> Twain, Mark, *op. cit.*, 1992, 28-29, 34

<sup>10</sup> Twain, Mark, *op. cit.*, 1992, 37-38

<sup>11</sup> Plato. "The Allegory of the Cave." *Republic VII*, 514 a, 2 to 517 a, 7. Trans. Sheehan, Thomas. California: Independently Published, 2017. PDF file.

<sup>12</sup> Id.



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<sup>13</sup> Gray, Thomas. "Ode On A Distant Prospect Of Eton College." *Thomas Gray Archives*, 2000. Web. 14 August 2018. [www.thomasgray.org/cgi-bin/display.cgi?text=odec](http://www.thomasgray.org/cgi-bin/display.cgi?text=odec).

<sup>14</sup> Tagaza, Ciel. "7 Mysterious Pinoy Building Superstitions." *Real Living*, 30 October 2016. Web. 15 August 2018. [www.realliving.com.ph/lifestyle/arts-culture/7-popular-pinoy-building-superstitions-a1519-20161030](http://www.realliving.com.ph/lifestyle/arts-culture/7-popular-pinoy-building-superstitions-a1519-20161030).

<sup>15</sup> Zarate, Ernesto R. "Filipino Building Beliefs." *National Commission for the Culture and the Arts*, 14 April 2015. Web. 15 August 2018. [ncca.gov.ph/subcommissions/subcommission-on-the-arts-sca/architecture-and-allied-arts-2/filipino-building-beliefs/](http://ncca.gov.ph/subcommissions/subcommission-on-the-arts-sca/architecture-and-allied-arts-2/filipino-building-beliefs/).

<sup>16</sup> Guillermo, Alice quoted by Bautista, Jay. "Bobi Valenzuela: The Curator as an Outsider." *Phil Visual Arts*, 16 December 2008. Web. 18 August 2018 (emphasis supplied). [philvisualarts.blogspot.com/2008/12/bobi-valenzuela-curator-as-outsider.html](http://philvisualarts.blogspot.com/2008/12/bobi-valenzuela-curator-as-outsider.html).

<sup>17</sup> Valenzuela, Bobi. "Random Thoughts on Art, Curatorship and Other Things." *Diary*. Undated. Leslie de Chavez Personal Collection and Archives.

<sup>18</sup> Iletto, Reynaldo C. "History from Below." *Pasyon and Revolution', Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Iletto, Reynaldo C. *op. cit.*, 1979, 14