

To Unsettle

by Louise Marcelino-Salas (2016)

Ash

Ash is fragile, poignant dark matter. It is pulverized rock emanating from a furious volcano, or detritus of burnt corpus. It portends the mortal life of people and things. The art historian Marita Sturken writes on the aesthetics of absence after the Twin Towers were reduced to rubble on 9/11. To her and to the people who mourned over the loss of lives and property, the collapsed structures turned into dust were heartbreaking traces of things that once were. There is something “otherworldly, unexpected, uncanny, yet also strangely familiar”¹ about dust, ash in its “generic form.” A similar air of melancholy hit when libraries, deeply personal mementoes, and like investments were abruptly transformed to ashes as the fire razed the U.P. Faculty Center. Ashes symbolically evoke endings more powerfully than beginnings. This could be because the terminus, or that moment when something is to become granulated matter is often unforeseen, violent, or simply beyond comprehension, to echo Sturken. In Roman Catholic rituals, applying ash on the skin is an intimate reminder that the corporeal body is bound to perish someday; from ashes to ashes, as the saying goes.

Leslie De Chavez captures the critical moment before the ashes dissipate into the earth. Like an act of salvation, the artist stirs what is left on the ground in the hope of recovering a seemingly extinguished flame. In this exhibition, De Chavez responds to the strife that continues to haunt the country today. He probes on disputes over territory, property, and ideology as well as the drought of farmlands and historical memory. De Chavez explores installation, a form/process that he began to work with in 2003. Drawn to its immediacy and the material possibilities it offers, the artist’s deliberate intention to show installation signifies his evolving practice and the urgency of the message, one that demands presence from a sensing and sensible public.

Painting

De Chavez is recognized for his paintings teeming with ghastly figures of beasts and people in power, often sharing the same pictorial space. The only large painting in the exhibition, *Subjugating the Nuclear*, departs thematically from previous works that have dealt head-on with sociopolitical critique. Small rips from the gold overlay reveal that the ground of the painting is black, and layers of fine white strokes were carefully built up to create a figure of two boys whose faces are concealed by their shirt. Their expression can barely be seen, but their hand gesture says they were posing to say, peace! Leslie confides that this painting was made after a photograph he took of his two children. He was intrigued by their candid expression, and it led him think about the influences that made them react the way they did. The pose strikingly bears a close resemblance to the iconography of the Santo Niño (child Jesus) whose hand gesture conveys the promise of benediction. The virtue of seeking truth, knowledge, and understanding articulated in the text seems to reinforce such connection. But the text is deeply personal, too; the blessing in fact was a note from the artist’s father given to him when he graduated from college. In some ways, this painting sets the tone for De Chavez’s installations. The references to the ripple effect of religious experience persist. The artist’s personal life and circumstances inform the works more acutely, among them, his role as a parent and as an artist rebuilding his studio. These can be gleaned with how he mines influences from personal stories or how he repurposes old objects to invest them with new meaning. Here, De Chavez affirms that the historical and the politically charged can permeate all aspects of life, including one’s domicile.

Installation

The artist reuses a sandbox outgrown by his children for the work *Quicksand*. Contained in it are carabao horns laid flat, facing opposite directions while a lead figurine of three monkeys faces the base of the horns, which look like gilded portals. The artist depicts the uneasy moment where we are compelled to make a life-changing decision, say, one that will shape the fate of the nation.

In *Craft-Mine-Crap*, De Chavez makes a dense work, literally, in his re-imagination of the Philippine archipelago. The artist appropriates Minecraft, a popular video game which to his observation, “develops a person’s imagination. It helps one to build and create.” Alluding to its rules of engagement and its goals of resource management, expansion of territory, and survival, the artist opens the conversation on “how empires are made.” He explores the issue on the country’s “troubled waters” or the ongoing disputes over control of maritime zones. He assembles small blocks reminiscent of the game’s hard-edged graphic elements as the base of the installation. Upon closer inspection, these are solidified rice grains, metallic blocks, and specks of green and pink, intimating resources where life is hinged. Above a patched surface is an outline of the Philippines based on the Murillo Velarde map of 1734, a pictorial description of the realm to be defended, until the tight battle is won and the game is over. De Chavez’s laborious gesture of inscribing is exposed in this work, particularly, in forming hardened plaster to recreate an ancient map. This manifests subtly in the work *Anggulo*, where the enlarged head of Rizal is rubbed repeatedly, fully darkening it with graphite. From afar, it could be mistaken as a metallic sculpture, but constant touching of its surface would erase its faux patina. The monumental head is but a fragment, and its wooden support impedes us from getting a full view. Dust settles at the bottom of the floor, with the text that reads “*reporma*.” While countless memorials have portrayed Rizal’s eminence, De Chavez presents a version less stable and unfinished, like the historical project of nation building.

The tendency to memorialize can be discerned in De Chavez’s installations. To the artist, the act of remembering is an important antidote to historical amnesia. But how do we remember painful events so that we may forge on? The anti-monumental work *Palingenesis* is comprised of concrete cast sculptures of the deposed dictator Ferdinand Marcos. There are 14 pieces in the size of an actual head. Its reference is the Marcos bust carved from a hillside in La Union Province, measuring 100 feet high and 70 feet wide. The latter resembles the busts of American presidents in Mt. Rushmore, although much smaller in scale. On the Marcos carving, the architect historian Gerard Lico writes:

The grossly egomaniacal act, or perversion as some would call it, was built ‘to make Filipinos proud of their history and culture,’ or so the Ministry of Tourism claimed. The mammoth bust overlooks a 500-hectare tract of land allegedly grabbed at gunpoint from the indigenous Ibaloi population who were evicted to make way for an eighteen-hole golf course, recreational facilities, and conference center—collectively known as the Marcos Park—in 1976 ... A cleansing ritual that required the pouring of pig’s blood was performed to purge what the Ibalois believed to be evil spirits residing in the bust.ⁱⁱ

In 2002, the controversial head was blasted, shattering its facial features into debris. Police attributes the blast to the “handiwork of treasure hunters who thought there was gold inside the bust.”ⁱⁱⁱ The head’s imposing presence upon the land remains to be a source of intense reactions and competing claims. Not simply a design motif, the aesthetic reference of the leader as “head” (or *pangulo*), the body part signifying “primacy, control, and command”^{iv} is also worth noting. The hillside turned sculpture or portrait turned landmark, is a wish fulfillment of a dictator’s desire for immortality. It writs large Marcos’s

enduring influence and the foothold his family has gained in the region. The sculpture may well be considered as suffering congealed in concrete, with the official discourse silent on the violent confiscation of a community's dwelling; the blood and sweat poured out for its transformation.

De Chavez revisits the "mammoth bust" to make sense of the traces of the dictator's lingering presence decades after his death and nearly fourteen years since the structure was destroyed. To the artist, the ascendancy of Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. as a stalwart contender in the national elections for the second highest position in the country was bewildering, like the mystery of the gold loot allegedly hidden in the hills. Mortified by tendencies of revisionism and the apparent memory deficit, the artist creates an enlarged scourge to confront viewers with the very instrument of suffering. The work shares affinities with the narrative of the *pasyon*, Christ's path of suffering, death, and redemption. This is underscored by the 14 miniature heads in keeping with Christ's Way of the Cross, narrated as 14 "events." In practices of local religiosity, self-flagellation and other acts of bodily sacrifice are perceived as ways a devotee can identify with Christ's suffering and be lead towards the path of eternal life or salvation. Can the scourge be taken then, simply, as an object of discipline and punish, so that we may feel again, and never forget?

In *UTI: Under the Influence*, a pair of fragmented limbs serves as a floor piece. The water in the tabletop fountain flows steadily, while the faint smell of glycerin wafts from the limbs lying atop a spread of brown silk. There is an angel figurine below and the two black candles perpendicular to it complete the cruciform. The smell of the glycerin and the sound of cascading water evoke sensuous experiences often involved in local Catholic devotional practices. It is not unusual to witness the following gestures among ardent devotees seeking for a miracle: touching religious images, applying fragrant oils on the *santo*, murmuring prayers, or walking on one's knees. De Chavez disturbs the quietness of the installation with the text: *Laging Maghugas ng Kamay*. It is instructive to first look at *Household Virtue No. 1* (2011), a work where the glycerin limbs made its initial appearance. The artist confounds the act of cleansing as a household virtue or a fundamental, preparatory ritual. To cleanse is to purge oneself of dirt or sin; to purify once again. On the other hand, the expression *maghugas kamay* is sometimes taken to mean, to absolve oneself of accountability. In this sense, cleansing entails removal, erasure, or forgetting. It is also euphemism for obliterating, often, to legitimize a new order.

Glass sheets discarded from the artist's studio were used to sandwich bullet cases for the work *Tension-Attention-Retention*. It recounts the gunshots fired in lethal encounters between farmers and the military in various clash sites in the country, among them and most recently, in Kidapawan City, Cotabato. Two small paintings titled *Ambal/Pangamba* depict: a famished farmer whose lower body is stuck in barren land; and a police officer whose rifle is aimed at broken sticks, the only weapon of choice for the former.

De Chavez was miles away from home when news of the bloody Mamasapano encounter broke. During his artist residency in Liverpool where he had access to a wood engraving machine, he began working on *Operation Exodus*. The artist had 44 keychains made in the shape of a rifle, each bearing the initials of the fallen soldiers. Naming and inscribing are subtle but significant ways fallen individuals can be remembered. Such tendencies can be traced in De Chavez's installation, first shown in 2006 during his artist residency in Korea. In *Finding Landmarks*, the artist gathered local soil and inscribed the names of Filipino soldiers who fought to the finish in the Korean War in the '50s. An iteration of this work exhibited earlier this year, titled *Apog* (2016) engaged visitors in an enlarged word jumble put together with powdery lime sprinkled over a bed of soil. The artist mentions that aside from its ephemeral

qualities, lime is used to neutralize the acidity of the soil, in effect delaying the decay of corpses. The letters form the names of massacre victims, from Hacienda Luisita to the streets of Mendiola. Seeking out the names of the deceased in the form of a game intensifies the feeling of irony and discomfort amid an orderly arrangement of forms.

This exhibition sees for the first time how the artist makes use of small, palm-sized objects in his works. It is intriguing how these are deployed because it opens up a conversation on its “social life”^v—how we ascribe meaning based on a thing’s contexts and the transactions it undergoes, its passage from hand to hand. In *Souvenir Item*, we find bullet cases laid out in a vitrine. Influenced by the legacy of Duchamp’s provocation, we too, are prompted to view the bullet cases as art. In installation art, the “abiding ethos” between the object and the environment is often exposed. The beholder is called to question how ordinary objects acquire value by virtue of its relationship to the environment; or how the environment can be experienced anew through the objects installed. As two writers on contemporary art aptly put it: “The condition of installation reveals that the eye is never innocent, the place is never neutral and the object never hermetic.”^{vi} The viewer who is “made to feel conscious of his/her precepts and misprisions”^{vii} therefore, is an important component in installation, and De Chavez foregrounds this role visibly. He causes further unease: What do we really make of a bullet case—souvenir, as the title suggests? Spare ammunition? *Anting-anting*? Or precious art?

Rather than to make a seamless whole out of the works in the exhibition, De Chavez creates a stir by carving out a space, not just for empathy but also for con/fusion.

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ⁱ Sturken, Marita. “The Aesthetics of Absence: Rebuilding Ground Zero.” *American Ethnologist*, vol. 31, no. 3, August 2004, p. 312.

ⁱⁱ Lico, Gerard. 2003. *Edifice Complex: Power, Myth, and Marcos State Architecture*. Manila: ADMU Press, pp. 43-44.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dumlao, Artemio. “Marcos Bust Blasted.” *The Philippine Star* 30 Dec 2002, Retrieved from: <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/189715/marcos-bust-blasted>

^{iv} Mojares, Resil B. 2013. “Beheading Heads, Changing Heads.” *Isabelo’s Archive*. Mandaluyong City: Anvil.

^v See Appadurai, Arjun, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in a Cultural Perspective*. 1986. UK: Cambridge University Press.

^{vi} Geczy, Adam and Benjamin Genocchio. 2001. *What is Installation?* Sydney: Power Institute Foundation for Art and Visual Culture, p. 2.

^{vii} Geczy and Genocchio 2001, p. 2.