

Mars Bugaoan's *Appear Disappear 1/2 1/4***Jose Santos P. Ardivilla**

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Printmaking is predicated by surfaces, tactility, and contact. As printmakers, we gauge the thickness of the paper by touch—to see if the paper is thick or thin enough to absorb the ink—which will then decide the amount of ink we will use. The images which we carve are negotiations made by and between sight and touch. Bearing this in mind, touch and sight are the notions of printmaking central in Mars Bugaoan's solo exhibition entitled *Appear Disappear 1/2 1/4*, which went live online¹ on April 2, 2020 at the Kapitana Gallery, Balay ni Tana Dicang, Negros Occidental. Bugaoan's works, along with the show itself, carried a different weight, held as it was in a time of a global pandemic in which tactility and contact prove to be harbingers of illness. Moreover, if many artists align themselves with the notion that their art, their vision, is a freezing of a moment in an attempt at immortality, Bugaoan undercuts this notion by weaving in his works displacements of time and space. The exhibition asks: Is permanence the point of art? What does it mean to be "permanent" when one claims to both appear and disappear and to be segmented into fractions of 1/2 and 1/4 like that children's game "*Api, Disapi*" in the larger sphere of emergent and fractured life, filled with things that are always hidden, lingering, and wafting away?

In Bugaoan's works, materiality is a springboard that ties the intricacies of the quotidian and the socio-political, and weaves location as an agent that informs the art process. Bugaoan weaves materiality via a banana leaf, which is featured as the central image of his show (fig. 1). The artist muses that a lot has changed since he last exhibited at the Kapitana Gallery in 2016.² That is precisely the currency in Bugaoan's works: change. This is not just observing from the changes of the surroundings but phantasms that flitter about in his handling of the material. For Bugaoan to use the banana leaf as a surface is an interesting visual cue because the artist used the material's very fragility to compound notions of time and space.



Fig. 1. The exhibition poster. Courtesy of Mars Bugaoan.

The carved lines of the matrix (fig. 2) were inspired by the details of a blown-up image of melted plastic piles. According to the artist, the image was reminiscent of both a thumb mark and the striation of lines found in maps that indicate waterways. The artist invoked human imprints—from the fingerprint and the imprinting of land via cartographic articulations of mapmaking—to frame an exhibition wherein touch itself is as destructive as it is generative. The banana leaf is an interesting choice not just for its materiality but for its “social life” as a thing. The banana leaf exposes the cartographic violence of carving out the land because of notions of “progress.” “This is to look at things as domains of the social that operate via dimensions of the institution of society” (Brown 143). Bugaoan exhibits his show in Negros Occidental where sugar plantations have reigned supreme for generations, deeply informing the social fabric by stringing a select few together with wealth, and enmeshing others in abject poverty and labor exploitation. In the land where sugar is king, what is the place of the banana?³ The banana tree is liminal as it is an overlapping agent that simultaneously represents both jungle tropicality and agricultural authority.



Fig. 2. The rubber cut matrix. Courtesy of Mars Bugaoan.

Bugaoan reflects time in his video installation *Under the Same Star* (fig. 3, 4) which shows the withering of printed surfaces of banana leaves. The circular projection resembles a petri dish full of vibrancy that eventually gives way to discarded scabs. Destruction is swift with the banana leaf.



Fig. 3. Beginning of the video installation. Screen capped image by the author.



Fig. 4. After the time lapse of the video installation. Screen capped image by the author.

A relatively slower evisceration⁴ is displayed when Bugaoan prints the same image, this time on Manila papers. He said he was inspired by the way Manila papers were displayed in a store. He replicates this with his prints by folding them neatly and stacking them like commodities (fig. 5). Like the banana, Manila paper is indicative of how agricultural lands have to be reshaped according to the demands of the global economy. The fact that it is called Manila paper, a globally recognized name, traces the social life and history of Manila hemp as it became part of the flow of international trade. The land becomes segmented (i.e., as the ditty goes “1/2, 1/4”) via the resources it can produce for global consumption.



Fig. 5. The Manila paper print is flanked by the rubber cut matrix as sculptural undulation on the right and the neatly folded prints on the left. Courtesy of Mars Bugaoan.

Bugaoan's video incorporates sounds he hears daily. If one listens to it, it is a blend of birds chirping as well as roosters clucking and crowing. The sounds are an imbrication and negotiation of the Jungle and the Domestic. These borderlands can be seen in Bugaoan's interpretation of a landscape via his *imp(l)asto* method (fig. 6), which is a play on the word "impasto" (the painterly application of thick coats of paint to create texture). However instead of paint, woven plastic bags are then melted onto wire frame. The result is an almost cartoon-like series of landscapes that jump at you, daring you to touch them. It bears noting that the material of the chicken wire is typically used to contain agricultural resources and also to demarcate between tamed and wild land. Once more, human touch is felt here.

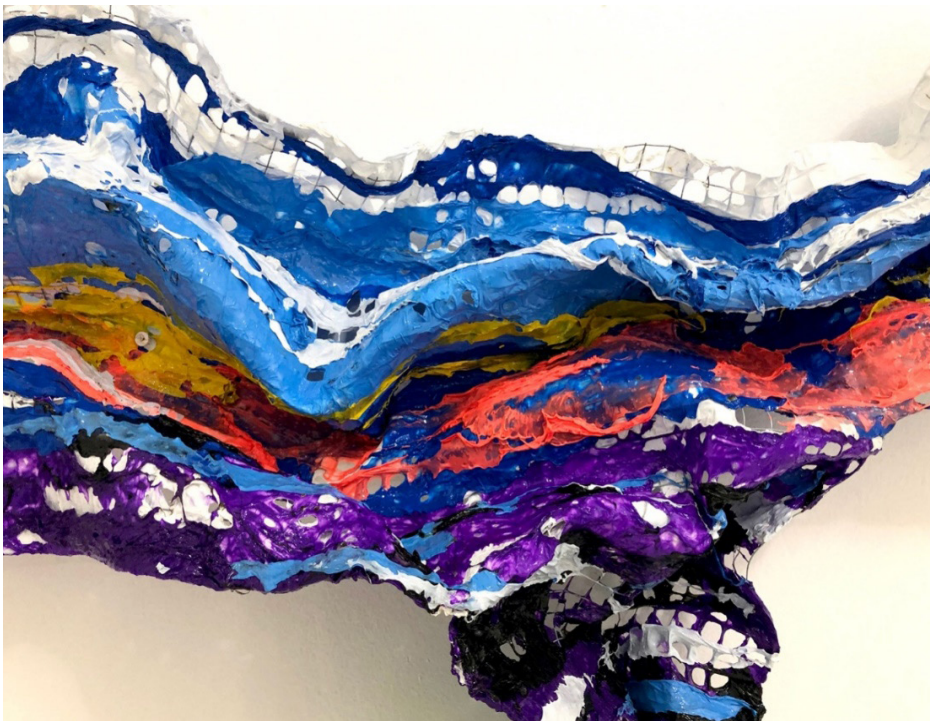


Fig. 6. A close-up on one of the *imp(l)asto* works. Courtesy of Mars Bugaoan.

What Bugaoan has rendered are not landscape portraits that display spaces of ostentatious ownership, but the protracted push and pull between man and nature. These are portraits of landscape negotiated *for the moment*. They are always becoming and not set, indicating issues of land grabbing as well as ecological malfeasance. Bugaoan's works are examples of what Donna Haraway calls "tentacular thinking," an approach that weaves through, works with, and is never set in stone: "The tentacular ones make attachments and detachments, they

make cuts and knots; they make a difference; they weave paths and consequences but not determinisms; they are both open and knotted in some ways and not others” (31). Bugaoan’s use of time and displacement both open and clog certain pathways of discussion regarding the materials’ intricate lives in the societies they move through, across generations, and emanating from the economic plunder and ecological foment of third-world places. These are landscapes of “response-ability,” situated in “collective knowing and doing, an ecology of practices” (Haraway 34). This is aligned with the “ongoingness” of the work which Haraway instructs is crucial to any critique against capitalist exploitation and the blind salvage accumulation of capitalisms’ handmaiden: consumerism.

While Bugaoan was mounting his exhibition, COVID-19 struck. His exhibition is now “live” online because the virus has made contact and presence a recipe for disaster. With the lockdown imminent, the organizers thought it best for Bugaoan’s works to be exhibited online, a crucial development of the concept of “presence” in a culture accustomed to Facebook. Online migration was and is deemed a “natural” step. Transition and presence then play another layer in the exhibit being uploaded online. Cybernetically, it is a testament to Bugaoan’s works that they are still capable of implicating an “event” brought by an “encounter.”⁵ Yet this does not diminish Bugaoan’s works, because the shift to a virtual space affords the viewer the ability to linger further, a luxury not afforded in a physical setting. While the encounter is virtual, it is no less real because one can now take a closer look in a way that is frowned upon in typical galleries. Viewers can course through the work and maybe look deeper by half or quarter perspectives, as the exhibition title suggests. When one lingers online, one can see the “events” which Bugaoan produces. In his work, an “event encompasses myriad surfaces, and diverse media beyond just paint or pigment. The event of painting may then include any material on a surface, such as the surface of a gallery, the surface of the viewer, the surface of the wall, or even surrounding phenomena such as the shadows that the paintings cast on a wall” (Eckersley 216). Online viewing is a privilege where the viewer can take her or his time, and perhaps take another look if they so wish. In a further reflection on the piece, maybe we should pay attention to such Eckersleyian shadows, for Bugaoan reveals what is disappearing and what has disappeared.

NOTES

1. <https://www.facebook.com/mars.bugaoan/posts/3083844104960742>
2. This is Bugaoan's second show at the gallery. He rendered some installations in his *Wander* show in 2016. However, *Appear Disappear ½ ¼* is from his stint as an artist in residence in Talisay, Negros Occidental, supported by ABungalow Artists' Residency Project.
3. The banana is an indicator of agricultural expansion for it is both desired (i.e., bananas are a staple for farm workers) as well as something to be cleared to make way for more farmlands and, in the current trend of globalization, more real estate for multinational edifices such as call centers.
4. Bugaoan speaks of how all prints eventually deteriorate.
5. Online is where politics has now unfurled. Through Facebook, the ditty of "*Apir, Disapir*" is the lubricant in which many terse commentaries are made.

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