

## **Of Dreams, Destruction, and Donald(s): A Review of Mideo Cruz's *Meme Generators***

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Through social media, Mideo Cruz introduced his latest one-man exhibit titled *meme generators* using metastatic memes at the Kaida Contemporary in Quezon City. From his intelligent manipulation of the 'Anime Jesus on the Phone' meme to his masterful imprint of his painting over the speech bubbles of the "I bet he's thinking about other women" meme, Cruz publicized the description of the exhibit online as his own version of "pixelies truth,"<sup>1</sup> which he defined as the contemporary Filipinos' mode of virtual self-expression in their excessively capitalized and pop-culture anchored online ecology. Oddly enough, these 'meme-ified' publicity materials do not do Cruz's latest assemblage any justice, considering that his return to the visual medium should be met by stronger reactions from critics.

Upon entering the gallery (see fig. 1), one's eyes are met with an ensemble of resplendent colors that reverberate across the other senses as they are welcomed to the space by an outside-facing orange Trump-faced sculpture called *Democracy*. Inside, Cruz's visual oeuvre bombards the viewers with a slew of American iconographies: a chicken, an American boy, a housewife, an atomic bomb, and the Michelin man. However, upon closer inspection, a shift in perspective occurs as Cruz's attempt to commit iconoclasm of these all-American images puncture the sight. Each of the pieces is playfully titled with two variations: a straightforward English title which invites seriousness and a loosely transliterated Filipino title which invites laughter. Wistful yet witty, Cruz's ambivalent nomenclature reflects the tangentially apparent poetic lyricism in his works. In the interest of word count, unless the Filipino title sparks immediate discourse, only the English titles will be discussed in this review, while the ludic Filipino translation is (jocosely) discussed in the endnotes.



**Fig. 1.** An overview of the *meme generators* exhibit at the Kaida Contemporary Gallery.

The first painting, *Touch my Hen*,<sup>2</sup> illustrates a decontextualized version of DeWitt's *Retro Rooster 1 Painting*, where the background is strewn with sunny side-up fried eggs – a perfect pair to a morning *pandesal* – and a 'HOLD MY HEN' saloon sign boldly written below. This is how Cruz opens his visual works in *meme generators*: by questioning the American perspective through illustratively saying, "this is not a rooster, this is a hen." Beside this is a small sculpture called *Freedom Love* where a Donald Trump-esque head attached to a Ronald McDonald outfit directs the focus to his worn out and held up middle finger atop of which a peace dove lays somnambulistically; behind the clown-like outfit stands a toy gun, an appendage which metonymizes the liberally radical war-begets-peace rhetoric (Luttwak 66). Another painting by the name of *Little Boy*<sup>3</sup> immediately comes after these two pieces; it features a truncated blonde version of the republican Big Boy Hamburgers mascot holding a plate of burning brains instead of the star-spangled red-striped banner. To further dilute the Big Boy image as a means of dispossessing its capitalist abscess and imperialistic power, Cruz extended the red-white checkered jumpsuit pattern to crawl into a tapestry backdrop, in which the little (Big) boy's body and immediate surroundings collapse into a semi-blur of pixelated drapery.

The next set of artworks propel the exhibit forward, as it is more closely adjacent to each other than the previous ones. Obviously speaking directly to Americans, *This is Not Your President, This is a Filipino Who is Dreaming to be White* erects a miniature naked Trump holding a makeshift *walis tambo* made out of a small wooden stem, black thread, and dried cut-up tiger grass. Interestingly, Cruz consciously ‘pixelies-ed’ the translation of this work as *Hindi Ito ang Iyong Pangulo, Ito ay Isang Pilipinong Laging Nanonood ng Eat Bulaga* as a reference to the popular Filipino noontime show of the same name hosted by a controversial trio of men: Tito, Vic, and Joey. By doing so, Cruz makes a compelling argument: that people hooked on a show that both questions and somehow propagates heteronormativity are those generally accustomed to revere their self-serving ticket to fulfill an (or their) all-American dream (Payuyo 293).<sup>4</sup> Hanged at the right face of this sculpture is the painting *Pixelies Savagery*<sup>5</sup> referencing the face of an American cookbook: a blonde woman holding a plate of freshly baked goods. Cruz, however, subverted this image of Americanized feminine domesticity by having her hold a washed-up skull cherry-topped with brain mush and red guts instead of oven-roasted chicken. In contrast, the highly masculinized *All Mighty*<sup>6</sup> drapes next to it. It is a painting of a man whose torso is enveloped by his muscle fibers and whose head is an illuminated skull, all backdropped by a hefty shade of pink with a dash of red with slithering crimson vines and cinnabar flowers. Found in a separate canvas, the lower torso of the man hangs below the muscled specimen, drawn out by hues from the opposite end of the color wheel by the shades of blue, yellow, and green placed on top of a puddle of brown and gold with a dash of moss green and cryptic cerulean. Through this image, Cruz stripped the American man of his overalls and coveralls, effectively skinning him alive to show that his thick skin, as well as his alpha male polemic, is nothing but a primatological myth (de Waal 237).

Stylishly and adroitly marshaled underneath the aforementioned paintings are eccentric sculptures that require political and linguistic context. One is a set of five figures with a golden Mao Zedong (save for a silver one) glued to a beheaded Ronald McDonald outfit—two ends of the sociopolitical spectrum merged into a piece called *This is Not the Great Chairman Mao, This is a Golden Tribute to Milton Friedman*, undeniably referencing the infamous political theorist, poet, and communist Mao Zedong founder of the People’s Republic of China, and the economist and capitalist statistician Milton Friedman who developed consumption analysis and money history. Perhaps the loose Filipino translation sheds light on the hyperbolic contrast of enmeshing these body parts: *Hindi Ito Ang Dakilang si Mao, Ito ay Gintong Pagkutya sa Neo Liberalismo*. Cruz’s characterological configuration is clear: this is a neoliberal thinker with the anatomy of profit-driven excess masking itself with

a face of pro-people lip service of a potent, respectable, charismatic leader but whose body is a (concealing) host for a sinister plot for profit, alienation, and other capitalist ventures.

The other set of figures is entitled *Fiend and His Friends* showing a dove-caressed middle-finger-raising Rodrigo Duterte-like figure with alien head contraptions standing on top of a “dismembered brain” rallying behind four identical skull-headed and afro-combed McDonald’s-wearing individuals pledging allegiance to an invisible phantom known by many names: populism, historical revisionism, to name a few. Each of the cerebral standees are pigmented to be lighter at where the figures stand and darker where they hit the ground, alluding to the authoritative nature of the figures’ intellectually acquired self-righteousness. Nevertheless, the translated title of this piece— *Ang Hokage at ang Kanyang Chuwariwap*— pokes fun at its own political layers by likening the leader to a fictional chief of a ninja village (*Hokage* referring to *Naruto*) and identifying the minions by a nonsensical, all-encompassing, meaningless Filipino word. Meanwhile, nestled in between the hubris and humdrum of the musculoskeletal images interlaced with the politically charged shapes are two other inconspicuous but equally poignant sculptures: (1) *Vision*,<sup>7</sup> an allusion to an innocently blinded sense of socio-political and economic balance depicted by a skeletal child-like figurine—its right eye punctured by crystalline glass rod embellished with a dove, as the whole figure falls from a tuna can glued to a brain, and; (2) *Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom - Anselm Kiefer*<sup>8</sup>—one of the exhibit’s most touching pieces because of its allegorical amplification of the woman’s role in battles fought against imperialism, a piece materialized as a Mickey Mouse-eared skull strapped to a naked woman’s body wearing make-do McDonald’s shoes, standing on top of a cactus-shaped membrane colored in three shades, her hand carefully stroking a barbecue stick flagpole interlaced with a faux J.C. Penny’s Standard Pillow Sham designed with floral burgundy like blooming cherry blossoms.

The following section housed a powerful quintet: five pieces playing to the same measure, overture, and rhythm of an anti-imperialist, postcolonial tune in almost perfect harmony. Acting as a placid politic pounce, the first work is simply called *Unity*,<sup>9</sup> a steel bar housed in a red-coated metallic implement screwed onto the wooden wall, the other end of which is a peace sign covered in dark red plum oozing down like ichor extracted from a wounded arm. Thereafter, representing an all-too-familiar presidential lip, *Fear No Evil*<sup>10</sup> is a grotesque painting of an upside-down face stroked by lines of yellow, red, and pink pigments. Another artwork is *Confrontation*,<sup>11</sup> a two-part visual work that signals the oppositional nature of a cross-sectional, corner-placed, interaction between a slightly long-nosed individual

whose internal anatomy is painted in heaps of yellow, pink, and red against a backdrop of blue and a stout-nosed serious individual whose musculo-skeletal features are exposed through strokes of crimson, peach, and tangerine against a background of what seems to be carnation. Meanwhile, *Loyalty*<sup>12</sup> sits idly on the ground below, as it continues to tread the thematic underpinnings of *Freedom Love* by depicting an all-green Trump-esque McDonald's raising his fist to an insuperable cause with its feet installed atop a tin can and in front of a half-slit red bottle. Drawing the most attention from this section is a Trump-headed Jesus-morphologized figurine transfigured and nailed to a cross made out of a blue toy gun; indeed, it acted as a relic of Cruz's *Poleteismo* when the former work was aptly, masterfully, and purposefully titled *This is Not Your Messiah, This is the Encapsulation of your American Desires*, particularly referring to America's (slouching towards) democratic theocracy built from post-911 colonial wars and overemphasis on freedom to bear arms (Douthat 23). Beside the quintet is a duo that adds melody to the chorus, but plays more of a supporting role in conducting the symphony of Cruz's postcolonial critique: *All-Seeing*,<sup>13</sup> indubitably a companion piece to *Fear No Evil*, allegorizes a leader's likeness to a deity in their role as the omnipotent overseer of the land, and *The Great Life*,<sup>14</sup> a Minnie Mouse McDonald's employee holding a box with a golden skull, standing above a stone-peppered downsized bowl.

Beyond the space stands *Cool Guy*,<sup>15</sup> a slouched Mickey Mouse contraption figurine stands on top of an emerald-colored bowl shaped into a disappearing mountain; Mickey appears to be replete of a soul, as his irises stay invisible from sight. Perhaps the separation of this figure from the Minnie Mouse sculpture using the doorless hole of the gallery construes a divorce between youthfulness and adulthood. However, when viewed together with *The Great Life*, this figure seems to illustrate the romance between the perceivably good effects and bad effects of parasitism (or parasocialism) between colonizer and colonized, whereby the corrosive virtuoso is dubbed "cool" despite their insistence upon the conquered about the ultimate dream to be consumed by (and for) capitalism, democracy, or heteronormativity. Truly, these pieces are the most perplexing parts of the narratological network of Cruz's oeuvre.

Cruz moves on to his final section with two large paintings that iconoclastically pollute the all-American dream. To the left is *The Great American Dream*,<sup>16</sup> illustrating an overjoyed obese woman hugging a huge atomic bomb standing in front of patternized clumps of green and black (see fig. 2). Reminiscent of the nuclear fallout trauma during the Cold War, this piece depicts the red scare being crucified by Oppenheimer's invention occult that has spread the Messianic ideology of preparing for hostilities as a manner of transcendental importance and embracing warfare as

a means for survival—a reading suggested by the manner in which the woman hugs the nuclear weapon with joy as if she were holding her own child. To the right is *The Fat Man*,<sup>17</sup> demonstrating a Michelin Man crying geysers of blood-red liquid all while extending a hand to receive the impact of Oppenheimer's nuclear invention, backdropped by several conceptually concentric circles of black and gray. Further referencing the red scare, this painting encapsulates that American propaganda of possible communist-anarchist takeover which, in the end, never even happened. In the middle of these red scare tactics is *I'm Lovin It*,<sup>18</sup> a bath-ready Ronald McDonald with glass shards for a face, trophy stand as a pedestal, and a skull-piercing sniper rifle as a hand carry—a metaphor for a militarist-capitalist system of control.



Fig. 2. *The Great American Dream* (oil on canvas 52 x 45 inches).

Scattered below this section are several figures that foreground America's capitalist-imperialist dreams, destructions, and Donald(s). *Take Out*<sup>19</sup> is a blue mini-shopping cart with a severed Ronald head, while *Possessed* is a glass-punctured skull with a baby's body trodding a luscious hamburger on top of a blue cap. Then, *Donald McDonald*<sup>20</sup> portrays several differently colored Trump-Ronald fusions standing on top of purple-pigmented brains, and next to those is *We Are Great Again*,<sup>21</sup> a green mini shopping cart with a severed Trump head. Lastly, *Groceries*<sup>22</sup> is a black mini shopping cart filled with five golden skulls. These sculptures complement the red scare theme by amplifying the voice of imperial capitalism that furthered the anti-communist propaganda.

Like blood which dripped down from *Unity*, the artworks from Cruz's *meme generators* pulsated, coagulated, and streamed through the contemporary circulatory system of postmodern art, all while maintaining a viscosity that is rich with the thickness of a postcolonial identity which distributes identitarian oxygen to neocolonized organs functioning for the bloodstream of the Filipino. With humorous earnestness and historical episteme, Cruz erected a glimpse into the rich (imperialistically postcolonial) history of the intersections of American and Filipino boomers using the gentrified language of the zoomers. With depth, clarity, grit, and power, *meme generators* immortalized the condition of the meme-ified entanglements between the Philippines's online ecology, the red scare, imperialism, capitalism, neoliberalism, and the all-American dream (note, *bangungot*) as a means to illustrate the inseparability of our postcolonial identity from our (neo)colonial brethren in what can best be described as a "parahistorical" diorama of excess, experience, and eclecticism.

## NOTES

1. This homonym is a word play on 'pixelized truth' which loosely refers to a truth that is blurred using blocks of color. (from exhibition notes)
2. Playfully translated as *Hipuin mo ang Akin* ("Touch What is Mine").
3. Capably translated as *Ang Malaking Pasabog* ("The Big Explosion/Reveal").
4. A dream which Cruz—again—loosely refers to as a *bangungot* or nightmare in this same exhibit.
5. What Cruz transcribed as *Ang Pilit na Pagkukubli*, this piece's Filipino title refers to (en)forced secrecy or concealment, alluding more to the pixelation of truth.
6. *Ang Pinaka Sakalam*, as Cruz alternately called it, banks on the recently popular vernacularization of altering Filipino words by spelling them backwards (e.g. *malakas* as "sakalam") to convey the catch-all omnipotence attached to the word "almighty."
7. Concomitantly called *Abot Tanaw* or "within eyesight."
8. Interestingly, Cruz alternatively titled this as 百花齊放,百家爭鳴 – 毛澤東 (a quote by Mao Zedong saying "Let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools contend." Perhaps Cruz noticed the intersectionality and parallelism between the same thought uttered by two distinct individuals because of the way statements get lost in translation but carry the same message across different manners of verbalizing the same thought.
9. Unorthodoxically titled in Filipino as *Sungay*, the translated namesake of this piece refers to the symbolic iteration of the peace sign in wacky photos aptly referenced and used by a politician who used the slogan Unity couple with a peace sign during the May 2022 Presidential Elections.
10. Fervently (en)titled *Tikom Bibig* in Filipino. It literally means "mouth shut."
11. Feverishly called *Hubad na Harapan*, this piece's alternate title precludes the "naked facade" oratory.
12. Loosely referred to as *Panata sa Kalayaan* or "Ode to Freedom."
13. Fancifully placated as *Kita Lahat sa Mata* or "The Eyes Show Everything."
14. Also called *Ang Saganang Handog* ("A Bountiful Offer").



15. Freezingly named in the alternative as *Ang Pagdating ng Nyebe* or the “onslaught of winter.”
16. Ironically re-translated to Filipino as *Ang Malaking Bangugnot* or “the gargantuan nightmare.”
17. As the only accurately translated artwork, it is confusingly called *Tabang Tao* (“fat man”).
18. Confusingly named *Ang Lamang ng Kusina* (“the lead/majority of the kitchen”).
19. Also called *Ang Kasiyahan ng Diwa* or loosely translated as “the joy of essence.”
20. Also named *Ang Dakilang Wasak* known in Filipino as “the heroic fracture(d).”
- 21 Also designated as *Ang Dakilang Bangugnot* known in Tagalog as “the great nightmare.”
- 22 Also labelled *Buhay na Saganan* or “a bountiful life.”

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