

DUGONG NAGLALAKBAY: Transformations and Revelations

Genara Banzon

The banana leaves are brown, scorched by the summer sun. It is afternoon and the breeze is hot and humid. Except for ants in single file among the banana trunks there is no activity in the forest. In the dry season, the afternoon is a wonderful time to nap. I do love the stillness. I am not up for a siesta, so I walk towards a young banana plant, and I tug gently, then harder, struggling with it until I pull down its long dried fronds. There are many of these fronds in the yard. I pull down two, then three, pull and gather a few more.

Nearby are other banana plants, their trunks the shades of lime, verdant green, orange brown and dark purple markings on their multi-layered stalks. They form a circle and I enter this circular enclosure, and slowly, carefully, pat and layer on the ground the spotted light milky brown and tan colored leaves, forming half a circle to the north and another half to the south, tracing the circle that is there. Lying on the bed of leaves I look up and see a round cerulean summer sky! So blue with puffy white cumulus clouds in the vast expanse. It is mesmerizing. All mine was this creation: a womb, a space, a special place - a structure defined by space in time, made intuitively of natural, organic materials. This I believe, was the first installation I created. I was seven or eight years old.

Rains and strong winds whip and rip through everything. The rainy season has begun. For several days now, the wind has been strong and the rain torrential. The downpour pounds the corrugated tin roof of our centuries-old Spanish-era house making sounds like loud pellets hitting iron. The rain rushes down the gutters into the downspouts dropping below into the dirt canals. The dugout canals are swollen with cold rain. The water swirls in and around the house, emptying into a bigger wider canal, leading to the forest part of the yard where gabi plants grow. I collect

fallen twigs and branches from bamboo, lanzones, rambutan, and balimbing trees and gather strewn leaves from the mango, guava, and makopa trees. I slice, cut, tear, and tie fallen tree branches with found vines and strings. These wet constructed vessels I now lay gently on the waters rushing through the canal. They float and flow with the wild currents. I learn about buoyancy, lightness, heaviness, and the nature of materials, from these constructions that are set on water and put to the test by the strong winds and rain. Some sail, some sink. I am wet, soaked, and shivering. My mother calls me to come inside, to take a warm bath and have some hot champorado.

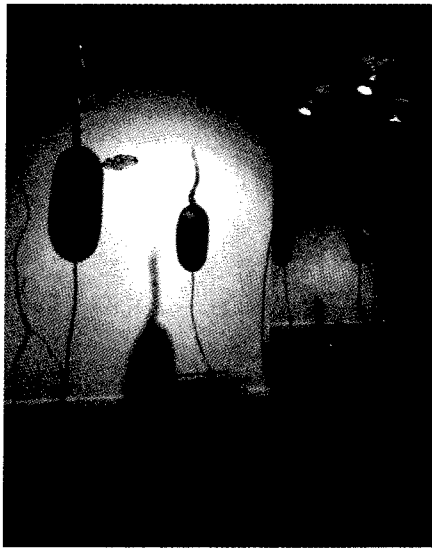
I grew up in the Philippines, in Los Baños, Laguna, on the foothills of legendary mountain Maria Makiling, which overlooks Laguna de Bay, I was reared by a mother and a father who were both naturalists, and by relatives and helpers from a faraway island called Doong, Bantayan, Cebu. As lush as the forest, humanity around me included nine sisters and brothers, as well as trusted loyal classmates and childhood friends, and people of diverse backgrounds from all walks of life in the university and nearby towns. Los Baños, a place where natural hot springs abound was so named by the Spaniards, who colonized us for more than three hundred years. I had the good fortune to spend a beautiful and memorable childhood there when our backyard was forest - where pythons and flying lizards were a common sight. We learned to climb trees and hills which were considered basic survival skills. This was the time I felt I was one with nature- one with all. My mother and father lived and breathed a life of deep respect and cultivation for nature. Everything was given a chance to blossom, grow, and sustain us. And, so also with people...

I learned the value of community as a source of strength and as a spring for the renewal of the spirit. When it was time for college in 1969, I went to the University of the Philippines College of Fine Arts. There, my art classmates and I were encouraged by Professor Roberto Chabet and Museum Art Director of the Cultural Center of the Philippines, Raymundo Albano, to be visual dynamic forces. We were encouraged to question settled structures of the senses, to go beyond traditional styles and discover our own authentic forms of expressions. Beyond the classroom, however, President Marcos declared martial law in 1972. As artists, we found ourselves investigating present-day awareness of attitudes and sensibilities.

My early works during this time dealt with the topic of how to see or how things determine perception.



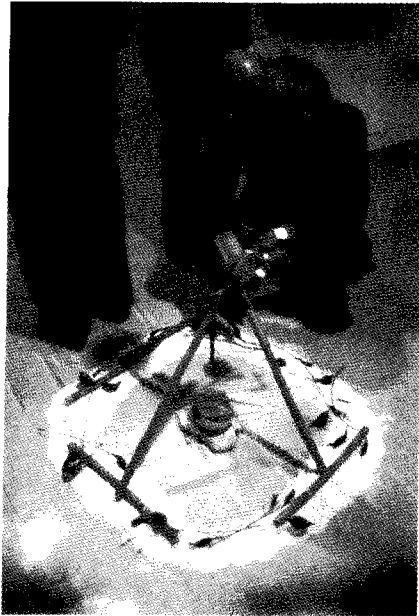
TRENDS in PHILIPPINE SCULPTURE
Museum of Philippine Art, Manila, 1980



FIVE DIRECTIONS
Museum of Philippine Art, Manila, 1980

I look up at the ceiling and watch the house lizards, the butiki. They slither down and kiss the floor at dusk at around 6 pm, just as the elders say. I am thrilled to witness such a phenomenon. I run to do some chores, which Mother would incessantly remind me of. I hear her voice, "...You must always persevere. Be industrious and hard working so that people will never say we did not teach you..." I fold my clothes just pulled from the clothesline swinging in the tropical breeze. About to put the freshly folded clothes in the closet, I see six tiny white eggs on top of my pink Sunday dress. It has been made into a hatching place by a butiki! They are as big as the round pearl earrings my mother wears only to church on Sundays

or when special people visit, except they are oblong and white as chalk. As a young artist, a new college graduate from art school and in the Thirteen Artists exhibition of 1978 at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, one of my installations would include butiki egg shells.



UNTITLED Installation
with fruit, vine, bamboo white sand bird's nest and butiki eggs
The Third Cultural Center of the Philippines Annual Exhibition, 1978

Described as environmental and much later as conceptual art, my first “solo” show: “GENARA BANZON: INSTALLATIONS” at the Cultural Center of the Philippines in Manila, was composed of several hangings of handmade paper sheets which combined natural objects such as leaves, flowers, butterfly wings, and ground tea in the weave of paper. Below these hangings was a carefully arranged selection of nature objects. At this time, I had become involved with a new generation of artists who introduced to the public new environments, situations and installations, echoing contemporary approaches, while projecting Philippine sensibilities in rituals, ceremonies, and in everyday living, using materials from the environment. Ray Albano in the Cultural Center’s “Notes on Sculpture and Genara Banzon’s Work” observes: “In recent years, the works of Genara Banzon emerged as one of the most original and innovative sculpture pieces being done here (the Philippines). Genara Banzon’s first solo exhibition further establishes “Installations” as an art form which is quite a Filipino expression of defining three-dimensional space. A view of this exhibition may therefore be perplexing, enjoyable and an effective reminder that sculpture need not be what we have known before: on

pedestal, whole and with limited materials to be used.”



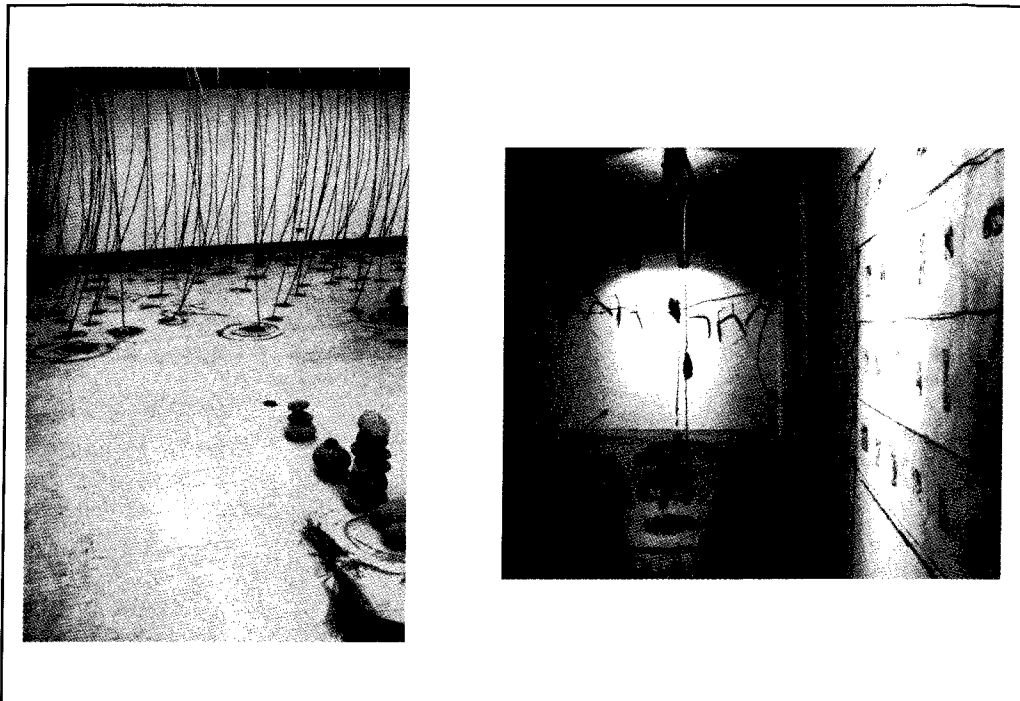
GENARA BANZON: INSTALLATIONS
Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1983

Installation art gave me the freedom to integrate the diverse disciplines in art. And by focusing on the use of natural materials and processes, I stayed close to home artistically and honored my father’s lifelong devotion to science and his commitment to finding new economic value for the coconut as an industrial product and source of income for poor farmers. I also honored my mother’s work as a general practitioner who believed and prescribed natural cures. I reflected on and expressed in my art, the experiences that I shared with my nine siblings, growing up amidst forests, lakes, mountains, and rice fields. While traveling extensively in the Philippines as research assistant, artist, photographer, and illustrator in various research projects in art, development communications, and anthropology, I absorbed broader Philippine traditions. I also gained deeper respect and admiration for tribal peoples. All of these contributed much to my sensibilities and defined me as an artist.

It was in the 70’s and early 80’s that I felt and experienced a new fervor and passion in the art world, as the thinking and art making in the contemporary art scene in Manila spread to outlying islands and towns including Los Baños. There were the Summer Workshops of the Cultural Center of the Philippines and the Philippine High School for the Arts classes and projects. Exhibition places were not limited only to physical gallery spaces in buildings. Art making included creating installations outside as opposed to physical structures like

buildings. The open fields, forest nooks and crannies, as well as coconut farms (as the Tiaong Bukid Art Inn project) became extensions of the galleries and museums. Making site works became an exciting part of art making.

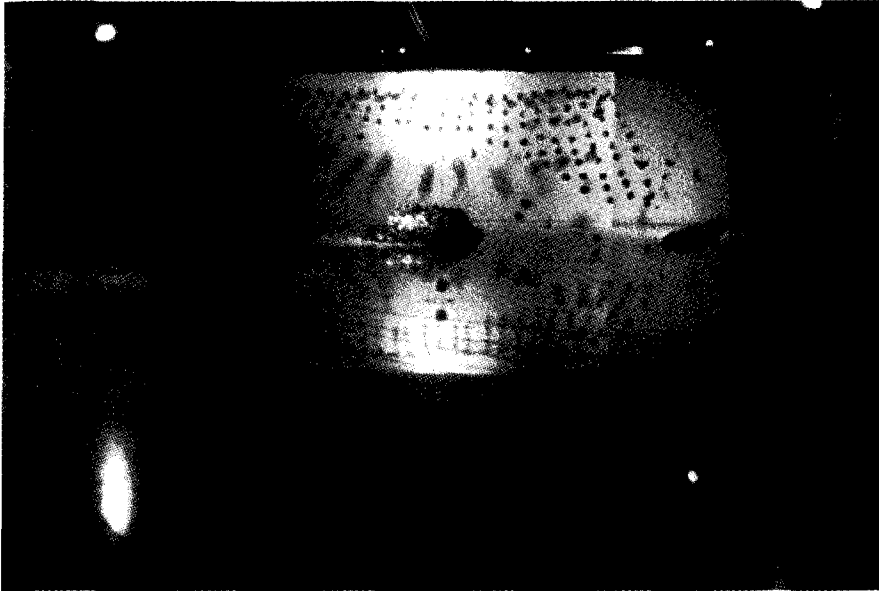
My art installations focused on and echoed systems and resources of the Philippines: the forests, lakes, and sea of my native land.



EARTH SKETCH:
Batu-bato sa langit ang matamaan...
Baguio Arts Festival, Baguio City, 1989

UNTITLED Installation
MacArthur palm frond with frangipani
seed pods, water, mosquitoes, flashlight
The 4th Cultural Center of the Philippines
Annual Exhibition, 1980

Kristina T. Subido of the Contemporary Art Museum of the Philippines of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) for the 1989 3rd Asian Art Show in Fukuoka Book states: "Nature is unquestionably the main symbol of Banzon's work, and all meanings with the word 'natural' arise from it pure, original, inspiring. She raises the issue of ecology, a sense of rightness in place and of purpose. Her installations of natural and recycled materials comment on the clashes of nature and technology."



UNTITLED Installation
FIBER as ART show (with Japanese parasol seeds, strings, and bamboo)
Metropolitan Museum of Manila, 1980

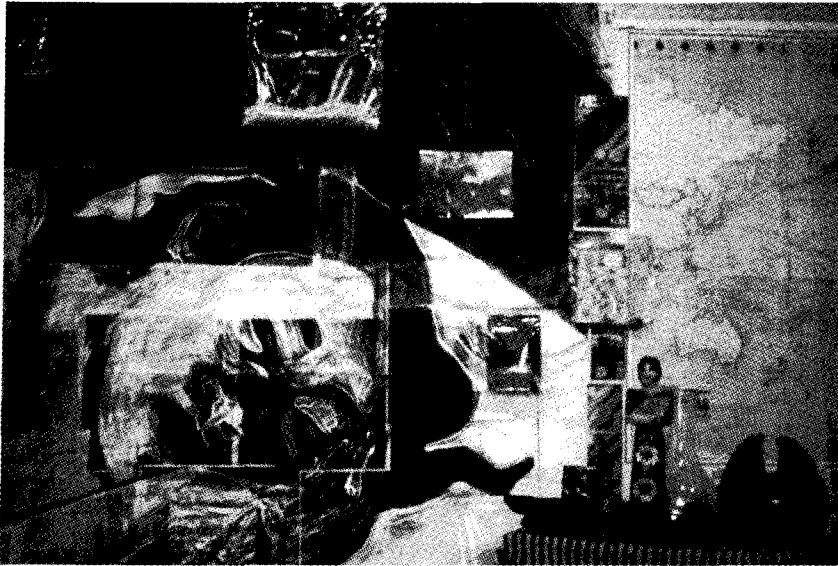
In an article from the Cultural Center of the Philippines' 1980 *Art Supplement*, Marian Pastor Roces focuses on the "Untitled" installation piece I worked on in the "Fiber as Art" show at the Metropolitan Museum of Manila, and declares the coming of age - the maturation of Philippine contemporary art. She writes:

"Banzon offers us rich and enigmatic lessons every time she assembles her delicate systems which, like this work are composed of flowers, strings, leaves, seeds, unusual configurations of stone and branches and roadside debris." She observes, "It is possible to seek... esoteric insights from Banzon's work... We could for instance, draw something valuable from her working methods.

Banzon does not start with a more or less ideal final form in mind. Instead, she intuits all possible Juxtaposition of a set of things, scanning subconsciously an almost infinite number of variations, blurring any precise format. As she does this, she acquaints herself with patterns of coherence revealed by the materials themselves... She is creating analogues to the process of art-making. Or, her work is a material metaphor for the act of creation..."

I had the opportunity to travel outside the Philippines in 1983. I traveled with my younger sister, Patria Viva, in Europe and America. It was a rude awakening to a world larger and more complex than the forest environment where I spent my early childhood years. There we would learn about our country, through other people's eyes. They would ask why we smiled

and laughed a lot in spite of our country's problems. My sister and I learned that women from our country were identified as domestics and entertainers. I started to wonder why this was so.



BIGO: The Kiss of Hunger
in THE BRIDE UNVEILED
Real Art Ways, Hartford, Connecticut, USA, 1993



Bar poster: For men's pleasure

A found bar poster referring to Filipinas

In 1987, I was invited to be the Philippine representative to the 1st Australia and the Regions Artists Exchange, an international conference and exhibition in Perth and Fremantle, Western Australia. I was asked, for the first time to be a storyteller, to talk about Philippine culture to a foreign audience. This was when I begin to use the works of Gauguin in installations and to explore cultural contact between the west and east and the diaspora. In a paper “Shifting Definitions of Home . . .” Isabela B. Mooney, my younger sister, notes in a paper she read at the Jorge B. Vargas Museum in October 1996, that my work [installation using Gauguin] “... gives a Banzon touch to the original Gauguin, major influence in [Genara’s]...work presented an unconventional view of the Blessed Virgin Mary as a ‘tapis’-wrapped Tahitian woman with baby Jesus sitting on her shoulder. [Genara] sees in Gauguin a way in which religion can be appropriated...She opts to present the kind of Christianity that may be the practice here [Philippines]. Emblems of the folk and the Catholic are shown, rosary beads lie side by side with amulets and wax figures, a lizard beside roosters.”



AMEN!
 in Pasalubong: Travel Gifts
 Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1987
 in Vestiges of War Exhibition, New York University, New York City 1999

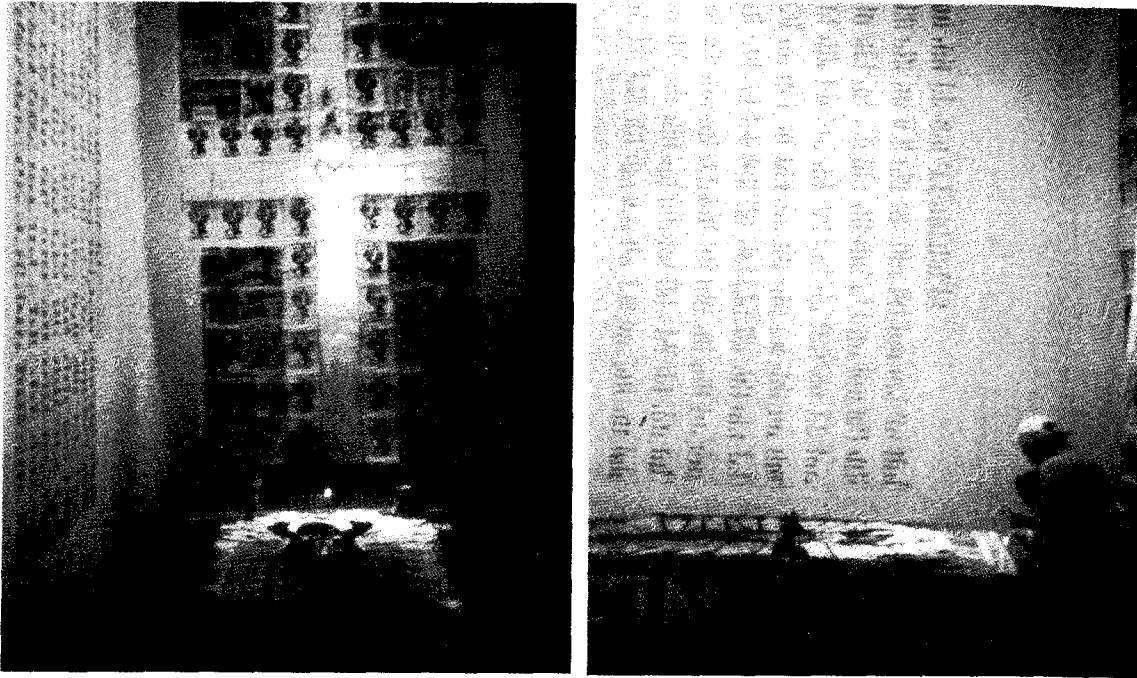
A year later, in 1988, my father passed away. It was a profound moment in my life and during that long grieving time, the subject matter of my art changed. In “LUKSA: Homage to a National Scientist: Julian Banzon” in a group show “Seven Sculptors” at the Kulay Diwa Gallery in Parañaque, I

inhabited a dark gallery – painted all in black, where I used chalk to dot in myriads of stars – gleaming and shining in the infinite dark achieved by black lights. My father told me in his last year of life that when he left this earth he would become a star. In May 1988, the *National Geographic Magazine* came out with a comprehensive scientific article on the “Birth and Death of Stars.” While on his hospital bed, my father pointed to the paragraph stating that the composition of stars is the same as the gases and energy produced when one’s body decomposes. As he told me about this, my father smiled. In white chalk I write on the black wall:

“May his voyage
thru the heavens
fulfill his expectations
and validate his theories
about returning to the most
simple force of the universe.”

In the exhibition “TATLONG YUGTO,” in February 9, 1989, Alex Umali of the De La Salle Gallery, Manila writes “... Genara Banzon... retrieves memories... (and) juxtaposes the folk ethnic with pop images, connections to her roots... Texture and patterns are achieved through the manipulation of dried leaves, fruits and twigs and warped paper in *pagkukula-almirol* technique. Printed images of animistic Filipinos are defined in natural illumination. The Gauguinesque Virgin Mary and Child Jesus are blended with pastel and collage, the 1521 legacy postcard, the thought process of “barong tagalog” ... nationalism questioning ... colonial trappings. The installation of tropical chrome yellow orange coconut shells, roots and leaves sets the mood of reflection. A personal statement of the artist accentuates the pathway of worship – a pattern of *baos*, a journey back to nourish the pain of losing a father. The exhibition taken in its totality is an exploration of materials and redefines art from its orthodoxy of the permanent and the mimetic.”

In 1989, I co-coordinated with Australian artist Judith Adam and was an exhibiting artist in an all-Filipina four-women exhibition in Sydney on the mail-order-bride phenomenon.

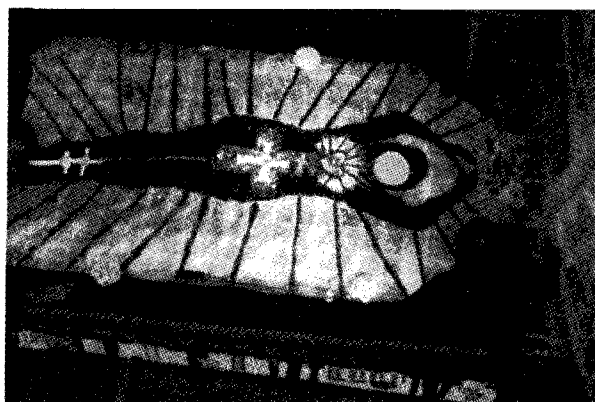


PAGMAMALASAKIT: Quest for Greener Pastures
The Art Gallery, University of California Irvine 1996
University of California Riverside 1997
North Dakota Museum 1998
Plug In Gallery, Winnipeg, Canada 1998

The mail-order-bride topic was an issue the Australians were confronted with and wanted to talk about. Imelda Cajipe-Endaya, Jean Marie Syjuco, Francesca Enriquez, and I created works that addressed the controversial issue in an exhibition entitled "Signed, Sealed and Delivered" at the Performance Space in Sydney in 1989. It was a much anticipated and well-attended show. The title of my work was: "Kuwarta O' Kahon: The Wheel of Fortune. Love Par Avion / Is the Price Right?" By this time I had married and divorced an American Peace Corps volunteer and was living in America, so the experience of a cross-cultural marriage as well as the sense of diaspora were quite personal to me. It was around this time that the mail-order-bride issue, echoing issues on women, economic disparity, and quest for justice and peace in the world became a focal point of my installations. My installations and exhibitions that address related themes came with different titles; as, "BIGO: The Kiss of Hunger" in "The Bride Unveiled," "The Economics of Love" in "(dis) Oriented: Shifting Identities of Asian Women in America," "PAALAM: Tales Of Arrivals and Departures, the US Bases in the Philippines, Women and Others."



THE ECONOMICS OF LOVE
in (dis)Oriented Shifting Identities of Asian Women in America
Abrons Art Center and The Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, New York City, 1995



DETAIL: PAGMAMALASAKIT: The Quest for Greener Pastures 1996
The Economics Of Love 1995
The Bride Unveiled 1993

In “(dis) ORIENTED: Shifting Identities of Asian Woman in America,” Margo Machida, author of the exhibition book and curator of the show, reflects and describes my installation: “... bright-hued information, image- packed works by the artist ... part community board, part half-furnished room stuffed with tokens of home and travel, the installation ... conveys the nature of transitory lives. Not just mirroring the intricate nature of Filipino identity, rooted in diverse island cultures straddling the Pacific and the South China Sea, and subjected to the interplay of influences from Asia and the West for centuries, the artist touches upon the issues of economic disparity that impel many of her countrywomen to settle in the West, as well as how nineteenth century views of Asian and Pacific women retain a powerful hold on the western imagination.”

In the New York City newspaper, the *Daily News*, June 30, 1995, Nick

Charles gives his insights on the same exhibit: "...Banzon's piece deal[s] with global issues of the imbalance of power ... show[ing] that oppression is in all of us, not just America or some other region."

"Pagmamalasakit: The Quest for Greener Pastures" in a show "Memories of Overdevelopment: Philippine Diaspora in Contemporary Art" became a traveling show. It originated at The Art Gallery at the University of California Irvine, moved to the University of California, Riverside, then on to the Museum of North Dakotas and to the Plug Gallery in Winnipeg, Canada. It was shown once more in an international exhibition titled "A Woman's View: Equality, Development and Peace" sponsored by the World Bank Art Society in Washington D.C. The exhibition was featured on the front page of the Wall Street Journal, under "Work Week: A Special News Report about Life on the Job – And Trends Taking Shape There." The article noted that the exhibition "... on the economic plight of women breaks the mold ... with ... 90 works from women artists world-wide who challenge inequity." The article went on to say that, "...Banzon has people step into a room papered with actual ads from mail-order-brides, many fleeing poverty (Such art) could help sensitize the bank to women's economic disparity."



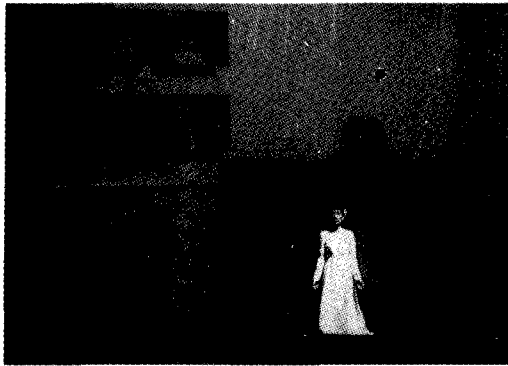
IN THE SWIM: Si Marilyn at ang Dalagang Gauguin
in The 7th Triennial Exhibition, The Fuller Museum of Art, Brockton, Massachusetts, USA, 1993

"In The Swim: Si Marilyn Monroe at ang Dalagang Paul Gauguin" was an exhibition where a life-size cardboard cut-out of Marilyn Monroe stood

beside the collaged and enlarged image of Gauguin's South Seas woman in his painting "Nevermore" on the wall, with little toy plastic men parachuting down, looking like jellyfishes floating down in a pool of water. Wrote art critic Constance Gorfinkle of the Massachusetts newspaper the *Patriot Ledger* in her article "Breaking Boundaries" on 23 May 1993, the installation was "... a startling, thought-provoking work that juxtaposes icons from different cultures and comments on events that have befallen Banzon's homeland ... dazzlingly colorful and in some aspects humorous, the work has also serious implications. It sums up ... what the museum's 1993 Triennial exhibition is all about."

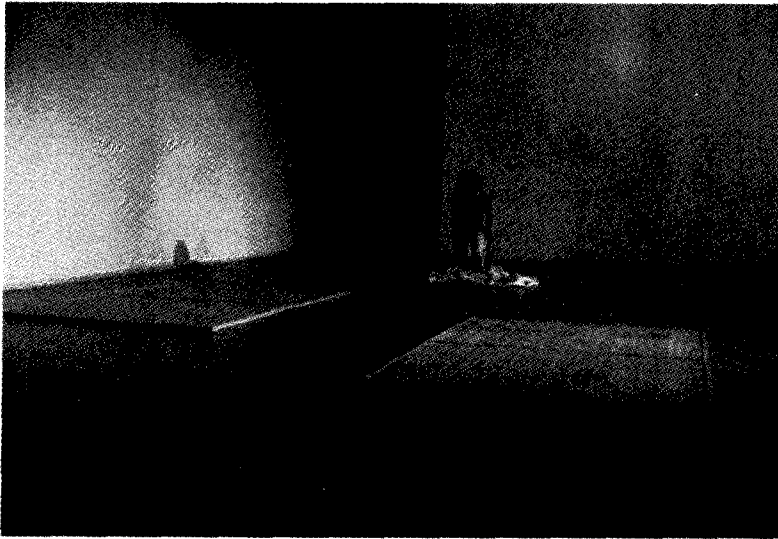
Gorfinkle also noted that the exhibit was: "... quite a crushing commentary on colonialism ... (and that in the installation) ... every little thing means something ... (She concluded that it) ... represents a new direction for the museum's show of contemporary regional art ..."

In the early phase of my life as an immigrant in America and in trying to adjust to a foreign land, I found solace in working on my art. I began to collaborate with Kristin Jackson, a former college classmate from the College of Fine Arts in the University of the Philippines, Diliman who had also migrated to America and pursued further studies in dance.



DETAIL: PAKIUSAP/Plea Installation
(dance video and Susan Meiselas' mail-order-bride photo)
in Signed, Sealed and Delivered
Performance Space, Sydney, Australia, 1989

"Pakiusap/Plea" became our first collaboration. She danced to the music of "Pakiusap" sung by Filipina Kuh Ledesma. The performance was put into video. Later, with two folding paper screens, conceptualized specifically for the dance, Jackson performed and danced with them. Metaphorically, the screens transformed into a rice field, a sack for carrying the harvest, a mat for selling vegetables in the palengke/market, and a box for the "mailing" of the bride.



PAKIUSAP/Plea with the two screens on the floor
Performance Space, Sydney
DIA Center for the Arts, New York City
Cultural Center of the Philippines
Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
1989-1994

Deborah Jowitt of New York City's the *Village Voice* relates "... the screen becomes the woman's house, her burden, her workplace, and finally in a stunning image, both screens (by Genara Banzon) form a box into which she (dancer/Kristin Jackson portraying the mail-order-bride) is enclosed, like a living doll, ready for mailing..."

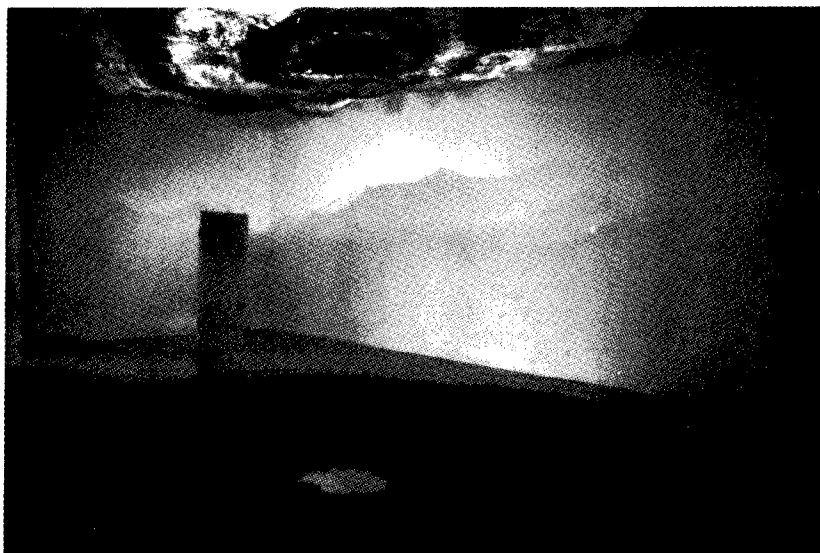


PAKIUSAP /Plea
Performance Space, Sydney
DIA Center for the Arts, New York City
Cultural Center of the Philippines; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
1989-1994

“Pakiusap” premiered as a video at the Performance Space in Sydney, Australia, as part of the collaborative exhibition “Signed, Sealed and Delivered.” Later, it would be performed live at the DIA Center for the Arts, New York City; at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, Manila; and at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.

In America, I had arrived in New York City, and then later moved to Cape Cod, finally settling in the Boston area, in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

In 1990 with the passing of my father and as my marriage was ending, I decided to enroll at MASS ART to put a sense of order and structure in my life at a very chaotic time. While completing the Master of Fine Arts program in the Studio for Interrelated Media and Performing Arts there, I learned about computers and digital imagery. I took courses in video making and learned how to incorporate it in my art installations. I attained valuable insight into the art environment in the US which gave me a sense of balance in a tumultuous time in my life.



BIYAHE: Origins and Directions
in MIRROR-ing
Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, 1992

In the installation “BIYAHE: Origins and Directions” – an MFA final thesis project, I reviewed forest, ground, mountain, and sky. It marked the beginning of deep reflections on my origins, and journeys past, present, and yet to come. My installation incorporated a blown-up and manipulated painting of Gauguin’s *South Seas woman* in “Nevermore” representing myself as the



BIYAHE: Origins and Directions
in exhibition MIRROR-ing
Mass Art, Boston, 1992

brown woman in a new world outside her culture. This is a reversal of a white man like Gauguin going to a foreign land and living within a foreign culture. Included was a video of my father's funeral ceremony in the Philippines.



Photo of my father's funeral 1988

That same year, I created “KABABAIHAN: Portraits of Filipina Women” which examined the different roles of modern Filipina women: Imelda Marcos, Corazon Aquino, the Poor, the Service Workers, Tribal Tinguian Women, intellectuals, and many others – in the local community. My goal was to break through stereotypes of Filipina women. This time it was the images of Filipina women who were collaged in the weave of paper. My forest was distant and I, now in another land, wanted to understand myself through knowing and understanding other countrywomen in various roles here and there.

A 2007 blog produced by one of the Filipinos who recently settled in Cambridge, Mitch De Leon, includes our conversation on this particular piece called “Tinguian Woman” shown for the first time in the Harvard Neighbors’ Gallery in an art exhibition entitled “KABABAIHAN: Portraits of Filipina Women”: “It’s a beautiful spring day in Cambridge and I get to ask Genara what inspired her to create this extraordinary piece.”



Tinguian Woman in Mourning
KABABAIHAN: Portraits of Filipina Women, 1990

“I was inspired by one of the first photographs taken by an American soldier when they first came to the Philippines. This photo was featured in a *National Geographic* issue on the Philippines in the early 1900’s. I created a heritage piece using the vintage photo-image in a ... process which embedded organic materials such as seeds and the leaves of a fern layered with the image.

Through the years, I have created art pieces using my own process of paper-making, some of which I have used in many of my art installations... Currently, I am going a step further by developing various ways of ‘etching’

photographs of my art installations. I hope to create layers of histories and stories bringing together the relevance of the past and the present.”

Coming to America has heightened my global outlook. Leaving my country of origin and being confronted with “other” issues here, in America, my concerns have moved beyond an earlier focus on pure materiality into commenting on contemporary life issues in the search for equality, development, and peace.



TRANSFORMATIONS
digital imagery
MASS ART, Boston, 1991

In exhibitions as Vestiges of War, DisCommemorating the Treaty of Paris, “Pagmumuni-muni/MEDITATIONS: The Anatomy of History,” (at New York University; the Washington Square Gallery, San Francisco; and Jorgensen Gallery, University of Connecticut at Storrs) history is remembered and reviewed. In “GUHIT”: Drawings In/Of Time” Philippine and Filipino-American history are told in simple large format drawings. Filipina-American, Isabel Zumel describes in a few words: “A dog announcing the arrival of visitors. A boat and plane transporting travelers to the farthest reaches. Motifs symbolizing inherent strength and the endurance of the spirit.”



GUHIT: Drawings In/Of Time
Puro Arte Gallery, Los Angeles, California, 1998

The journey in/of time spans hundreds of years and thousands of miles. What appears at first glance to be discrete chapters of time and space are inter-connected. What looks to be mere retrospective is also commentary on present complexity born of the lines of time intersecting and meeting at the center.”

In “BULUBUNDUKIN: Mountain of Dreams,” Director of the Atrium Gallery at that time in the University of Connecticut at Storrs, Salvatore Scalora proclaims: “... [Genara] has centered her art installations in the arena of culture and politics. The magical swoop of the flying lizard, her artistic muse remembered long since childhood, now continues its downward spiral, each time closer to the center.”

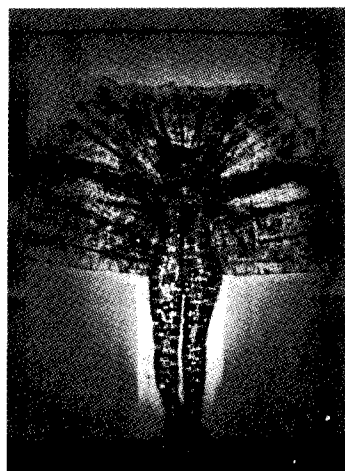
I maintain connections with my native land through friends and relatives and countrymen introduced to me wherever I find myself in the world and exhibit in the Philippines whenever the opportunity arises. In the exhibition “WOW-B: Who Owns Women’s Bodies,” my installation: “PAALAM/Farewell ROSA,” pays homage to two dear friends - Doris Olivar and my high school classmate Rosa Francia-Meneses (co-founder with her

husband of the Philippine Breast Cancer Network of the Philippines) who fought so hard and valiantly in their fight against breast cancer.



PAALAM/Farewell ROSA in WOW B - Who Owns Women's Bodies
Cultural Center of the Philippines and a traveling show, 2001

In an exhibit called "RESURRECTIONS: Objects with New Souls" in Connecticut, USA, I return to paper-making embedding X-ray negatives of sick children into a large paper cross. The exhibit is offered as a prayer for the cure of illnesses of the body and the world. Art critic Terese Karmel wrote in *The Chronicle* of Willimantic, CT: "Genara Banzon's figure with legs constructed of X-ray negatives ... explode against a far wall with huge varnished wings of paper ... a kind of resurrection man seeks to rise above bodily illnesses in a statement of hope."



DASAL: Praying for a Cure
in RESURRECTIONS
The William Benton Museum of Art, Connecticut, USA, 1996

“ANG PAGBIBISITA: The Visit” was created when I returned to the Philippines for a visit in June 1999. Before I left for America, an art colleague and former co-teacher from the Philippine High School for the Arts in Mt. Makiling, Los Baños, Laguna, Professor Benjamin Cabangis, invited me to exhibit at the now College of Fine Arts of my alma mater, the University of the Philippines at Diliman. “ANG PAGBIBISITA: The Visit- Not simply Ethnic” was an installation in a spacious, white –walled classroom-turned gallery that involved a large wall piece, collaged with several painted and pasted together photocopied blown-up parts of the naked Gauguin woman. In the exhibition notes by Lily Rose Roxas-Tope of the English and Comparative Literature Department of the university, she writes:

In the past, it was possible to be born into an identity. One rarely left one’s village and one traveled long distances to reach the next one. Globalization, technology and history, however, have shattered the isolation of communities and have imposed the epistemic violence that ruptured cultural ties and certainties. Boundaries have disappeared and ethnicities reconfigured. Truths have been decentered, the logos unframed. The late twentieth century individual is a liminal entity, constantly shifting between old and new territories, old and new paradigms, often in a state of self-destruction. She/he is a migrant, traveler, collecting artifacts from physical and mental continents, hoping that these strange fascinating objects and concepts would lead to some kind of identity.

The exhibit speaks the language of liminality. The huge figure of a Gauguin woman reminds the viewer of a white man traveling to exotic places, paying homage to brown women with abundant flesh. Orientalist, critics say. On one side is Venus de Milo, white and classic, wearing the underwear of a bar girl in Olongapo and a talisman against evil spirits at the entrance of her womanhood. What, where is woman? The cheap shiny tablecloths dream of dollars but the native kitchen utensils hang like swords wielded in nationalistic fervor. The suitcase and *balikbayan* boxes are proof of a new life established elsewhere but not completely free of Darna’s superpowers and the lure of the batik. The Filipino tree of life and the fruit of compromise loom large in the artist’s landscape but her letters to Mom, although full of family, is work-oriented, distant, foreign. The self grounds itself in original territory but searches for completion in diasporic existence.

Genara Banzon... has erased her boundaries. Now based in America, she still dreams Filipino dreams but has enough artifacts in her travels to reinvent herself, her art, giving new meaning to being an artist-in-transit. Neither here nor there, her art conquers a space in between, inviting new perspectives on identity and gender.



ANG PAGBIBISITA/The Visit

School of Fine Arts, University of the Philippines, Diliman, 1999

Another art critic, Maya Shinohara writes in an article: “Here and Now: Asian American Artists” published by the University of Massachusetts, Boston:

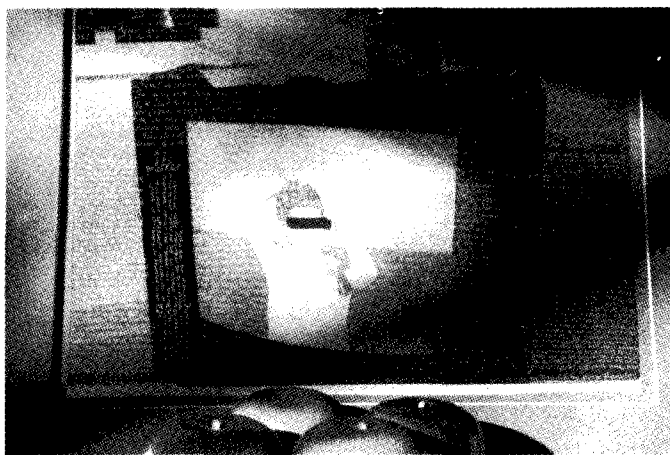
For Genara Banzon (the artist) creating art in her homeland, the Philippines, was a quiet and personal affair. Her early artworks dealt with nature and its materials, structures, and processes. Yet, such artistic solitude began to change when she traveled to Europe in 1983 and had her first glimpse of how some Europeans stereotypically saw her as a Filipina. And it ultimately changed for the better in 1987 when Banzon was invited to the “First Australia and the Regions Artists Exchange” in ... Australia and selected to be a representative of the Philippines. For the first time, Banzon had to reflect on issues that she had never wholly considered before. Issues about representation, identity (race, gender, and nationality), stereotypes, and out/insider politics hit her long and hard. She had to represent her homeland and her Filipina-self

to outsiders:

‘I had to talk about my country from a different perspective. I was no longer on the inside but outside. So my art was about connecting to the Philippines and my Philippine experience with an outside country. I realized that my art would no longer be my private experiment. I was sad, but also excited about the challenge.’

At this time, Banzon shed her artistic solitude and began to make works that deal with socio-political issues, often pertaining to her homeland Philippines and about being a woman. . . . Banzon’s works about nature in the Philippines evolved into art in the United States that confronts viewers about issues such as Woman, sexuality and race.

In the group exhibition “Damage Control,” my installation: “A Grammar of Installation: Piringan: ‘dot the i’s and cross the t’s’ ” included a framed photograph of a woman whose eyes are covered with a strip of black tape. I etched and marked the photograph and used text from various historical and contemporary voices and sources that comment on media, society and more.



PIRINGAN: A Grammar of Installation: ‘dot the i’s and cross the t’s’
in Damage Control, Advocate Gallery, Los Angeles, California, 2003

This installation, according to Maya Shinohara is “indicative of the perpetual rigidity of our society that still believes in and practices gender, sexual, and racial hierarchies. According to Maya Shinohara,

such issues are also evident in the title phrase “dot the i’s and cross the t’s.” In French, “dot” means dowry and in Old English, it stands for breasts (“tit”). “T[i] t[i] means penis in Filipino. Thus, both man and woman are suggested by the words used, and question the role of Woman as wife, sex object, etc. In addition, cross the “t’s” is suggestive of a “crossover” in gender and sexuality, signifying the existence of diverse values, interests, and feelings. The phrase also suggests a “crossing” to another country, thereby signifying globalization and multiculturalism. ...

Banzon’s works about nature in the Philippines evolved into art in the United States that confronts viewers about issues such as Woman, sexuality and race. I am thankful that Banzon’s work underwent this transformation and that she gives voice to minorities through her work.

Interweaving personal narrative with migrancy/immigration and dispersion, I use words/text with my images to speak out as an artist on issues of race, gender, class, stereotypes, and the environment.



SAKLOLO: SOS –Saving Our Souls
The Artists Foundation Gallery, Boston, 2005

Bill Rodriguez of *The Providence Phoenix* on 18 November 1994 wrote: “The most impressive and involving work ... takes the exhibition’s title to heart. Ingeniously, Banzon has the text read as though each of the four places we can begin is the only starting point, making her girlhood recollections an endless loop, like obsessive memories. If the gallery contained nothing but this evocative installation, a trip from the city, if not the Philippines, would be

worthwhile.”



DETAIL: (inspired by Mar's Ravelo's) DARNA in:
FEAST: Miracles, Mysteries and Inspirations from the 7,100 Isles
The William Benton Museum of Art, Connecticut, 2003
My Mother's Daughter
Bunker Hill Community College, Boston, 2005
From Melancolony to Hedenopolis
University of San Francisco, 2007

I pay homage to inspirational, nurturing influences in my life as in a tribute to my mother in a group exhibition, “My Mother’s Daughter” in 2005 at the Bunker Hill Community College in Boston. I give gratitude to and salute my mother -- an incredible woman, a wonder-woman raising ten children while being a full-time doctor/general practitioner.



MY MOTHER'S DAUGHTER
Art Gallery, Bunker Hill Community College, Boston, 2005

I relive celebrations of life, spirit, ritual, and heritage of the Philippines even while in America.



FEAST: Miracles, Mysteries and Inspirations from the Archipelago of 7,100 Isles (A collaborative show with S. de la Rosa and I. Lee)
The William Benton Museum Of Art, Storrs, Connecticut, USA, 2003



DETAIL in FEAST: Our Lady of Perpetual Help



DETAIL in FEAST: inspired by Mars Ravelo's 'mga manannanggal'

Involving various media and range of art forms from huge installations to small artwork, I transform my art, revisiting, connecting, bridging, layering, marking people and time. In the end, I begin again and go back to my roots like a well of water to drink from, to rejuvenate me so I can create once more.