

**SCRATCHING THE SURFACE:
SEARCHING FOR SPACE FOR LESBIAN ART
IN THE PHILIPPINES**

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The title I chose for this paper embodies the various issues and concepts that I am going to discuss. As the paper progresses, each of the key words, namely, “lesbian”, “lesbian art”, “Philippine context”, and “scratching in relation to surface” will be interrogated.

First Question: What Is A Lesbian?

“All women are potential lesbians by virtue of the primacy of their emotional bonds with other women,” Adrienne Rich boldly declares in her thought-provoking article, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (In Lewis 1992: 22). She cites the unique bond of a mother to her daughter and a daughter to her mother, and a girl to her best girl friend as manifestations of womanly love. But, to hastily conclude that lesbianism is merely manifestation of all forms of love of women toward other women is to court the dangers of oversimplification. Lesbianism, in fact, involves more than just feeling love for women. It is a more complicated sexual energy that is defined not solely by sexual attraction and energy direction, but also by how society constructs what is lesbian and what is not, and how one expresses lesbian energy. In reality, not all women are heterosexuals in the same way that not all women are homosexuals. For that matter, any

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number of sexual expression and energies lies in between these two extremes as Martine Rothblatt points out in her book, *The Apartheid of Sex: A Manifesto on the Freedom of Gender* (1995). Thus, human sexuality cannot be just one of the two, and to say therefore that every woman is “straight” or “lesbian” is to disregard the numerous possibilities of human sexuality.

The expression of human sexuality varies from person to person. In view of this wide spectrum of sexual energy and expression, “people must be free to choose and change their gender as they choose any other aspect of their self expression” (p. 22), whether it may be lesbian expression or not. Thus, lesbianism and lesbian identity in the end becomes a choice and not something destined by nature. For whatever reason/s a woman has to identify herself as a lesbian — political, sexual, emotional, practical, etc. — lesbian choice is still dependent upon the subject and not in any other thing, place, and person outside that subject.

Second Question: What Is to Be a Lesbian in the Philippines?

The question does not mean to lay some of the standards and rules of being a Filipina lesbian. It does not give certain instructions on how to be a lesbian, or how to fit in a so-called “Filipino lesbian lifestyle.” On the contrary, this question is being raised to address not a lifestyle but the context and specificities that lesbians experience in a society such as ours. Contextualization becomes necessary for the following reasons: Firstly, to get a glimpse of the lesbian’s struggle with her everyday life as a Filipina; secondly, to establish where lesbian art is located in the lesbian movement, and how it becomes important within the larger struggle; and lastly, to focus on some issues raised by my discussion of the featured three lesbian artists and their art.

The lesbian and gay movement in the Philippines is relatively a premature but continually growing struggle. Manifestations of this growth are (1) the annual celebration of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Pride March held every June since 1992; (2) the increasing number of gay and lesbian literature such as Neil Garcia and Danton Remoto's *Ladlad 1: Gay Literature Anthology* (1993) and *Ladlad 2: Gay Literature Anthology* (1996), Tony Perez's *Cubao Series* (1980), Neil Garcia's *Philippine Gay Culture in the Last 30 Years* (1996), Giney Villar and Aida Santos' *Woman-to-Woman* (1992) and Ana Leah Sarabia's *Tibok: The Heartbeat of the Filipino Lesbian* (1998). Even though such manifestation were taken as essential efforts to the gay and lesbian struggle, the movement is still marginalized in the sense that it is not yet considered as a serious political struggle. Most often than not, gay and lesbian issues are taken as mere sentiments without material basis, or entertainment, or even just a form of noise barrage. This marginalization is observed in the many aspects of social life, but most specially in the fields of art and culture.

Specificities of Lesbianism

Being a lesbian in the Philippines is even more complicated than being a homosexual or a woman — the two gender positions where lesbianism is included. A close look at these two gender positions will show that lesbians are the more marginalized. On the one hand, you have a woman-based feminist movement which in essence is heterocentric. On the other hand, you have the homosexual movement which is animated by the flamboyant and noisy gays. As can be seen, lesbians are basically still invisible within the movements that have adopted them as daughters (women's movement) or sisters (homosexual movement). This is not to criticize the

efforts of the gender-sensitive movements that were mentioned but to lay bare certain realities that lesbians have to deal with and have to overcome in the current trend of gender-based movements.

Stereotypes that Maintain and Support the Heterosexist Pattern

In the article "Notes from the Margins: Lesbian Feminist Politics Examined or The Invisible Road Many Women Travel" (1994) Giney Villar lays bare the common stereotypes used against lesbians in the Philippines. These stereotypical images, Villar says, are not only causes of violence and harassment committed against lesbians, but also affirm and maintain the social stigma, lesbophobia and discrimination suffered by lesbians.

The first of these stereotypes regard lesbianism as a problem and an abnormality. Moreover, lesbianism is considered a problem rooted in the following: One, improper child rearing by the parents. Two, the inability of a woman to attract a man, finally, resulting in male rejection. If the root cause is traced to the lack of male presence in these women's lives, the "logical" solution is to bombard her with male presence. This is to say that in order for the lesbian to be free of such abnormal sexual expression, she must have a man. This kind of thinking has given rise to stories about lesbians who become "straight" once they have sex with men, or to use Tagalog vulgar language, "*kapag nakatikim na ng lalaki.*"

The second major stereotype image of lesbians is that they are "emotional vampires who will suck the life of their victims leaving nothing more than emotional and physical wrecks" (Villar 1994: 86). Aplenty are sensationalized stories and news about psychopathic, deranged, insecure and unreasonably selfish lesbians who killed their lovers be-

cause of jealousy. This imaging of lesbians truly heightens the society's stigma against persons like us who are neither masculine nor feminine, because it affirms their speculations and fears about us.

Another stereotype image of lesbians is that they are men trapped in women's bodies, thus, it is the ultimate dream of every lesbian to have a penis and become a full-pledged man.

Because of "the ideological premise. . . that the world is hetero-patriarchal in nature," Villar further elaborates, the only recognized "valid relationship is between men and women, with men in a dominant position" (p. 87). It is not surprising therefore to find in lesbian relationships, where one acts as a man, and the other acts as a woman in order to complete and affirm the "normal" standard of romantic relationship.

Third Question: What Is Lesbian Art?

The power of art to change, empower, and maintain a social discourse must never be underestimated, or worse, ignored. It is for this reason that social engineers like Mao Zedong, who wanted to hasten socialist construction in China after the Proletarian Revolution, issued the call for the production of art and literature that is in the service of the working class during the famous talks at the Yenan forum. But while literature and all forms of art have the power to produce and reproduce an ideological discourse that functions either for change or social conservation, it is the visual arts with the advantage. This is pointed out by John Berger who asserts the power of visual arts more than any other art form by explaining how "sight" and the act of "seeing" has a raw and immediate effect in both the viewer and the artist that make sense of an art work.

Seeing comes before words. It is in seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world

with words, but words can never undo the fact the we are surrounded by it (Berger 1972: 7).

If the visual art has this immediate effect from the stimulus to the stimulated, then communication between this two becomes faster than, for example, word-translation and comprehension in literature. Simplistically, visuals give us our primary comprehension point before the brain even articulates what we see in cohesive ideas through words.

Not only has the visual art this ability for immediate visual communication, it also has a relative autonomy. According to Alice Guillermo

art has its specificity, that is, its particular language or vocabulary of elements, mediums, and techniques, which constitute it as a distinct area of human knowledge and a signifying practice. This is not just what we might call the formal aspect of art, but it is what constitutes art as a particular human discipline different from others (Guillermo 1997: 6).

This relative autonomy is important for the marginalised sectors in the society, especially for lesbians, because this creates for us more spaces where we can express our issues and position in a freer manner. In a society that continues to treat lesbianism/homosexuality as a sin, disease and social liability, it is imperative to explore all possible opportunities to engage societal attitudes towards lesbianism.

However, I think it is necessary to make it clear here that the advocacy for a lesbian art means to reveal art made by lesbians. These works may be pieces that deal or do not deal with lesbian themes. As a first move to establish lesbian art, I think it is necessary to highlight the artist/producer as the defining point of what is lesbian art and what is not. I think it is necessary to be exclusive first, be clear and refined, then possibly expand.

A few years ago, women art historians in advocating to create women's space amidst and against the male-centric art world, asked this question: Why have there been no great women artists? This question led women to enter the field of art history (which was for a long, long time the private preserve of men) if only to track down women artists through the ages. Such efforts have birthed fruitful results as more and more women artists were discovered, written about, and included in art history. Furthermore, as a consequence of the efforts to make women artists visible, more and more women are now art historians, critics, and theorists.

But while women artists have now been unearthed and considered fit subjects in art history, they are classified by sex, not gender. And, there is the rub. Not all with female bodies develop as feminine subjects. As we have already said, there are other gender orientations for females, and whether people accept this or not, it is a fact that lesbians did, do and will exist. And thus the imperative for the lesbian community to ask this question: *Why are there no great lesbian artists in art history?* or even, *why have there been no lesbian artists?*

Fourth Question: What Is Meant By "Scratching The Surface"?

Given the invisible existence of lesbian artists in the country and the heterocentric trend of women in the arts, to "scratch the surface" means smashing the thick screen that hides lesbian artists and begin to reveal their flesh, minds, and voices. This must be the first step for establishing lesbian art in the country. The next step is to claim for lesbians and their art the unearthed space erroneously recognized as women's territory. In this reclaimed space the lesbian's will to live and produce art must be nurtured and made to flourish.

The first challenge is to search for “out” lesbian artists who are ready enough to face the discriminating eyes of the public, and needless to say, there are very few of them. Luckily, in my lesbian and art journey, I have encountered three brave women who were already in the lesbian movement even before I even accepted my own sexuality—Maita Beltran, Irma Lacorte and Tata Lim.

These three women have paved the way for lesbian art through their numerous engagements in the art field, either by holding art exhibitions or joining art discussions. Fortunately, their respective solo exhibitions and participation in group exhibitions in and out of the gay and lesbian community were written about in popular newspapers and art magazines in the country. This gave them the exposure so necessary for networking with both gay and non-gay groups and individuals, and establishing their presence in the art scene. Some of these exhibitions were “As Above, So Below”, a solo exhibition in 1998 and “I Am A Woman”, a collaboration with New Voice Productions in 1996 by Maita Beltran; Tata Lim’s numerous group shows with “Art Manila”, and Irma Lacorte’s participation in a gay and lesbian art and literature exhibition, “Intimations of Desire” in 1998.

Lesbian artists are also relatively more participative and visible in art conferences catering to women, including Lacorte’s participation in “Women Imaging Women Conference: the body, the home and the memory” in March of last year.

A few months ago, Cristina Quisumbing Ramilo, a New York based painter, and myself established an internet link of Filipina lesbian artists here and abroad, called the “Pinay-dikya II Art Link”. The link is to serve as network and venue for lesbian Pinay artists to bond with sisters across the globe. A website for the said link is also in progress as a part of the link’s initial efforts.

BEHOLD THE ARTISTS

Maita Beltran's Celestial Images: A Recollection of Spiritual Celebration

Maita's love for the arts was evident even as a child. She took to colors and images as shown by her drawings. But like any other obedient daughter she sacrificed her love for the arts when she pursued a pre-medical course in college through the bidding of her mother. She earned her BS Biology degree at the University of Sto. Tomas, but soon, her love for the arts caught up with her which egged her to work for an advertising agency as a copy writer for almost four years. In between her office work, she would usually paint as a hobby until friends started noticing her works and advised her to try painting as a full-time practise. This encouragement drove her to buy books on art and techniques. She read them all carefully. Then she painted without let-up. Her art production grew by leaps and bounds. It was then that she entertained the idea of exhibiting her works.

Her first solo exhibition, "Gay Divination: Out of the Closet and Into the Canvas" in 1996 at the Café Caribana turned out to be Maita's most meaningful exhibition. It was in this exhibition that she let loose two of the most important aspects of her life—her love of the arts and her lesbian sexuality. After that, her exhibitions became more rampant, sometimes even two major ones in a year. Some of these exhibitions were "Wings" (1997), "I Am a Woman Too" (1997), "In the Name of the Goddess" (1998), and the latest "As Above, So Below" (1998).

Art as Sanctuary

Maita knew the moment she held her first brush and saw the *tabula rasa* that was her first canvas that art would be her sanctuary where she can be as free as she wants in express-

ing and celebrating her sexuality. According to her, it is relatively easier to be “out” in the art world because it is only in this world where reversals, distortions, ruptures of conventions, and normalities can have spaces and actually be appreciated. “The more different and deviant you are the better,” she says. Elaborating further she continues “. . . *nakatulong ng malaki ang sining ko sa pagpipinta dahil nagkaroon ako ng tinatawag na creative license para maipahayag sa ibang tao kung sino at ano ako. Ang maganda pa niyan, dahil nasa arts ang mundong ginagalawan ko, kung saan, “normal” or should I say “regular” na makakita ng sari-saring bakla at lesbiana, wala akong takot na lumabas dahil alam kong maraming maaaring sumuporta sa akin at sa sining ko.*” (“My art in painting helps a lot because through it I acquire what is called as creative license to explain who I am to others. What is beautiful about it is that I move in a world where it is “normal”, or should I say, “regular” to find all sorts of gays and lesbians. I am not afraid to come out into the open as a lesbian because I know there are many who will support me and my art.”)

Positive Images

Evident in Maita’s creations are her efforts to uplift the degraded images of lesbians in a heterosexist society. As she herself says, she feels it her sacred duty “to challenge myself and my Self to stand my ground as a lesbian and as a lesbian-artist in a predominantly heterosexist society.” With this in mind, she creates beautiful, joyful and glamorous images of lesbians in her art works. She has also embraced this “personal mission of making a difference in people’s lives whether they be gay, lesbian, or straight.” It is her aim to disseminate the idea of a varying, continuous and fluid expression of human sexuality, and to make it more acceptable to her

audience. Furthermore, she does not only address her issues to “straight” audiences but also to fellow gays and lesbians. She encourages them to be proud of their sexualities for after all every act of choice, including sexual choice, has a definite purpose in this life. Finally and most importantly, it is also a conscious effort for her to break the stereotypes that continually pushes lesbians as fearful, violent, and abnormal beings. According to her, *“para mamulat ang kaisipan ng mga hets na ang mga lesbiana ay hindi mga babaing nagnanais maging lalaki at hindi tayo mga hayok sa laman, at hindi rin tayo nagtatago ng balisong dahil hindi tayo mamatay-tao.* (To make heterosexuals aware that lesbians are not women who want to become men and we are not lusting for flesh, and we are neither hiding fan knives because we are not killers.) Blame some members of the media for painting lesbians as jealous killers.”

Spirituality and the Process of Creation

Aside from offering positive images of lesbians, Maita’s works also indicate her strong hold of the immaterial world and her spiritual consciousness. Oftentimes, her canvas would be dominated by celestial images such as angels, goddesses, and other “other”-worldly iconographies. Like her spiritual images, her creative process also moves along the context of spiritual healing and meditative conditioning. As a matter of fact, before she touches her paint brushes or her canvases, she goes through an inspirational ritual first. This usually starts with playing new age and instrumental music, particularly “In Search of Angels” and “Celestine Prophecy” over her component, accompanied by the burning fragrance of incense. This helps her connect with her soul in order to create a peaceful heart and mind. She says, “I need them for grounding and centering my Self before I can even touch the first canvas with

my first brushstroke." Only through this ritual of getting the right mood and stimulus can she start painting.

As a form of studies for her works, she does sketches on random sheets of paper as automatic notations for images that play in her mind. Not all, but some of these sketches make it to her big works. She does not use live models. Relying more on visualization, Maita consults printed materials for poses that her imagination could not capture.

She uses oil on canvas as a medium for her positive and colorful images. Similar to Henri Matisse's bright colours and child-like figures, Maita's works toy around the idea of celebration in the same child-like style of configuration. Her distinctive elementary style of drawing in bold outlines and rugged shapes in pastel shades of yellow, fuschia, pink, blue and orange, expresses her positive aura.

The Colorful World of Irma Lacorte: Art as an Expression

Irma Lacorte, according to Irma Lacorte herself, was very sure of her destiny as a visual artist early in life: "*Maliwanag kong naaalala, nung elem ako, naitanong nung teacher ko kung ano ang gusto ko paglaki. Sabi ko pintor.*" (I remember pretty well when I was in grade school my teacher asked me what I wanted to be. I said, a painter.) What convinced her about her calling was her fascination with colors. Unlike other kids her age who watched Walt Disney cartoons for the catchy music and interesting characters, Irma's compelling reason for watching concerned colors. This is the same reason why she read, nay, looked at comic books and magazines. "*Nalulunod ako sa kulay*" ("I drown in color"), she confessed. This power of color to drown her has prodded her to memorialize the feeling in her art works.

So very sure was Irma of her becoming a painter that she enrolled at the College of Fine Arts, University of Santo

Tomas. She chose Advertising as her major. After college, she worked for a few years as an animator until she decided to give up the big money that she was getting there by being a full-time artist/painter. Since then she has put up a number of solo shows and participated in a number of group shows locally. Some of these are “*Limang Buwan, Dalawang Gabi*” (1997) at the Blue Café as her first solo show, “Intimations of Desire: An Art and Literature Exhibit” (February, 1998) at the Café Caribana, and “Womenspace” (March, 1998) at the Sandra Torrijos Gallery. Aside from these shows, she has also joined several art competitions like the National Commission on Culture and the Arts (NCCA) Diwa ng Sining, NU 107 Painting Competition where she won the third prize, and the Kameradare Photo Contest where she also won third prize. She is also a member of some art and women’s organization in the country such as Art Association of the Philippines, Kameradare Club, and Womyn Supporting Womyn Center.

Of Colors and Movement

Irma’s absorption with colors grew stronger when she engaged herself in full-time practice. She would find herself staring at almost anything and everything for hours indulging in the different color combinations that each subject emits. Her mind plays of changing the angles, the colors, positions and the juxtaposition of almost anything that she stares at is a kind of a creativity practice so she could come come up with interesting compositions when she works on a piece. Her portraits are oftentimes reminiscent of Vincent Van Gogh’s expressionist colors. She paints her portraits in different hues of blue, green and red depending on how she sees that person.

Aside from colors, she is also captured by the various elements of nature such as the moon, the night sky and the

constellations. This is not to mention her fascination with violent storms which manifest their power over the earth. Storms have a way of reminding her of the infinite vastness outside her existence. Once, she related, she was stranded in an island in Mindoro when typhoon Rosing was raging. She was awed by what she witnessed: strong waves crushing into huge rocks by the sea, and gusty winds blowing away even heavy objects on its path as though these were mere bits of paper. A counterpoise to all these violent movements were the heavy nimbus clouds that hanged so threateningly fixed and immobile. She also confessed to being seduced by the slow process of color changes that the dawn or dusk sky parades before her eyes—from blue to violet, orange to magenta, gray to black, pink to blue again, until all the colors were completely absorbed by the absence of light.

In one of her untitled landscapes she allows us a peek at her rage and grievance imprisoned in her innermost soul which she expresses through the fiery image in red-orange beneath the calming effect of a moon. This combination of strong movement and stillness truly captures the conflicts and the diversities of her emotions – from happiness to sadness, violence to calmness, and turmoil to serenity.

Combined with the uniqueness of artists, both local and Western that she idolizes—the colors, brush strokes and line movements of Toulouse-Lautrec; Edward Munch's emotional and turbulent pieces, Paul Cezanne's colors and lines; Vincent Van Gogh's expressionism; Gustav Klimt's positions and figure executions; Paul Gauguin's colors; Frida Khalo's innocent portraits, Egon Schile's outlines; Agnes Arellano's power; Julie Lluch's terracotta portraits; and Jojo Legaspi's complicated contents, combined with her own expression in colors, smooth textures, graceful movements and fluid lines, indeed capture Irma's artistic style as a whole.

Irma's Contemplations on Sexuality

Irma may not be articulate in words about her lesbian sexuality but she definitely articulates her lesbian contemplations in her works. In fact, her titles always include the word "*lesbiana*". The straightforwardness of her Filipino titles has a two-way effect on beholders: First, they could be embarrassed by the directness considered undue by polite society, but at the same time be also amused by the stimulation of their fancies. In her series "*Pagmumuni-muni ng Isang Lesbiana*" for example, she centralizes what appears to be a face of a woman in contemplation. Over her head are abstract figures of female body parts in details: first a woman's breast, then the sex organ between her thighs, and finally the wholeness of the woman.

In another series which she included in the group exhibition "Intimations of Desire" entitled, "*Mga Lesbianang Bulaklak na may Pagnanasa sa Buwan*" (Lesbian Flowers Desiring the Moon) her attraction for colors is again evident, this time, as an expression of the different emotions, desires and lust that a woman feels under the influence of the erotic moon. These emotions are represented by a woman's face with closed eyes much like the figure in the "*Pagmumuni Series*", with flowers in violet, white, gray and blue hues over her head.

Irma's sense of humor is evident in paintings that touch on the issue of sexuality. A painting hanged at the Tumbang Preso Cafe for the gay and lesbian poetry reading entitled Homo-Erotika (June, 1998), comically titled "*Araw-Gabi Walang Panti*", drew robust laughter from her audience when she explained her work. The diptych of oil on wood at first glance would plainly appear to be a bunch of organic-like figures in chaotic relationships to one another, but as she explained, it is actually a number of tongues all darting towards what is sup-

posed to be the sex organ of the woman. All of these done in bright colors of yellow-orange as a representation of the *araw* and green-blue as a representation of the *gabi*.

Her present work of portraits also has something to do with lesbianism, celebration and empowerment. She chose to paint 30 lesbians who are "out", which she exhibited last December.

Art as Visual and Mental Stimulation: Tita Lim's Photographs, Experimentations and Compositions

A graduate of the Academy of Art College majoring in photography in San Francisco, California, Tita "Tata" Lim first enrolled as a political science major before shifting to Studio Arts in the College of Fine Arts at the University of the Philippines, Diliman. Her stay in this college was cut short by her passionate and bold experimentations with caricature. Much to her dismay, she soon found out that her desire to break out of tradition did not rest well with the college. She was left with no choice but to quit school. At around this time something happened to her. This acted as a catalyst in making further changes in her life. She decided to fly to San Francisco to pursue a course in photography in 1987. She finished the course in 1990 and then came back to the Philippines in 1991.

Some of the exhibitions that she put up in San Francisco before coming back to the Philippines were "Spring Show" and the "Bay Guardian Annual Photo Show", both at the Academy of Art College in 1990. She had also put up a number of individual shows locally such as "Women" (1996), "Altered Images" (1992) and "Perception and Other Realities" (1991), all at the Hiraya Gallery, and participated in local group shows as "*Bongga Ka Day*" at the Hiraya Gallery, "Art Manila '94" at the Shangri-la Plaza, Manila and the lesbian

art exhibit with Maita Beltran at the U.P. Vargas Museum in August 1998.

Composition and Photography

Tata Lim prefers photography over the other arts as a form of self expression for various reasons. For one, the camera poses a challenge. *Vis-a-vis* its own technological limitations, how is the need to capture seemingly “unphotographable” images to be done? How is the photographer to grapple with the problem of the fleetingness of time in the face of the lack of fixedness in a subject’s revelation of essence or character? For that matter, how is a photographer to show that the conservative and traditionalist attitude of the *beaux arts* towards the medium is without basis?

More than anything else, Tata gives importance to composition in creating her photograph collages. She says, “*kahit marami kang equipments, [at] kuha ka lang ng kuha diyan kung wala ka namang creativity [at] imagination, wala pa ring dating ang trabaho mo kung hindi ka marunong mag-compose.*” (Even if you have all the equipment [and] you shoot your subject over and over, if you lack imagination [and] creativity, your work will have no impact if you do not know how to compose.)

As art should be “both visually and mentally stimulating even to the most skeptical viewer,” Tata embodies in her photographs not only her expertise in form, but also her philosophical, sometimes even political, messages. By her own admission, Ayn Rand, a 20th century writer/philosopher precursor of the “objectivist” thought, is the one thinker who has influenced Tata most. The belief of Rand that the world moves in an integrative way so much so that all conflicts and contradictions have a way of functioning so that everything and anything is still united in the end (Branden 1962: 71-73)

tallies with this statement of Tata: "The society and the world has been and is still functioning successfully under illogical and contradicting circumstances." This serves as a philosophy in the production of Tata's art work. Sometimes, she collages seemingly unrelated objects such as an eye with a flower, a shoe with a picture frame, etc., only to transform these random objects into a visually united composition. In her colorful photo collage called "Vasalisa", a woman's face in fragments of an eye, a pair of lips, a distorted nose, and what appears to be a jaw line, is combined with organic figures such as flowers and leaves. This is an embodiment of a woman's inner journey which is free and beautiful despite the oppressive hands of tradition (Dy 1996: 32).

Form and Experimentations

Tata Lim's compositions highly revolve around experimentations in form more than experimentations in content. Educated from the American way of free experimentation and exploration, Tata does to her proofs and negatives what any experimenting painter does to her/his canvases.

A truly rebellious photographer, Tata knows no boundaries and rules when it comes to photographic and compositional experimentations. She scratches, crumples, changes lighting and angles, tampers with simple acidic substances like clorox, paints over, writes over, and burns her extra proofs and negatives in order to get various visual effects. She looks up to some of the West's great photographers as inspirations for such experiments. Some of these photographers are the rebellious American who experiments on color polaroids named Lucas Samaras, the Argentinean Marcelo Breitfeld who experiments on contrasts of dark and light colors, the Czechoslovakian landscape photographer Josef Sundeck, and the French photographer Eugene Atget.

In her simple photography tentatively titled “Landscape”, Tata experimented on capturing the reflection of a fish pen on the water at sunset. Very similar to the landscapes of Eugene Atget, her consciousness for the beauty of reflecting subjects over water is highlighted in this picture. This simple picture of a fish pen was soon transformed into what seemingly is a leaning Eiffel Tower when she tampered the slide negatives of it with soot and changed the angle of the whole picture when she developed and enlarged it.

In “Ornamental Mask” (photo collage), a simple picture of a what is seemingly a totem pole in detail was painted with blue and red strips of acrylic over the negative, and blown up. The result is a painting-like composition.

In “Calla Lilly II”, she slow-paced the shutters of her camera in order to capture the detailed movement of the moving light, eliminated any light source in her whole room, and took a picture of a simple flower arrangement on a vase while tracing the outlines of the subject with the light of a simple pen light covered with different colors of cellophane such as red, blue, green and yellow, only to give out the effect of a neonized composition.

According to her, such experimentations should not stop, everything and almost anything that she has already done with her proofs, finished photographs and negatives, are only fragments of the ideas that come along with time, of what she wants to do, and of exploiting the full potential of her equipments – the camera, the subject, the things around her, the imagination, and the creative composition.

Lesbianism and Tata’s Art

Lesbianism in Tata’s art may not be as apparent as Maita’s compositions. This is due to the fact that Tata prefers to view herself as an artist first and foremost. Unlike Maita and Irma,

Tata is not given to publicly announcing her gender construction as a lesbian. As she herself puts it, "*Ina-announce mo sa kanila na lesbian ka tapos hindi ka naman nila naiintindihan. Nangunguha ka lang ng atensiyon. Basta ako, gumagawa ako. Irerespeto mo yung trabaho ko for what it is. . . .*" (You tell them that you are a lesbian [but] they do not understand you. You are only calling attention. As far as I am concerned, I work. You respect my work for what it is.)

Conclusion: Why a Lesbian Art?

Jeanette Winterson in her *Semiotics of Sex* says:

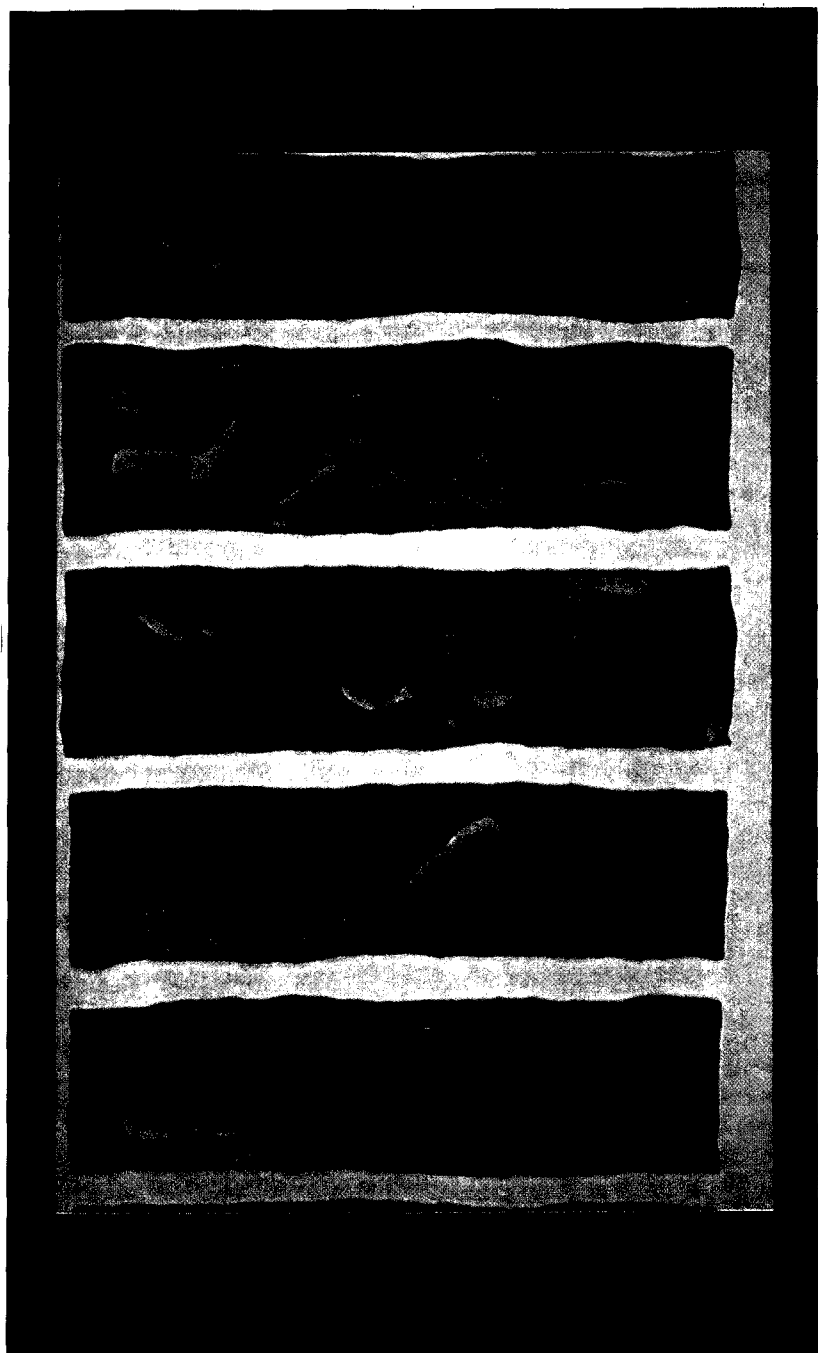
In any discussion of art and the artist, heterosexuality is always backgrounded, whilst homosexuality is foregrounded. What you fuck is much more important than how you write. (Winterson 1995: 103-104).

The quoted material points to how gendered society looks at one's sexuality more than one's capabilities. Thus, we have come to the point of presenting the first problematique of foregrounding lesbians in the art scene, as lesbian art. That is, such methodology of highlighting "lesbianism" in an artist may be a "cause of taking the artist and recognizing her precisely because of her sexuality, more than her potentials as an artist." Again Winterson's words are worth quoting at this point:

the Queer world has colluded in the misreading of art as sexuality. Art is difference but not necessarily sexual difference, and while to be outside the mainstream of imposed choice is likely to make someone conscious, it does not automatically make that someone an artist. . . . (*Ibid.*: 104)

She concludes: "I am a writer who happens to be a lesbian, not a lesbian who happens to be writer".

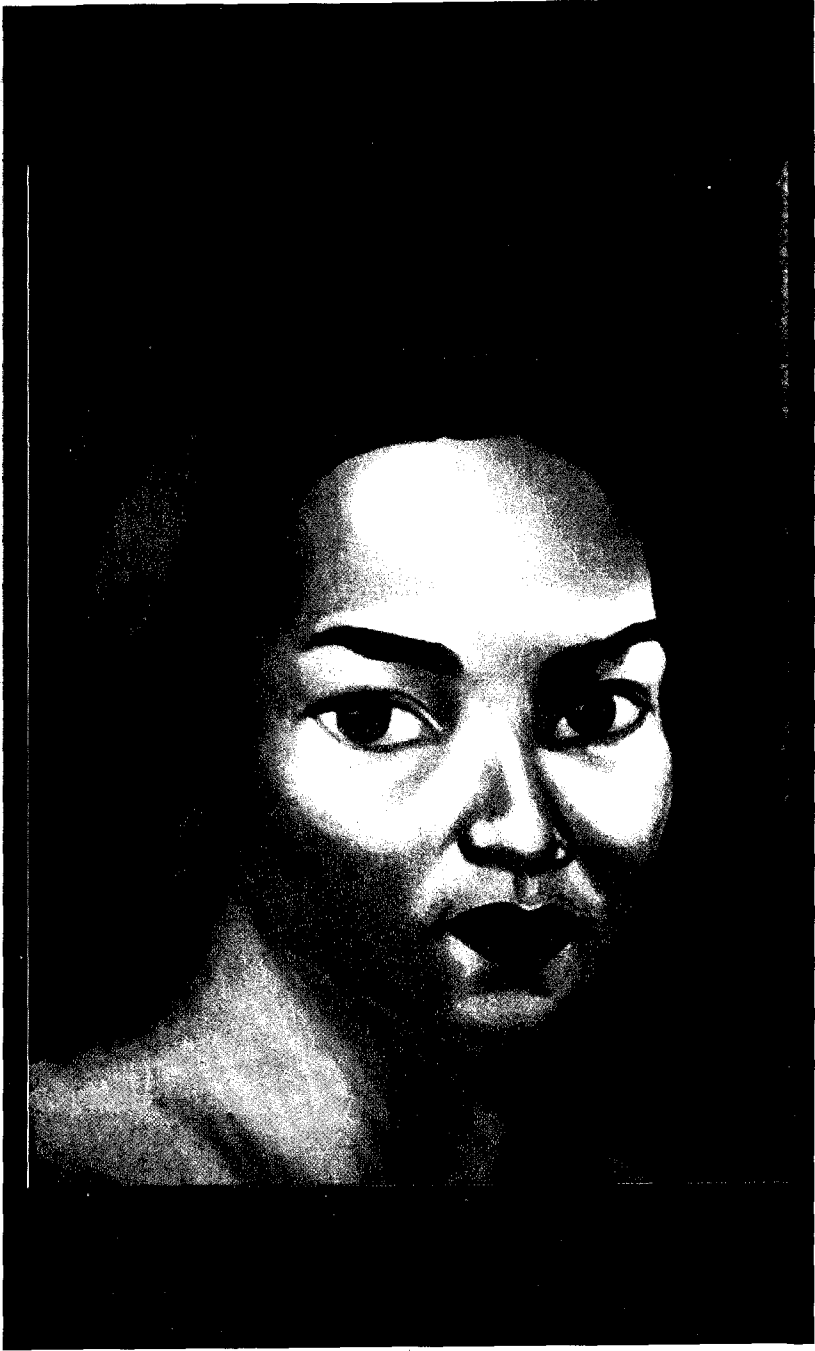
Winterson's sentiment is logical to all "out" lesbian artists, who may be taken and essentialised for their sexuality. This



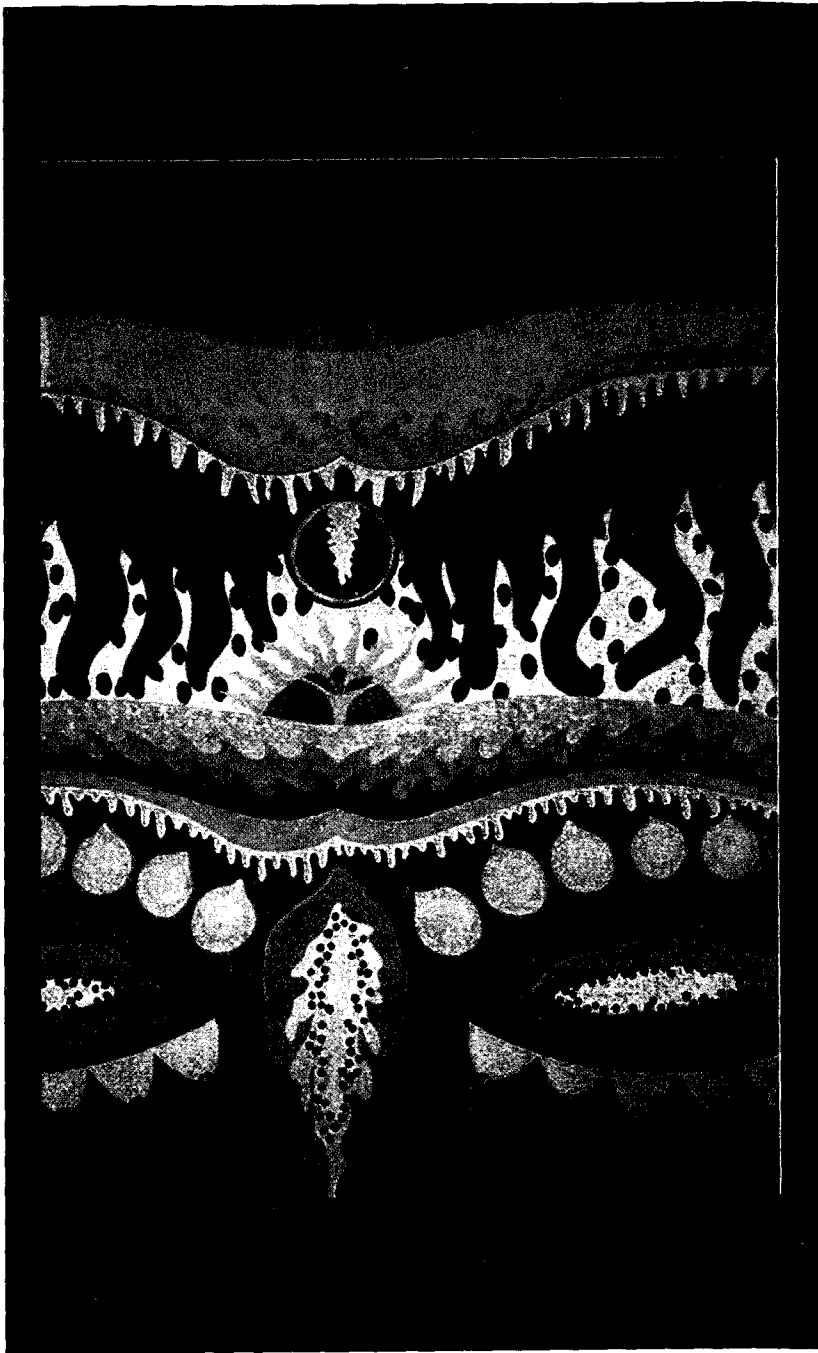
Maita Beltran
“Fine Dining”
Oil on Canvas
1996



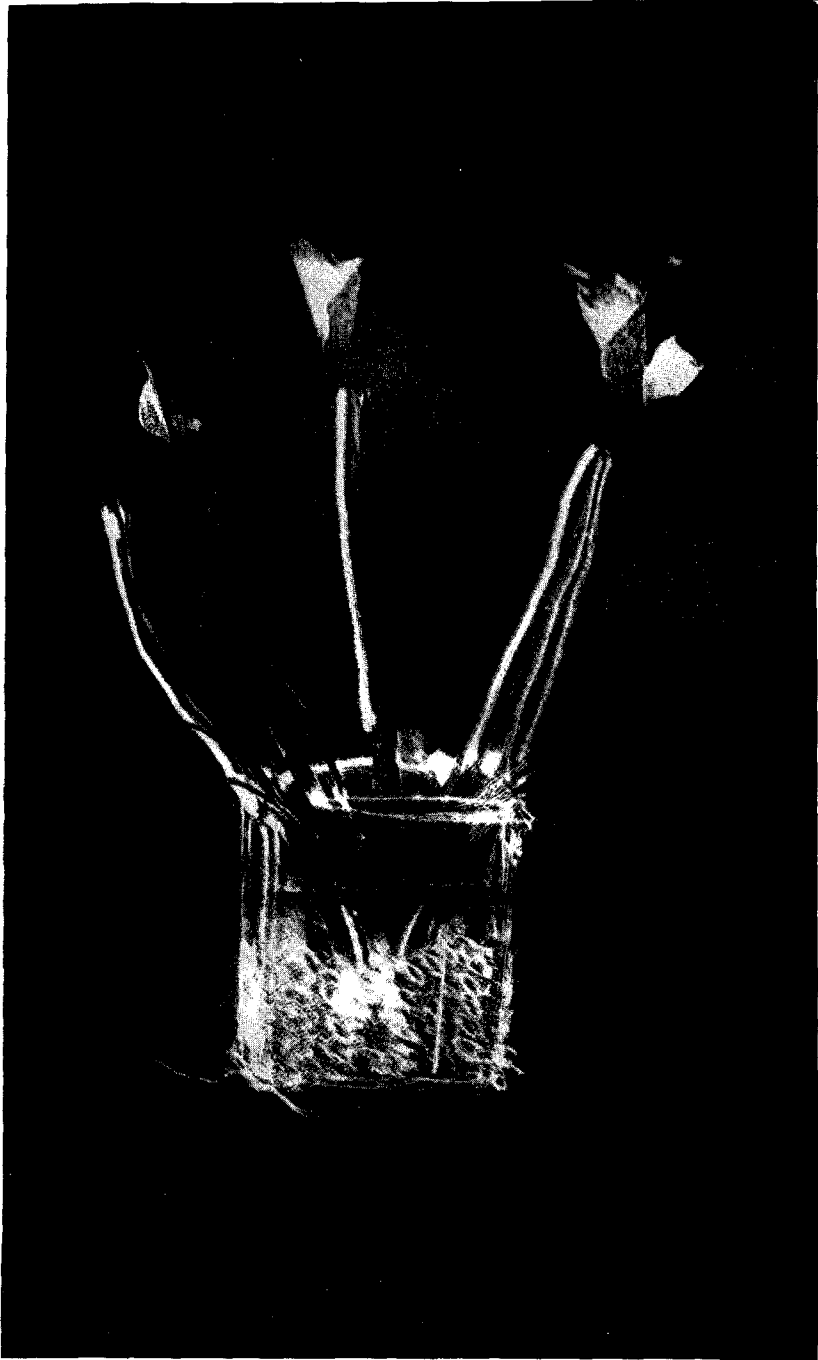
Maita Beltran
"Lovers"
Oil on canvas
1996



Irma Lacorte
"Koko"
1998



Irma Lacorte
"Ako si Irma"
Oil on wood
1998



Tata Lim
"Calla Lily I"
Photo collage

is also the reason why some lesbian artists choose to remain quiet about their sexualities: they want to be patronized for their art and not for being a lesbian.

Admittedly not all lesbian artists are good in the same way that not all heterosexuals artist are good. However, even just to expose oneself as a part of the marginal, oftenly misconstrued community, is empowerment enough for visibility, recognition, and eventually, assertion. I do believe that visibility is power, and it is a fact that for every movement to progress, it must strive to have visibility, the sooner, the better. Given that foregrounding the marginal does not answer all problems concerning that sector, and despite the dangers of tokenism and sympathetic sex-based recognition, I still consider visibility and foregrounding as a necessary step for empowerment. As a gay friend so clearly puts it, “one must have a space first, the choice of visibility, in order for her to choose otherwise.” (Interview with Yason Banal).

In this study, we tried to show that lesbian artists do treat their sexualities in different modes. On the one hand, you have the blissful images Maita Beltran who celebrates her sexuality in relation to her spirituality. On the other, you have the more subtle lesbian images of Irma Lacorte, who expresses lesbianism through the boundaries of colors and the mind: contemplative and meditative, and Tata Lim’s more *formal* experimentations.

Although most of the three women’s expression are very Western in concept, as the lesbian movement historically started in the West, traces of indiginization can still be found in their works: Irma’s Filipino titles and her local humor included in her works, Maita’s strong hold for the supernatural and the spiritual, and Tata’s local politics manifested in some of her works like the “Imeldific Beauty”, are some of the materialization of indiginization.

In this light, I believe that the bold revelations of these three women, self-identified as lesbians, and this paper have scratched the surface of hetero-dominated women's art. True enough, these works and writings may be exposed to forcoming criticisms and revisions, but it would all be worth it just to scratch the surface and search for flesh to bare, mind to explore and voice/s to hear.

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Interviews

- Written interview with Maita Beltran by Roselle V. Pineda. March, 1997.
- Written interview with Irma Lacorte by Roselle V. Pineda. August, 1998.
- Live Interview with Tata V. Lim. East St. Louis Blues Cafe, Tomas Morato, Quezon City, Philippines. August 29, 1998, 7:00 p.m.