

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS NEW YORK

Maia Cruz Palileo

Pioneer Works

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By Cora Fisher



Maia Cruz Palileo, *Lover at Woodland Creek (Bat's Land)*, 2018, oil on canvas, 52 x 62".

The canvases are still fragrant with drying oil paint in Maia Cruz Palileo's solo exhibition here. This only adds mystique to the dusky tropical scenes—a thick stew of Filipino, American, and Spanish history. Last summer in Chicago, where the Filipina American Palileo once lived, the artist excavated ethnographic photos of the Philippines' indigenous people at the Newberry Library, taken by American zoologist Dean C. Worcester in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The pictures were meant to lubricate the American imperialist campaign after the US purchased the country from Spain in 1898. The artist recast the figures in these photos, freely transposing them into painted interiors and lush nocturnal landscapes. In *Lover at Woodland Creek (Bat's Land)*, 2018, Palileo queers the garden scene of Adam and Eve by rendering an androgynous odalisque on a rock near a serpent, the earth bloodred under the light of the moon. The canvas disrupts the lusty gaze of Worcester, who at times posed topless indigenous women in this clichéd Western art pose.

Fisher, Cora, "Maia Cruz Palileo," *Artforum.com*, May 17, 2018

In *Ancestral Home*, 2018, Palileo creates a dark room of ricocheting glances, adapting Diego Velázquez's 1656 canvas *Las Meninas* (and the Spanish imperial courts that produced it) to the colonial world of the Filipino upper class. With all of the metabolized trappings of Western decor, the ancestral home's protagonist is an elder matriarch who sits before an ornate mirror at the center of a deep interior, flanked by figures who may only be ghosts.

The tropical gothic, a term coined by the Filipino literary master Nick Joaquin, is an aesthetic built on the ruins of a tribal civilization first colonized by the Spanish, then by the United States. It is a mood and a metaphor ripe for Palileo's paintings, redolent with history but not beholden to it. The artist's figures, emancipated from their source material, now look back at us as part of her decolonized imagination.