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Maia Cruz Palileo Reveals Invisible Stories of American Filipino Heritage at David Kordansky

In Los Angeles, the artist reclaims ancestral narratives lost to colonial history, weaving memory, myth and landscape into vivid, symbolic paintings.

By Elisa Carollo • 03/17/25



Maia Cruz Palileo's "SATOR ROTAS" is at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles through April 26, 2025. Photo: Elon Schoenholz, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

People do not talk much about the role of the U.S. in the Philippines—a chapter of our history strategically overwritten by calibrated media narratives that, more often than not, fail to convey the multilayered reality of what was, ultimately, a colonial occupation that left indelible traces. Following Spanish control, the American colonial era in the Philippines (from 1898 to 1946) marked a period of profound transformation and enduring consequences. Though frequently framed as a benevolent mission of modernization and uplift, the reality proved far more complex. U.S. involvement in the region led to cultural erasure as the American administration imposed sweeping changes in governance, education and economic structures, frequently disregarding existing Filipino systems and cultural frameworks.

The imposition of American values and institutions left a deep and lasting imprint on Filipino identity, shaping national consciousness in ways that still reverberate today. American Filipino artist Maia Cruz Palileo has long engaged with this occluded history, surfacing the stories that remain silent—those invisible narratives lost in the transference of migration, colonization and generational passage.



The show sheds light on the multifaceted nature of the artist's project and their poetic engagement with the Filipino diaspora. Photo: Elon Schoenholz, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

After selling out on day one at Frieze Los Angeles with David Kordansky Gallery, the Filipinx artist is making their solo debut across both of the gallery's spaces in Los Angeles. For "SATOR ROTAS," Cruz Palileo undertook an extensive

research project guided by a desire to reconstruct and revive an archival, geological and spiritual topography of the Philippines—their family’s homeland—while also tracing the migratory route that brought them to the United States. In their practice, personal and collective traces, intimate familial memories and historical documents blur with imagination, coalescing into a fluid mnemonic landscape animated by the artist’s vivid paintings. This new body of work, however, emerges with even greater vibrancy—its saturated hues and sweeping strokes lush with the sensorial force of the Philippines’ forests.

For the first time, these paintings are grounded in a direct encounter with the land itself. In early 2024, Cruz Palileo traveled for the first time to two mountainous regions outside Manila, where their father’s family is from. The nature and energy of the place deeply shaped their sensory and autobiographical approach to these new works. “I could describe that experience as falling through a rabbit hole,” Cruz Palileo told *Observer* before the opening. “I’ve always been on the other side of it, looking at images and hearing stories. It was all secondhand. I finally got firsthand experience.”



Maia Cruz Palileo, *Springtime Again*, 2025; oil on linen diptych, overall: 84 x 192 x 1 1/2 in. (213.4 x 487.7 x 3.8 cm.). Photo: Dario Lasagni, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

The fascinating entanglement of ancestry, flora and fauna transports the subjects of Cruz Palileo’s paintings into a more imaginative and symbolic realm—one dense with an animistic spirituality, as if the oils on canvas might suddenly stir with the same primordial energies sparked by a deep connection to the land. Ancestral mythologies and folkloric tales intertwine with natural elements, forming an ecosystem of vivid presences that now feel far more alive than the ghostly apparitions seen in the artist’s earlier work. “I think the spectral aspect of it was because the Philippines is my home, where I’ve never lived. It existed before in this sort of spectral zone.”

Freely merging these narrative threads with their family's archival materials, Palileo resuscitates lost images and stories, recontextualizing them within symbolically and spiritually charged canvases that seek to dismantle the exploitative gaze of the ethnographic image and instead reclaim an intimate, personal narrative for their subjects. For Palileo, the process was one of profound reconnection—a restoration of what had long been held at a distance.

This trip was also different in a quieter, more personal way. Where past visits had included aunts or uncles, this time it was only the artist and their cousin. "We both had the desire to go to our grandparents' town," they explain. "People knew our name; they knew our family despite never being there. I grew up here, but I felt the home was somewhere else. I think that's kind of what allowed me to sort of take off that snail shell."



Maia Cruz Palileo, *Not a Wave in the Sea*, 2024; oil on canvas, 96 x 84 x 1 3/8 in. (243.8 x 213.4 x 3.3 cm.). Photo: Dario Lasagni, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

Through a continuous rhythm of doubling, mirroring and echoing between time and place, Palileo offers a compelling visual translation of longing and belonging—emotions central to the diasporic experience. At the same time, the Philippines evoked in these works emerges not as a fixed territory but as an expanded, multidimensional entity that encompasses not only landscape and people but also the mythologies, narratives and legends that collectively shape its living identity.

The interplay of reflections, layered hues and mirroring effects across Cruz Palileo's work hints at a more intricately entangled, multidimensional understanding of reality—one where emotional, mnemonic and symbolic elements continuously permeate and blend with the physical world, shaping a felt sense of place. Techniques of doubling, splitting and splicing serve as formal strategies to convey the coexistence of multiple temporal and spatial planes within a single image, where past and present can intersect. Obscured figures—human and animal alike—emerge from the dense foliage, only to dissolve once more into the forest's organic patterns, suggesting a mystical symbiosis between living entities and their surroundings.

Elsewhere, hand-sculpted clay figures appear like unearthed relics, recalling the Filipino heritage that endured through colonial disruption. Mythological figures



Understanding the invisible, like travel or other sensorial events, plays a large part in Palileo's project, prompting questions about what experiences can be rendered visible. Photo: Elon Schoenholz, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

and ancestral traditions, rather than erased, pulse quietly beneath the surface. Dogs and domestic animals recur throughout the show, operating on dual levels—as critical metaphors for domestication and subjection and as archetypal symbols connecting to ancient, primordial mythologies of the land. More than allegorical props, they serve as reflective agents, embodying the friction between civilizing forces and primal instinct. Seen as symbols, they gesture back to a time when instincts thrived, and untamed spirits moved in deep, unbroken rhythm with the natural world.

In the other gallery space, the artist has composed a quieter, more intimate environment for contemplation, punctuated by the occasional sculptural presence and a restrained palette of natural oils. Here, Cruz Palileo plays with voids and silences, offering a momentary pause from the lush vitality of the forest scenes—a liminal space that evokes the stillness before the dust settles, where ghosts and symbols hover in a state of in-between. In one room, two lamps, relics of a forgotten civilization, appear locked in quiet conversation, radiating both a gentle domestic warmth and the eerie presence of something ominous. Their glow conjures the inevitable obsolescence faced by all civilizations, bearing witness in silence to the passage of time, the rise and fall of empires, colonial dominions and the fragile impermanence of existence itself.

This immersion in ancestral wisdom carries through the various media dispersed throughout the gallery, transforming the space into a site for summoning both personal and collective memory. Imbued with a dreamlike, even epiphanic quality, Cruz Palileo's canvases offer up an imaginative realm where luscious brushstrokes and warm tides of color become tools of reactivation. Through painting, the artist breathes new life into forgotten histories, working to heal generational trauma and honor memory—not as a static archive, but as a living, pulsing force that endures.

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