

BOMB

INTERVIEW

Maia Cruz Palileo by Melissa Joseph

Losing and finding your way.

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Maia Cruz Palileo, *The Invitation*, 2024, oil on canvas, wood, and glazed porcelain, 99.75 x 84 x 8 inches. Photo by Dario Lasagni. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

Maia Cruz Palileo's paintings are rabbit holes opening into another world. The scale of the works, which varies greatly, doesn't seem to impact our ability to get lost inside them; we just shrink or expand ourselves accordingly, which allows us to dive into their lush, dense landscapes. The people we meet when we get there seem like they have been waiting for us, either to join them or, perhaps, to bear witness to their presence. Cruz Palileo dedicates their practice to unearthing stories from the archives of their family history and wider Filipino cultural narratives while embedding talismans from their own spiritual journey. In their newest show at David Kordansky in Los Angeles, the artist has taken over two galleries. With over forty works, *SATOR ROTAS* is Cruz Palileo's largest exhibition to date.

Melissa Joseph

So you've been working on this show for over a year?

Maia Cruz Palileo

About a year and a half. It's my first time showing in LA.

MJ

How do you work when you have a show? Some people have it planned out and then execute; others are messier, finding their way through, figuring out what it means on the other end.

MCP

I'm a combination of both. I look at this space first and try to visualize the form of the show, and then it's messy from there on. I love that the first works to get started are sometimes the last works to get finished, so they're with me the whole time. And I always feel that the last piece is the thing I want to keep working on after the show.

MJ

That seems like a natural way for one thing to feed into the next so that you don't get the post-show blues.

MCP

I'm a little in that now, but it's interesting to work through it.

MJ

Your paintings have been increasing in scale for quite some time. Is the diptych in the show the biggest work you've done?

MCP

It's the largest piece in the show, but second biggest work I've done, after the triptych for the Wattis show.

MJ

It looks incredible. Some of the pieces have—I'm not sure if I would call it a doubling—but almost a sense of linear time.

“The content of the work is a mix of oral and personal histories and archival materials.”

— Maia Cruz Palileo

MCP

You know those old stereo cards where you need a viewer to look at them? There are two of the same image next to each other, and when you put them in the viewer it creates a triangle and becomes 3D. That was the inspiration for that diptych. It's a collage of the same image, sliced vertically, and then woven, although it wasn't actually over and under; it's just next to. It's also this idea of a line being inscribed. It really struck me when I read an essay by Patrick Rosales talking about the Philippine–American War and US imperialism as a horizon line spreading west and obliterating everything it comes in contact with. When it



Maia Cruz Palileo, *Thunder Across the Trail*, 2024, paper collage, 9.25 x 10 inches. Photo by Christopher Stach. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

reached the Philippines that was the intention, but for Filipinos there was no such thing as a line. But once they brought the line, it was forever inscribed. The content of the work is a mix of oral and personal histories and archival materials. It's about time, profound shifts, and a line that exists, even if you don't have a word for it. All of that is in the painting.

MJ

Just hearing the word *inscribed* immediately makes sense. The painting makes us question the veracity of our vision, which we need to be doing. One collage, *Thunder Across the Trail* (2024), actually describes perfectly how I've been feeling about things in a world that I used to see as a solid image but now seems to be dissolving and fracturing. I really appreciate that the image isn't gone, but just harder to access.

MCP

That's the first one where I did the cutting. I kept getting lost. It's something that I think about a lot in the work: losing your way and then finding it again. But it was a real challenge to paint. And on a personal note, the image of the figures in that painting and in the diptych is these dancers.

MJ

I see their arms!

MCP

That's a recurring image for me. Personally, that painting is my mom when she passed away. She had a heart attack, and she was dancing with my dad on the dance floor. They were performing in front of all of their friends. So aside from all the other content of it, that was a very personal painting to me just because I was there, I witnessed it, and it was a total seismic shift in my life. Everything changed after that.

MJ

Oh, my gosh, Maia. I'm so sorry to hear that. I can't even imagine.

MCP

It's hard, as you know, losing parents.

MJ

How old were you when that happened?

MCP

Nineteen.

MJ

Were you already on the path of being an artist?

MCP

Not consciously. I knew that I wanted to go to art school, but that wasn't some-

thing that my mom was psyched about. I'm sure she would have come around, but in a way it freed me to pursue it.

MJ

It never gets easier, but it's so hard when we're young and don't know how much suffering is embedded into the human condition.

MCP

I feel art saved me through all that. I just ditched all my classes and went to art class. I was like, Thank God!

MJ

I'm so glad you had that outlet and it brought you here. Thank you for sharing that. I know you have a sculpture background. Can you share a bit about the piece with the wooden tree roots?

MCP

This was an idea I've had for a long time and was able to make it happen through this show. It is called *The Invitation* (2024), and I think about it as the guest book, or the concierge for the show, and also as an altarpiece.

MJ

Is it wood or ceramic?

MCP

The painting is based on a holy pilgrimage site in the Philippines. The roots are carved wood, and the little heads are ceramic. One of the heads is double-faced. A theme in the show is questioning the act of looking, seeing. Melding the 3D and the 2D has been something I've been trying to conceive of for a while. The Kamay plant, or the hand-looking tree thing, was the first thing that my gay Filipino Auntie gave me. She's amazing. She's been teaching me all about Filipino spirituality and told me that I have to go to Mount Banahaw. When we went to the volcano, we had to enter into this deep crevice inside of these rocks to get down to this little sliver of healing spring water. The whole idea of that trip was that you go to these sites on the mountain, you light candles, and you pray or just sit in silence. You do difficult physical acts to get to these places. At the first site we went to, we signed our names with the backs of our candles onto the cave wall. Everybody who visits the mountain does it. You write your name and the date, and you ask for permission to be there. It's a way to introduce yourself to the mountain. The names of everybody we went with are written on that painting.

MJ

It's really stunning work. I would also like to discuss the ceramics. Are the animals part of the same spiritual conversation?

MCP

Dogs have been in the work from the beginning. There's a couple of different layers to the dogs, aside from me just trying to convince Kim that we need to get



Maia Cruz Palileo, *Banahaw Hairless Aspin*, 2025, stoneware, 7.5 × 9.25 x 2.5 inches. Photo by Dario Lasagni. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

a dog.

MJ

(laughter)

MCP

One of my first memories of the Philippines was of all the dogs that were there. They are different from dogs here. They're street dogs, and they're everywhere. They can sense and see what we can't see. I think about that a lot and what it is that we can't see. They also refer to the St Louis World's Fair in 1906, when Filipinos were brought and displayed at the fair, and were the most popular exhibit. They were made to sacrifice and eat a dog every day, which wasn't really the case in real life, but was propaganda to show their perceived savagery, which would justify why America had conquered the Philippines and how they were doing a benevolent assimilation.

MJ

So are you placing them to confront people?

MCP

Every time I went to my grandmother's house in the Philippines, there was a dog at the door. They greet you, but they're also guard dogs. That's what I was imag-

ining for the larger dog that's standing on the floor. It's a guardian and a protector, but also a greeter.

MJ

Some are life-sized, right?

MCP

Yeah, there are large ones and mini ones.

MJ

And do you make collage studies before the paintings?

MCP

That's how I've learned how to work with archival materials. When I started cutting things up and collaging, it felt like a way to open up the images and mix them all together. My reaction when I first went to research the archives was that it felt stiff and fixed for a reason. There was a US-imperialist message being pushed through these images. My way of countering that was to rip it apart and put it back together in a multiplicity of ways.

MJ

Any final takeaways from this show?



Installation view of *Maia Cruz Palileo: SATOR ROTAS*, 2025. David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo by Elon Schoenholz. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

MCP

Getting to share the work has been the biggest gift of all. Openings and exhibitions are celebrations and gathering points where connections are made interpersonally and conversations prompted by the work are exchanged. Just like the magic of the stereoscopic 3D viewer, the gallery becomes a space where visitors become activated by artwork, and a new space has the potential to open up in our imaginations and psyche.

Maia Cruz Palileo: SATOR ROTAS *is on view at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles until April 26.*