Telling Our Story

Exhibition | December 1st – 15th | Columbus Hall Library | 2nd Floor Gallery
Presentation & Reception | Dec. 4th, 6-8 p.m. |
Columbus Hall Library, Media Studio, 1st Floor
Pinoy, 1997, acrylic on canvas
Artist’s discussion of Pinoy

Pinoy

Pinoy is the informal appellation given to Filipinos all over the world. Pinoy’s are a racially and culturally heterogeneous group of people – the result of earlier migrations into the Philippine archipelago of Malays, Chinese, Arabs and Negritos and major colonization by Spain and the United States. Intermarriages and the blending of eastern and western cultures have created a unique and rich national identity which Pinoy’s have retained and used to good advantage, especially when adapting to new environments. We speak seventy regional languages but English and Filipino are the unifying means of communication. Around 80 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. It has the fastest growing population in Asia – around 85 million and a sizable portion of it is dispersed around the globe – a diaspora brought on by economic pressures at home.

Filipinos are known for their hospitality, friendliness and resilience. They are bound together by their fondness for music, certain kinds of food, strong family ties and religiousness. Here, they are hardworking and adaptable members of society. Many of
300 + Years, 1997, acrylic & paper on canvas
This work summarizes the essential aspects of our pre-spanish culture and Spanish colonization itself, from 1565-1898. Like other European maritime powers, Spain was looking for sea routes to Asia. In 1521, Ferdinand Magellan was commissioned to find the spice island of Moluccas, Indonesia. Instead, he discovered an archipelago that was later claimed by Spain as her colony. It was named the Philippines, in honor of the pious ruler, King Philip the 2nd. The rationale was that it was Spain's duty to christianize and civilize the inhabitants. In fact, our pre-spanish era ancestors were highly civilized, not semi-savages contrary to the ideals of western colonizers. The figures and objects in this painting illustrate this point. Pre-spanish Philippines consisted of scattered but organized political units called barangays. There was social hierarchy. Wealth, as shown here by the gold-laden couple belonged to the chieftain or datu and the upper class. They had their own method of writing, theBaybayin, which virtually disappeared during colonization. They had a system of native religious beliefs and Islam was adapted by certain groups since the 13th century. Trade and commerce were conducted with the Chinese, Arabs, Borneans and Sumatrans. They were highly skilled artisans: wood carvers, boat-builders, jewelry makers, weavers, tattoo artists, musicians, metal smiths and potters. BTW, if you will be in Metro Manila, I urge you to see the more than 1000 gold artifacts at the Ayala Museum. You will be amazed at the level of artistic sophistication evident in the collection. As I ironically show here, Spain used the church and the sword to subdue the "indios", the derogatory term for the natives. Centuries of subjugation, abuses and exploitation gave rise to sporadic revolts and then finally to a nation-wide revolution led by the KKK - Kagalingang Ahangang, Kapatidang Hanggang, Kayguman ng bayan.
Manifest Destiny, 1997, acrylic on canvas
Artist’s discussion – Manifest Destiny

Manifest Destiny

In 1896, after centuries of subjugation, Filipinos waged a war of national liberation, led by a secret organization, known as KKK, for the words ‘Katastasang Kagalanggahang na Katipunan ng mga Anak ng Bayan’ or ‘The Highest, Most Respected Society of the Nation’s Children.’ It later became a known and widespread movement that resulted in the virtual defeat of the Spanish colonial government. They declared independence, established a government and formed a Constitution. Earlier, the United States, brought to the islands by the Spanish-American War, offered to help the Filipinos finalize the defeat of the remaining Spanish troops in Manila. However, she had other plans; the Philippines would be her first colony and foothold in Asia. Spain ceded the country to America for $20 million in the Treaty of Paris in 1898. President McKinley justified the take-over as a mission to Christianize and civilize the Filipinos. The Filipinos felt betrayed and resisted the new colonizers. A new war—the Philippine-American War erupted, lasting sixteen years (officially, three) and resulted in around 4000 American casualties and about half a million Filipinos dead. American influence started right away. A new infrastructure was installed. Free public education, public health, representative government and Protestantism were introduced. In July 4, 1946, Philippine Independence was granted.
Manila Village, 1997, acrylic and paper
Artist’s discussion of Manila Village

Manila Village. 1997. acrylic & paper.32x38

From 1565 to 1815 Spain maintained a galleon trade that brought goods from Asia to Mexico and from Mexico to Manila. The galleons were built and manned by Filipinos who were maltreated by their Spanish masters. Many of them jumped ship in Acapulco and settled there. Hundreds found their way to the bayous of Louisiana and started their own communities. The Manila men, as they were called then, married local women. Historical records show that in 1763, they were living in stilt houses as fishermen and hunters. It was noted that they preserved shrimps by drying, then stumping on them to remove the skins and later, exported them to Canada and other places.
Hawaiian Plantation Worker, 1996, oil and paper on canvas
Hawaiian Plantation Worker. 1997. Oil

During the first 3 decades of the 20th century, large numbers of Filipino men were recruited to work in vast sugar and later, pineapple plantations in Hawaii. They did back-breaking physical labor and lived in oppressive conditions. They worked with other foreign workers in a kind of racial hierarchy. The Portuguese were the "capata" or overseer, then the Japanese, who were paid more came next and below, the Pinoy sacadas. Pablo Manlapit rose among the ranks when he organized a Filipino Labor Union which demanded better treatment. He led a strike demanding a wage increase from $0.72 to $1.24. He was falsely implicated in the infamous Hanapepe Massacre of 1924 whereupon he was jailed and then banned from Hawaii.
America is in the Heart, 1997, paint and paper on board
“America is in the Heart” is the autobiography of Carlos Bulosan who, at the age of sixteen, enamored by the ideals of liberty, justice and equality, came to America during the Depression. The book doubles as a kind of social history of this tumultuous period in the West Coast as seen from an immigrant and poet’s point of view. Bulosan, with very meager formal education, read voraciously and taught himself to write while struggling with illness, poverty and loneliness and discrimination. He is considered “one of the first Filipino writers of any consequence to write in English in this country”—from a quote by Carry McWilliams in the introduction.
Field Labor, 2013, oil
Artist’s discussion of Field Labor

Field Labor. 2013. oil. 36 x 48

In the West Coast during the 20s and 30s Filipinos largely worked as "stoop" laborers- planting, tending and harvesting fruits and vegetables. When working conditions became oppressive, they, like their ilk in Hawaii demanded reforms and organized themselves and were later joined by Mexican workers. They eventually forced the farm owners to increase their pay and limit work hours. But during the great depression, acute economic conditions resulted in conflicts with the majority white labor unions and the government pushed for repatriation of Filipinos to the Philippines. Very few went back. Many leaders emerged during this times and famous among them were Larry Itliong, Philip Vera Cruz and Pete Velasco.
Migrant Worker, 1997, acrylic on paper
Artist’s discussion of Migrant Worker

Migrant Worker. 1997. acrylic & paper 40x42

The first three decades of the 20th century saw large numbers of Filipinos working in agricultural fields, canneries, mines, restaurants, hotels - mostly in the west coast. They helped solve the labor shortage due to a ban on Chinese immigration in the late 1800s. Harassment, discrimination and violence were part of their lives. They were also banned from certain public places and barred from marrying Caucasians as part of the anti-miscegenation law imposed on African-Americans.
Larry Itliong, 2015 (on painting), oil on canvas
Artist’s discussion of Larry Itliong

Larry Itliong, 2016, oil

Only in recent years has Larry Itliong been properly recognized and honored, together with Philip Vera and Pete Velasco. Itliong came to America at age 14 with only a 6th grade education but later on, he became a polyglot and autodidact. He taught himself law. Just like the rest of the Pinoys, he worked in the fields and became involved in labor organizing. For sometime, the owners of grape farms in California paid workers less than what the law required. In 1965, Itliong organized the Pinoys and formed a coalition with Mexican workers led by Caesar Chavez to start a long and strife-ridden strike and boycott. It lasted five years, until they successfully got what they deserved- a daily wage of $2.90 per hour.
Here We Are, 2000, acrylic and paper on wood
Here We Are. 2000. acrylic, paper. 36x48

There are about four million Filipinos in America, scattered over all states. We are known by our professions. In the early years as a colony, many came as workers and also as government scholars During World War 2, many men enlisted in the US army and navy and more women came to join husbands or as brides. Later, professionals like doctors, nurses, engineers, pharmacists and others were allowed to immigrate and fill the need for their skills. Now a wider variety of professionals have come here. Notable are science teachers for elementary and high schools. Also noticeable are numbers of Pinays who arrive as brides or wives of American men.
Alaskero, paper, paint on wood 1997
Artist’s discussion of Alaskero

Alaskero

Filipino migrant workers toiled in Alaskan salmon canneries amid harsh and numbing conditions. They were called Alaskeros.
Bagong Salta (Newly Arrived), 2008, acrylic on canvas
Artist’s discussion of Bagong Salta (Newly Arrived)

Bagong Salta. (Newly Arrived). 2008. acrylic. 36 x 48

Leaving behind the place you grew up in and facing a new place and culture can be daunting. The prospect of fitting in, finding work and achieving the American dream hangs heavy in the minds of new immigrants. The "bagong salta" who generally speaks English, still has to struggle with the language in terms of pronunciation, diction and usage.
Lolo, Please Go Sledding with Me, 2000, acrylic on wood
Artist’s discussion of Lolo, Please Go Sledding with Me

Lolo, Please Go Sledding with Me. 2000. Acrylic

This poignant scene touches on the existential dilemma of older parents, uprooted from their home to start life anew in a strange place, sometimes in very cold ones. They often take care of their grandchildren who can present challenges to their abilities and adaptability.
Side-Lined?, 2000, mixed media on wood
Artist’s discussion of Side-Lined?

Side-Lined? 2000, mixed media

Filipino-Americans, in the opinion of some observers are the "invisible minority". How they came to this conclusion is debatable. But the feeling is real and palpable in certain sectors. They say the reason could be that Filipinos are so Americanized and adaptable and hence, blend so easily. Their distinctness is easily glossed over. This piece you see poses 2 questions - are we, generally speaking, still side-lined and ignored as a distinct ethnic minority? In the public arena of politics, entertainment, literature, art, science and others, are we at the same level of prominence and recognition as other Asian-Americans?
TNT, 2014, acrylic, fabric on canvas
TNT. 2014. Acrylic, fabric

TNT stands for the Pilipino phrase-"Tago nang tago" which literally means "hide and hide". It is an apt description of an illegal immigrant whose life is doubly fraught with fear, insecurity and tenuous hope. The Pinoys are said to rank 6th in the number of illegals in the country.
Roses for Nanny and Nanay, 2009, oil on canvas
Roses for Nanny and Nanay

The present Filipino diaspora seems to be the biggest global dispersal of Filipinos in our history. In 2016, 2.2 million worked abroad. Over all, it is estimated to be 10.4 million ethnic Pinoys living abroad. The bulk of this population is made up of OFW or Overseas Filipino Workers. Many of them are women. A UN estimate is that 67% are women. They are often in domestic jobs as nanny, housekeeper, governess or caretaker. This painting is my tribute to the Nanny, whose own child she left behind and to the her mother or grandmother who takes over her responsibilities. This whole phenomenon - this diaspora has many implications for society. Sociologists have taken note of its social costs- broken marriages, family dysfunction, increased materialism and the like. On the other hand, the dollar remittances of these workers have helped the Philippine economy for years. The estimate is that the remittances make up 9% of the Philippine GDP/ 2011 figure GDP was about $250 billion.
I Need a Tan, 1999, acrylic and paper on wood
I Need a Tan

For a very long time, Filipinos generally have regarded whiteness or fairness of skin as an ideal attribute of beauty and even of social status. This is a deeply rooted colonial legacy that is so hard to erase because it is reinforced by popular culture - in advertising, movies, TV and so on. When I went home years ago, I saw this ad in the papers - Pumuti na Talaga ako., lots of whitening creams in stores and whitening centers. This piece is my not so subtle jab at this pernicious issue.
Over the Cliff?, 2000, acrylic and paper on wood
Over the Cliff? 200. acrylic and paper. 32 x 40

The Philippines has the fastest growing population in Southeast Asia - around 105 million, on a total land mass a little bigger than Arizona. This is one of the major problems of the country. It has reached this point mainly because of the entrenched opposition to population control by the Catholic hierarchy. Now the government has finally passed a bill providing for means of family planning and health. Hopefully, this will pave the way for drastic reduction in population growth and misery among the vast majority of the poor who generally have more children than the rich and middle-class.
Aroma Therapy/Omen, 2009, acrylic & paper on canvas
Artists discussion of Aroma Therapy/Omen

Aroma Therapy/Omen. 2009. Oil

The stark reality in the Philippines is such that one has to wonder why the extremes of economic inequality has persisted for so long. If we ignore or deodorize the problem as a whole, we as a society stand on perilous ground.
Three Thousand Pairs, 2009, oil on canvas
Artist’s discussion of Three Thousand Pairs

Three Thousand Pairs. 2009. oil. 36 x 48

In the eyes of the global public, during and after the rule of Ferdinand Marcos, Imelda Marcos became very controversial. Her rapaciousness and corruption were often talked about but her acquisition of more than 3,000 pairs of shoes caught the imagination of the world and from then on, people all over associated her name with multitudes of shoes and profligacy in the face of abject poverty in the country.
Thank you for visiting this exhibition online. For more information about Lewanda Lim, please go to www.lewandalamim.com.