



Marigold Santos

Unearthly, Uprising

OCTOBER 3 – NOVEMBER 1, 2013

The Artist May Not Be Present

Marigold Santos,

The Self, and What's Left Over

"I walk the room, surrounded by the time I've made; which is not a place, which is only a blur; the moving edge we live in; which is fluid, which turns back upon itself like a wave.

I can no longer control these paintings, or tell them what to mean. Whatever energy they have come out of me. I'm what's left over."

—Elaine Risley in *Cat's Eye*

Often viewed a veiled autobiography of Margaret Atwood's own artistic career, the seminal novel *Cat's Eye* presents a protagonist coming to terms with the relationship between social and physical landscape, memory, and the formation of identity. The protagonist, painter Elaine Risley, is presented in two timelines: as an 8-year-old child who gives up core part of her identity to fit in with friends, and as an adult looking the to past to give clues to the present day self. The novel is of a piece with Atwood's career-long explorations of identity: on a micro level, the negotiations of self that emerge from shifting social landscapes, and on a macro level the combination of individual selves across a varying physical and cultural landscape that cohere to form a national identity.

Montréal-based artist Marigold Santos was just a child when *Cat's Eye* was first released, but her work draws on many similar themes. Like the protagonist Elaine Risley, Santos experienced a fracture of identity at an early age, in Santos' case when her parents moved from the Philippines to Canada in the late 1980s. But whereas the fictional Risley is at somewhat at odds with her fractured self, Santos confidently anchors her work at the locus of the fracture. To that end, Santos is more Atwood as-Risley: an artist looking unblinkingly at the multiple nature of the self, and placing those selves in the context of nationality.

Santos' *Unearthly, Uprising* looks particularly at the influence of social and physical landscape on the concept of identity. As with her previous work, the four, large-scale mixed-media canvases in *Unearthly, Uprising* are a pastiche of images borrowed from modern pop culture, ethnocultural iconography, folklore, and personal memory. While the sum total of these images do draw the contours of Santos' experiences as an immigrant to Canada, they purposefully stop short of presenting a finished or singular identity, rather, they are the id of the artist laid bare, positing that the self is forever subject to perception and presentation.

There are several callbacks to previous exhibitions by Santos, reflecting the artists' penchant for revising and re-contextualizing memory to reflect multiple selves. The *asuang*, a vampiric creature from Filipino folk tales explored by Santos in the series *haunted/talisman* (2011, 2012) and *modern asuang* (2009), is present here in "Revenant", whose title infers we're looking at a malevolent ghost. However



Marigold Santos, *Flight* (detail), 2013.

the figure is rendered familiar, almost benign, through the use of formalist composition and the inclusion of patterns and textures evoking a soft, domestic, femininity.

“Hoax” likewise calls back to Santos’ previous work. Here, hands forming the letters of some secret semaphore that is forever inscrutable—a code rendered unsettling by its refusal to have meaning. Emerging from a murky background, the hands are disembodied, evocative of an afterlife or purgatory, though the artists’ intent is resolutely unclear.

liminal and *flight*, which represent newer imagery for Santos, deal out a similar doses of ironclad ambiguity. The figures here are either descending to the heavens or ascending to an underworld, or perhaps both. The viewer is seduced to judge, lest the figures remain in the uncomfortable space of equivocation or uncertainty.

The works, in this manner, focus like a Rorschach test. They are comprised of imagery from both the artists’ personal memory and the collective memory, but there is little in the way of moralizing or conclusion.

The artist refuses to take ownership: like Atwood’s *Risley*, Santos is at peace with the idea that she cannot tell the works what they mean, nor control them. Our reaction, as the viewers, is the energy that comes out of us, born from a synthesis personal and collective experience that shapes our own identities. What’s left over then, by Atwood’s formulation, is who we are.

—Elaine Corden, 2013

BIOGRAPHIES

MARIGOLD SANTOS pursues an inter-disciplinary art practice involving drawn and printed works, sculpture, animation, and sound. She completed her BFA in Print at the University of Calgary in 2006, is a recipient of numerous awards, and has exhibited her work within Canada, United States, and Japan.

She currently resides in Montréal, QC, where she has recently completed her MFA from Concordia University in the Fall of 2011, and divides her time between her practice and eating croissants.

ELAINE CORDEN is a writer and editor currently living in Halifax, Nova Scotia, though her heart remains west of the Rockies.

COVER IMAGE:

Marigold Santos, *Revenant (detail)*, 2013.

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