

JAMES RENWICK ALLIANCE FOR CRAFT

SUMMER 2022

# CRAFT QUARTERLY



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Cover: Einar and Jamex de la Torre, "Ohio Goza y Mas," 2013. Blown glass, resin castings, and mixed media, 67 x 67 x 9 inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Todd Wingate and Steven Cason. © Einar and Jamex de la Torre, courtesy of the artists and Koplín Del Río Gallery.

Right: Marilyn Pappas, "Nevertheless She Persisted II" (front view), 2018, Cotton embroidery thread, linen, wooden stand; wooden stand by Cynthia Pellegrini, 58.5 x 16 x 11 inches. Collection of the Artist. Photo credit: Will Howcraft.

Left: Nick Cave, "Soundsuit," 2010. Fabric with beads and sequins, 95 x 28 x 12 inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Fleur S. Bresler. © Nick Cave. Photo by James Prinz Photography, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

# WHERE WATER OR LAND MEETS SKY

## MATT MANALO'S ACTIVISM THROUGH ART

By Kathryn Hall,  
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Matt Manalo centers his experience as an immigrant living in America within his artistic practice to give visibility to the Filipino community and bring awareness to the racial and colonial history of America and the Philippines. Born in the Metropolitan Manila region of the Philippines, Manalo studied computer engineering until he and his family immigrated to Houston in 2004 when he was 19-years-old. This was a pivotal moment that catapulted him onto a different trajectory towards a career in the arts.

On April 9, 2019, in an interview with Chelsey Wen and Mai Ton for Rice University's Houston Asian American Archive, Manalo mentioned that his immigration to the U.S. removed what he called the "golden blanket" of the American Dream, revealing to him the depth of America's involvement in the colonial occupation of the Philippines. As a person who felt disoriented in his new home, he reflected on how this history has shaped his own experience. Manalo described his use of blue in his work saying, "...for us Asians, being an immigrant, it's not like a physical wall or mountains that we have to cross. We actually have to cross the ocean and the sky." Informed by his desire to improve accessibility for those making art, Manalo favors sustainable ways of sourcing materials. His sculptures grip the tension between a scarcity and abundance of resources. As a student with limited means, Manalo was attuned to the social and financial barriers of becoming a full-time artist. He chose to pursue a bachelor of fine arts in painting at the University of Houston in part, because it was more accessible than other programs. In school, he sourced materials from a collection area for leftover art supplies. From there, his practice evolved from painting into something more sculptural as he enjoyed deconstructing and repurposing found objects.

Manalo views his artistic practice as somewhat of a collaboration with friends and family who donate materials. It is a mode of community building where



Matt Manalo, "Waterwall 02," 2019. Raw canvas, ink, acrylic paint, gesso, concrete, charcoal, raw cotton, tracing paper, jute twine, wood glue, gel medium on canvas, 9 ½ inches in diameter. Photo courtesy of Matt Manalo.

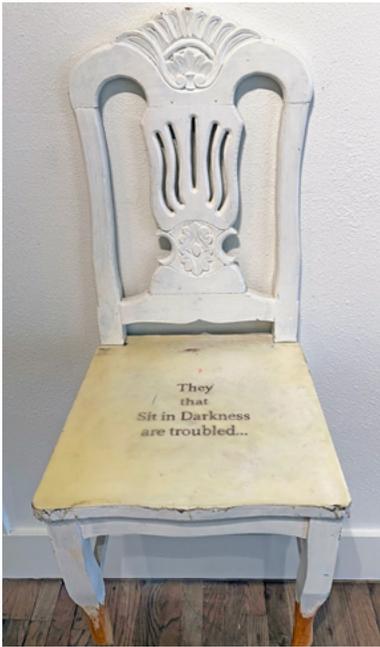
the reciprocity of giving and sharing can strengthen relationships. In the 2019 interview, Manalo said, "It's... like having people's memories immigrate... into my own memories... In a way, it becomes personal to me and then it relates to my whole immigrant story."

For "No Partaking," Manalo received a collection of handmade vintage placemats, made from pineapple fiber in the Philippines. With no visible authorship, this donation embodies the invisible labor force that sustains the Filipino tourist market. The donor, a friend of Manalo's, divulged that her mother, who once owned the placemats, was guilty of making racist comments.

In light of this information, Manalo reclaimed the souvenirs by commissioning a family-owned shop on Harwin Drive to embroider "Not Your Brown Brother" onto the cloth. Manalo coined this phrase in response to the American slang, "Little brown



Matt Manalo, "No Partaking," 2019. Embroidery on handmade vintage placemat from the Philippines, 10 x 64 inches.



*"Conversation Between Kipling & Twain," 2020. Latex paint, encaustic wax, chairs from a dining set brought from the Philippines when the artist immigrated, 40 x 16 x 18 inches. Photo courtesy of Matt Manalo.*

brother." This phrase was first spoken during the U.S. occupation of the Philippines by William Howard Taft, the first American Governor-General of the Philippines and subsequently the 27th President of the United States. Manalo's slogan is a call to action to resist white supremacy and imperialism that extends to all individuals of color.

Manalo further explores the legacy of colonization in "Conversation Between Kipling & Twain." He has repurposed two dining chairs that his family brought with them when they immigrated to the U.S. Manalo 'whitewashed' the chairs and encased the seats in encaustic wax. On the seat of these chairs, Manalo references Mark Twain's essay from the "North American Review" in Feb. 1901, "To the Person Sitting in Darkness", which uses satire to condemn America's imperialist behavior in the Philippine-American War. The essay is an anti-imperialist response to Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem, "The White Man's Burden: The United States & the Philippine Islands". Kipling, a staunch imperialist, argued for Western civilization's moral responsibility to civilize non-white populations and supported America's annexation of the Philippines. The title of Twain's essay, "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" ironically references Matthew 4:16, scripture that Christian missionaries, who shared Kipling's perspective, used to justify their mission work. It wasn't until 1946 that the U.S. relinquished sovereignty over the Philippines. This period of colonization left a lasting stain on US-Philippines relations.

Having yet to return to his home country, Manalo has spent half of his life in the U.S. He has made a significant impact in Houston. In 2019, Manalo founded Alief Art House as part of DiverseWorks Project Freeway Fellowship. He transformed shipping containers into a gallery space that provides the Alief community a sustainable place for fellowship and creativity. In the same year, he co-founded the Filipinx Artists of Houston with curator Bridget Bray to expand awareness of Filipinx creatives. Together, these community initiatives along with Manalo's artwork reinforce the power that art has to foster understanding and strengthen relationships.



*Concert at Alief Art House. Photo by Sergio Garcia.*