

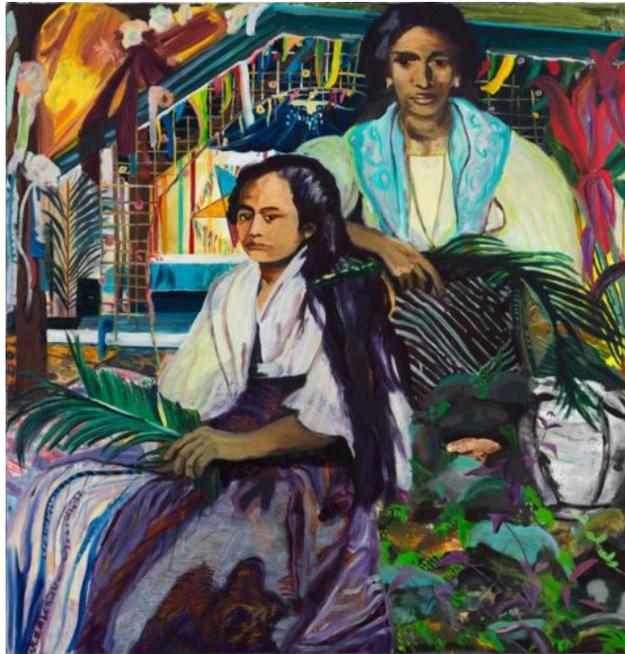
Art in America

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By Lauren DeLand

Maia Cruz Palileo

at Monique Meloche



Maia Cruz Palileo, *Magic Fire*, 2019, oil on canvas, 52 by 50 inches; at Monique Meloche.

The titular work in Chicago native Maia Cruz Palileo’s first hometown exhibition, “All the While I Thought You Had Received This,” was one of several paintings in the show depicting a not-quite-empty room thick with ominous energy. Roughly worked layers of scummy yellow oil paint form the long tables of a classroom, a ghostly white dunce cap perched on one of them. Three figures lurking in the back of the room are partly obscured by suspended green screens, their upper bodies represented on the surfaces as shadowy silhouettes that do not quite match up with their lower bodies. The painting has the quality of a nightmare: the viewer senses that something bad has happened here, but the specifics remain out of reach.

The works in the exhibition evolved out of research into colonial imagery from the Philippines that Palileo, inspired by her Filipino family’s history, conducted. At the Newberry Library in Chicago, she studied a collection of photographs taken by nineteenth-century American colonialist Dean C. Worcester, a fierce opponent of Philippine independence, who produced thousands of dehumanizing images portraying Filipino subjects as if they were zoological specimens. For Palileo, these photographs, produced in the service of white supremacist and colonialist narratives, suggested a challenge: can an oppressive visual archive be made to have a different quality? From Worcester’s photographs, her works depart in improbable directions, suggesting the existence of

multiple other histories that are still only partly accessible. This unknowability is conveyed through formal choices that render the motives of her figures unclear. In *A Thousand Arms Offered* (2019), for instance, hands attached to several floating arms that reach from the peripheries of the canvas stroke the face and hair of a hollow-eyed girl.

The press release notes that Palileo found inspiration and a positive counterpart to Worcester in the example of Damián Domingo, a Filipino painter who founded the first art academy in the Philippines in 1821 and instituted an egalitarian admissions policy that welcomed Indigenous students. Yet the classrooms featured in several of Palileo's paintings, including the aforementioned title work, are frightful places, sharp reminders of the ways that "education" was wielded by colonizers as a means to assimilate and deculturate Indigenous children. In *They Dreamed in English* (2018), mud-colored benches are jammed tightly together on one side of a classroom; from the foot of them, silvery reflections of human forms spread across the floor, though no figures actually occupy the seats. Childish renderings of animals line the walls, and stirrups dangle mysteriously from a pillar. Lurking over the shoulder of the child depicted in *Eyes in Their Hands* (2019) is a wraithlike figure. The figure is reflected in a mirror on the wall and appears to be in the process of creating a self-portrait. Palileo's painting captures the sinister dimension of image-making, suggesting effects of the probing, objectifying gaze of the colonial camera.

In a wall-mounted installation of works on paper, Palileo seemed to ritualistically strip the colonial photographs of their original context. She produced drawings based on the photographs on thick paper, and then cut out the figures and used them to create pencil rubbings. The cutouts were interspersed among the rubbings on the wall, as if the figures had walked right out of the scenes to which they were previously bound. Whether it is ever possible to truly recuperate the images used to reinforce colonial power, however, remains an unresolved question.