

GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY ARTIST ANALYSIS ARCHIVE PROJECT

MARINA CRUZ

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This short art analysis paper accompanies an original video presentation produced by UTC undergraduate students, dedicated to the work of a contemporary artist and developed as part of ART 4190r: Global Contemporary Art course in Spring 2021.

Marina Cruz was born in 1982 in the Philippines. She gained her BFA in painting from the University of the Philippines College of Fine Arts, where she graduated cum laude in Quezon City in 2003. She still currently resides in the Philippines in Manila in the province of Bulacan with her husband and three children. Her husband Rodel Tapaya is also an artist, and they have exhibited together in a few shows. Cruz herself has exhibited widely in Manila, as well as internationally.

Cruz works with painting, embroidery, photography, sculpture, and installation, but is most well-known for her hyper-realistic oil paintings depicting fabric. Her family heritage is the biggest influencer within her work, most predominantly the three strong female figures she grew up around: her mother, aunt, and grandmother. This leads to some of the major themes of her work, including family heritage, generational ties, lost narratives, aging, domestic crafts, and the depiction of fabric. Keeping these themes in mind, identity is a strong contributing factor within her work.

A large portion of Cruz's work centers around the subject of clothing that belonged to her mother and aunt when they were children, all made by the hands of her grandmother. She became fascinated by this subject in 2002, when she was living with her grandmother. When looking through her grandmother's room to find a certain type of material for a college project, she came across her mother's baptismal dress. Cruz noticed how old and brittle, though also well-preserved, the material was and began thinking about "how a material such as the dress can somehow echo what's happening in a person's life."¹ This led to her archiving over 100 dresses

¹ Arndt Art Agency, A3 Editorial: Marina Cruz

that belonged to her mother and aunt. After this, she began to inspect other sorts of clothing as well to further examine her personal history.

Cultural heritage, identity, and history are major concepts in Stuart Hall's *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. Throughout the article, Hall focuses predominantly on the cultural identity of people of Afro-Caribbean descent, and discusses the experience of dispersal and fragmentation caused by colonialism, and the impact that experience can have on one's identity. While Marina Cruz is not Afro-Caribbean, there are still substantial echoes of Hall's ideas mimicked throughout her pieces. Hall comments on the effects of diaspora and history on identity, and that identity is constantly being constructed. It is a production; a constantly fluid, always in process, shifting essence rather than a fixed one. History, both personal, local, and cultural, will have an effect on one's identity, whether on purpose or not.

Cruz is consistently engaging with her own identity within each work she makes, no matter the medium she's working with. And though Marina Cruz does not directly engage with movement and displacement within her work, her identity cannot be removed from the diaspora of Southeast Asia. Due to globalisation and a society that is becoming increasingly commodified, a dispersal has occurred in Southeast Asia, much like many other countries across the world. This means that Cruz's work is also affected by that facet of her identity, as Hall suggests. The effects of contemporary fast fashion trends have grown, and this is a theme commonly brought up in regards to Cruz's paintings that depict carefully made, long-lasting garments. Because of the direct relationship of a display of the time and care being put into the clothing shown in Cruz's pieces, her work "reveal(s) the regional cultural value of heritage and close family ties, as well as the desire to protect them in an increased globalised world."² This may not be her direct purpose for creating work, but it is a connection she is mindful of and welcomes the

² Hsu, "Lot Essay: Woman & Selfhood"

conversation. Cruz herself notes that in her grandmother's time, there was a tradition of tailoring clothes for one's family, and says, "Today there is a global commodification and overproduction, while back then there was a frugal and careful, mindful creation of clothes."³

Taking her work, *Mend Me* (2016), we see a large-scale oil painting of one of those many dresses Cruz took inventory of from her grandmother. Viewers at first glance will see a pink and white patterned dress with many wrinkles, stretched out over a black background, but the intense detailing is where Cruz's intentionality comes to play. Because of the scale and detail, we see the stains, creases, and folds of the clothing, giving notions and suggestions of the person that once lived in this dress. In several of her paintings, she depicts frays, tears, and spare threads as well. All of these imperfections present an emphasis on the tender quality of the garment and the long life of both the person and the dress. In complete contrast, globalization has caused quick turnaround and cheap materiality. The attachment and care within this pink dress would not be seen in today's fast-fashion trends. The dress has been carefully preserved through generations, which has been immortalized in Cruz's work along with those lost memories and familial ties. Perhaps this can be attributed to Hall's notion of having an "endless desire to return to lost origins."⁴ Cruz, through the careful depiction of fabric that belonged to the female figures she cares so much about, is piecing together her origins and heritage.

In conjunction with both primary themes of cultural identity as well as underlying ideas of globalization, one of the most important reappearing concepts within Cruz's work is maternity and generational ties. In her work, *Elisa in White* (2008), Cruz fiberglass casted the baptismal dress(es) of her mother and aunt that were found in the collection in her grandmother's house. There are also other pieces of clothing Cruz has casted for art pieces, one being a teacher's

³ Bollmann, "Subtle Histories: A Conversation with Marina Cruz"

⁴ Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", 236

uniform that her aunt would wear. In *Elisa in White*, she has “not only preserved the dresses and captured every crease and crinkle, but she also distressed and petrified them. The dresses as casts are all copied from a single ‘maternal’ line.”⁵ Cruz is redefining Filipina identity through her own matrilineal heritage. She is showing this baptismal dress that is representative of infancy and lost narratives of childhood, and harshly preserving those memories on display. Cruz explores the role of motherhood and domesticity through this sculpture, as well as her other fiberglass castings. In a way different from the paintings, Cruz is once again emphasizing the folds and creases of the clothing that was once lived in. She is preserving her mother and aunt’s identity, as well as her own.

Furthermore, Cruz’s work “engages the enduring legacy of representations that resulted from growing up in a system that both limits and complicates the space inhabited by women.”⁶ Circling back to Hall’s ideas on cultural history and diaspora, not only does Cruz’s work elicit a feeling of the past and memories that have been forgotten, many of her various pieces engage with femininity and the notion of strong female influences through the characters and clothes of her mother, aunt, and grandmother.

⁵ Datuin, “Marina Cruz: Redefining Nostalgia”

⁶ Sarmiento, “Marina Cruz and the Stuff of Former Lives”

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