

Information about the text:

Exhibition wall notes for *Fertile Land*

Solo exhibition of Nathalie Dagmang, UP Vargas Museum

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Gestures of Unsettling

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What does art have to do with land, people, and the passage of time?

In documenting how a river hews close to home, Nathalie Dagmang threads through and makes visible histories of dispossession. Charting found stories and objects from resettlement communities in Barangay Tumana, Marikina since 2015 and Barangay Banaba, San Mateo since 2020, she eventually eased into the rhythm of the villages' everyday concerns, facilitating initiatives from container gardening to Covid-19 aid and typhoon relief in recent years.

What one encounters here are fragments across this journey from observer to facilitator. The works proffer the quiet contradictions of movement: how water and words flow and define the life of a community. Ironically, people were relocated to these marginal marshlands out of scarcity and dispossession; only to be again dislocated by the ebb and flow of the monsoon season and by expanding development projects. Dagmang salvages footage, artifacts, and affects across this strip of contested riverbanks, laying down a topography of underdevelopment.

The exhibition demonstrates how research, immersion, and engagement strongly informs Dagmang's art practice. Grounded in the migrant, itinerant, and changing life of communities, the artist goes beyond anthropological queries and embraces the quiet activism of her generation. She takes on the critical labor of research not as a detached observer but as one with eyes wide open, keenly interested in the survival of a place and its people.

Dagmang's art straddles the line between social investigation and socio-ecological intervention. In refusing to celebrate gardening as resiliency, but as a signifier of something amiss; in digging further at the lexicon and materials of precarious flux towards action, the exhibition points to how discrete impressions of sociality are unified in the experience of oppression.

In committing to chronicle the objects of daily toil, Dagmang underscores how much there is to be done, and undone.

It is a reminder of how the Philippines has vast agricultural lands lying idle or diverted to growing for export. So much that strips of soil, such as those along the banks of rivers, become precious commodities and prime space. So much that those daring to plant and till on such contested space elsewhere risk being red-tagged, or worse.

It is also a reminder that the river development projects across this country's problematic past, being invested in rapacious accumulation rather than in genuine equity and ecology, are continually sites of struggle. These are lines flowing beyond the borders of Marikina and San Mateo. Remember the Chico River Dam project, meant to be the biggest in Asia, threatening to inundate the length of the vast Cordillera region. Remember the rising of indigenous resistance since the 1970s, marked by the military's treacherous assassination of Macli-ing Dulag on April 24, 1980. Remember why the words #NeverForget and #NeverAgain continue to resonate beyond and across five decades, from mountains to rivers that flow out to the sea. In offering a microcosm and metaphor for a longer history of unsettling, the works reflect on how development and progress has remained elusive, a century hence.

In the end, Dagmang's interventions outside the museum and into the gardens beyond offers the gentlest reminder of all: that resistance blooms wherever it is planted on fertile soil. ###