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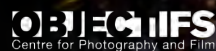
***ABOUT THE
PHOTOGRAPHER***

Gab Mejia (he/they) is a queer Filipino photographer, multidisciplinary artist, and environmental engineer. Born and raised in the Philippines, his work unveils the threads of the climate crisis, biodiversity loss, cosmologies, and cultural interconnections to confront our socio-political and ecological crises. Mejia is a National Geographic Explorer, Climate Pledge Global Storyteller and a Fellow in the International League of Conservation Photographers. His work has appeared in National Geographic, BBC, ArtPartner, Vogue, Photo London amongst other publications and platforms.

SPECIAL THANKS TO

Datu Arayan, Krystahl Guina, Kulahi Pangantucan Performing Arts Group, David Loughran, Miko Reyes.

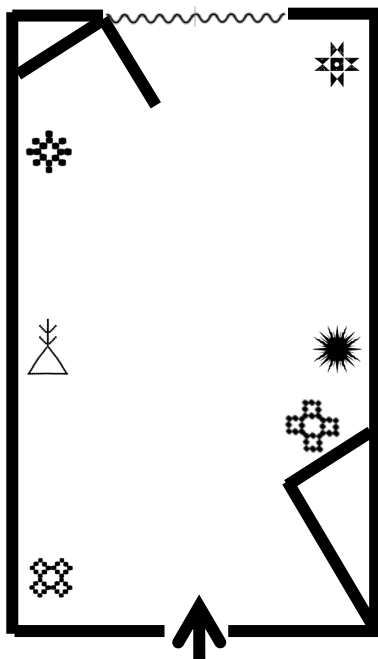
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EXHIBITION LAYOUT



“I desire to bring home to the readers of the National Geographic Magazine some of the more essential facts as to the division of the non-Christian inhabitants of the Philippines into really distinct peoples, and to this end I shall summarise briefly some of the important known characteristics of each, illustrating my statements, when practicable, with reproductions of photographs taken either by the government photographer, Mr. Charles Martin, or by myself.”

Dean C. Worcester, “The Non-Christian Peoples of the Philippine Islands: With an Account of What Has Been Done for Them under American Rule,” National Geographic Magazine, Vol. XXIV, No. 11, November 1913

Between 1898 and 1913, Dean Conant Worcester—zoologist, colonial administrator, avid photographer—published several illustrated articles detailing the Philippine native peoples in the National Geographic Magazine (the full text from which the aforementioned quote is excerpted is reproduced here without its 60 over pages of lavishly hand-coloured figures). Worcester’s photographs assume a certain ethnographic certitude, coupled with his sentiment that Filipinos presented “an interesting problem in civilisation” contributed in no small part to the legitimisation of U.S. colonial rule the Philippines.

Thinking against Worcester, Gab Mejia attempts a contrarian approach in honouring the indigenous inhabitants of Mount Kaluntangan forests of the Bukidnon province. Resisting the descriptive allure of photography’s promise of legibility, Mejia turns instead to his queer affinities as a starting point in this project. At times, his photographs reveal an uncertainty of abandoning formality altogether, a tension he contends with in his documentary practice and as a storyteller. This desire for a recovery recalls Donna Haraway’s provocation: “it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with.” The figures central in his homage to this verdant landscape are his friends; their portraits emerge from ludic intimacy and playfulness. Mejia was first acquainted with Krystahl Guina and subsequently Datu Arayan while on assignment covering the Agusan Marsh, a wetland ecosystem on the cusp of climate change and anthropogenic destruction, for a National Geographic Explorer feature. *The Forest Listens, Their Spirits Cry* is a gentle, unequivocal nod to a coalition of kindred kinships. In this exhibition, the key portraits are laid out in a loop, readable clockwise or counter-clockwise, like the major arcana in a tarot spread; each a big picture that weaves insights and contexts through multiple entry points and exits.

Departing from a traditional documentary process, Mejia’s mise-en-scène makes space for a relational reciprocity, allowing his subjects to see themselves in, through, and beyond his photographs. Wherever Mejia looks at, there is a looking back even if their gaze is not directed back at his camera.



I am just and fair.
I am compassionate.
I am an unflinching arbiter.

—Datu Arayan, self-description

Known as Kuya Anton to Krystahl and other members of the community, Datu Arayan—or Datu for short—is a spiritual leader of his community. While Datu is a title inherited under customary laws, the role of the Arayan (spiritual leader) is appointed by a council of Baylan elders. Mejia’s portrait of Datu’s penetrating gaze captures the triadic spirit of his role as a Datu (chieftain), a Baylan (healer), and a Bagani (warrior), whose roles he emphatically expresses in his self-description.



Comprising youth members from the Bukidnon province, the Kulahi Pangantucan Performing Arts group was established in 2012 by Christine Joy “Makabugwas” Guina Agudo. It started out as a music band before expanding to theatre, performance, and art. Datu has been a central figure, acting as a creative leader in the group. Today, the Kulahi group is about 25 members strong, with some of the group members featured across this exhibition. Kulahi means “shout” or “scream” in Talaandig language. The Kulahi group bridges cultural practices and ancestral traditions, advocating a principle of “culture for nature” to a younger generation who continues to play a role as vanguards of environmental conservation and indigenous heritage. Here, Datu poses with Krystahl Guina, Chocolate and Vencent.



As a trans youth and a Baylan apprentice, Krystahl’s journey is one intimately connected with a struggle against erasure and forgetting. In her own metamorphosis transitioning—both in her gender and spiritual identity—Krystahl reflects poignantly:

a butterfly—
ugly, as time passes,
flies free.

a cat—cursed with elegance.

—Krystahl Guina, self-description



The Philippine forests are steeped in a fraught history of extraction from early colonial period and more recently, resettlement policy, unregulated logging and mining concessions.

Today, only about one-fourth of the Philippines’ land mass is forested, in contrast to 70% during the early period of American colonial period. Outlined in a pamphlet detailing 100 over tree species and their commercial uses in the Philippine Islands’ forestry and timber exhibits at the 1904 St Louis World Fair:

The most evident and striking element of wealth in the Philippine Islands consists of its forests. The official geographic statistics of 1876 fix the forest area at 51,537,243 acres. (...) Upon the military occupation of the Philippines by the forces of the United States it was decided to enforce a system of forest preservation and at the same time utilize the forest products.

Philippine Islands Forestry and Timber Exhibit: Louisiana Purchase Exposition, St. Louis, 1904, pp. 1-2.

The balete tree may refer to several tree species from the Ficus family commonly found in the Philippines and holds a particular significance in the local folklore. In Baylan rituals, the tree stands as a witness to time and tradition; a portal through which an initiate walks through their stages to become a Baylan.



A star in the sky of spiritual realm;
a transformational Baylan;
a strong and smart leader;
a creative and artistic Kulahi music genius.

—Datu Arayan’s description of Krystahl

In this project, Mejia invited Datu and Krystahl to write down how they perceived themselves and how they related to one another. Their descriptions—projected as fragments guiding us through the forest—reveal a mutual witnessing: of a relationship between teacher and pupil, Baylan and understudy, and as equals as environmental defenders in a time of climate crisis. In encapsulating her sentiment of this queer spiritual kinship, Krystahl affirms: “He is every person we need.”