



## Cyril Wong Interviews Cristian Tablazon

**Cyril Wong:** Why photography? I see, too, that you've written poetry. What is the common thread between such modes of expression or communication that both frames and compels your imagination?

**Cristian Tablazon:** I have always been drawn to images. We didn't have TV when I was little and I remember fondly how I'd listen intently to Horror and Romance radio-drama series and conjure scenes in my head. I also grew up reading Tagalog horror and fantasy komiks, and voraciously took in pictures of natural history, archaeology, and mythologies in books at our municipal library. I had been fascinated by old photos in our family albums annotated by my mother's stories. I had been fascinated by how they are records of another time and place, and yet they are more than that; they are remnants of previous lives and affects, and there is a strong spectral quality to them. I think this is what initially lured me to photography, and the spectral and that sense of the aftermath have been what I also seek to maintain in my work.

I am drawn to photography that works more like the kind of poetry I believe in, the kind that is less preoccupied with meaning than it is with numen. The paradox of poetry is that it labors using language toward the incommensurable to generate scenographies beyond language, or at the very least, moments and spaces that elude language. I have never been entirely at ease with the necessary and prosaic sort of photography, the straightforward, rational, causal, and commonsensical sort that obsesses with fidelity and indexicality, clarity, precision, depth of field, and proper lighting. I am rather interested at how photography could defamiliarize the visible world and render unsettling fragments out of it. I am interested in images that may not be 'reasonable' or 'sensibly shot', or necessarily 'good takes', but seek instead to enact the aforementioned paradox and offer glimpses of the numinous and the interstitial.

**CW:** Maya Deren, the American experimental filmmaker, comes to mind when I sample your images sequentially; albeit not as surreal, but still perceptual, conceptual, consisting of plenty of black-and-white as well as poignant glimpses of corporeal segregation and bodily intimacies (nascent or in the aftermath). Which photographer or artist has inspired you? Any other sources of inspiration; film, perhaps?

**CT:** My photo-based media practice started with shooting videos and engaging in cinema studies, and I seriously ventured into photography only a few years ago. I could only name a few photographers that I consider influential and most of them I discovered only recently (Chang Chao-Tang, Shomei Tomatsu, Daido Moriyama, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Eikoh Hosoe, Mårten Lange's *Another Language*,



occasional works on *Phases*, et al.). Other than being drawn to Expressionism and Max Ernst's *Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale* in my early teens, I'd say the artists that have contributed a lot to my practice mostly are in the field of moving images. The tokusatsu series *Masked Rider Black*, *Shaider* and *Maskman*; the gritty mise en scène of Pinoy action flicks from the 80s and 90s; a fragment of Lav Diaz' *Hubad sa Ilalim ng Buwan* I saw on TV when I was 13; the films by Ishmael Bernal, Mike de Leon, and Lino Brocka aired during Lenten holidays; and music videos of mostly electronica musicians all left their mark. I would also cite analog home videos, Joy Aquino's "Nilda", Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Mysterious Object at Noon*, Anton Corbijn's music video for Joy Division's "Atmosphere", Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo*, Miguel Gomes' *Tabu*, Jaime Rosales' *Dream and Silence*, and images by Nina Danino, Pedro Costa, Tsai Ming-liang, Carlos Reygadas, Shireen Seno, Gym Lumbera, as among my influences. The poet Allan Popa and his works have also contributed a lot to shaping my practice.

**CW:** In *Phases Magazine*, you have a series of photographs entitled, "the day approaches as if". Film elements are evident. The images seem to be retrieved from transitory spaces between moments of perception, between conscious and semi-conscious instances of memory. Dreamlike shards of seeing, feeling, and possibly even truth, half or fully formed. Do I detect a private sense of isolation and even loneliness informing and pervading your work?

**CT:** Thank you for your very keen observation. Mostly images of late afternoons in old towns shot using consumer-grade cameras and phased-out camera phones, "the day approaches as if" builds on the rudiments of travel and documentary photography to take on themes of human absence and bygone traces of previous habitations, the blurred lines between memory and dream, and a pervasive sense of mortality. I have always been fascinated with low-resolution imaging technologies when it comes to translating memory and affect. Through these images, I seek to fabricate preludes (if not annotations) to extinction. It is a reworking of the traditional role of photography as a means of remembrance while exploiting a Barthesian sense of the photographic image whose enactment of presence is a sheer index of what has gone; the photograph as intrinsic elegy. In the same way that its fragment title intimates both a promise and a threat, "the day approaches as if" mines the contradictions in that preoccupation with absence and trace; the transient and the interstitial; generating artifacts that are at once both allusions to possibilities and proofs of endings.

**CW:** Is detachment (in whatever context this is defined) a necessary component of taking pictures or making film? Does it inform your artistic practices at all?

**CT:** Detachment may be entirely illusory in photography and art-making in general, but yes, I have always valued this ruse or technique and found it



necessary. For me, without sufficient detachment, the affect is in danger of becoming too direct and literal. I am invested in gaps, in the unspoken and in erasure. I find detachment indispensable in this light, especially since work that explores intimations of human absence and extinction is very prone to bathos.

**CW:** What does "queerness" mean to you? Does it inform your diverse forms of artistic expression?

**CT:** I think I'd always be uncomfortable with problematic labels like "queer artist" or "queer art", and I rarely think about my queerness to be honest. It is natural and default to me, so I refuse to affirm insistences on alterity whenever possible. I acknowledge, however, that not needing to harp on difference—to feel normal despite being queer—may be a matter of privilege for others. I definitely think of queerness as a given and yet alternative state, a natural state of deviance (in relation to mostly fictive parameters), and while risking sounding essentialist, I would say that my poetics would have been different if I weren't queer.

**CW:** Can you talk a bit about the feelings and intentions behind the artwork that we have chosen here for Queer Southeast Asia?

**CT:** Most of the works are unpublished images from "the day approaches as if", while the rest more or less share the same intentions behind the series. I meant for most of them to have the feel of dioramas and tableaux vivants. The series labors to mine photography's propensity to signal the liminal and the ephemeral, to gesture towards narratives and histories predominantly concerned with accounting for traces and disappearances. These photos chronicle (mostly everyday) objects, bodies, and spaces that persist in the aftermath. Through these images, I aspire to create a glossary of poignant, sometimes dissonant, gestures and spaces that explore the fleeting and the in-between, the nameless and the invisible, always caught in the act of meaning and becoming, never fully arriving, and teetering on the brink of insight and loss.

**CW:** Which artists and/or writers do you keep track of these days?

**CT:** Poets Marlon Hacla and Mesándel Virtusio Arguelles, filmmaker Paweł Pawlikowski (*Ida*), photographer Peter Bennett ("The Voyage"), art collective Tita & Tita, and visual artist Jesa Perl.

**CW:** What's in your future as an artist? What more do you hope to say?

**CT:** I'm very thankful to you, Bry, and J. for accommodating my works in this issue, and for the opportunity to be reflexive about my practice and aesthetics. Your questions have been discerning, generous, and thought-provoking.



Recently, I've been working on projects that either explore 3D aspects of photographs or go beyond photo-based media altogether, like embroidery and tissue sculpture. I also have this long-term project comprising installations that explore notions of Chinese-ness in the Philippine context; a locating of identity and kinship in the larger context of Chinese hegemony and the Philippine-China maritime conflict.