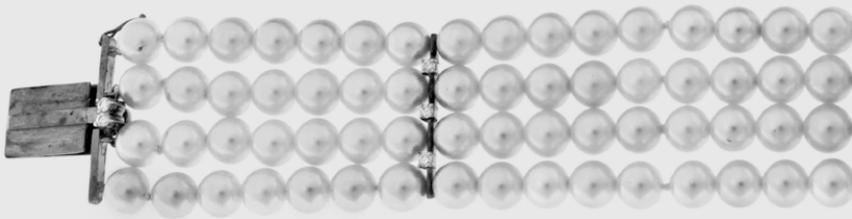


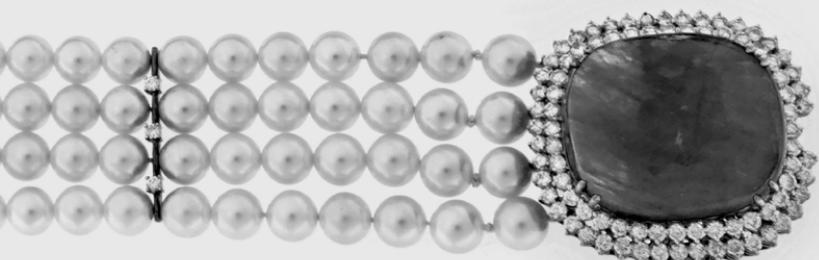
KISS

THE

HAND

AND





Pio Abad, Kiss the Hand You Cannot Bite

Shona Mei Findlay

The stars and stripes of the American flag ought to be replaced with a skull and crossbones. We cannot maintain an empire in the Orient and maintain a republic in America.

—Mark Twain¹

Culminating his residency in San Francisco, Pio Abad's solo exhibition *Kiss the Hand You Cannot Bite* draws from multiple histories of exile, resistance, and displacement from the '70s and '80s that brought Filipinos to California, home today to one of the largest diasporas of this community in the world. The exhibition begins in KADIST's public facing display windows with political imagery (A) gathered from various archives in San Francisco. Situating the exhibition within the universality of empire, and denoting symbols of conquest, complicity, and impunity, the fly posters demonstrate the cyclical nature of the states of uncertainty we face today.

Inside the gallery, the newly commissioned body of work departs from narratives related to the former Filipino dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, and his infamously extravagant wife, Imelda. Choreographing a confluence of historical facts, Abad first

1. James Hamilton-Paterson, H. Holt, "A History Told by Foreigners" in *America's Boy: a Century of Colonialism in the Philippines* (Henry Holt and Company: 1999), 462, pp. 37.

unearths the objects and archival material as proof of a perpetuated political fantasy that allowed the Marcoses to cling to their gilded power. An ostentatious 30-carat ruby bracelet with diamonds and cultured pearls materializes in the gallery as *Kiss the Hand You Cannot Bite* (2019) , a colossal concrete effigy produced in collaboration with jeweler Frances Wadsworth Jones. The jewels, along with silverware, Old Masters paintings, and other lavish goods belonging to the Marcoses, were smuggled into the United States in 1986 when they fled the Philippines following widespread anti-government protests across the country. Known today as the Hawaii Collection, the jewels were immediately seized by U.S. customs when they landed in Honolulu after being granted exile by the Reagan administration. Valued at a combined worth of twenty-one million U.S. dollars, the ill-gotten assets were eventually repatriated to the Philippines (their rightful owners) to be auctioned off and liquidated. However, shortly after President Rodrigo Duterte, a self-declared admirer of Marcos, assumed office in 2016, and despite Philippine's Supreme Court ruling that the jewelry was illegally acquired, no action to sell the loot has yet been taken. They remain locked in a bank vault in Manila, obscured from public consciousness and condemned to a permanent state of irresolution. The sculpture unmoors the bracelet from the vaults of the autocratic regime, manipulating its scale and function to contrast its corporeal frailty with the weight and monumentality of its new concrete form. Complicating the functions of a monument, the work simultaneously memorializes the bracelet's physical presence as a body—representing both a body of evidence and of the many exiled bodies upended by the Marcos dictatorship—while slyly suggesting the farcical monumentality of Imelda's sense of self as nation.² The bracelet at once interrogates the losses and victories, the singular and the multiple, and the people and nation. Further articulating these complexities, a photograph  of a hand clutching a piece of barbed wire, hangs adjacent to the sculpture. The image was taken by photojournalist Kim Komenich³ in Manila in 1986 on the day that the Marcos regime was overthrown.

2.
"She often used 'I' when she meant the Philippines, and 'the Philippines' when she meant I." Bob Colacello, "Chapter 27: Imelda," in *Holy Terror: Andy Warhol Close Up* (Harper Collins: 1990), 514, pp. 273, also in this brochure.

3.
Kim Komenich worked as a staff photographer and editor for the *San Francisco Chronicle* (2000-2009) and the *San Francisco Examiner* (1982-2000.) He was awarded the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for photographs of the Philippine Revolution he took while on assignment for the *Examiner*.

Confuting the myth that the sociopolitical legacy of the Marcoses is one isolated to the Philippines, the exhibition summons a transnational cast of characters that have either been in favor of, or vitiated by the United States quest for empire and the perpetuation of its political mythologies. *A Thoughtful Gift* (2019) (D) is based on a version of a letter written by First Lady Nancy Reagan to Imelda Marcos in 1986, assuring her of their safety from persecution in the United States, engraved onto a tablet of Carrara marble. The gesture of inscribing the letter onto marble functions as symbolic recuperation and concretizes the complicity, extent, and aftermath of the Marcos-Reagan friendship and the flippant deployment of protection from the United States defense at the highest level, long after the country's independence and despite recommendations from the State Department to remove Marcos from power.⁴ *A Thoughtful Gift* rings the bell on historical revisionism, erected as a marker for histories that have been unintentionally or intentionally altered.

In the exhibition, these notorious figures become closely intertwined with the lesser known narratives of the individuals who put their lives on the line for the sake of democracy. A diptych of paintings *For Silme* (2019) (E) and *For Gene* (2019) (F) bear witness to the 1981 murders of Silme Domingo and Gene Viernes in Seattle, two young leaders of the Union of Democratic Filipinos (KDP) who spearheaded the fight for social justice in the United States and democracy in the Philippines. Their deaths can be traced back to the Marcoses through expenses for a certain Mabuhay Corporation, a San Francisco held company. The statements showed the regime had illegally spent one million dollars in the United States between 1979 and 1981 on various activities, including political campaigns and a mysterious transaction labeled "special security projects."⁵ The paintings appropriate the book covers of Ferdinand Marcos' manifestos, which detailed his political motives and included a defense of his decision to place the Philippines under martial law in 1972. While *A Thoughtful Gift* (2019) irreversibly inscribes, the paintings erase the textual basis of Marcos' political fictions, reducing them

4. Since 1898, when one colonizer, Spain, ceded the Philippines to another colonizer, the United States' presence (even after the archipelago's independence in 1946) has loomed large over the Southeast Asian country: militarily, politically, economically, and culturally. After the country's independence, the U.S. support of the Filipino regime remained unflinching (primarily for the sake of its Philippine military bases) until the administration faced a tide of critical global opinion following the assassination of Marcos's principal political rival, the exiled former senator Benigno Aquino Jr., upon his return to the Philippines.

to form and color, and repurposing them as tributes to those who resisted and suffered as a result of these fantasies. Abad re-dedicates these forms as austere emblems of a nation that never was—a nation on the cusp of geopolitical plaything and libertarian proxy. A final painting, *For Dina* (2019) , is dedicated to Abad's mother, who, along with his father, was involved in the democratic socialist movement in the Philippines—activities that placed his parents in the Marcos' unfavorable line of sight.

Revealing the underbelly of sociopolitical mechanisms that still allow authoritarianism to manifest today, *Kiss the Hand You Cannot Bite* performs an elegy for those whose efforts were muted by the absolute power that perpetuates empires and dictatorships, for painful personal histories and imminent collective futures.

5. Jim Douglas, "Defeating the Marcoses in a Court of Law," in *A Time to Rise: Collective Memoirs of the Union of Democratic Filipinos (KDP)*, ed. Rene Ciria Cruz, Cindy Domingo, and Bruce Occena (University of Washington Press: 2017), 368, pp. 246.



High Art As Object of Fascist Desire

Marian Pastor Roces

SELF-MAGNIFICATION

That Imelda Marcos styled herself in the manner of Empress Farah Diba, the consort of the Iranian Shah, is the first of all cues to pay attention to the links among these figures. In her case, the links are to do with marriage to despots who knew each other through the American ambit of the Cold War; with the flows of arms, goods, people around a belt of right-wing dictators that spanned the world; and thus with an immense ideological front that was as though a Great Wall against communists/barbarians. These flows crucially involved personal encounters, during which soft power enveloped the hard phallic power of despots.

It is within this global network of dictators during the middle to the third quarter of the 20th century and its relationship with art that the work of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP), Imelda Marcos' most conspicuous creation, ought to be considered. The CCP is an unusually rich site of inquiry into the form of aspiration—indeed ambition—that Imelda contributed to the Marcosian statecraft during the Martial Law period (1972-1981), performing to the requirements of the modern State to realize a right-wing autocracy demanding legitimacy on the basis of pseudo-liberal cultural values.

In the context of the full range Cold War despotisms, Imelda Marcos was arguably the most desirous of validation. Both she and her husband were born to humble circumstances, and in their exercise of conjoint power exhibited (a well-remarked) avaricious behavior. They were particularly noteworthy for their fulsome expression of an *ancien regime* idea conflating the power of big money, recondite art, and muscular politics. They produced momentum around their emergence into prominence when they married in the '60s, in a fashion that prefigures their calculated restating, soon enough, of a Philippine origin myth of the native in a male/female godhead: The Strong and The Beautiful, *Malakás at Magandá*. Which is to say, they activated pre-modern sources of identity and foreordination, to buttress a modern State they construed as embodied in their persons. That Marcosian modern State was, in the view of its author, at once centralized, authoritarian, magnificent, patrician, merciless, and advanced; and, in addition, mythic. Ferdinand Marcos organized mythmaking around his person, not only to produce the folk hero figure he was not but more importantly to conjure old Philippine mysticisms around that hero figure. Magical talismans were as vital to this mythmaking as were the fake medals supposedly awarded for wartime bravery. And his attentiveness to divination equaled that which he gave to history, modern warfare, and legal culture.

Founded as a performance venue in 1969, the CCP became a governmental agency for the promotion and development of the arts and culture in the Philippines when Ferdinand imposed the Martial Law in 1972. The CCP was the only Philippine cultural agency that operated astraddle the inter-national. Of course, other entities organized forays to other countries (for example, the Philippine Women's University and the University of the Philippines), but did not have the wherewithal to accept exchange on a regular basis. Since only a State agency can do so, it fell to the CCP to accomplish the pertinent details of diplomatic protocols entered into by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), starting in the '70s. Immediately upon its establishment, the CCP took

up the tasks of hosting artistic delegations; tasks that the DFA could only accomplish prior to the CCP by asking to use privately owned theaters and other venues. The CCP, moreover, initiated and institutionalized its own cultural diplomacy, extending invitations to foreign artists through their managers and impresarios, and paying for these engagements. It likewise started organizing overseas tours for Filipino artists soon after its inauguration.

FORM

When the American pianist Van Cliburn (1934-2013) was to be flown by chopper onto the CCP's newly built National Arts Center (NAC)¹ on the slopes of Mount Makiling in 1976, either Imelda Marcos or a sycophant sent a radio message with instructions to posthaste procure fresh papayas and other fruits, and to tie these invisibly to the appropriate trees for the guests to behold.² Fruitless trees would not suffice in the staging—no matter how agriculture is incongruous to a tropical rainforest on a mountain—of the inauguration of the Philippine High School for the Arts at the NAC.

Stories of this tenor have been plentiful since the days of the dictatorship, and their meta-narrative belongs to whomever the narrators may be—all of whom affect snobbish airs to mock a social climbing First Lady. In hindsight, no snobbery from any direction would have had an effect on Imelda Marcos, whose faith in herself and her mission appears to be a hermetically sealed condition. Notwithstanding her pretensions, Imelda Marcos was not sophisticated enough for haute couture nor the *beaux arts* of the period. Notably, the Madame did not channel Jacqueline Kennedy, another contemporary. It was a fairy tale queendom that was in her line of sight, and Empress Farah—and the Thai Queen Sirikit—were to her the figures to reproduce. The bejeweled band across the torso, the long, height-emphasizing, svelte silhouette in a single color, the tiara, and the resplendent necklace that heightened a swan-like neck, were elements of a popular culture fantasy of royalty. Imelda managed a Farah;

1. The National Arts Center is a cluster of buildings mostly given to the Philippine High School for the Arts, a secondary level public educational institution receiving scholars.

2. I was with those who received the message.



though, arguably, not Sirikit. Still, it bears noting that the bouffant hair enlarged the head, elongated the figure, and solidified an aura in black crowning the person. The monarchical look that Imelda Marcos affected may be described as in fact fascistic in the 20th century, in its aspiration to monumentality and projection of imperiousness, as it were, a sculpture set on a pedestal in civic parade grounds. This styling produced a rigidity or tautness, even if—indeed often because—executed as the couturier Jose “Pitoy” Moreno’s heavily, multiple overlaid embroidery on *piña* cloth. So inert was her form, Imelda Marcos could very well have been wearing an 18th-century crinoline with a sculptural corset beneath.

The assiduous cultivation of (a gauche idea of) aristocratic form betrayed a lack of understanding of art. The woman who

purported to massively scale-up patronage of the arts styled herself in the iconic manner of a figure on an old coin. Inadvertently, she was the perfect anachronism to the art that she caused to happen at the CCP. She grandly performed the role of patroness in collecting art housed in different locations, notably, as she and her surrogates added pieces to older collections at Malacañang Palace, in which she lived for three decades. Mention must be made as well of collections purchased or otherwise acquired for the Santo Niño Shrine and Heritage Museum in Tacloban, Leyte; the Philippine Center in New York City; the Metropolitan Museum of Manila; the Philippine Museum of Ethnography at Nayong Pilipino,³ and for short-lived places like the Philippine Costume Museum.⁴ However, for all these places, art was simply purchased or borrowed long term. The totality of these *objets d'art* is the outcome of a three-decade collecting frenzy and will be critically evaluated as such from political, financial, and other perspectives in the future.

The CCP, for which a collection was also built,⁵ was a different art place vis-à-vis Imelda Marcos, specifically in that the works of artists were and continue to be presented there. The CCP collected, so to speak, *art makings*, rather than art as finished material. And it was this in-process art making that was at variance in spirit from the *nouveau riche* unrefinement that she displayed in the utter fixity of her fashion statements. Whether in performed or plastic forms—and as early as the mid-70s in multimedia and ephemeral forms—the local and foreign artists the CCP gave space to were part of the cultural production whose center of gravity was the here-and-now, that is to say, the contemporary as it was playing out; and whose language was turning to the postmodern and postcolonial as early as the year of establishment, 1969. The period buzz words spun out of the CCP of the time, notably, “experimental,” “avant-garde,” and even “developmental”⁶ and “relevant”⁷ firstly concerned a heightened sense of time, and secondly, a giddy sense of arrival at a point of rupture. A kind parricide applied to events and ideas, this late modernity saw art-making as a linear relay of outbreaks from previous orders; and

3. The park Nayong Pilipino was located immediately next to the Manila International Airport (today's Ninoy Aquino International Airport).

4. This museum displayed a collection of Imelda Marcos' gowns designed by favored couturier Jose “Pitoy” Moreno. It was housed at the former Luneta Hotel in front of Luneta Park, and has since been lost.

5. The CCP art collection began to be built immediately upon its establishment.

furthermore regarded that thrust towards a more critically-savvy future to be driven by precisely the break with the past.

HAUTE, UNDERCUT

At its most *haute*, art at the CCP during the Martial Law years was immensely self-contradictory. That the CCP was the most prestigious physical emblem of a dictatorship that thus signaled (or argued) its benevolence did not pose a problem for the artists. Through the Martial Law decade from 1972 to 1981, no sign of increasing awareness about the abuses of the regime was evident in the artmaking presented at the CCP.

The absence at the CCP of signs of awareness of the times would have been unremarkable had not the CCP presented art that makes capital of critical thinking. The CCP's early institutional career played out with a yawning disjunct between the emancipatory claims of contemporary art, on the one hand, and on the other, the manifest lack of critical faculties being exercised in relation to the anti-criticism character of tyranny. That disjunct compromised the authenticity of the CCP as an institution purportedly enabling cutting edge artmaking for that period. It exposed the vintage of the thinking that created and run the CCP: an idea of patronage that can be described as a pastiche of Baroque ambition and popular Romanticism. Benevolent patronage was inconsistent with the imperative of contemporary art to seek release from patronage.

To be sure, not all genres of artmaking at the CCP proposed critical views of modernity. The CCP presented symphonic music and the full spectrum of musical genre. A vast range of repertoires was performed, of which avant-garde music was only one. Modern dance was presented, which, by the nature of the form was a celebration of high modernity. But so was classical ballet staged, if less frequently than modern dance. Moreover, folk dance at state-of-the-art staging was a staple. Conceptualism and its materializations as installation art and performance art was the expected form in the galleries. And the full range of theatre

6.
The word "developmental" was used by Ray-mundo R. Albano in 1979 in an exhibition catalog for *A Decade of Developmental Art* he curated at the CCP. He said, "Pardon the attempt to borrow a trendy operative word to explain a type of art, but 'developmental' is such a word which was used to try to validate, or put within an art-critical context, some works which by their nature tended to be inaccessible, simple but difficult."

7.
"There must have been something relevant (another operative word) to such visual exigencies, because the issues stayed on to pursue the logical innovative achievement of the '70s."

genres was quotidian fare for CCP's audiences, notably including experimental theatre and, with the latter-day emergence of a form thus called, experimental cinema. The visual and performing artists were both foreign and local; and of the local, there was an immense number of artists from the various provinces of the Philippines. A "Philippine" quality, character, citation, content, or suggestion was always involved in the presentations by Filipino artists. It bears saying that programming was not overly skewed to foreign artists.

Still, notwithstanding this vast range, the CCP was not eclectic. Its institutional personality followed an international art mainstream trajectory of critical interlocution of the past. Modern dance as developed by the CCP resident company Ballet Philippines physically shifted the dancers' center of gravity and silhouette from that of classical ballet; and took up local content. An immense amount of innovation similarly took place in theatre, at the lead of both Teatro Pilipino and Tanghalang Pilipino, which explored different relationships between audience and actor, between stage and auditorium seating, between theatre itself and its purpose. Conceptual art at the CCP questioned what art was or could be. It investigated the limits of what materials, ideas, processes, gestures, and protocols might liberate art from previous imprisonments in set forms, traditions, and spaces of presentation. Avant-garde music at the CCP was a conceptual work to be freed from previous confinements in the musical structures of the past. This music used non-musicians at times, who made sounds with materials which were not musical instruments. This collective body of work—which produced a good many National Artists in due course—was "happening" (to use a correct period term) as similar practices happened in the First World.

Some obvious reasons can start addressing how all this questioning transpired without addressing the same quality of interrogation towards Martial Law itself, and the role of the CCP within a dictatorship. Firstly, the leading artists of the time—Lucrecia R. Kasilag, long-time CCP President and avant-garde composer; Roberto Chabet and Raymundo Albano, heads of the CCP Art

Museum and pioneering conceptual art avatars; Rolando Tinio, theatre genius; Alicia Reyes, innovative choreographer—were not only artists of integrity. They were, each in inimitable ways, seductive individuals who maintained a following out of sheer genius. These artists were such bright lights that, at the CCP, they obscured Imelda Marcos' paltry star.

Secondly, the intellectual infrastructure to sustain this kind of avant-garde did not exist to the degree needed to even recognize the contradictions the CCP imposed on all artists who worked in it; much less to address the contradictions. The criticism of the CCP by the Left constructed a dichotomy between art-for-art's-sake practices "within the center" and socially-conscious art practices "outside the center." It is a false dichotomy in that the critical cast of Conceptualism, for instance, and of avant-garde music, is unrecognized; notably, in that the phrase art-for-art's-sake was coined in the late 19th century as a critique of capitalism's stranglehold on art making. And conversely, the conservatism of Social Realism, for instance, is not conceded; notably, the lack of criticality in relation to the limited capacity of figurative illustration to change society. The too simplistic dualism did not acknowledge the critical traditions of both philosophical lineages. The dichotomy did not, therefore, offer an intellectual framework for true debate to have transpired, that could or may have assisted artists on either side of the divide in taking on the Marcos regime, albeit in various ways.

Yet, these two obvious reasons for the inability of critical art to criticize the CCP and the dictatorship do not quite get to what should be the actual object of interrogation. And that is fascism itself, as embodied in the case of the CCP by Imelda Marcos.

This text is an excerpt of an essay delivered at the conference, *The Remains of a Dictatorship: An International Conference on the Philippines under Marcos*, held at the Ateneo de Manila University, August 3–4, 2017.



Kiss the Hand You Cannot Bite

Pio Abad

June 5—August 10, 2019

KADIST, SAN FRANCISCO

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IMAGE CAPTIONS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE): A ruby, diamond, and pearl bracelet from the Hawaii collection, Presidential Commission on Good Government. Imelda's gift to Ronald and Nancy Reagan, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, photograph by Pio Abad. Cultural Center of the Philippines, Manila. Andy Warhol and Imelda Marcos in 1976 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, Getty Images.



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EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

(A)

Untitled (Boerium), 2019
407 posters, each 11 x 17 inches

(B)

Kiss the Hand You Cannot Bite, 2019
Concrete sculpture, dimensions
variable. Produced in
collaboration with Frances
Wadsworth Jones

(C)

Kim Komenich, *Hand and
Barbed Wire*, February 25, 1986
Inkjet print on Hahnemühle
Baryta paper, 10 x 15 inches

(D)

A Thoughtful Gift, 2019
Etching on Carrara marble,
10 x 13 x 0.75 inches

(E)

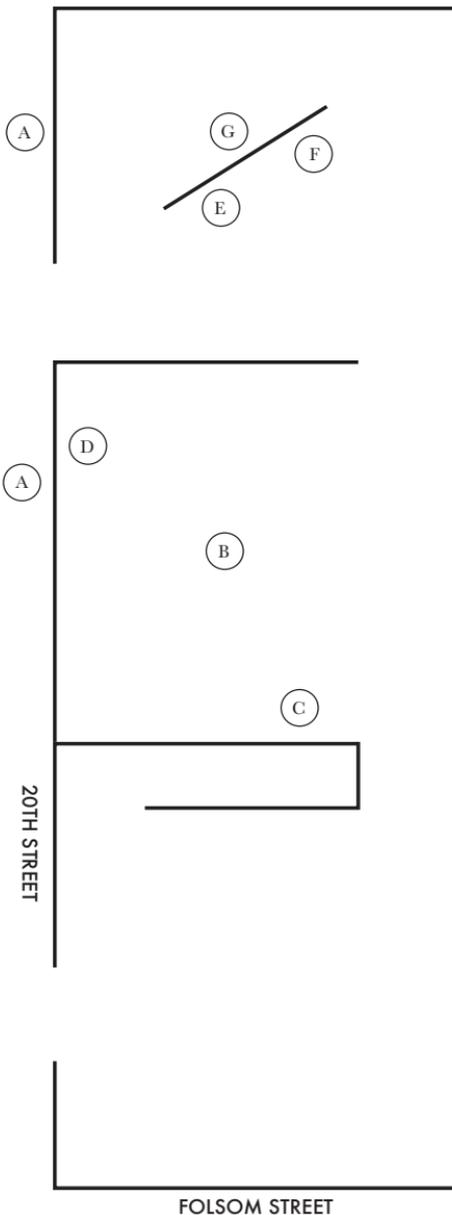
For Silme, 2019
Acrylic on canvas,
12 x 16 inches

(F)

For Gene, 2019
Acrylic on canvas,
12 x 16 inches

(G)

For Dina, 2019
Acrylic on canvas,
12 x 16 inches



KADIST