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## Getting Into the Out: Memories of the 90s Live On in the Sanggawâ Mural at the University of New South Wales

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## Memories of the 90s Live On in the Sanggawâ Mural at the University of New South Wales

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**MATT COX**

The late 1980s and early 1990s were an exciting time for Asian art curators, academics and general enthusiasts of Asian art in Australia. Government initiatives to build stronger trade relations with Asia overlapped with academic and museum interests to foster greater cultural exchange, both institutional and individual, in what Christine Clark and Caroline Turner have described as a watershed period of interconnections.<sup>1</sup>

For the first time since Ian Fairweather's oft mentioned interaction with modernist circles in the Philippines, Philippine art reappeared on the Australian art radar and Australian organisations made new connections with Filipino artists. In 1989, four Philippine artists featured in the exhibition *C*, held at the Performance Space, Sydney. In 1992, the Australia Centre was established in Manila and in the same year Artists' Regional Exchange (ARX) facilitated Filipino artist, Alwin Reamillo's residency in Perth.<sup>2</sup> In 1993, the inaugural issue of *Art Asia Pacific* was dedicated to the Philippines and the first iteration of the Asia Pacific Triennial at Queensland Art Gallery included nine Filipino artists.

Jointly organised by Hiraya Gallery, Manila and Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, the 1995 exhibition *Vox Populi Vox Dei*, featuring collaborative paintings by the Philippine artists' collective Sanggawâ was another, albeit less documented, moment of interconnection.

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The first leg of the exhibition opened in Manila, January 1995, just two months after the formation of Sanggawâ. The seven paintings on display represented the group's most recent works and their altruistic aspirations at this early stage in their organisation as expressed in their accompanying statement:

... an ad hoc group of painters called Sanggawâ, composed of members Elmer Borlongan, Mark Justiniani, Karen Flores, Federico Sievert, Joy Mallari, with participating artists Emmanuel Garibay, Anthony Palomo, and Mike Parial, created a series of large scale paintings collectively titled *Vox Populi Vox Dei*. The voice of the people is the voice of God. It is a Latin phrase often invoked by journalists and politicians come election time, indicating that through the ballot the people have spoken their choice, therefore God's will and political will must also prevail. The artists borrowed this phrase, taking it's meaning to another level and posed a pertinent question: Whose voice and which god is speaking to us today? Following the tradition of the *bayanihan*, the artists gathered for this project with the belief that collaborative mural-making is a potent medium for social change.<sup>3</sup>

Coinciding with the opening of the exhibition in Sydney on 2 June, five members of the group commenced work on a mural at the University of New South Wales commissioned by Belinda Webb, former Curator, UNSW Art Collection. The mural was conceived in partnership with Ray Hughes Gallery as a means to further promote Sanggawâ's presence in Sydney and foster relations between Australia and the Philippines.<sup>4</sup>

Earlier this year, I was asked by former Sanggawâ member Mark Justiniani to make some enquiries about the condition and documentation of the mural at UNSW. I found the mural, the largest ever executed by the group, painted on the northern wall of the Central Lecture Block at the Kensington campus, slightly obscured by plant growth but in relatively good condition. I returned to Justiniani and fellow member Joy Mallari with some further questions about the origins and ongoing importance of the mural.

COX: How does the mural relate to the subject matter of the other large-scale paintings exhibited at Ray Hughes Gallery?

MALLARI and JUSTINIANI: It wasn't directly related to the murals at Ray Hughes' but the process was consistent with the way we did the works.

By that we mean, doing the studies together and rendering it the way we've done it as a group.

The two main figures in the mural carry the colours of the inverted Philippine flag. When the flag is upside down, it means that the country is at war. We also did that in one of our murals here in Manila.

COX: In late 1994, when Sanggawâ began working with murals, or in the large-scale painting format that might also be considered as a mural, was the collective looking towards historical examples? I'm thinking about possible Philippine examples like the artists Carlos "Botong" Francisco or Vicente Manansala, or instead to billboards or to the kind of narrative paintings found on church walls?

MALLARI and JUSTINIANI: Yes, we were thinking about the billboard artists. They're good examples of how collaborative effort works on the painting format. We also had this collaborative experience in doing large-scale works in ABAY or Artist ng Bayan (artists of the nation), a protest group which we were members of in the mid- to late 1980s. We would parade works on the streets during public demonstrations or sometimes paint big works on the spot during rallies. We incorporated this practice with the Salingpusa group and, later, we formed Sanggawâ, where the goal was to do works as if one individual made them. We came up with the word Sanggawâ, which was a contraction of *isa* which means one and *gawa* which means work. It means to work as one.

There was the triumvirate group of Carlos "Botong" Francisco, Victorio Edades and Galo Ocampo, who also collaborated on murals during the pre-war period. But in particular, we were looking at Botong Francisco's history of Manila mural.

COX: Further to this question, how do you see the relationship between a mural painting that is bound to its location and therefore always available to the public, and large-scale paintings on canvas that are inherently more mobile and thereby available for acquisition as part of private collections?

MALLARI and JUSTINIANI: Some of our works with previous groups can no longer be traced. In Abay, we used to do works on muslin instead of canvas because they were cheaper and the works were not meant to be permanent. Many of those works were mobile and carried in the streets with the public.

We should have saved those pieces. Or at least documented them well because a lot of them were good pieces. We heard that most photos were destroyed either by termites or floodwater. We also did works with the previous groups which were erased. They were on concrete walls and were in a way permanent, but without our knowledge, they were painted over.

COX: What is your ongoing interest in the mural? How would you like to see it represented and what value do you see in the archive as a post-object representation of the work if, for example, it was to be hidden from public visibility by planting or over-painting or other construction nearby?

MALLARI and JUSTINIANI: We did murals in previous groups and these works no longer exist because they were covered and painted over. We also did many large-scale works for street demonstrations and most of them could no longer be found. During that time, we had little documentation so it's a shame we could no longer see them. Those works will no longer be remembered. At least we have documentation of the mural in UNSW. And it's been there for a number of years now. The murals are imprints of a special period when friends still had the time and the willingness to work together. They showed how we viewed the world and saw our function in it. We have our own individual paths now.<sup>5</sup>

Justiniani's and Mallari's conflation of large-scale painting with murals stemming from the political context of public art and protest in the Philippines has important implications for the preservation of *Paloob Sa labas (Getting into the out)* at UNSW. With only one painting from the Ray Hughes' exhibition remaining in Australia,<sup>6</sup> the mural at UNSW, is the only other work by the collective to remain in Australia and on permanent display. Its preservation is significant not only as an imprint of Sanggawâ's collaborative practice but also of an especially cooperative period of exchange between Australian and Philippine artists, curators and academics.

## BIOGRAPHIES

**Matt Cox** completed a BA in Asian Studies with a major in Indonesian Studies (UNSW), a MA in Art History (USYD) and has recently graduated with his PhD dissertation titled “The Javanese Self in Portraiture from 1880 to 1955”. Cox has published in Australia and internationally on Asian art and architecture and is curator of Asian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. As a curator, he is broadly engaged with both historical and contemporary art as brought to the fore in two recent exhibitions—“Beyond Words: Calligraphic Traditions of Asia” and “Passion and Procession: Art of the Philippines”. Integral to these exhibitions and his curatorial practice more generally is his work with artists, curators and academics in Australia and Asia to explore relationships between art history and living communities.

**Mark Justiniani**'s current projects include large-scale installations and site-specific art. These works belong to the Infinity series and are informed by his long-standing interest in vision and optics, and the structures of space and time. Through these works, the artist is keen to redefine the aesthetic experience not only through form but by way of historical references and reflections. This speaks to his work with activist groups and artist initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s, including Abay (Artista ng Bayan) and the collective Sanggawâ (1994). While in Los Angeles, he and partner Joy Mallari were involved with workers groups. From social realist leanings to magical realist strains, his practice has evolved and grown into multimedia configurations that seek to explore the nature of reality and perception. Justiniani is currently working with curator Tessa Maria Guazon to represent the Philippines at the 58th Venice Biennale.

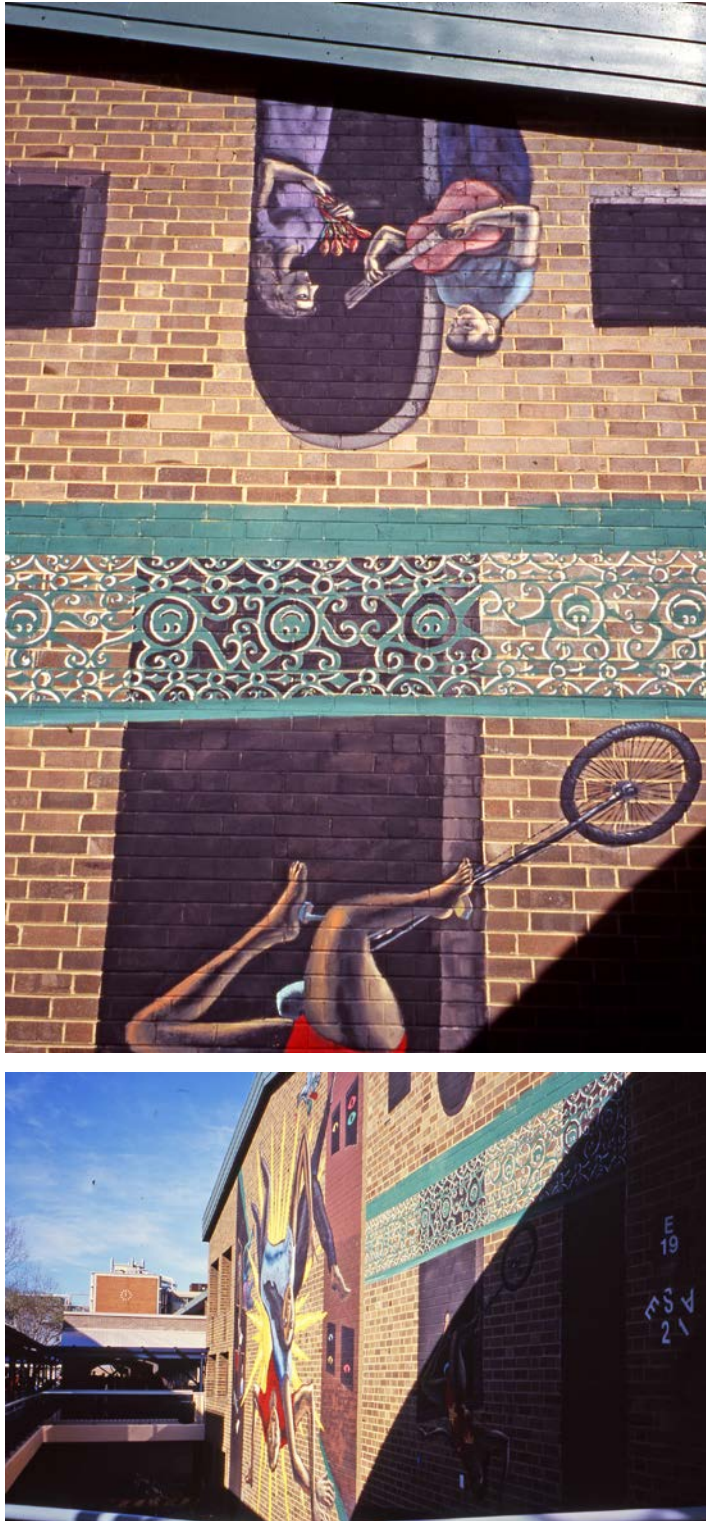
**Joy Mallari** began her practice as a painter. She is known for a visual style similar to the contemporary Filipino figurative expressionism common among members of Salingpusa, but distinguished by a narrative approach which she attributes to her exposure to the pre-digital animation industry during her developmental years as an artist. She is also known for exploring themes of identity and marginalization in Philippine society. She was a former member of politically active art collectives Abay and Sanggawâ in the 1990s. Mallari's painting, *Mawalang Galang Pô* (With All Due Respect) was a Juror's Choice at the Philippine National Awards in the year 2000. In 2001, she participated in the 10th Osaka Triennale with a piece entitled *Ama Namin* (Our Father). Mallari currently explores various materials for her mixed media and installation pieces.





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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See Christine Clark and Caroline Turner, “Cross-cultural Exchanges and Interconnections from the 1980s and 1990s: ARX and the APT, Australian and New Zealand”, *Journal of Art, Asian Art Research in Australia and New Zealand: Past, Present, Future* 16, 2 (2016): 167–84.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Sangaawâ, *Vox populi vox dei*, Hiraya Gallery, Manila, 1995.
- <sup>4</sup> Further information regarding the conception and planning of the mural can be found in the UNSW Records & Archives, Archive (00A44).
- <sup>5</sup> Mark Justiniani and Joy Mallari, e-mail communication with the author, 28 June 2018.
- <sup>6</sup> The Painting, *Palo-sebo*, was acquired by the Queensland Art Gallery in 1995 and the following year Sanggawâ were invited to participate in the second APT.