

Paschal Berry and Paul Howard

Balik Bayan is a multi-art form and community celebration project that uncovers contemporary Philippine arts and culture. Literally translated from the Tagalog language, *balik* means return and *bayan* means country. Blacktown Arts Centre will transform into a gathering space of intersecting contemporary art forms: video, installation, painting, performance, film, community activations and events, featuring artists with Filipino ancestry based in Sydney and Manila. The common thread running through these artists' practices is their interest in the notion of projected futures, while always looking back to a point of origin.

In Blacktown, 34,000 people have Philippine ancestry, roughly 9% of its population. *Balik Bayan* asks a central question: What does a 'return to country' mean for one of the world's largest diaspora? Historically, Philippine traditional practices have been defined by the interplay between oratorical performance, music, dance, poetry, craft and visual arts. Art serves a central role within communities, giving life to religious rituals, and are implicit in the diverse creative expressions that have defined the Filipino people.

Framed by this multiplicity of forms, *Balik Bayan* radiates out of a central work by artist Alwin Reamillo. Known internationally for installations and sculptural works that encourage democratic participation, ritual and social sculpture are central to Reamillo's work. The *Bayanihan Hopping Spirit House* - originally commissioned by Urban Theatre Projects for Sydney Festival 2015 - exemplifies

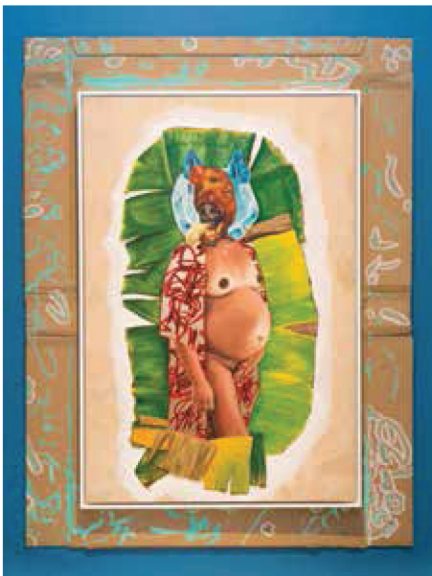
his practice and has an inherent performative and participatory core. *Bayanihan* is the Filipino tradition of physically moving a bamboo house from one location to another, often as a response to natural calamities. The term has also grown to symbolise a sense of collectivism - often used as a romantic and arguably problematic representation of the Filipino community spirit.

Reamillo's house is designed around collaboration, constructed through a series of creative workshops. The house has 'skin' made up of lanterns, photographs, textiles and a small section that acts as a memorial grotto for local Filipino artist Ed Aragon. At every new iteration the layers accumulate, from the workshops that started with *Bankstown Live* (Sydney Festival 2015) and *Sculpture by the Sea* (2015) to the launch of the *Bayanihan Philippine Art Project* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2016 where Reamillo worked with artist Cassandra Bossell on the bamboo structure for the Art Gallery: each process involved people from Blacktown.

For its next iteration, the house will undergo further re-construction through public participation at Peacock Gallery in Auburn, and then traverse across the border between Cumberland and Blacktown Local Government Areas to launch the *Balik Bayan* project.

Balik Bayan will extend out to and transform the Arts Centre car park with a large-scale installation by Manila-based artist Leeroy New. New is fast becoming one of the most prolific installation artists in Manila, building

LECHON BUHAY, MARIKIT SANTIAGO, 2016. OIL, ACRYLIC, DUTCH METAL GOLD LEAF, FOUND CARDBOARD, PEN ON PLY (PEN MARKINGS BY MAELLA PEARL AGED 2 YEARS). PHOTO: MARIKIT SANTIAGO



an international following through large scale sculptural works using diverse materials. In Blacktown he will incorporate a public bar and community space into his work. This recycling project, currently underway, utilises a strong partnership between the Arts Centre and other sections of Blacktown City Council, building a garden that uses waste from the area and including the Arts Centre's weaving garden. The space will be curated by the community, led by the Filipino cultural advocacy group Sinta, highlighting the depth of talent within Blacktown.

Manila-based performance company Sipat Lawin will work with the Sinta Group to create a *tiyangge* - flea market - that celebrates the Filipino community in Blacktown. Inspired by the dual meaning of the word *mahal*, meaning both love and expensive in Tagalog, Sipat Lawin will curate a public space that expresses what the diaspora holds dear: a fiesta atmosphere that usurps the inherent hierarchy of traditional celebrations rooted in a colonial past, making people more important than the *patrón*.

In addition to presenting the work of Philippine artists Alwin Reamillo, Leeroy New and Sipat Lawin, *Balik Bayan* will also include new commissions by eight local artists. In partnership with the Australian Centre of Moving Image in Melbourne, Blacktown Arts Centre has commissioned a new video work by the collaborative artist team of Bhenji Ra and Justin Shoulder, collectively referred to as Club Ate. This will be the final part of their *Ex*



BALIK BAYAN PROJECT, BHENJI RA AND CAROLINE GARCIA, 2016. PHOTO: JOSHUA MORRIS

Nilalang series which draws on their shared Filipino heritage to re-imagine mythologies as celebratory legends.

Ra and Shoulder are also presenting their club night Club Ate during *Balik Bayan*, taking their celebration of underground queer culture into the greater west. Through this heady mixture of live performance and video-based narratives filmed in the Philippines, with collaborating artists and community collectives, the artists use their bodies to forge connections between queer, migrant, spiritual and intercultural experiences.

Ala Paredes' works on paper reflect her pregnancy, symbolising her body as home. Working mainly in watercolour, Paredes examines her relationship with cultural tradition and inherited memory through portraiture. Her work explores themes of transplantation, utilising familiar elements from religious iconography and her traditional Filipino up-bringing. Inspired by the spiritual disciplines of Japanese Buddhist monks, Paredes committed to completing a body of work consisting of one self-portrait a day for 365 days, with the aim of exploring repetition as a path to enlightenment. For *Balik Bayan*, Paredes is also working collaboratively with Leeroy New on the community-activated art installation for Blacktown Arts Centre car park.

Born in the Philippines and raised in Blacktown, Melissa Ramos works with time-based media, in particular investigating the intrinsic nature of time and movement. Ramos explores stories that confound reality with fiction to convey a poetic experience. Ramos' film work uses abstract narrative to explore heritage and diaspora. In previous works, Ramos has used a distorted narrative voice that delves into her connection to a political dynasty. She juxtaposes soft focus close-ups of interiors with the high drama and the performative context of politics.

Marikit Santiago's paintings and 'soft' sculptures examine the military legacy, literature, mythology, superstition, religion, politics, socio-economic status and popular culture that remain present within the Filipino communities in the Philippines and the diaspora. Santiago's practice interrogates her personal conflict between her Filipino ethnicity and Australian nationality. Incorporating found material, garish lights, banana leaves, brown wrapping tape and the painterly marks of her young daughter into her installations of paintings and sculptures, Santiago mixes layers and slices of Manila and Sydney.

Caroline Garcia explores the hybrid body and cultural fluidity, working in video and



installation as well as live performance. Her practice is shaped by alterity, echoing notions of cultural ambiguity and displacement by adopting the role of shape shifter – sliding into the gaps between cultures, experiences of otherness and timeless clichés of exotic femininity. Garcia is concerned with forgotten choreographies, mimesis, alternative ways of viewing images of the past that eschew accepted myths, and the cultural make-up of the *Filipina*.

Mamie and Melanie Palomares' new dance film for *Balik Bayan* delves into folklore and how it manifests as choreographic language. Sisters as well as dance collaborators, they are informed by an ancestry that harks back to the Spanish colonial era – full blooded Spaniards who identify as Filipino. These eye-catching contemporary dancers, trained at Western Sydney University, integrate live action dance and film.

To acknowledge and celebrate the important role cinema has played in shaping contemporary Filipino art and culture, filmmaker Robert Nery will curate a series of experimental and feature length popular films for *Balik Bayan* called *A Portrait of the Filipino as Filmmaker*. It includes *The Super Parental Guardians*, a comedy by the country's most commercially successful filmmaker, Joyce Bernal, and Lav Diaz's *The Woman Who Left*, the film that won Diaz the Golden Lion at the 2016 Venice Film Festival and took the

Filipino director's global reputation to a new level. Also included is Ishmael Bernal's 1982 Filipino film *HIMALA* (meaning 'miracle' in Tagalog), about the evils of blind faith, and Mario O'Hara's 1976 film, *Tatlong Taong Walang Diyos* (Three Years Without God), a love story on the nature of love and sacrifice, but also a reflection on the great cruelties that human beings are capable of.

Balik Bayan's closing event is symbolically scheduled on 2 November for All Souls Day. Filipino interdisciplinary group, Anino Shadowplay Collective creates a ritual on remembering and connecting the present to the past. Framed around the balikbayan box (care packages sent to loved ones back home) the collective explores the long history of Filipino migration. The performance draws invisible threads between ancestor and migrant through sound, projected images and contemporary shadow puppetry.

Like the much desired and culturally specific care package that has been the symbol of Philippines recent migrant history, *Balik Bayan* seeks to unpack the complex layers of diasporic culture; creating a space in Blacktown where the Filipino community can make a metaphoric return to country.

Paul Howard and Paschal Berry are curators at Blacktown Arts Centre.