

Stephanie Syjuco: The Visible Invisible

Blaffer Art Museum

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Exhibition Brochure



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Text By Steven Matijcio

Who, what, and how we see is informed as much by subjectivity and circumstance as it is by the technologies we employ to manifest, standardize, and disseminate visual representation. The camera has become paramount in this discourse, producing and catalyzing many of the enduring norms shaping how we picture ourselves and the world around us. Few, if any, of the images produced by these means can claim to be objective, but as photography and video migrate from film to pixel, an increasing number of prejudices and blind spots built into the medium itself are coming to bear. In an April 2019 article for *The New York Times* in which she examines the “unconscious bias” of photography and film, writer Sarah Lewis argues, “By categorizing light skin as the norm and other skin tones as needing special corrective care, photography has altered how we interact with each other without us realizing it.” As a case study, Lewis analyzes longstanding industry-leader Kodak, who developed the chemical baseline for its color-film technology based upon the skin tone of a predominantly Caucasian demographic. In the 1950s they employed what came to be known as a “Shirley Card” to establish color correction guidelines which have continued to influence the way photos are shot and seen. “When you sent off your film to get developed,” Lewis elaborates, “lab technicians would use the image of a white woman with brown hair named Shirley as the measuring stick against which they calibrated the colors. Quality control meant ensuring that Shirley’s face looked good.” And while Kodak expanded its product line in the mid-1990s and introduced both a multi-racial Shirley Card and film stock that better captured dark tones, many of the entrenched social leanings of film emulsion technology have carried over into the DNA of digital photography. In today’s arena where Adobe and Instagram are the leading vessels of photo shaping and sharing, the politics of visibility and color remain unresolved as Lewis observes “a merry-go-round of problems leading to solutions leading to problems.”

The Modernist ambition to transcend such motley discord with a universal language produced stark, streamlined, and consistently colorless models including the white cube gallery, the International Style of Architecture, and thinly-veiled moralizing such as architect Adolf Loos’ 1910 essay *Ornament and Crime*. Arguing for the purity of unfettered function in life and design, Loos indicted the

decorative impulse as a kind of primitivism, “degenerate” and indicative of “uncivilized immorality.” The extension of his austere ideology into the so-called “neutral calibration” model for lens-based technology, however, becomes a site for contestation for artist Stephanie Syjuco. In her 2016 installation *Neutral Calibration Studies (Ornament and Crime)*, Syjuco interrupts the purported universality of modernism with a maximal, room-sized still life of images, objects and materials that implicitly argue for the inclusion—and embrace—of color, difference, and dialect. Positioning the subjects of photographic color calibration charts that have long been used to check for “correct” or “neutral” tone as an incomplete, and eminently flawed canon (including Shirley cards), Syjuco skillfully stretches and muddles the master narrative of colonialism as told through art history, Modernism, ethnography, stock photos, and Google Image searches. Moreover, by painting the backside of every attendant item in this installation gray, Syjuco also evokes the postmodernist theorem that relativizes the image as flat, empty, ubiquitous retinal fodder. For Syjuco, the image, and its circulation through the shared consciousness of popular culture retains, in her words, “profound” capacity to both “endanger” and empower certain populations.

Syjuco’s work moves in a consistently intersectional manner across analog and digital, physical and virtual, personal and societal, to measure the “real world” impact of imaging, as well as its absence/s. As much of our world migrates to paperless transmission, and the speed of photo sharing accelerates without the need for material index, she pays special attention to the way technologies affect, and often obscure, people of color. Casting a critical lens upon our supposedly enlightened models of inclusion—from the mythos of the “melting pot” to “woke” cultural appropriation—Syjuco examines the neo-colonial capacity of digital image-making. As cases in point, the tools present in Adobe Photoshop and Greenscreen technology exponentially advance historical darkroom techniques used to layer, enhance and erase elements in/from the frame. The ensuing photo is less a stringent record than a site of negotiation; a collage; especially fitting for this artist who, like many immigrants, constructs identity from pieces of myth, chronicle, and pop culture. Such is true in the 2019 installation *Dodge and Burn (Visible Storage)*, a sister work to *Neutral Calibration Studies*, in which Syjuco translates a



technique used in photography to manipulate the exposure of a selected area on a photographic print (lighten/darken) to a deconstructed self-portrait. Amidst a plethora of color calibration charts, skin tone grids, Photoshop layer patterns, and images of fruit, flowers, emojis, riot gear, and exotic artifacts gleaned from Google, she positions a pair of female mannequins wearing traditional dresses from the Philippines and United States. The garments are made from chromakey green and Photoshop checkerboard fabrics respectively, suggesting simultaneous absence and presence as they live as a mutable surface upon which to project. They are subjects and surrogates at once, standing in a field of emblems and iconographic shorthand, speaking in silence to the continued struggle for recognition as a woman, a Filipino-American, a political agent, and a person.

Looking back to move forward, Syjuco employs the modern technology of chromakey green to confront the historical invisibility imposed on women in the realm of politics, voting, and societal organization. With the titular 2018 installation *The Visible Invisible*, she fashions three iconic dresses from chromakey fabric to represent pivotal eras in the political life of women within American history. This shade of green is commonly used in film and television production as a background upon which other imagery can be projected. The particular hue is an apt, if ambivalent paradox: chosen because it rarely appears in/on nature, people, or clothing, but overtly saturated so that it renders overlays more effectively while remaining invisible. As such, this is a sadly shared condition with many of its female wearers; Intensifying ambitions pushed to the background of political recognition were also characteristic for women of the Plymouth Pilgrim epoch, the Antebellum South, and

the Civil War era represented in this installation. It is also important to note that Syjuco made these garments from commercial dress patterns rather than archival sources—reflecting the romantic, sublimating sheen projected upon these highly conflicted times in/by the popular imagination. In actuality, much of the tailoring and garment construction in the Civil War era was conducted quietly by slaves and recently freed women whose names are largely absent from both text and textile. The continued use today of anonymous “Third World” sweatshop labor by the fashion industry perpetuates this shameful practice behind the brand marquee—glorifying goods by obscuring the architecture of their making, and the identity of their makers.

The substitution of products for people continues through a number of Syjuco’s related photo series as she depicts the suffocating application of seemingly benign color. In her 2016 *Neutral Orchids* series the delicate and exotic beauty of orchid flowers are bathed in gray paint, set against backdrops of the same gray, and hung upon similarly painted walls. The elegance of the ensuing photos is undeniable and unnerving at once, singing the death knell for flowers whose color and individuality is neutralized with classical aplomb. These are lives made still, ossified while still upright, whispering an allegory for the violent erasures endemic to cultural assimilation. These deadly aesthetics continue in Syjuco’s 2019 series *Hard Light* as she spray-paints lilies, tulips, and other species of flowers indigenous to Asian countries before they were globally cultivated through colonial trade. Drawing the title from a Photoshop filter used to amplify light and create artificially intense glare, these subjects assume a grotesque spotlight—thrust forward behind a costumed shroud—performing a phantasmagorical version

of themselves for our aesthetic consumption. Syjuco poses a similar question of what is amplified, and what is obscured behind hyperbolic patriotism in the 2019 photo *Color Checker (Pile Up)*. Attempting to find space between the poles of allegiance and assimilation, the artist holds up a color calibration chart in this photo from behind the camera to a pile of Stars & Stripes paraphernalia. In so doing, asserting her visibility—if still partial—upon this loaded backdrop/history, Syjuco becomes the projection and declares, “I am an American artist as much as an Asian American one.”

Banners, flags and the residue of revolution pile up with a more open invitation to project upon, in the 2017 photo series *Chromakey (Aftermath)*. After the 2016 Presidential election Syjuco has made her politics more pronounced in art, teaching, and life, but draws a distinction between the signs she makes for marches and those that circulate in, and through, her practice. Public banners are explicit and unwavering, while those pictured in this series—lying amidst rubble, encapsulated in chromakey green—are used, silent, and dormant; stripped of function, awaiting future assignment. They reference the detritus leftover from 2016 election protests at UC Berkeley where Syjuco now teaches, reflecting a broader engagement with students whose enrollment, citizenship, and very existence in this country are in jeopardy. In this heightened arena of xenophobia and political fear-mongering, being active and visible can make one a target, at the same time remaining silent and hidden dissolves the urgency of reform. In response, Syjuco orchestrated a confrontational series of what she calls “humanizing portraits” of those whose legibility and self-representation are dangerous to both their status and safety. The 2017 series *CITIZENS* poses these students in the guise of militant anti-fascist protestors, standing pointedly before black backgrounds with hoods, masks, flags, and simmering defiance. Wearing the insolence which is so regularly projected upon them, these tenuous citizens live the paradox of being perceived threats to a nation in which they are an oft-persecuted minority. For Syjuco it is crucial to amplify these “resistant voices” while still protecting the authors, who become agents and avatars for all those who cannot be photographed, named, or identified as their political status hangs in the balance. Stuck in liminal space, oscillating between nations, families, and identities, these migrants live the masks they strive to shed.

Draperies have long been featured in classical portrait painting as a means of demonstrating the artist’s technical skills, as well as projecting their sitter’s prestige, prosperity, and societal standing. In the 2017 photo *Total Transparency (Portrait of N)*, Syjuco composes a satirical, if no less somber adaptation of this model when draping her subject completely in translucent Photoshop checkerboard fabric. Originally part of the *CITIZENS* series, the sitter is one of Syjuco’s former students and an undocumented U.S. resident who attended UC Berkeley under the increasingly precarious Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)



Stephanie Syjuco, *CITIZEN (Portrait of B)*, 2017.

Act. Now enveloped in what Syjuco calls a “camouflage textile” of the digital era, as well as an evocation of the hijab that is perceived widely in the West as a refuge of malfeasance and danger, *N* inhabits her projection surface/cloak, interrupts its clean geometry, and pushes against its flattening effect. A parallel action infuses the 2017 installation *I AM AN...*, in which Syjuco re-creates the World War II era sign of Japanese-American business owner Tatsuro Matsuda who declared “I AM AN AMERICAN” shortly before he was taken away to an internment camp. In Syjuco’s contemporary update and homage, Matsuda’s words are writ large in white block letters across a 20-foot long black curtain, partially bunched up on the right side, obscuring the word “American” as a reflection of, and chorus for citizens in flux. This convergence of loyalty and uncertainty extends into Syjuco’s 2019 *Phantom Flag*, in which the iconic American flag is woven out of translucent black fabric and hung vertically. As both an object and action, the funereal connotations of a deceased American dream float here—ghost-like—speaking to a nation-state evacuated of color, and the apparition of a country that has either lost its heterogeneity, or found a place beyond the divisiveness of colorism. Related installations *Rogue States* (2018) and *To the Person Sitting in Darkness* (2019) confront the insidious “othering” that is propagated in the form of flags, as fearful fictions of alien lands manifest into pseudo-national icons. In this upended global village, borders harden and misunderstandings proliferate as human beings are lost behind the homogenizing dressing of homelands.

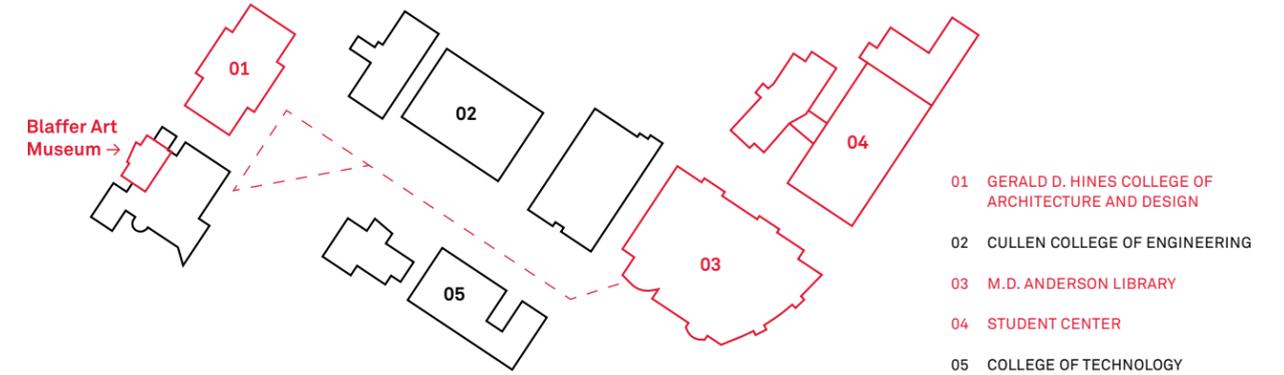
Syjuco strives to find and make visible the people gathered behind these problematic banners—both real and bogus—and free them from the simplifications inscribed by capitalism and ethnography. The way out can be through, as she locates agency in reclaiming “ethnic” patterns and designs, re-composing prejudices embedded in art history, and projecting new possibilities onto the so-called neutral. In the 19th century, traveling photographers who wanted to sell the ethos of exoticism posed native women of the Pacific Islands in studios, ensconced in patterns and props which all but swallowed their sitters. Over a century later Syjuco orchestrates a humorous, yet piercing rejoinder to this practice in the self-portrait series *Cargo Cults* (2016). Referencing a cult in which adherents practice rituals they believe will cause a more technologically advanced society to deliver them goods, Syjuco re-creates these historical compositions dressed in kaleidoscopic “ethnic” clothing culled from popular stores like Anthropologie, H&M, and Forever 21. With price tags still hanging noticeably from each item, and greyscale calibration charts running along the borders in some photos, and the center of others, Syjuco amplifies the artificiality of the enterprise and neutralizes—in black and white—the palatable consumption of people/products of color. Purposefully competing to distinguish herself as a subject from the maximalist patterns of the backdrops, themselves derived from Moroccan, Vietnamese, and Algerian textiles, Syjuco explains that she also wanted to evoke the World War I strategy of “dazzle camouflage” here. Originally placed upon battleships to thwart the

enemy’s ability to gauge their direction or speed, Syjuco re-directs this subterfuge towards the contemporary capture of foreign cultures by commerce and an enduring pathology of Western colonialism. With this camouflage, much like the hybrid nature of so many nations (i.e. The Philippines was host to colonies from Spain, Japan, and the U.S.), it is unclear who or what you are looking at—and that is exactly the point.

In the sister series *Applicants (Migrants)* (2013–2018), Syjuco uses her cellphone to take black & white passport-style photos of people whose faces are wrapped—and completely obscured—by scarves of similarly exuberant pattern and design. In so doing, the requisite signifiers of international passage are subverted and re-routed by subjects whose only danger is their defiance of identification. As empowered agents they are visible and invisible at once, speaking Syjuco’s imperative that, “You have to be able to be legible in certain ways and illegible, or unidentifiable, in other ways.” Just like her work, this re-imagined subject escapes caption and category—defying gestalts to travel as a fluid, variable entity. And while Syjuco is not one to romanticize the serious difficulties of living outside of citizenship, this indeterminacy is no less emancipatory as a flight of/for understanding. Beyond antiquated notions of essentialism and authenticity, this traveler is anything, everything, and nothing, here and there, flickering in and out of focus as much of want, as need.

SM 2020

Stephanie Syjuco, *Rogue States*, 2017.



Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston 120 Fine Arts Building University of Houston Houston, TX 77204

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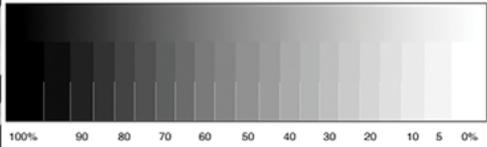
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Stephanie Syjuco, *Cargo Cults: Cover-Up*, 2016.