

ARTICIPATION

by CLARISSA CHIKIAMCO
Philstar.net

Dust masks and white ice cream

Not unlike other Filipino-Americans who journey to the Philippines to learn more about their roots, Hanna Pettyjohn undertook such a passage in reverse. Spending four months in Dallas-Forth Worth, Texas from December 2006 to April 2007, Manila-born and -based Pettyjohn got acquainted with America.

With her excursion framed by work at a geotechnical engineering laboratory that she embarked on to support her stay there, Pettyjohn uses the laboratory's essential accessory as a parallel of her perception and experience of American suburbia. She depicts not only coworkers in dust masks but even her grandfather and cousin, both of whom she had met for the first time, donning these aseptic vizards as well. The concealment of a key area of facial expression ensues into a perceptible blankness of emotion and Pettyjohn places it under a magnifying lens through extremely close headshots painted to large-scale. Like labels in which one would mark slides of samples, Pettyjohn abbreviates the subjects' names into clinical initials for the titles.

This practice of abbreviation was picked up from the writings of the late David Foster Wallace, whose stories about small-town America accompanied Pettyjohn's own American journey. His prose mirrored her own impressions and, fittingly, his initials even had equivocal meaning as the town's airport code. Pettyjohn's paintings of the town are named simultaneously representing her memories of it and paying tribute to the author she associates with those memories. The scientific, documentary feel to Wallace's writings spurred Pettyjohn to meticulously record her experiences of America through extensive writing and photographs. Isolating certain fragments from the written collection, Pettyjohn rewrote them and the result — the artist statement and introductory quote — sparked the ideas for the images of the show.

The writing-and-rewriting process which the exhibition sprang from carries the thread of Pettyjohn's practice. She constructs, deconstructs and reconstructs — in past shows quite literally, smashing old works to pieces to generate new ones. While materially less evident here, the construction-deconstruction-reconstruction practice manifests itself through her writing. The process this time, ostensibly subtler due to the product (text vs. something physical) and not an artwork per se, actually is, as writers know, quite harrowing, mentally taxing and even downright brutal. The artistic regenerative progression is, while unseen, no less difficult nor less demanding.

In what may have been a smoother process, a birdcage from an installation Pettyjohn did for a 2008 group show, where she also did a dust mask-portrait, is carried into this new setting and reworked into a new installation. The previous installation had a small house painted in clouds, conveying the American dream of an unspoiled life, which then rested atop a chicken pillow entrapped in the cage. In its current incarnation, the cage dangles freely from the ceiling with neon text of 'now this is now.' It hovers above naked white plaster casts of homes forming their own little residential area. Each house the same as the last, the installation edifies the flatness and monotony of everyday America, where everything — and even everyone — seems to be a clone.

For many, this may not be a representation of their own perception and experience of the USA. For Pettyjohn though, there is something more to and about these idyllic dreams. Mundane, repetitive, sanitized, incessant and, ultimately, impossible, *The American Sweet* is a land where everyone gets to have some ice cream. But the only flavor is vanilla. ■

(Hanna Pettyjohn's *The American Sweet* exhibit is on view until June 6 at Slab (Silverlens Lab). Silverlens Gallery is at the second floor, YMC Bldg. II, 2320 Pasong Tamo Ext., Makati. For info e-mail manage@silverlensphoto.com, or visit www.silverlensphoto.com.)

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'Baron Just 'on Loan'...

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me a drama project soon."

Is she willing to work with her ex, Rustom who has since transformed into BB Gandanghari?

"We're okay," she quips. "But I won't answer na lang about a project with him."

Guess Mina would rather not do a *Maalaala Mo Kaya* of the Rustom Padilla episode in her life. ■

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