Stephanie Syjuco (b. Manila, 1974, lives and works in Oakland, California) creates large-scale spectacles of collected cultural objects, cumulative archives, and temporary vending installations. Her projects leverage open-source systems, shareware logic, and flows of capital in order to investigate issues of economies and empire. She is featured in Season 9 of the acclaimed PBS documentary series Art21: Art in the Twenty-First Century. Recent exhibitions include Being: New Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; This Site is Under Revolution at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art; and Disrupting Craft: The 2018 Renwick Invitational at the Smithsonian Museum of American Art. Syjuco is the recipient of a 2014 Guggenheim Fellowship Award and her work has been exhibited widely, including at MoMA PS1, Whitney Museum of American Art, ICA Boston, and the 2015 Asian Art Biennial (Taiwan), among others. A longtime educator, she is an Assistant Professor in Sculpture at the University of California at Berkeley. Syjuco received her MFA from Stanford University and BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute.

Stephanie Syjuco: Rogue States is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Wassan Al-Khudhairi, Chief Curator, with Misa Jeffereis, Assistant Curator. The exhibition is generously supported by Nion McEvoy; Janet American Art, ICA Boston, and the 2015 Asian Art Invitational.

The exhibition is part of Innovations in Textiles STL 2019. Stephanie Syjuco: Rogue States presents multiple bodies of work that explore the complexities of such charged concepts as citizenship, immigration, and nationality. Using a wide range of media, including installation, photography, sculpture, and textile, the artist links history to present-day political narratives connected to image-making and the impacts of colonialism. Syjuco is especially interested in mining archives, and exposing institutionalized histories as narratives constructed and influenced by those in power. The artist draws attention to America’s history of cultural “othering” and rendering certain populations invisible, even as she attempts to present alternative stories of marginalized communities.

The exhibition takes its name from Syjuco’s installation of twenty-two flags, hanging in the museum’s performance space. For this installation, Syjuco recreates flags designed for Hollywood and European movies depicting real and fictionalized foreign enemy nations through a Western lens, drawing attention to the flag as a complicated symbol of nationhood and national identity. In the series Cargo Cults, the artist presents herself as a foreign, exotic other, adorned in “ethnic” designs sold in the US—each photograph’s flag as a complicated symbol of nationhood and ways of looking at non-Western cultures.

More recently Syjuco has turned her attention toward an analysis of what it means to be American. The artist makes work in direct response to the current political climate in which the nation finds itself divided by polarizing narratives. Syjuco’s photograph Total Transparency Filter (Portrait of N) is related to her body of work, CITIZENS, in which the artist photographs immigrants, people of color, LGBTQ, young women, refugees, and undocumented people—populations at risk from the rise of xenophobia. Just as our historical narrative has rendered certain populations visible and others absent, the Photoshop transparency pattern in the Photoshop transparency pattern

Note: For more information, visit camstl.org.
Portraits of N renders this undocumented person both present and unidentifiable, visible and invisible. Ultimately, Syjuco suggests that different realities and futures are possible to construct, but only after examining the complicated and contradictory stories about how we reached this perilous present, and why.

Rogue States

The title work, Rogue States, is part of Syjuco’s ongoing investigation into the power and meaning of flags and banners. A country’s flag supports ideas of nationhood and national identity, even as it may instill fear or threaten. Rogue States consists of twenty-two flags, their designs reproduced from American flags and banners. A country’s flag supports ideas of nationhood and national identity, and often symbolizes political, and social narratives. Block out the Sun attempts to deny the medium its ability to perpetuate racist narratives by literally blocking a view of the subjects of the photographs—the Filipino inhabitants of the living exhibits.

To the Person Sitting in Darkness

To the Person Sitting in Darkness is part of Syjuco’s ongoing investigation into the power and meaning of flags and banners. A country’s flag supports ideas of nationhood and national identity, and often symbolizes a country’s claim over territory. The flag installed in the courtyard takes its design from the words of Mark Twain. Twain condemned all efforts by Western nations to lay claim to the non-Western world. In a 1901 essay for the North American Review, reprinted as a pamphlet by the Anti-Imperialist League, Twain said, “And as for a flag for the Philippine Province, it is easily managed. We can have a special one—our states do it: We can just have our usual flag, with the white stripes painted black and the stars replaced by the skull and crossbones.” Twain’s flag was never produced. Syjuco prints the flag as it was designed and published in the 1904 World’s Fair, particularly records of the exposition’s Filipino Village, one of the notorious “living exhibits.” In the various archives Syjuco accessed she came across images of the exposition’s Filipino Village. This resulted in Syjuco questioning the power of photography and its ability to capture a moment in time that may create long-lasting historical, political, and social narratives.

Block out the Sun

Sylvioo took part in a two-week residency in St. Louis over the summer of 2019. During this time she researched local archives for information relating to the 1904 World’s Fair, particularly records of the exposition’s Filipino Village, one of the notorious “living exhibits.” In the various archives Syjuco accessed she came across images of the exposition’s Filipino Village. This resulted in Syjuco questioning the power of photography and its ability to capture a moment in time that may create long-lasting historical, political, and social narratives. Block out the Sun attempts to deny the medium its ability to perpetuate racist narratives by literally blocking a view of the subjects of the photographs—the Filipino inhabitants of the living exhibits.

Cargo Cults

Within much of Syjuco’s work lies critiques of 21st-century capitalism as she borrows images from the internet and the American marketplace. In her photographic series Cargo Cults, she depicts herself as a foreign and exotic “other.” However, the clothing, props, and artifacts used to suggest authenticity were purchased from American shopping malls and are appropriated “primitive” designs. This body of work came out of her fascination with historical ethnographic photos from the Philippines and the notion that these images were constructed and influenced by the dominant culture or colonizer that created them. Depending on who is looking at these photographs, notions of native and foreign are blurred. Born in the Philippines and raised in the Bay Area, Syjuco has stated, “As an American immigrant, I’ve had to myself construct an identity based on a collage of visuals and influences, each telling me what I am supposed to culturally be.” By using the intensely patterned “dazzle camouflage” backdrop—employed by WWI British battleships to confuse enemy aim—Syjuco denies an easy read of the image and our perspectives of others.

Dodge and Burn (Visible Storage) and Neutral Calibration Studies (Ornament + Crime)

The installations Neutral Calibration (Ornament + Crime) and Dodge and Burn (Visible Storage) are contemporary “still lives” containing hundreds of images and objects, many taken from stock photos and Google Image searches. These objects are contained on platforms that are reminiscent of a stage set, with a full neutral-gray painted backside and backdrops. Each installation contains a multiplicity of coded narratives of empire and colonialism told through art history, Modernism, and ethnography. Man Ray’s photograph of a white woman model holding an African mask, a reproduction of the rattan chair on which Black Panther Huey Newton posed, fake plants, tiki torches, artifacts from the Met Museum’s collection—these are just a few of the loaded images that make visible the marks that empire and colonialism have left on seemingly innocuous cultural objects.

In Dodge and Burn (Visible Storage), Syjuco presents two of her hand-sewn garments: an early 20th-century American gown rendered in chroma-key green, and a Baró’t Saya—a traditional Filipino dress—made from Photoshop transparency checkerboard pattern. Both patterns serve as generic placeholders for photo or video editing, and here represent how the US has plasticized how the female is equated certain populations invisible. Syjuco focuses on female garments to call attention to how the female is equated to nationhood. The chroma-key and Photoshop patterns used for these traditional garments point a critical eye toward past narratives, with the implication that despite associations with modern technology, these controlling narratives continue to dominate. The quality of her hand-sewn garments makes these cultural conflicts difficult to ignore.