

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 Mohle-Boetani, MD; Seth Ammerman; and the Whitaker Foundation. The Artist Talk is generously supported by the Robert Lehman Foundation. Special thanks to Catharine Clark Gallery, RYAN LEE Gallery, and Zane Williams, and to The Luminary for hosting Stephanie Syjuco's St. Louis artist residency. Thank you to the St. Louis organizations that facilitated the artist's research: Missouri Historical Society, Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis Mercantile Library, St. Louis Public Library, and St. Louis Science Center.

The exhibition is part of Innovations in Textiles STL 2019.

Related Programs

Artist Talk: Stephanie Syjuco
Saturday, September 7, 11:00 am

Feast Your Eyes: Jane Sacro of Vicia
Tuesday, November 5, 6:30 pm

Film Screening: Eating Up Easter
Thursday, November 14, 7:00 pm

RE: Living History
Saturday, December 7, 1:00 pm

Drawing from Observation
Wednesday, December 11, 10:30 am

Artist's Suggested Reading List

Stephanie Syjuco provided the following list of books, essays, archived documents, and a syllabus to share insights into her art and ideas.

'All Monuments Must Fall: A Syllabus.' Available at: <https://monumentsmustfall.wordpress.com>.

Apostol, Gina. (2019) *Insurrecto*. New York: Soho Press.

Azoulay, Ariella. (2012) *The Civil Contract of Photography*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Behrens, Roy R., ed. (2012) *Ship Shape: A Dazzle Camouflage Sourcebook*. Cedar Falls, IA: Bobolink Books.

'Camouflage of Vehicles.' (1944) FM5-20B War Department Field Manual, Corps of Engineers, War Department. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/Fm5-20b>.

D'Souza, Aruna. (2018) *Whitewalling: Art, Race & Protest in 3 Acts*. New York: Badlands Unlimited.

Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten. (2013) *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Chico, CA: AK Press.

Steyerl, Hito. (2009) 'In Defense of the Poor Image.' Available at: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image>.

Twain, Mark. (1901) 'To the Person Sitting in Darkness.' Available at: <https://ia801903.us.archive.org/3/items/jstor-25105120/25105120.pdf>.

Wexler, Laura. (2000) *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.



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Gallery Guide
Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis

September 6–
December 29, 2019



Stephanie Syjuco Rogue States

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 authenticity betrayed by visible price tags. The work critiques ethnographic portraiture and institutionalized 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



Total Transparency Filter (Portrait of N), 2017. Archival pigment print, 40 × 30 inches. Courtesy the artist.



Audio Tour
Visit camstl.org/audio on a mobile device to hear directly from the artist and curator.



Rogue States, 2018. Twenty-two digitally printed flags, 5 × 3 feet (each). Installation view, *This Site is Under Revolution* at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, June 6–July 12, 2018. Courtesy the artist.

Portrait 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 Hollywood and European movies that depict fictional and imagined “enemy nations” through a Western lens. These include such blockbusters as *Coming to America* and *Die Hard 2*. The fictional flags represent made-up countries from Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Central and South America. In popular movies and television comedies these rogue states are positioned as backward, terrorist, unstable—the uncontrollable “other.” The flags are hung vertically from the ceiling in rows, to convey a United Nations-style convention of collective anxiety.

Block out the Sun

Syjuco 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 image after image 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.

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 *North American Review*, her version is rendered oversized yet limp and powerless.

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 lifes” 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



Block out the Sun, 2019. Photographic intervention in the archives of the Missouri Historical Society, Mercantile Society, and the Missouri Public Library. Archival pigment prints mounted on aluminum, wooden risers, display case, 8 × 10 inches each, of 30 (96 × 48 × 36 inches overall), Courtesy the artist.



Cargo Cults: Head Bundle, 2016. Archival pigment print, 40 × 30 inches. Courtesy the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery.

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 Baro’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 projected a skewed history of its dominance, rendering 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.