


Paul W. Zuccaire
GALLERY

Staller Center for the Arts
 Stony Brook University
 Stony Brook NY 11794-5425

Front cover: *Uber Hashtag* (detail)
 Back cover: *Serotonin*

ISABEL MANALO

Skin Codes

PAUL W. ZUCCAIRE GALLERY STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY **NOVEMBER 7 – DECEMBER 12, 2015**



ISABEL MANALO

Isabel Manalo is an interdisciplinary visual artist whose work addresses ideas of power and identity as defined by race, ethnicity, geography and class. Combining painting with photography, drawing, sewing and writing, her work embraces visual clues and coding, often inspired by her Filipino-American heritage.

Ms. Manalo recently returned to Washington D.C. after living in Berlin for the last three years. The following is an excerpt from an interview conducted in her studio on October 5, 2015.

Karen Levitov: Can you discuss the sources for the symbols and imagery in your current body of work?

Isabel Manalo: Two of the most significant influences for me right now are the pre-colonial Filipino script called the Baybayin and the ancient art of Filipino tattooing as practiced by many indigenous tribes even today. Prior to the Spanish coming, the Philippines communicated in writing with the Baybayin. However, it was abolished by the Spaniards when they colonized the Philippines. The script was rediscovered about twenty-five years ago and although it isn't used anymore, it is being honored and revitalized in many forms of art.

In the Asian-American diaspora, Filipino-Americans have always been somewhat invisible. My parents came to the U.S. in the 1960s to study. I was born in the U.S. and lived in the Philippines for a few years as a young child. Even after we moved back to the U.S. we spoke Tagalog (the official language of the Philippines) in the house. Also, my mom was a Tagalog professor so the language was important to me on many levels. When I learned about the pre-colonial Baybayin alphabet in the mid-1990s, it struck a chord and started figuring into my paintings.

Skin Codes

Opening Reception: Saturday, November 7, 7–9 pm

Artist Talk: Wednesday, November 18, 4:15 pm

Tell me about Filipino tattooing as an inspiration.

People knew about the ancient art of tattooing, but for me, it was a relatively new discovery. I love that it is pre-Spanish and has nothing to do with our colonial past, that's really important to me.

I wanted to reconnect with an art source that is non-Western. Something that made reference to my past as a Filipina that was pre-colonial. I did some research and what I eventually found was the art of Filipino tattooing. It had nothing to do with painting per se but it really struck me because it's ink and it's being applied with a tool, like a paint brush. I also fell in love with the patterns of repeated motifs and symbols that all have meaning in regards to power, spirituality, individual and group accomplishments and so much more.

I started experimenting with repeating the Baybayin and appropriating some of the motifs from the tattoos in this patterned way. Now I'm playing around with pattern and abstract elements. The movement of writing as well as spilling and pouring paint are all really important in my practice.

Describe how the coding of tattooing combines with other symbols in your work.

In indigenous Filipino societies, tattoos were given as a recognition of achievement in the community. While both men and women received tattoos, the recognition was for accomplishments divided along traditional gender roles. Men were awarded for the hunt and protecting the community and women received tattoos that honored their role in the domestic sphere.

Tattoos were inked using bamboo with a needle on the end that would tap the ink into your skin, a long and painful process. Traditional societies, like the Cordillera people in the north, still practice this art of tattooing in patterns that can be traced back to pre-colonial times. There is a recent interest among some Filipino-Americans to

have tattoos in that same pattern applied in the traditional way, in a sense reviving that practice to connect with their heritage.

I'm appropriating some of these motifs as well as motifs from other areas, combined with my own symbols that are based on memory and also taken from contemporary social media. For example, I incorporated this braiding symbol as it recalls moments when my sister and I would braid one another's hair. The emoji are connected to my own kids and their generation of chatting and texting. I wanted to blend the two, so when people look at it, they might first see the traditional Filipino symbols and then they'll see an emoji. For me, the patterns have meaning in each motif—otherwise, why repeat them?

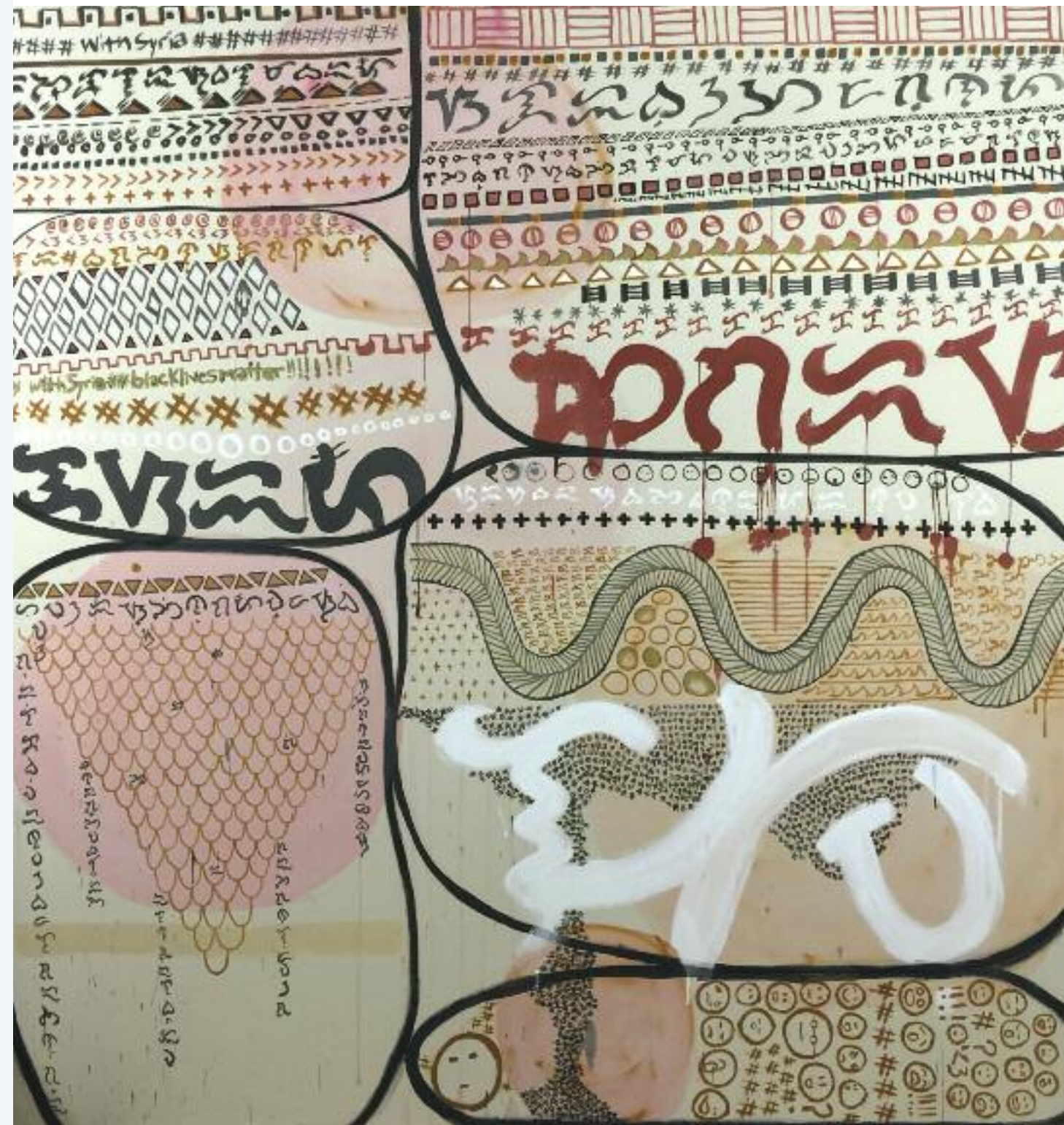
What other specific issues are you referencing through symbols?

I'm really concerned about the refugee crisis in Europe right now, so in this painting I just finished there is a hashtag #WithSyria. It also has emojis and the mountain symbol, appropriated from a Philippine indigenous tribe. Other paintings reference what's going on in the United States with the Black Lives Matter movement, and climate change centered in the oil drilling in Alaska. These are all political issues that I'm most concerned about. It is my way of sharing that with the viewer, trying to tweet onto the canvas but hopefully more subversively than overtly.

Your earlier work used symbols and coding as well.

Going back to grad school, I started work that was inspired by maps, creating all these different symbols both of my own and preexisting. I used phone numbers, for example, to make a map of people as an abstraction, and used topographical lines to make abstracted landscapes.

I've always loved looking at things from above, that aerial point of view. I love looking at maps. It helps to ground me where I am. There's something about feeling like I'm able to navigate



With Syria

through a city and orient myself and know where I am. There is something really beautiful about the way maps are drawn, so I've referenced them quite a bit in my previous work. It made sense conceptually at the time. I was interested in boundaries that were connected with colonial histories, especially the Philippines and other Southeast Asian nations that were brutally colonized by European nations. Trying to create maps about lands that had no boundaries had a personal meaning.

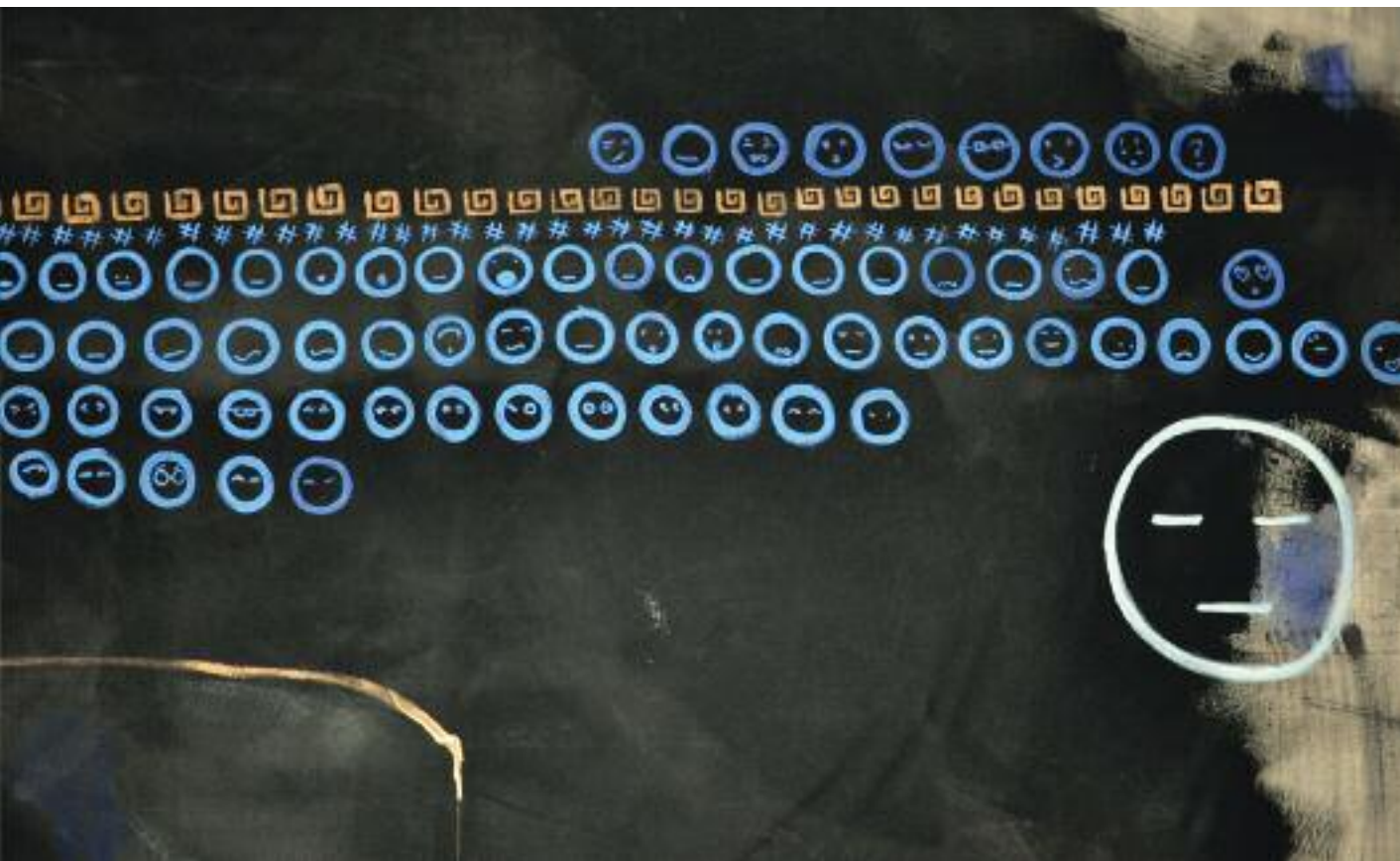
Is map-making part of your current work?

In my current work, when I make the pours or do brushwork with the canvas on the floor, I'm always thinking of the paintings from an aerial point of view. I'm not trying to make it look like a particular land mass but I like the fact that it is this

made-up map, like a treasure map.

You lived in Berlin for the past three years—can you describe its impact on your work?

Berlin is like New York, you feel anonymous and no one's looking at you and you can do whatever the heck you want without anyone judging you. It was so liberating. So I started making work that was much more raw. And I didn't care if the works were pretty or beautiful or what anyone thought. I just wanted to say, okay, I'm going to make this work, it's not going to be about romantic landscape painting, it's not going to be about abstraction, it's just going to come out of this image, which was the [Baybayin] script. How can I make a picture with this script and how can I make it emotional? And now it's evolving from that—an attempt to make writing pictorial.



Some Kind of Magic (detail)

Can you talk about the stitching that you do in some of the work?

In Berlin, I started to think about making marks a different way, other than paint, other than graphite, so I started sewing. And I love the action of hand-sewing—puncturing the paper—it was very violent, but also very satisfying. When you punch the paper, it makes that *phhttt* sound and there's the physical feel of it as well. I poked my finger a lot and there was a lot of blood.

I wanted to organize the small stitched paper pieces in a way that was like a funky quilt, where it wasn't a perfect square. I am thinking of sewing them all together. I was thinking of these as a collection and as a tapestry.

Tell me about the large works on unstretched canvas.

This is all connecting to the idea of surface as inked skin. The whole process of puncturing the paper, stitching, bleeding, I started thinking of the paper as skin, it became visceral. Shortly after I started to paint again on canvas, I came across the Filipino tattooing and it just came together—ah, the canvas is skin! I started to imagine tattooing on skin. So I would wash the canvas prior to painting on it to soften it up and make it more skin-like with all its imperfections. The tapestry installation is all on washed canvases. When I paint on it, the paint goes into the fabric, much as ink goes into the skin in tattooing.

These unstretched canvases are more spontaneous than the paintings on stretchers. That's what allowed me to be more wild—more fleeting. These I make on the floor, beginning by pouring paint and letting it take on a life of its own. It seems to work with the idea of skin—in Western culture there is the idea that skin needs to be perfect, but here I'm letting it go, letting it take on a life of its own. I'm planning to drape this from the wall in a sculptural way.

Memory, both real and imagined, has figured in your previous work. Are these ideas present in your newer work as well?

Yes, the script and symbols reflect memories of my time in the Philippines as well as what is going on in my mind today. The bulk of my work right now is couched in a certain nostalgia. It is very specific to my own memories, it is very personal. For example, the mountain peak symbol is a direct reference to my travels in the Philippines right after college. There is a huge difference in the highland and lowland culture. In mountain culture, it is much more remote, not connected to Western civilization, more rural, poorer, and people are more connected to their tribal identities. I respect the way they treat each other and the environment. Whenever I make that mountain symbol I think of these people.

Can you describe your process?

It begins with the topics that I've been following and often times researching. However, it often times is equally an emotional response about these issues. After priming the canvases I usually start with a mark or a pour. It may be days before I go back and make another mark. So it builds slowly in layers and over time. I don't sit down in front of a canvas for hours. Most of the time I'm thinking about it when I'm exercising, eating, helping my kids with homework... and then I make a plan of when I'm going to make that next move. It all progresses rather intuitively once it begins.

What are you thinking about for your next project?

I still want to continue exploring the Baybayin as image, changing the scale of it and the kind of brushwork involved. One material I've been dying to use is abaca paper. Abaca is the hemp of the Philippines and is derived from its plant stalks. Abaca is also known as "Manila hemp." I'd like to incorporate more stitching in my work, and maybe learn how to embroider, which is a big part of the Philippine textile tradition. I'd really want to embroider the Baybayin script onto paper and canvas.



CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

All works courtesy of the artist and Addison/Ripley Fine Art

Glacier Melt, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
72 x 72"

Isang Araw (One Day), 2014
Graphite, collage and fabric on paper
Approx. 65 x 75"

Katotohanan (The Truth), 2014
Acrylic, collage, string and graphite on layered paper and Mylar
65 x 75"

Love Letter, 2014–2015
Acrylic on canvas
75 x 75"

Mahal Ito (This is Love/Expensive), 2014
Graphite and acrylic on paper with fabric
Approx. 48 x 48"

Seratonin, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
72 x 72"

Singing La La La, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
72 x 72"

Some Kind of Magic, 2014–2015
Acrylic on canvas
75 x 75"

Stitched Baybayin, 2013–2014
Graphite, pen, thread and collage on paper
Dimensions variable

The Stories We Write, 2014–2015
Acrylic on canvas
Approx. 96 x 144"

Tagumpay (Victory), 2014–2015
Acrylic on canvas
75 x 75"

Uber Hashtag, 2014
Acrylic on canvas
75 x 75"

Verbotten! (Forbidden), 2014
Acrylic on canvas
75 x 75"

What Matters, 2014
Acrylic on canvas
75 x 75"

With Syria, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
72 x 72"

Left: *Love Letter* (detail)



Glacier Melt



Seratonin



Tagumpay



Isang Araw



Singing La La La



Uber Hashtag



Katotohanan (detail)



Some Kind of Magic



Verbotten!



Love Letter



Stitched Baybayin



What Matters



Mahal Ito



The Stories We Write



With Syria



Photo courtesy of the Orlando Museum of Art

BIOGRAPHY

Isabel Manalo has shown her work internationally since 1999, including a solo exhibition at the Orlando Museum of Art and group and solo exhibitions in New York, Washington D.C., Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Philadelphia and Berlin. Her work is in numerous public and private collections including the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C., and the permanent collections of the U.S. Embassies in Bulgaria, Kazakhstan and Nepal. She was featured in *New American Paintings* in 2004 and 2006 and was awarded a Fellowship at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts in 2008, 2009 and 2011, with support from the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation for 2009. Her work is represented by Addison/Ripley Fine Art where she has had two solo shows in 2009 and 2012 and another upcoming in 2016. Additionally, Manalo's work is included in the Drawing Center and White Columns curated artist registries.

From 2000–2012, Manalo taught at American University's Department of Art. She served on the Board of Directors and the Visual Arts Committee for the District of Columbia Arts Center from 2010–2012. From 2012–2013 she served as a Visiting Artist and Curator at Takt International Artist Residency where she conducted weekly art critiques and seminars for the artists in residence. Manalo is the Founding Director and Managing Editor of *The Studio Visit*, a curated web journal. She received her MFA in Painting from Yale University, a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a BA from the University of Wisconsin, Madison.



Stitched Baybayin (detail)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is my great pleasure to present the work of Isabel Manalo. Her creative energy and generous time spent talking with classes, visiting graduate studios and presenting an Artist Talk are greatly appreciated. I thank her for her enthusiasm for the project and for sharing her new work with the Stony Brook community.

I would also like to thank the Art Department and the staff of the Staller Center for the Arts, notably Alan Inkles, Director, and Samantha Clink, Gallery and Community Relations Assistant. Many thanks as well to Pete Pantaleo for his installation expertise and to the student gallery assistants.

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Karen Levitov
Director and Curator

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Gallery Hours
Tuesday–Friday, 12–4 pm, Saturday, 7–9 pm
Also open during intermission and one hour prior to most Staller Center season performances. Free Admission.

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