



Here We Are On Earth

solo exhibition by **Geraldine Javier**

19 November - 18 December 2022



On Earth, As It Is

Text by Michelangelo Samson

I. Embers

*The first step in liquidating a people...is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will forget what it is and what it was.*¹

- Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

It began with fire. On the morning of January 12, 2020, a fissure appeared on the La Cumbre crater of Fernandina, a volcanic island in the Galapagos. From this rift, threads of magma traced ancient pathways down the mountainside to the boiling ocean below.

At the same time, over sixteen thousand kilometers away, on a line along the equator, another volcano in the Philippines—Taal—began sending out seismic swarms that shook buildings and caused birds to fall silent. Ash fell like false snow. Soon, Taal Volcano erupted in a series of violent pyroclastic explosions, sending a plume of smoke nearly fifteen kilometers into the sky. The black pillar rose in the dying light and collided with low-lying clouds, causing a great lightning storm to ignite the night, as if titans were wrestling in the caldera of the angry mountain.

The artist Geraldine Javier, whose studio and estate are in Cuenca, Batangas—a township near the volcano—witnessed these biblical scenes firsthand. Days later, when the eruptions subsided, the devastation across Taal and Batangas Province was laid bare. Homes and buildings had been turned to rubble, abandoned animals were mummified in ash, trees were burnt—it was a disappeared landscape, rendered in charcoal.

As residents returned to rebuild what they could, another silent, secret fire ravaged the countryside. A global pandemic had taken hold, and a community that had wrestled with gods, was once again confronted with death. Batangas Province, together with the rest of the Philippines, entered a lockdown on March 17, 2020, a quarantine that would eventually become one of the longest in the world.

In that solitude, millions perished. Under blue skies, with flowers blooming in great

¹ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 159.

numbers, free to grow in unfettered joy, freezer trucks filled with the dead, stadiums were converted into makeshift hospitals, the elderly faded like old fabric, and doctors and nurses fell at the front lines of a war that had no visible end. In contemplating the great human cost of Covid-19, Marisa Renee Lee wrote, “Grief is the repeated experience of learning to live after loss.”² It was this burden that was handed to the living, to emerge from isolation and mourn what was the lost in the embers.

The pandemic changed all calculations. As humanity entered a cocoon, so did the truth. Instruments of communication shrank to the size of a phone screen. Opinions, news, and even history became mutable, malleable, transmuted into weird, unnatural shapes, then packaged to individuals, as hollow, daily bread. Across the world, people thirsty for hope, absorbed these revised histories and triggered a wave of disturbing political changes. On May 9, 2022, the Philippines elected the son of a former dictator as president in the largest mandate ever given to any candidate. At one stroke, four decades of history were successfully erased, a national memory burned away.

It is these three strands of burning—of the land, of the lost, of memory—that Geraldine Javier weaves together in her show *Here We Are On Earth* at Mizuma Gallery in Singapore. This is Javier’s first show in Singapore in a decade. In the intervening years since her last shows in Singapore when she worked in community, first with the workshop and print-makers of STPI³, then with her own workshop of embroiderers and weavers in the Philippines for Equator Art Projects⁴, Javier returns to a more solitary mode of art-making, as a painter, but using the art practices she has built up over her career—collage, engraving, print-making, etching—to add to the dimensions of her paintings.

In the title painting of the show, *Here We Are On Earth*, Javier imagines a cross-section of deep soil, the earth peeled back, revealing the root system of old trees. The roots are also like veins, spreading angrily through the canvas, ending in a sponge-like ganglia. There is an impression of friction, of nerves set on edge, or electrons about to burst. Though the work is rooted in the earth, the central network of orbs can also be likened to planets, a galactic system set aflame.

The work is comprised of many layers of powdered pigments and encaustic wax. At the very base, like an inverse grisaille, there is a bed of volcanic ash. It is this ash

² Marisa Renee Lee, “Grief, Everywhere.” *The Atlantic*, April 12, 2022. Accessed September 17, 2022.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/04/us-covid-grief-one-million-deaths/629533/>.

³ *Geraldine Javier: Playing God In An Art Lab*, Singapore Tyler Print Institute, Singapore, July 14 – August 11, 2012.

⁴ *Geraldine Javier: Chapel of Many Saints and Sinners*, Equator Art Projects, Singapore, November 2 – 25, 2012.

which lends the work an earthy darkness. It also recalls the Ring of Fire, a necklace of volcanoes on the rim of the Pacific Ocean, a chain that began with Fernandina and ended with Taal. Volcanic eruptions are extremely destructive. But they also bring forth a great abundance of minerals, restoring fertility to the land. This is akin to the artistic process.

It is the gift of artists that even when they are using the language of pain, their act of creation is like a salve against loss. 'Here We Are' is as much a lament, as a statement of being. It is the lone tree left standing after the explosion that reminds us that the forest will grow again.

II. Listening Post

*This was the loneliest time. In the deep silence of midnight, the universe revealed itself to its listeners as a vast desolation.*⁵

- Cixin Liu, *The Three Body Problem*

At the center of a forest clearing, in the town of Parkes in New South Wales, Australia, stands the 64-meter radio telescope Murriyang. The name, in the indigenous Wiradjuri language means 'Skyworld', the place where the creator spirit Biyaami lives. Murriyang, together with the Green Bank Observatory in West Virginia, USA, is part of Breakthrough Listen—the decade-long initiative conceived by Stephen Hawking as the latest step in the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. "It is important for us to know if we are alone in the dark," Hawking said at the project launch.⁶

Breakthrough Listen is meant to survey a million stars across the night sky for signals of life. The radio telescopes in Australia and the USA have become so sensitive that they are able to hear broadcasts with the power of common radar at distances spanning light years. Critically, the data gathered is regularly uploaded to public servers giving astronomers a chance to seek patterns in the background cosmic noise.

Six years into the project, the heavens remain silent.

During the pandemic, a similar silence descended on the world. Like other artists, Javier used the quarantine as a creative retreat, crafting the concept behind her latest show. While in seclusion, Javier was drawn to the works of Cixin Liu, China's greatest writer of science fiction. In science fiction, time is counted in billions of

⁵ Cixin Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, trans. Ken Liu (New York: Tor Books, 2014), 271.

⁶ Michael Rundle, "\$100m Breakthrough Listen is 'largest ever' search for alien civilisations," *Wired*, July 20, 2015, accessed September 24, 2022, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/breakthrough-listen-project>.

years, distances in light years, empires in hundreds of generations. In this language of astronomical numbers, Javier saw a vessel that could contain the heartache of natural and national disasters, as well as the awesome human toll of the pandemic. For this reason, the works in *Here We Are On Earth* use the iconography of the universe, the alphabet of the cosmos.

In Cixin Liu's work, Javier found a resonance. Liu drew from different resources compared to his Western counterparts. He lived in a country that numbered billions in its population, where the scale of disaster, the impact of death in the thousands, could be processed, and even understood.

As Joshua Rothman wrote, "Liu's stories see life from two angles, as both a titanic struggle for survival and as a circumscribed exercise in finitude."⁷ Javier balances these opposing forces of defiance and acceptance in her show.

In the installation work *The Golden Cell (Endurance Test – The Fuck Us Years)*, Javier assembles a structure of golden bricks, like a confessional, containing one stool, also in gold. Closer inspection of the bricks shows that they have been engraved with the word 'Lies' on the outside, and with the words denoting measures of time on the inside. Anyone sitting within the structure will feel trapped, contemplating the lattice light crossing the space, a messenger from the greater light outside. Here, time becomes a loop, an eternal hourglass where the golden sands stand frozen. The work is a metaphor for blindness, a monument to defeat, the temporary loss of memory, like a space capsule of inertia.

Above this work is another installation, *Broadcast From The Sky*. Waves of gauzy tulle fabric embroidered with the silhouettes of birds are stretched across the ceiling of the gallery. A resident of Endurance Test below needs only to look upwards to escape the earthbound confines of their golden cage. This too, is the Skyworld—home of the creators, the dome of suns, of birds in flight, pulsing like black stars.

III. Monarch

I can only say in the dark / how one spring / I crushed a monarch in midflight / just to know how it felt / to have something change / in my hands

- Ocean Vuong, *My Father Writes from Prison*⁸

One of the greatest migrations on Earth begins in late summer when millions of

⁷ Joshua Rothman, "China's Arthur C. Clarke," *The New Yorker*, March 6, 2015, accessed September 17, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/chinas-arthur-c-clarke>.

⁸ Ocean Vuong, "My Father Writes From Prison," in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017), 18.

monarch butterflies fly south from Canada and the Northeastern United States to forests of oyamel firs in Central Mexico—a journey of two months and nearly five thousand kilometers. The butterflies then hibernate in Mexico for the winter before starting the cycle again in reverse. The butterflies have never seen the forests in Mexico, but their generational compass guides them unerringly each year, following the seasons of the world. This movement contains one further mystery—the journey north is achieved by four generations of butterflies, each living for only four to five weeks, mating and spawning along the way, but the journey south, as Carolyn Kormann notes, “is accomplished in a single generation—known as the Methuselah generation, because its butterflies live for eight months.”⁹

Butterflies have been featured prominently throughout Javier’s career. The metamorphosis a butterfly undergoes, its propagating role, and its incandescent beauty over its short life is a source of constant reflection for the artist.

In the painting *Cassiopeia A*, Javier depicts an apocalypse. Before a pink cloud tinged with black, white butterflies pause in fragile flight, caught in the moment before a conflagration engulfs them. The work is named after the remnants of a supernova that occurred eleven thousand light years away from Earth. The painting conflates the fleeting lives of butterflies with the death of stars. *Cassiopeia A* contains a tender message to the lost. Just as generations of butterflies pass away in the service of migration, perhaps there is an unseen purpose to death on a grand scale.

In the same way that a volcanic explosion can renew the land, the explosion of a star is the foundry from which planets are formed. The ejecta from a supernova unleashes the heavy metals found only in the core of stars, thus propagating the seeds for new life.

For the painting, *Dark Matter*, Javier depicts a pastel brightness surrounded by a deep mossy green, a shining city under water. The luminous center of the painting, when seen closely, is comprised of many rose, yellow, and orange forms, like microscopic jellyfish, or an array of aliens from a first-generation video game. The darkness surrounding these elements at first seem sinister until they are seen through the lens of astrophysics. The formation of planets after a supernova cannot be fully explained by gravity alone. The force of a nova-scale explosion should lead to a dissipation of material across the galactic void; instead, the metals congeal over millennia, to become new planets revolving around new stars. Physicists have surmised that there is an unseen force, yet to be discovered, that shapes planets into being. This is dark matter, the cosmic shepherd. “Without dark matter,” Ethan Siegel

⁹ Carolyn Korman, “Saving the Butterfly Forest,” *The New Yorker*, February 8, 2021, accessed September 25, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/02/15/saving-the-butterfly-forest>.

writes, “the Universe would likely have no signs of life at all.”¹⁰

From the darkness, there comes light. From the light, there is life.

In the painting *The Oort Cloud*, Javier imagines a beautiful nebula of indigo, violet, and blue, a space of beginnings, like a cradle. The spiral arms of this galaxy transform from gaseous wisps to leaves and ferns, the embedded plant life from the artist’s studio. And then a final revelation: engraved on the canvas, animals emerge from this galactic forest, as if summoned to a conclave, answering the call to gather in the great enterprise of creation.

With *Here We Are On Earth*, Javier confronts the great questions of our time. Are we alone? Is it all dark? Working with encaustic and resin, the artist harnesses the destroying fire as her brush, painting the story of the last years in wax, through the eyes of a wanderer, staring out at the cosmos.

“There is a crack, a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in,”¹¹ Leonard Cohen famously wrote. Through this crack, Javier offers a meditation, a suite of works that holds a mirror of beauty up to the sky, a tiny spot of brightness, one among billions of points in the vast and infinite well of stars.

Michelangelo Samson

25 September 2022



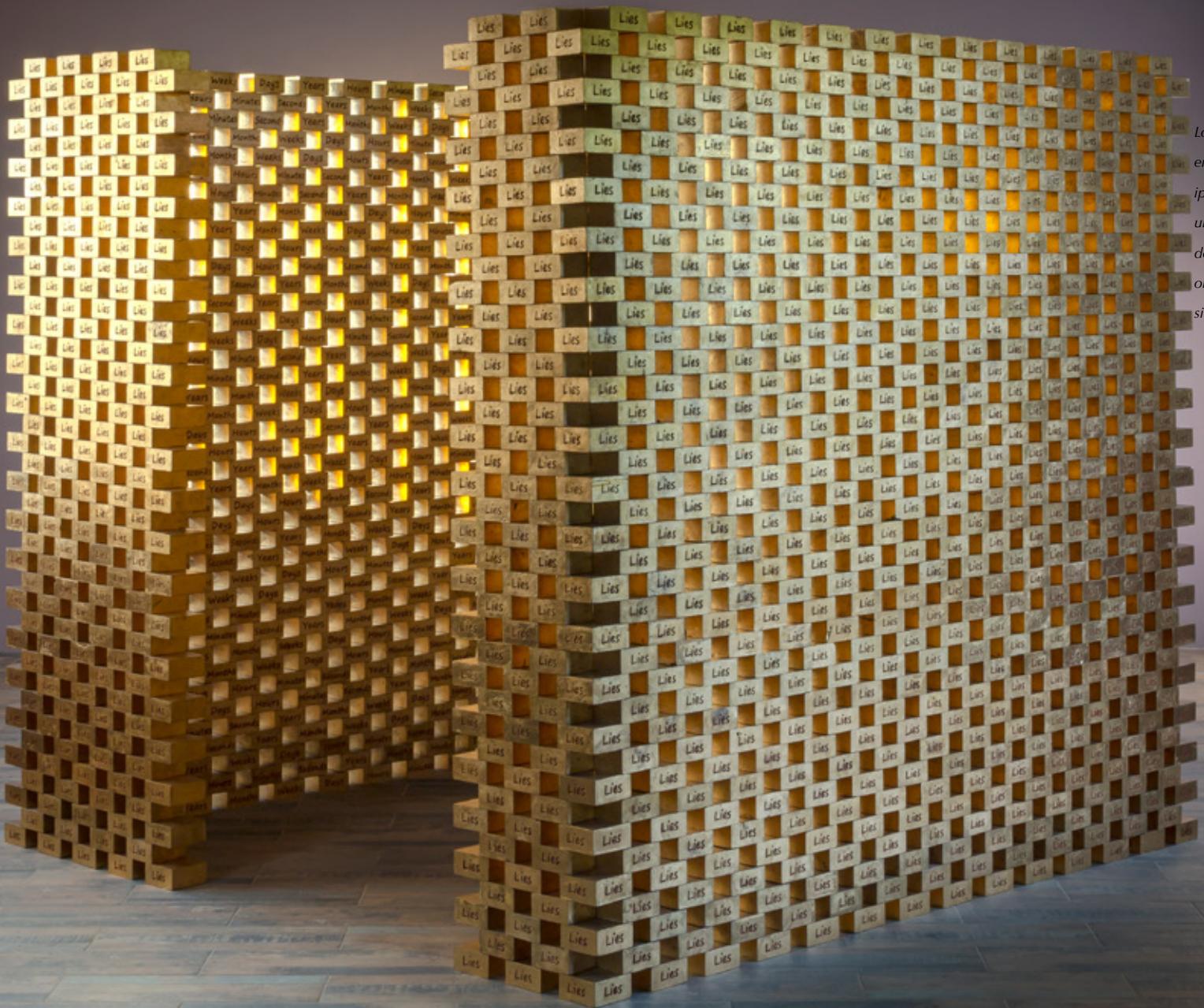
Michelangelo K. Samson has been a banker for over twenty-five years. In that time, he has worked with clients across diverse industries, including private equity, real estate, insurance and banking, clean technology, energy and natural resources, technology, consumer goods, and infrastructure. Together with his wife, Lourdes, they have built an important collection of contemporary art from Southeast Asia. The collection reflects the diverse artistic practices and conceptual concerns of artists in the region, with a strong emphasis on post-colonial discourses and material strategies. He is presently the Chief Executive Officer of a bank in Australia. He splits his time between Sydney and Singapore.

¹⁰ Ethan Siegel, “Is Dark Matter Required For Life To Exist?,” *Forbes*, June 17, 2016, accessed September 25, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/startswithabang/2016/06/17/is-dark-matter-required-for-life-to-exist/?sh=4c0bb3433879>.

¹¹ “Anthem”, Track 5 on Leonard Cohen, *The Future*, Columbia 472498 2, 1992, Studio album.

The Golden Cell (Endurance Test – The Fuck Us Years),
2022

wood, paint, imitation gold leaf
183 × 183 × 173 cm (6 × 6 × 5.7 ft)
(set of 1,860 pcs, 4.5 × 9.5 × 9.5 cm each)







Broadcast From The Sky, 2022
silk organza and piña cocoon fabrics,
thread,
dimensions variable,
fabric width 114.5 cm (45 in) ×
total length 5360 cm (175.85 ft)





Cassiopeia A, 2022
powdered pigment, encaustic on canvas
152.5 × 212 cm (5 × 7 ft)



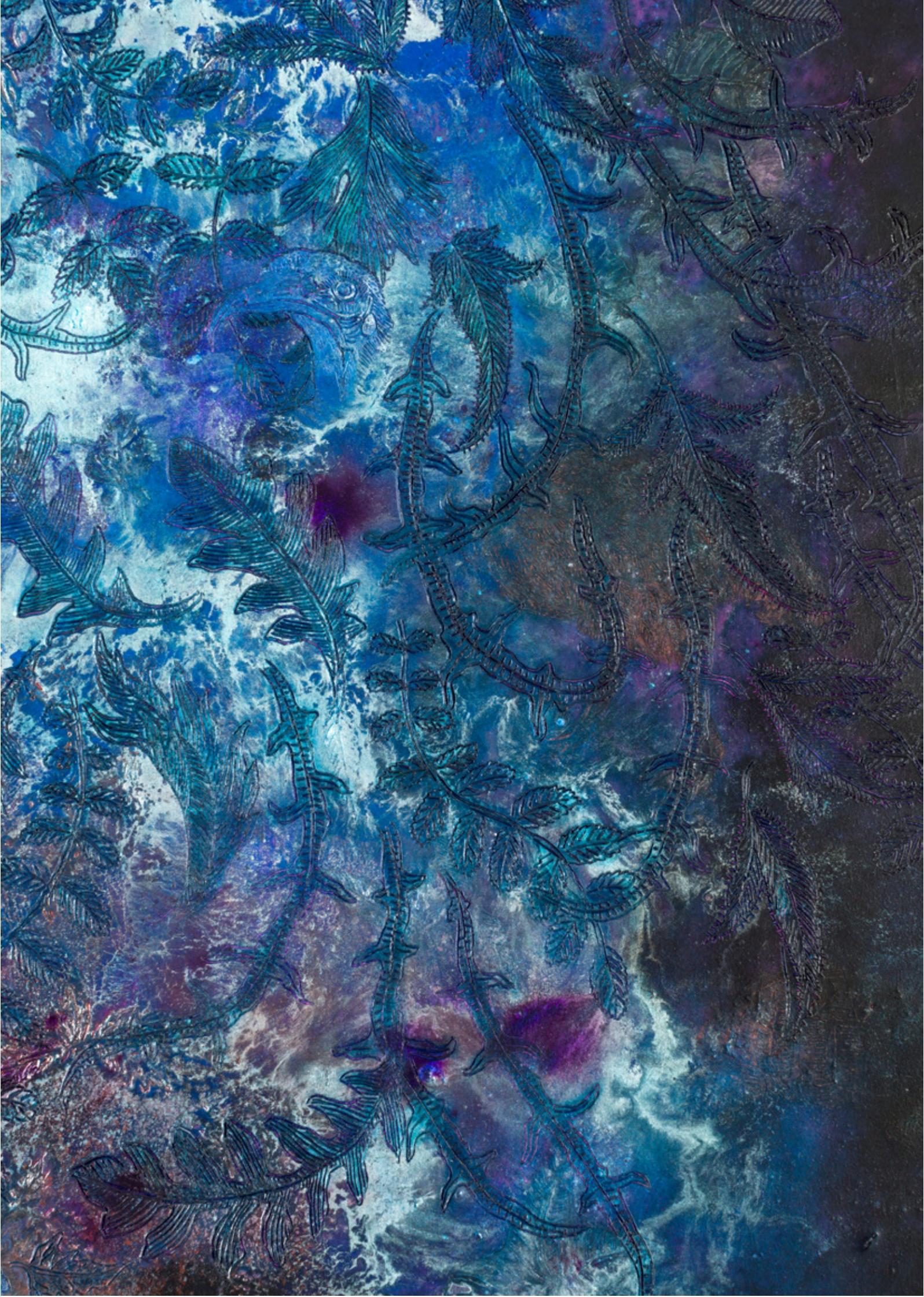


Dark Matter, 2022
powdered pigment, encaustic on canvas
152.5 × 212 cm (5 × 7 ft)





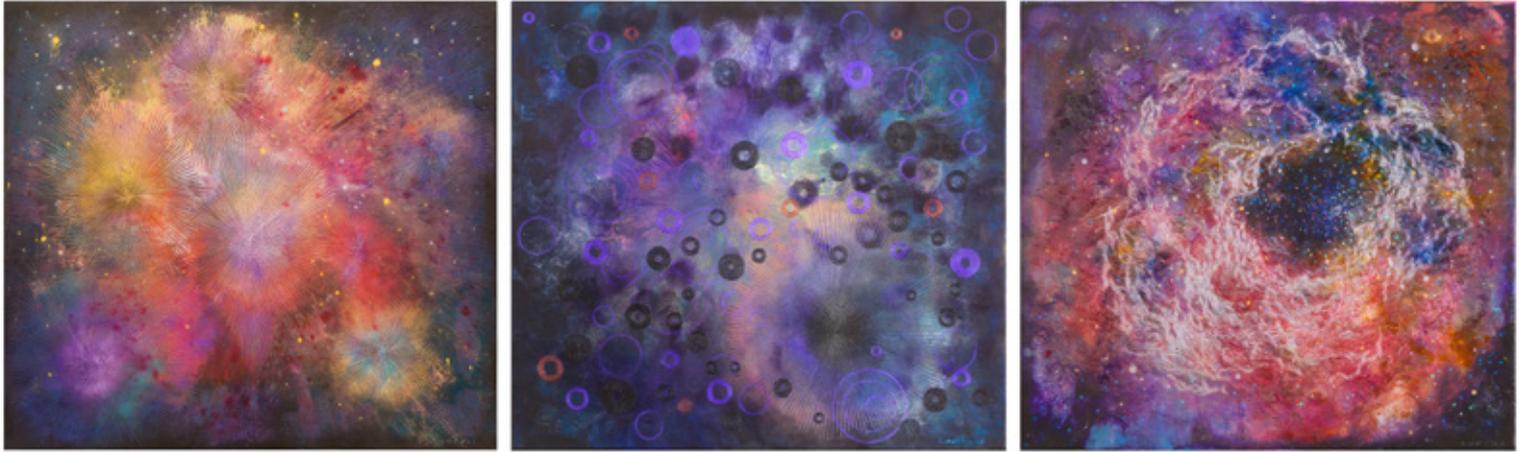
The Oort Cloud, 2021
acrylic, powdered pigment, encaustic on canvas
152.5 × 212 cm (5 × 7 ft)



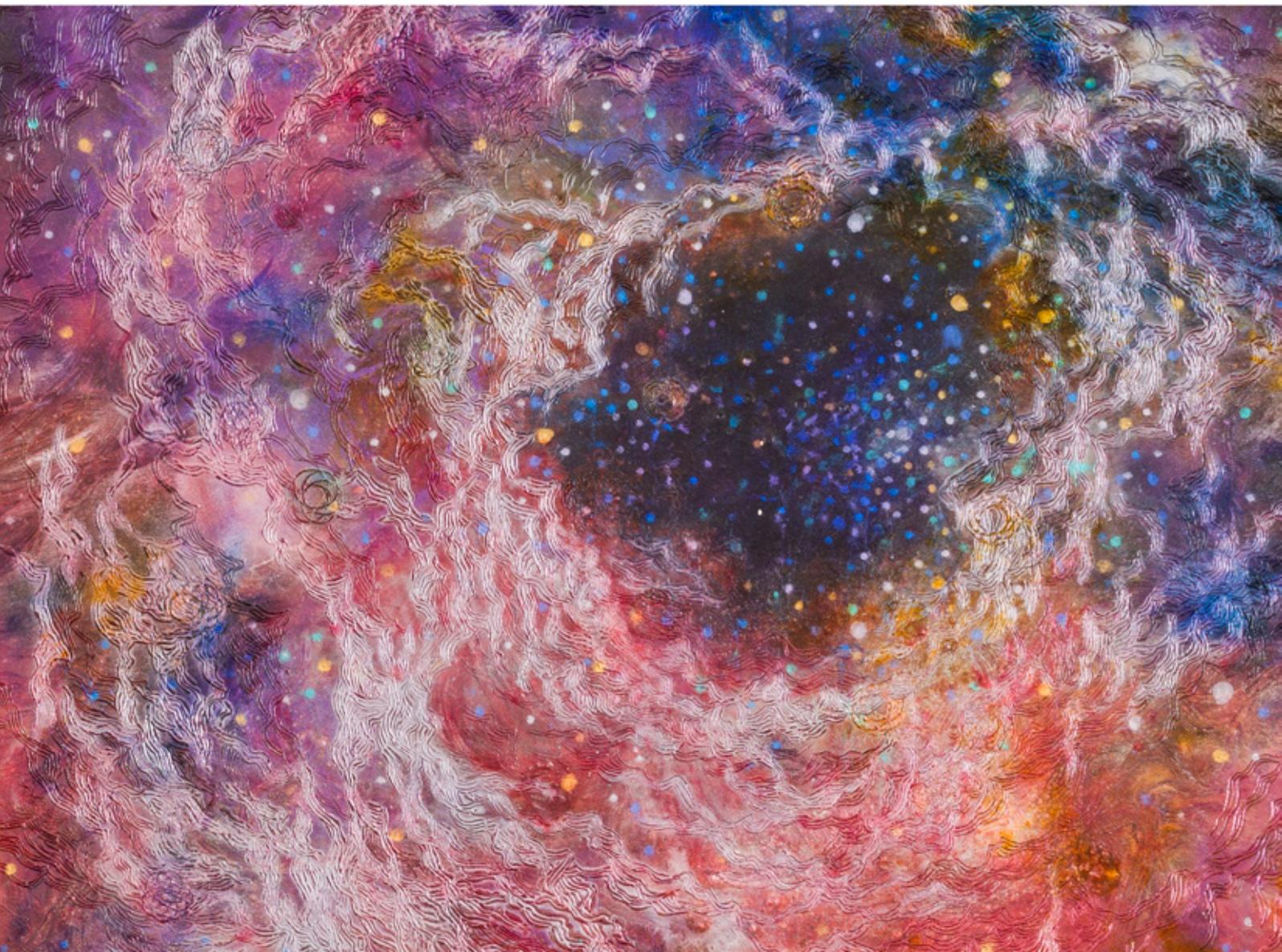
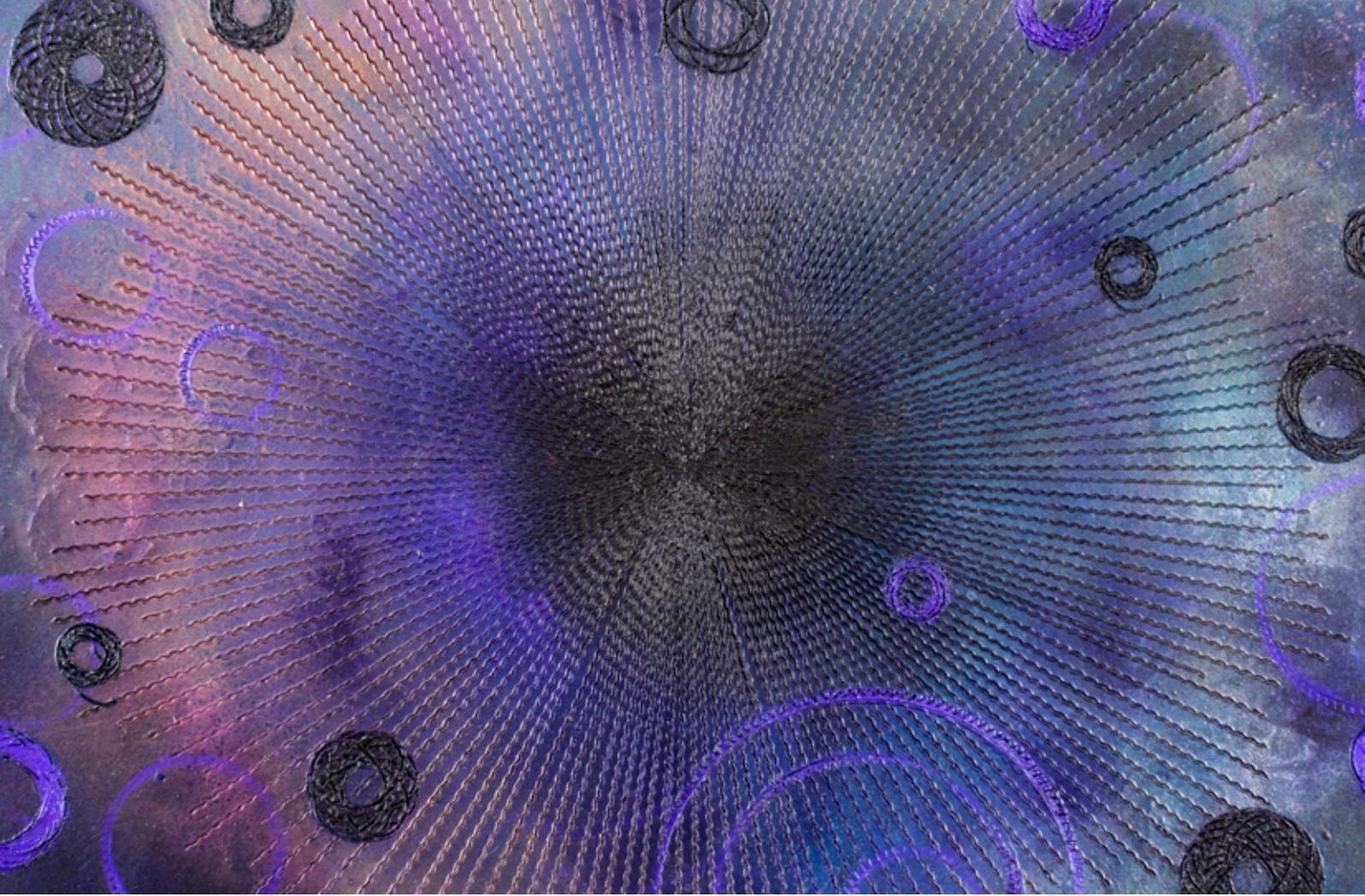


Here We Are On Earth, 2022
powdered pigment, encaustic on canvas
183 × 183 cm (6 × 6 ft)





Indistinct Chatter From Below (A), 2022
powdered pigment, encaustic on canvas
set of 3 panels, 56 × 61 cm (22 × 24 in) each





Indistinct Chatter From Below (B), 2022
powdered pigment, encaustic on canvas
set of 2 panels, 35.6 × 35.6 cm (14 × 14 in) each



Indistinct Chatter From Below (C), 2022
powdered pigment, encaustic on canvas
35.6 × 35.6 cm (14 × 14 in)



Indistinct Chatter From Below (D), 2022

powdered pigment, encaustic on canvas
set of 2 panels, 30.5 × 30.5 cm (12 × 12 in) each



Indistinct Chatter From Below (E), 2022
powdered pigment, encaustic on canvas
30.5 × 30.5 cm (12 × 12 in)



Indistinct Chatter From Below (F), 2022
powdered pigment, encaustic on canvas
set of 2 panels, 20.3 × 20.3 cm (8 × 8 in) each



Indistinct Chatter From Below (G), 2022
powdered pigment, encaustic on canvas
set of 3 panels, 15.2 × 15.2 cm (6 × 6 in) each



Geraldine Javier: Ten Years, Thirteen Works¹

2013-2022

Text by Tony Godfrey

Within the space of twelve months, between 2011 and 2012, Geraldine Javier held no less than three solo exhibitions of new works in Singapore: *Geraldine Javier: Museum of Many Things* (Valentine Willie Fine Art, 5th – 26th November 2011); *Geraldine Javier: Playing God in an Art Lab* (STPI, 14th July – 11th August 2012); and *Geraldine Javier: Chapel of Many Saints and Sinners* (Equator Art Projects, 2nd – 25th November 2012).

Ten years later, she is coming back to Singapore and opening a fourth exhibition of new works.² What however, you may ask, happened to her in those ten intervening years? What has she been doing?

She has certainly not been idle. In those ten years, she has made many works and exhibited them in South Korea, Germany, Australia, China, Slovakia, Indonesia, Thailand, Cuba, and several times in her native Philippines.³ Already as we write, she has started making work for an exhibition in Manila next year and has begun thinking about an exhibition in Korea the year after.

“She is so various!” a Singapore artist remarked of her back in 2011. Those three exhibitions had included paintings, sculptures, figurines, tableaux, installations, paper works, prints, a DVD, embroideries, and collages. So many media and such a range of images, ideas, and visions. Is she still so various? Are there recurring themes in her work? Has she developed? Can we trace such a development? I shall attempt to do so, looking at a few selected works.

Yes, her work is still “various” – but in different ways. There are both recurring themes or concerns in her work of these ten years, but also new ones.

¹ Yes, *Ten Years, Ten Works* would be a much snappier title and it was what I first used, but I needed more to give a decent range of Geraldine’s “variousness”, and show her development.

² There was also in 2013 a retrospective exhibition of her earlier works entitled *Geraldine Javier: Fictions* accompanied by a substantial catalogue. (Shown at ArtSpace@Helutrans, Singapore, 27th September – 5th October 2013.)

³ Furthermore, although she has not had a dedicated exhibition of her work in Singapore, she has shown new works there on four occasions: a set of twelve photographs with nine small paintings (shown by Silverlens Gallery at Art Stage Singapore, 24th – 27th January 2013), one painting in 2014 – see below, a set of seven new paintings in 2015 – see below, and in 2019 two paintings and a related sculpture or installation in *Shaping Geographies: Art/Woman/Southeast Asia*, at Gajah Gallery, 23rd November 2019 – 12th January 2020)

Another word for “various” here is “innovative”, or “inventive”. Critical discussion of work in this region tends to be very focused on subject matter or meaning. But formally her work has become exceptional. She has always enjoyed making, has always been convinced of the importance of making – individually and communally.

Importantly, her interest in both abstraction and (using the word as Henri Matisse used it) the decorative has grown. At the risk of making a too sweeping generalisation, where early work ultimately depended on clinching a striking or uncanny image, the conclusion to a painting comes through a long organic process in which colour has come to take a greater importance.

This is not to say that she lives in any ivory tower. In fact, the opposite is true. In parallel with this concern with the decorative and at times abstraction, she has become increasingly engaged in issues of community, ecology, and in the wider sense of the word, politics. She makes pictures and objects for people to live with – but also to think about how we and they live with.



2013. *The Erl King's Cage*, 2013, oil on canvas, 183 × 244 cm.
(Shown in *Geraldine Javier: Beyond the Veil*, Arario Gallery, Seoul, 7th June - 7th July 2013)

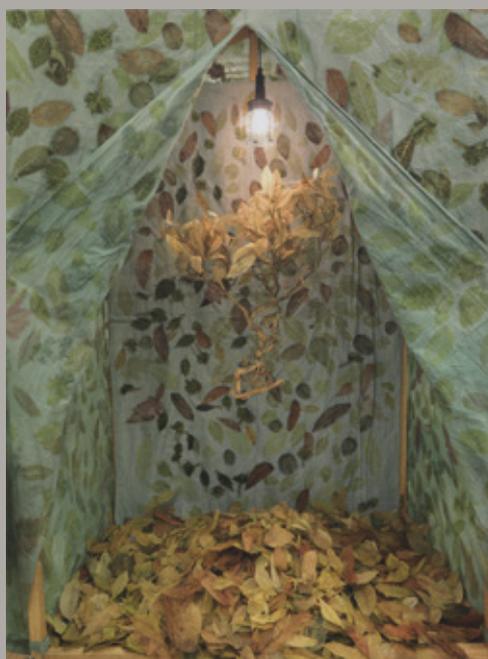
A young woman, perhaps a teenager, in a long virginal dress lies, her eyes closed, on a bed of grass. She looks like a Filipina. Some dead birds also lie on the bed. All around her leafless trees loom, their branches writhing as if to form into a net or cage. Mist gathers in the background.

Geraldine⁴ has always had a taste for the gothick. She has been fascinated by the confrontation here, if that is what it is, of innocence and malevolence. Isolated figures, normally female, appear often.

At this time, she was very interested in folk tales, especially those of the Brothers Grimm. The danger and violence in such stories fascinated her, as did the way they dramatised primal fears and psychological rites of passages.

When exhibited it was hung next to a very gothick sculpture entitled *Weavers of Time*, three grotesque figures covered with intricate crochet sitting in front of a painting of tangled trees. All around this, and also in front of *The Erl King's Cage*, dried dead leaves were scattered on the ground. It is a most theatrical *mise en scene*.

Important though this complex and often ambiguous storytelling was, formal issues were also important to her: how to combine sculpture and painting into an installation without demoting the individual elements to the status of mere stage props. As always, she paid much attention to the whole exhibition as a coherent and discrete entity. Even though the individual elements would disperse at the end of each exhibition, each exhibition had been conceived as a whole. It had its own particular character and coherence, its own *stimmung*, its own specific vision.



2013. *Magic is Back*, 2013, oil and skeletonised leaves on canvas, preserved tree with skeletonised leaves, preserved tree covered with tatted lace. (Shown in *Geraldine Javier: Stuck in Reverse*, Arndt Gallery, Berlin, 15th November 2013 – 25th January 2014)

⁴ Although it is normal to refer to artists by their surname, this essay is much informed by the fact that through these ten years I have been Geraldine's partner. I have been in her studio most days, been with her at almost all her exhibitions, talked about art often and, importantly, seen how she lives her life outside the studio. Sharing her life as I do, it seems too cold, too pompous, on this occasion, to refer to her as "Javier".

In this exhibition, each of five paintings also formed the back wall of a tent. Within each tent were selected objects. In this case a shrub, much like that the girl in the painting holds, was suspended, each of its leaves skeletonised. Many more skeletonized leaves laid underneath.

It was another solution to the formal problem of how to combine painting and installation.

The works were deadly serious – one dealt with the death of a much-loved dog, but also funny – one should never discount the presence of an often wry humour in her work. Witness the crocheted duck, squirrel, dog, and bunny rabbit that hung around the tents. There were also two trees, each covered in tatting, a form of crochet work. One of them was listed as an integral part of *Magic is Back*. She had been making these embroidery-covered trees since 2011. These two were the thirteenth and fourteenth to be made. An ambition of hers, one not to be achieved, was an exhibition (a forest) entirely of just such trees.



2014. *Seven Nocturnes: Reading the Stars*, 2014, encaustic, hammered leaves, ink on fabric, wrapped wood, 152.4 × 121.9 cm. (Shown in *ARNDT 20 + 2 YEARS*, ArtSpace@Helutrans, Singapore, 16th January – 15th February 2015)

This work, eight small canvases fitted together within an expanded frame that acts somewhat like a halo or speech bubble, is one that, after not selling when exhibited, she decided to keep for herself. Why?

Because she saw it as an important transitional work. The painting has no figure, no apparent narrative. In the past almost all her paintings had had a figure at the centre; if not a narrative they had a situation, often problematic, or what she would call vision.

But what is it a painting of? It too is problematic, but in a different way. Four of the canvases are made with a mosaic of strips and pieces of painted or dyed fabric, three suggest night with the presence of darkness or stars. The eighth, presumably not itself a nocturne has these words “ANNOUNCING YOUR PLANS IS A GOOD WAY TO HEAR GOD LAUGH”⁵

The title is a clue: *nocturnes*, a word with two meanings: “a painting showing a night scene, a piece of music of a dreamy character suitable to evening or night thoughts, a reverie”⁶ ; “a picture of a night scene, a short musical composition of a romantic nature.”⁷ The musical term seems as pertinent as the painting one here. If we listen to Chopin’s nocturnes, they are short but much longer than a prelude or waltz; they are dreamy, reflective, full of yearning.⁸

The meaning, despite the words, is non-verbal – intriguing, but elusive. It is in the mood the painting creates.

The year before, I had remarked that “Javier is at her most painterly not when she is painting but when making collage or fabric works. That is when she is most free and improvisational.”⁹ From now on, the act of painting became freer and more intuitive for her, as if it had a life of its own. Interestingly, about this time, her habit of tating in the evening when she watched TV or a DVD lapsed.

When she was focused on her paintings, there was sometimes nothing for her assistants – initially four young women whom she had taught tating to – to work on. Therefore, she got them to make decorative objects – embroideries, chairs, and fabric figurines of famous artists. These were sold unsigned as Geraldine Javier Studio works. When commissioned by Bench to design T-shirts she showed her avowed interest in the decorative by experimenting with patterns

From this point on, figures appear only intermittently in her work and sometimes end up almost hidden by paint.

Given where her work arrived in 2022, the interest here in stars now seems prescient. Indeed, it is in the small paintings of the 2022 exhibition that we see a new generation of *Nocturnes*.

⁵ A quote from the hard-hitting TV series *Deadwood* – a series she much admired.

⁶ Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary, 1900?

⁷ Oxford Concise English Dictionary, 1995.

⁸ However, it should be noted that Geraldine has never knowingly listened to Chopin. Sadly, she has no passion for classical music.

⁹ The catalogue essay by myself for *Geraldine Javier: Stuck in Reverse*, Arndt Gallery, Berlin.



2015. *Proposal for a National Dog of the Philippines*, 2015, hammered leaves, fluid acrylics, wood, encaustic, 200 × 191 cm. (Shown at Art Fair Philippines 2015, 5th – 8th February 2015)

This painting evidenced an unexpected shift from the psychological to the political. It is a beautiful painting, but one heavy with irony. It has an ugly subject. The dog is not a pedigree. She has described the dog as the underfed dog with skin disease you seem to see in every *barangay* of the Philippines.

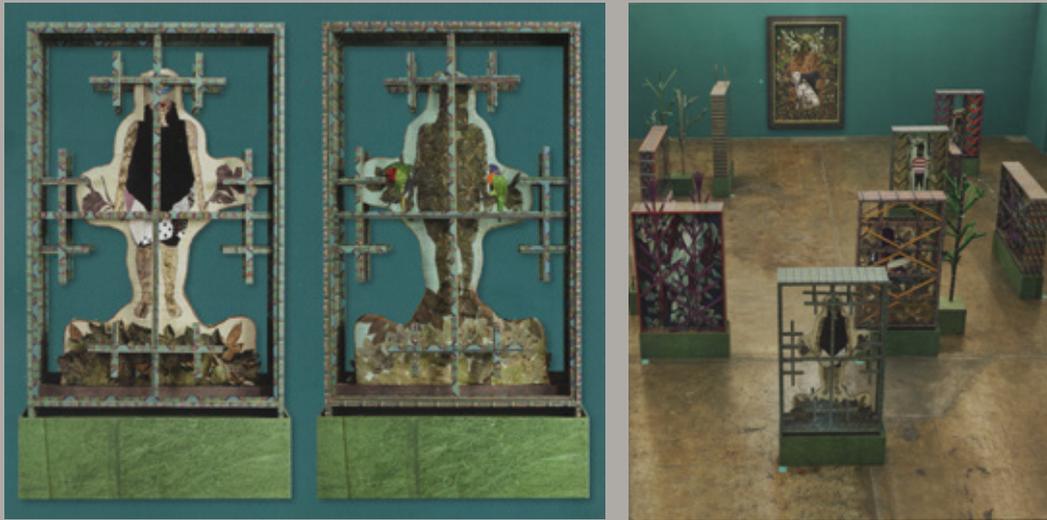
A viewer who had not noticed the title or not wondered what it meant missed the point. What dog most typified the Philippines?¹⁰

Her anger and distress are not just at the nation's maltreatment of dogs but at the degraded state of public space in the average Filipino *barangay*, the dilapidated buildings, the squalor, the dumped litter, the lack of civil pride. She is naturally a very patriotic person, angered when her countrymen and women let her down.

Like *Seven Nocturnes*, this work did not sell and she has been more than happy to keep the work for herself.

Now, ironically, and rather appropriately, the painting too has been a trifle degraded. Hung in an unenclosed room, insects have bored into it, leaving several small holes.

¹⁰ Only the Netherlands officially has a national dog, but other countries have a national animal. The elephant is the national animal of Thailand, the unicorn is the official national animal of Scotland, and the lion, its supposed nemesis, is the national animal of England. The national animal of Wales is the red dragon. The Philippines has a national bird (the Philippine eagle), but no national animal.



2015. *Geraldine*, 2015, ink, embroidery, encaustic, wood, fabric, hammered leaves, acrylic sheet, 177.8 × 100 × 29.2 cm. (Shown in *Geraldine Javier: Landscape is a state of mind is a landscape*, Finale Art File, Manila, 4th – 30th May 2015)

This was an especially large and especially important exhibition for her, one where she talked openly about her move from Manila to the countryside, and how her work had become about nature and her garden. Beneath Mount Maculot in Batangas province, her 2.3 hectare new property is filled with trees (it was an old fruit farm with coconut, mango, banana, mahogany, avocado, etc). The untamed jungle spread down from the mountain and came right up to the edge of her property. The new studio she built was many times larger than the one she had had in Manila. The work could expand, and so could she. Every day she could take breaks from the studio and work on the garden. In Manila, her gardening had been confined to a balcony and a pocket-sized backyard. Now she could truly create a garden. But this was not a flight from society, though it was certainly a flight from the noise, pollution, and traffic jams of Manila. At the centre of the exhibition was a series of free-standing works based on the people who worked on her property, including herself.



2015. *Mother!*, 2015, fluid acrylics, encaustic on canvas, wood, 71 × 96.5 cm (one of a set of seven paintings collectively called *Grey and Pink*, shown by Arario Gallery at Art Stage Singapore, 22nd – 25th January 2015)

She has always had the instinct for and skill at making beautiful works. These seven paintings were also about beauty and notions of beauty – and the decorative. As she was getting old, her mother had increasingly made flower arrangements – but with plastic flowers. Photographs of these that Geraldine had made were the bases for seven paintings.

As in *Seven Nocturnes*, she used mosaics made from textiles to animate space. The works were about nature and artifice, but also about ageing and things that do not decay.



2017. *Oblivious to Oblivion*, 2017, thread, silk organza, mirror, wood, dimensions variable.
(Shown in *Hearing, Doubting, Wondering, Hoping, Dreaming*, Arario Gallery, Shanghai, 19th January – 11th March 2018)

This work became a very popular site for selfie taking, something she was perfectly happy with. On several occasions she has invited the viewer to participate in her works. At its most extreme, in a project for Art Fair Philippines in 2014, where having put fabric figurines of dealers on the wall accompanied by a fabric pad on which was written their answer to the question “What is art for you?”, anyone was invited to write their answer on a pad too. So many wrote that the pads were all used up and people had to write directly on the wall. In this 2022 exhibition, a certain degree of participation is invited: entering the golden cage and sitting on the stool provided.

2017-2019. Innovations in painting: palimpsests, encaustic, and blow torches



2017. *To the Gardeners of Kabul*, 2017, fluid acrylics and liquid graphite on canvas, 243 × 243 cm.



2019. *746/2.2* and *838/1.5*, 2019, encaustic, acrylic paint on canvas, 304 × 243 cm each.
(Shown in +63 | +62, Silverlens Gallery, Manila, 16th February – 16th March 2019)

In paintings such as *To the Gardeners of Kabul* (shown also in *Hearing, Doubting, Wondering, Hoping, Dreaming* at Arario Gallery, Shanghai), she copied, using fluid acrylics, botanical illustrations of plants sometimes with roots attached. She never,

it should be noted, copied slavishly. Nor, it should be added, did she get assistants to do any of this painting; even though the early layers would be partially hidden by succeeding layers, she wanted to be in full control of the process knowing that early decisions would affect later ones, however small they seemed. Although she was using brush and paint, this was primarily a linear, or drawing process.

Then she painted another layer of plants over the first; and again; and again, until a very rich palimpsest of lines and shapes was created. She would also often let the paint drip down the canvas, or make abstract blobs. In the earliest of these plant paintings there were figures but either they were eventually almost concealed by the manifold tendrils and leaves, or else wholly absorbed. Although the making process was primarily linear, it should be noted that the colour of these paintings was very rich, complex, and compelling.

In 2018, she decided to experiment with a second new technique. She has already used encaustic as a finishing layer or glaze to some paintings and in multiple layers on some small works. However, she wanted to make a full-scale work that used encaustic not merely as a final surface, but as something that could be applied in layers between sequential layers of painting. This painting acted as the prototype for the two larger paintings the next year. They are much larger – indeed they are the largest paintings she has ever made – 304 × 243 cm. They were made as a pair, partly because with this way of working it was important to have a painting she herself could work on whilst her assistants were rubbing photographic images into the other one for her to paint over. Also, one being predominantly red, the other green, they were meant as complementaries. What she learned in doing one could be used in what she did on the other. This was the first time she had worked on two paintings simultaneously. To do so has only been possible since building her large studio in the country.

What is the exact process? Firstly, the canvas has a layer of beeswax applied. Secondly, she, or her assistants make flower arrangements which are then photographed digitally. These are then scanned onto paper, placed upside down on the canvas, dampened and then rubbed, normally with blocks of wood, by her assistants until all the paper is rubbed away and only the coloured inks are left impregnated on the wax. This is a very laborious time-consuming process. There is a certain amount of moaning about wrists and the palms of hands being sore. Thirdly, she paints over these flower arrangements, adjusting the colours and textures. To confound things further, she may also now be adding chunks of ready-made and dried paint. She would have mixed these in advance in trays, letting them dry, then breaking them up into fragments. Fourthly, a layer of beeswax is applied, sealing all. Then the whole process is repeated, and once again a layer of coloured ink from the scanned photographs is impregnated into the layer of wax and so on until a final layer of encaustic, beeswax mixed with resin, is applied.

How many layers are there in each painting? The green painting (746/2.2) has five layers of paint and six of beeswax or encaustic. The red painting (838/1.5) has six layers of paint and seven of beeswax or encaustic.

The result of all this layering is two very dense and complex paintings. Many, many arrangements of flowers, or colours, all singing out. What metaphor could one use for them? The jazz musician John Coltrane talked of creating “a wall of sound”. That seems good: every instrument in the orchestra is playing simultaneously, and loudly.

Importantly, it is only when one goes close up that one can see most of the elements are flowers. But the effect is very different from even those most extravagant of Dutch flower paintings - by Jan van Huysum, for example. These flowers of Geraldine’s do not sit peacefully in the vase: they are spread out across the canvas like explosions across the sky. Fireworks? Yes, we could use fireworks as a metaphor but when one sends up a rocket it ignites, expands, and then fades. Then we send up a couple more. Here it is as if each explosion hangs in the sky, explosion layered over explosion, over explosion, suspended in time.

One of the great projects of the last few decades, especially in New York, has been bringing complexity back into abstract painting - perhaps these paintings belong to that project too, after all it is not difficult to see these paintings as abstract. Yes, the images all come from her garden, but they are not the subject matter.

Obviously as her partner I have seen these paintings develop solely day by day over a long period. Although I knew she planned a final layer of encaustic and had talked of also using a blow torch, I was shocked when I saw how drastic this last action had been: the painting had been turned upside down and heated with a blowtorch in places so that the wax, and paint, melted and formed streaks down the canvas: then the canvas was put the right way up and the process repeated. After so many hours of work, it seemed an extraordinary thing to do!

It was only after I had gone for a walk and came back to look a second time that I could see that what she had done made sense. She had said all along that she knew there was something missing, something that had to be added. To resume our musical metaphor, the orchestra was playing flat out, but no-one was conducting it. Instead of a conductor’s baton, she used a blow torch to call them to order. Now there was a clear, albeit still complex, composition to look at.

The curious numeric titles refer to the number of hours she and her assistants had to work to make the work, and the length of time she worked with a blow torch to complete it.



2018-19. *Spinning Women*, 2018-19, acrylic on pineapple fibre, embroidery, wood, dimensions variable.
(Shown in Casa de Asia, 13th Havana Biennial, 12th April – 12th May 2019)

Geraldine was impressed by the many women in the community around her who worked hard to support their families, taking on numerous odd jobs to earn money. In a statement accompanying her installation *Spinning Women* at Havana, she wrote: “I live in the Philippines, a country where the majority of the population can only live on a day-to-day basis. Women especially are often faced with a difficult decision, faced with dire poverty or having to leave the family to find work abroad and provide for that family, yet knowing that the separation will damage and perhaps break the family up. Those who opt to stay but can’t find permanent work have to be resourceful, finding bits of work here and there to tide them over. This work celebrates all those anonymous women who provide for and keep their families – and the country as a whole – together.”

To honour these heroines of everyday life, she – having made tracings of twenty-two of the women – painted the tracings, life-size, on to banners made from native pineapple fibre; then, with other women from the community, she embroidered flowers on the banners. As shown in Havana, the banners were suspended from the ceiling and the windows left open, allowing the wind to spin or swing the women about as if dancing. An accompanying wall text listed the women’s names, the various jobs they undertook, their ages and the number of children they had. Also listed were the names of all who helped make the work. In any communal project, even if initiated and overseen by a solo artist, it is right and proper that all involved are named.

It was a spectacular work, but one that called for intimacy. Visitors took time and wandered amongst the spinning women.

The lyrical beauty of the work came out of the movement, the delicacy of the

facture, but also the colours. In her recent work she has developed into one of the most convincing colourists of her generation.

A year later, in 2020, she turned fifty - perhaps the most difficult zero birthday for any artist to negotiate. Most artists after passing fifty tend to get set in their ways, become content to explore an established and limited set of forms, mediums and ideas. To date, she has shown no sign of getting any less various!

By the time of this birthday, she was fully caught up in the pandemic and lockdown¹¹. Like many other artists, the pandemic and the attendant lock down ensured she spent more time in her studio working and thinking. Necessary time, for, as has been seen above the paintings and installations take more time to make. The studio was also where she read or listened to podcasts – *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer, *The Neapolitan Novels* by Elena Ferrante, the sci-fi novels of Liu Cixin.

In May 2020, she wrote that claustrophobia was not going to be a problem: “We live in a 2.3-hectare farm, there are lots of things to do, it is a big enough space to roam about. But, still, so many pressing concerns plagued me. I was only able to conquer and control my anxieties and an awful feeling of helplessness by channelling all these unhealthy thoughts into more positive, concrete actions, however small they should be.

The solution is simple - focus on the needs of others.”¹²

She and her assistants made protective masks for the people in the *barangay*, grew as many vegetables as they could and gave them to the local co-op to hand out for free. They also distributed seedlings so other people could grow their own vegetables.

“I am hoping the pandemic will miraculously end soon. We must promise not to forget the lessons we have learned from this crisis. We must promise to unlearn the bad things that probably contributed to this situation. And lastly, we must all try to be better people.”¹³

In 2021, she organised an organic farm. On two unoccupied plots of land, she paid eight people from her *barangay* to work and learn about organic farming. Although many artists now would consider this as an art work – community art or participatory art of, in Joseph Beuys terms, social sculpture, it was not an art work to her. She was just doing the right thing, being a good citizen.

¹¹ As the volcano in Taal lake near to us had erupted earlier in the year we had already endured a severe lockdown.

¹² Geraldine Javier. “Living and working through the Covid 19 Pandemic”.

¹³ Ibid

If she has become less prolific, she works no less hard than before. The work has become increasingly complex, increasingly considered.

She is most unlikely to do three shows of new works as she did in 2011. In an ideal world she would now want more than a year to prepare a new show.



2020. *Gertrude Jekyll (The Earth was her Canvas I)*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 213.4 × 243.8 cm.





2020-21. *The Two Fridas*, 2020-21, acrylic, thread, silk organza, dimensions variable.
(Shown in *Five Gardens*, Art Informal, Manila, 13th July – 17th August 2021)

Always her exhibitions include installations and paintings, so for her exhibition of last year, it seems appropriate to include two works: a painting and an installation. The exhibition was called *Five Gardens*. The paintings, installations, and objects were homages to four artist gardeners that she especially admired: Claude Monet, Gertrude Jekyll, Frida Kahlo, and Derek Jarman. The fifth garden was her own. She was much taken at this time with the holistic approach to nature of the native American writer Robin Wall Kimmerer. One work had words by Kimmerer burnt into wood: “Even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy. I chose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the earth gives me daily and I must return the gift.”

The four paintings she made for Monet were encaustic, the three paintings she made for her room dedicated to Gertrude Jekyll were palimpsestic. Jekyll was the great English designer of gardens in the early twentieth century. Originally trained as an artist, she became famous instead for the books espousing natural gardens that she wrote. Digging, weeding, raking, planting, planning, mulching, and making the garden anew was Jekyll’s life-work. Seeing the “pictures” she made with plants and trees was her reward.

Both figures in the painting illustrated here are of Jekyll.

Kahlo and Jarman were represented by installations or objects. Kahlo has long been an artist she has been fascinated by and with whom she feels some empathy. The installation, one of her most lyrical, based loosely on Kahlo’s painting, again offered

the viewer the opportunity to be involved, to put their head where Kahlo's would have been. The English filmmaker Derek Jarman had in the last years of his life made a garden on the gravelly coast of South-east England close to a nuclear power station. Geraldine admired his tenacity in making a garden in such an unpromising site and when he was dying from AIDS.¹⁴

Once the work for this show had been collected and some other work completed so that the studio was empty, she took down the photographs of the garden at Hauser and Wirth, Bruton, Somerset designed by Piet Oudolf which had been an initial inspiration for *Five Gardens*. She replaced them with photographs of star systems from the Hubble Space Camera. It was time to begin work on this exhibition.

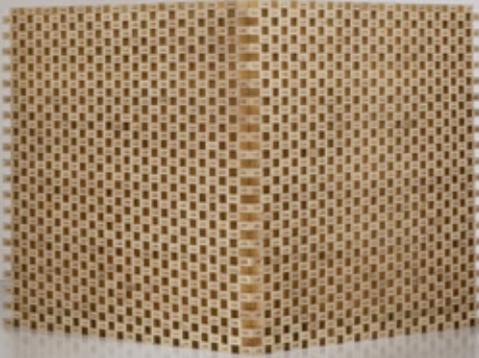
Tony Godfrey
October 2022



Tony Godfrey has been working in the contemporary art world since 1978 as, teacher, writer, and curator. His first book was *New Image in Painting* (Phaidon, 1986). His 1998 book, *Conceptual Art* – translated into six languages – was the first book to see Conceptual Art as a global phenomenon. His book *Painting Today* (Phaidon, 2009) attempted likewise to see painting as a worldwide phenomenon. It has been reprinted and translated into three languages. Tony Godfrey's other books include *Drawing Today: Draughtsmen in the Eighties* (1991) and *Contemporary Photography in Asia* (2013). His two latest books, both published in 2020 are *The Story of Contemporary Art* (Thames and Hudson, and MIT Press), an attempt to understand contemporary art as a worldwide phenomenon, and *Ding Yi* (Lund Humphries), an attempt to give the local and global contexts for a Chinese Abstract artist. Having moved from London to Singapore and Asia in 2009, he now lives in the Philippines. In 2022, he launched his website arttalksea.com dedicated to interviews with artists from Southeast Asia (the most recent additions are Gerry Tan, Geraldine Javier, and Mawen Ong).

¹⁴Subsequent to this exhibition at Art Informal, she made a painting about Jarman. For an account of the making of that painting and also of *The Oort Cloud*, the first painting made for this 2022 exhibition, see my essay/interview "Geraldine Javier makes a painting" at arttalksea.com







Geraldine G. Javier

Born in Manila, Philippines, 1970

Lives in Batangas, Philippines

Education

1997 Bachelor of Fine Arts Major in Painting,
University of the Philippines, Diliman.

1991 Bachelor of Science in Nursing,
University of the Philippines, Manila.

Solo Exhibition

- | | | | |
|-------------|--|-------------|---|
| 2022 | <i>Here We Are On Earth</i> , Mizuma Gallery, Singapore | 2011 | <i>Playing God in an Art Lab</i> , Singapore Tyler Print Institute, Singapore |
| 2021 | <i>The Five Gardens</i> , Artinformal, Makati, Philippines | 2009 | <i>Museum of Many Things</i> , Valentine Willie Fine Art, Singapore |
| 2019 | <i>Bless Us Anyway</i> , MO_Space, Metro Manila, Philippines | 2008 | <i>In the Beginning...</i> , Arario Gallery, Seoul, South Korea |
| 2018 | <i>Fearing, Doubting, Wondering, Hoping, Dreaming</i> , Arario Gallery, Shanghai, China | 2008 | <i>Always Wild, Still Wild</i> , Finale Art File, Makati, Philippines |
| 2017 | <i>Dear Earthlings</i> , Project Space Pilipinas, Lucban, Quezon, Philippines | 2008 | <i>Butterfly's Tongue</i> , West Gallery, Quezon City, Philippines |
| 2015 | <i>Beginnings and Endings</i> , West Gallery, Quezon City, Philippines | 2008 | <i>Sampaloc Cave Paintings</i> , Finale Art Gallery, Mandaluyong City, Philippines |
| 2015 | <i>Landscape as a State of Mind is a Landscape</i> , Finale Art File, Makati, Philippines | 2007 | <i>Living Images, Leaden Lives</i> , West Gallery, Mandaluyong City, Philippines |
| 2014 | <i>Let's Talk About Art</i> , Art Fair Philippines, Makati, Philippines | 2007 | <i>The Most Beautiful Memories are Those of Childhood</i> , Finale Art Gallery, Mandaluyong City, Philippines |
| 2013 | <i>Chapel of Many Saints and Sinners</i> , Art Fair Philippines, Makati, Philippines | 2006 | <i>HAHA HUHUU</i> , West Gallery, Mandaluyong City, Philippines |
| 2012 | <i>Stuck in Reverse</i> , ARNDT Gallery, Berlin, Germany | 2006 | <i>Plaster Saints</i> , Valentine Willie Fine Arts, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia |
| 2012 | <i>Beyond the Veil</i> , Arario Gallery, Seoul, South Korea | 2005 | <i>Veiled Hostility</i> , West Gallery, Mandaluyong City, Philippines |
| 2012 | <i>Curiosities</i> , Vargas Museum, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Philippines | 2005 | <i>Weighing of Light</i> , Finale Art Gallery, Lao Center, Makati, Philippines |
| 2012 | <i>2012 Inventory</i> , West Gallery, Quezon City, Philippines | 2004 | <i>Sea Whores</i> , Theo Gallery, Makati, Philippines |
| 2012 | <i>Chapel of Many Saints and Sinners</i> , Equator Art Projects, Project Room 1, Singapore | 2004 | <i>There is no there there</i> , West Gallery, Ayala Center, Metro Manila, Philippines |
| | | 2004 | <i>Slipping</i> , Finale Art Gallery, Mandaluyong City, Philippines |

- 2003** *Freezing the Flight Hummingbirds*, West Gallery, Mandaluyong City, Philippines
- 2002** *Red On Her Skirt*, West Gallery, Glorietta, Makati, Philippines
- 2001** *Dividing the House*, West Gallery, Mandaluyong City, Philippines
Very Scurry Furry Tales, Surrounded by Water Gallery, Mandaluyong City, Philippines
- 1996** *Hospital Diary of an XN (Discovery Series)*, Hiraya Gallery, Manila, Philippines

Group Exhibitions (Last 15 Years)

- 2022** *Mothering from a Distance*, Project Space Pilipinas, Lucban, Quezon, Philippines
- 2019** *Shaping Geographies*, Gajah Gallery, Singapore
Far Away but Strangely Familiar, Danubiana Museum, Slovakia
+63/+62, Silverlens Galleries, Makati, Philippines
XIII Bienal de la Habana, Havana, Cuba
- 2017** *Voice of Asia*, Arario Gallery, Shanghai, China
Passion and Procession, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
- 2016** *Life Jacket Under Your Seat*, Langgeng Art Foundation, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
Between The Street and The Mountain, Arario Gallery, Shanghai, China
- 2013** *A Tribute to Roberto Chabet*, Cultural Center of the Philippines, Manila, Philippines
- 2012** *Migration Melbourne Edition*, Ormond Hall, Melbourne, Australia
Incidental Pleasure, MO_Space, Metro Manila, Philippines
MIGRATION (First International Pop Up show by ARNDT), CASSydney, Sydney, Australia

- 2011** *Artists with Arario*, Arario Gallery, Seoul, South Korea
ASIA Looking South, ARNDT Gallery, Berlin, Germany
STRIP Painters as Photographers, Silverlens Galleries, Makati, Philippines
- 2010** *Beacons of Archipelago*, Arario Gallery, Cheonan, South Korea
- 2009** *Thrice Upon A Time: A Century of Story in the Art of the Philippines*, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
Prague Biennale, Prague, Czech Republic
In the Ocean Without a Boat or a Paddle, Blanc Gallery, Mandaluyong City, Philippines
South East Asian Art Booming, Primo Marella Gallery, Milan, Italy
- 2007** *Dog Show 07*, Green Papaya Art Projects, Diliman, Philippines
I Have Nothing to Paint and I'm Painting It, MO Gallery, Metro Manila, Philippines
Headlights 2007, Valentine Willie Fine Arts, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Collections

- Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
National Center for Culture and Arts, Manila, Philippines
Central Bank of the Philippines, Manila, Philippines
Escuela de Bellas Artes Museum, Las Casas De Filipinas De Acuzar, Philippines
Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
Arario Museum in Space, Seoul, South Korea

Residencies

- 2012** Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI) Artist Residency, Singapore

Awards

- 2004** Recipient, Ateneo Art Awards, Philippines
- 2003** Thirteen Artists Awardee, Cultural Center of the Philippines

MIZUMA GALLERY

Executive Director Suelo Mizuma established Mizuma Art Gallery in Tokyo in 1994. Since its opening in Gillman Barracks, Singapore in 2012, the gallery aims for the promotion of East Asian artists in the region as well as the introduction of Southeast Asian artists to the international art scene. From 2014 to 2019, the artist residency space “Rumah Kijang Mizuma” operated in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, providing a new platform for dialogue by supporting exchanges between East Asia and Southeast Asia. In 2018, a new gallery space, “Mizuma & Kips” in New York, USA, as a shared collaboration between Mizuma Gallery from Tokyo and Singapore, and Kips Gallery from New York.

Mizuma Gallery features the works of Japanese artists including Aida Makoto, Aiko Miyanaga, Amano Yoshitaka, Ikeda Manabu, Tenmyouya Hisashi, and Yamaguchi Akira. Moreover, it showcases the works of renowned East Asian artists such as Ai Weiwei, Du Kun, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, Ken + Julia Yonetani, and Zhao Zhao. The gallery also features the creations of prominent and emerging artists from the region including Agan Harahap, Albert Yonathan Setyawan, Angki Purbandono, Ari Bayuaji, Ashley Yeo, Ben Loong, Budi Agung Kuswara, Entang Wiharso, Gilang Fradika, Heri Dono, I Made Djirna, indieguerillas, Iwan Effendi, Kemalezedine, Made Wianta, Mark Justiniani, Nasirun, and Robert Zhao Renhui.

GILLMAN BARRACKS

Set in a former military barracks dating back to 1936 and surrounded by lush tropical greenery, the Gillman Barracks visual arts cluster was launched in September 2012. Gillman Barracks’ vision is to be Asia’s destination for the presentation and discussion of international and Southeast Asian art. Today, Gillman Barracks is a place for art lovers, art collectors, and those curious about art. The cluster is a focal point of Singapore’s arts landscape, and anchors the development of visual art in the region and beyond.

Mizuma Gallery Pte Ltd
22 Lock Road #01-34
Gillman Barracks,
Singapore 108939
T. +65 6570 2505
F. +65 6570 2506
www.mizuma.sg
www.mizuma.shop
info@mizuma.sg

Tue-Sat: 11am - 7pm
Sun: 11am - 6pm
Closed on Mondays
and Public Holidays

Facebook.com/mizumagallery
Instagram @mizumaartgallery

Executive Director
Mizuma Sueo

General Manager
Fredy Chandra

Gallery Manager
Theresa Irma

Project Executive
Marsha Tan

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