

The Weight and the Weeping

Marigold Santos rejects the notion that women's emotions are a sign of weakness and uses severed bodies as a metaphor for the power to reinvent oneself.

by Lindsey V. Sharman

May 2, 2018 12:05 PM



Marigold Santos, "Sublimation," 2017, acrylic on canvas, 9' x 13'

The larger-than-life female figure in the epic painting, *Sublimation*, dominates *The Weight and the Weeping*, Marigold Santos' current exhibition at Calgary's Jarvis Hall Gallery. She floats with severed limbs on a delicate mauve sky above glowing chinook clouds. Her shroud is braided, woven, knitted, frayed. Her hair gushes like blood. Scattered flowers hint at a former terrestrial existence. The nebulae on her skin make one wonder if she is a conduit through which the universe is seen, or if she herself has become universal.

Facing *Sublimation* is *Constellation*, a floor-to-ceiling installation of tiny gilded objects individually pinned across the wall. Golden teeth are interspersed with shimmering finger bones and the occasional grub, croissant and ripple chip. These golden offerings read simultaneously as celestial debris raining down from the cosmos and as lost treasures sunk and scattered along the ocean floor. On the gallery's remaining walls are weepers – painted and drawn figures in mourning or celebration, exuding the strength that propels the ascension of the levitating giant in *Sublimation*.



Marigold Santos, "Weeper Wax," 2015, acrylic on canvas, 54" x 54"

The figure in all these works is the Asuang, a shape-shifting folkloric character in the Philippines, where Santos was born. Now based in Calgary, she uses it as a through-line in her work to investigate ever-changing and expanding themes of multi-faceted identity in relation to the immigrant experience. In this latest iteration, the Asuang as weeper challenges the perception of emotion, particularly as experienced by women, as weakness.

Rendered in a variety of media, these smaller works feature shrouds of blood and melting flesh, severed limbs sinking into the earth or rising out of it, legs separated from torsos, bodies haphazardly wrapped in cloth or draped in snakes. To describe Santos' work in words is to conjure images of violence, nightmares and the grotesque. In fact, the opposite is true. The works themselves speak of strength and empowerment.



Marigold Santos, "Weeper Flowers," 2015, acrylic on canvas, 54" x 54"

Santos aims to dispel colonial deformations of the feminine as weak. Her line of research is one of inversions that point to a pre-colonial worldview – not limited to the Philippines – where women's traits and emotions were not disdained. Consider the textiles in the work, described by Santos as symbolic of continual possibility. When frayed, they can always be rewoven to give strength. This truth runs counter to contemporary experience, where textiles, along with other consumer goods, are disposable and the idea of repair is all but rejected. In Santos' inverted *memento mori*, however, limbs separated from bodies represent the multifaceted, adaptable, resourceful self. Deterioration or "falling apart" offers limitless potential for how one might put oneself back together. ■

The Weight and the Weeping runs from April 27 to May 26, 2018 at Jarvis Hall Gallery in Calgary.

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