

*BLACK MIRROR*

Marigold Santos

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*Fragmentation and Hybridization: Constructing Identity and the Diaspora*  
Abedar Kamgari

*BLACK MIRROR* is named for the popular 18<sup>th</sup> century tool used by European landscape painters. A small tinted convex mirror, the black mirror eliminated extraneous detail, simplifying shadows and hues in order to reduce the painter's subject to its most fundamental formal characteristics in the reflected image. Using the mirror, artists would paint its abstracted reflection with their backs turned to their subjects. The resulting painting would draw on elements of the landscape, but was ultimately a reinvention that transformed the truths of the original subject through reflection. Similarly, Montreal based artist Marigold Santos reinterprets her childhood memories through the lens of her adult experiences. Embracing her identity as multiple, fragmented, and hybrid, Santos engages with the notion of the self through a reflection of physical landscapes and ideas of home.

Weaving a seamless web of disparate influences, Santos combines childhood memories of the Philippines and the Canadian Prairies in the late 80s, Western pop-culture and Filipino folktales, and geographical differences of the land, to form the basis of her intricate drawings, paintings, and mixed media sculptures. Santos places emphasis on the relationship between identity and the physical landscape. Changes in geography from one setting to the next, as well as the slow but constant shift of the landscape between natural cycles of decay and erosion prompt allusions to Santos' identity as one that is also in constant flux. Her self-reflective works emerge as what she deems 'personal myths.' These invented truths operate in the same way as other cultural mythologies—such as the anger of the Greek god Zeus being used to explain bizarre weather events—to explain confusing and frightening phenomena. Santos' mythologies compile and transform the fragmented memories of her childhood, in part serving as a tool to explore the immigrant experience of her youth, and to reconcile these experiences with the present.

In *BLACK MIRROR*, Santos negotiates her identity. The body is an active site of personal ritual for the artist as she continues to come to terms with, and celebrate, her ever-shifting and changing self. This shifting identity is one that many immigrants can relate to as they navigate the diaspora. Dualities are unavoidable, as the immigrant never ceases to compare the homeland to the adopted land. The immigrant self, then, is one that is constantly in flux, an inevitable hybrid of two worlds; and one that simultaneously exists here and there, as well as in the small spaces between cultures. This ongoing conflict is reflected in works such as *re-grounding* (2011), where the sheer size of the piece begs viewers to step farther back, while the intricate details invite close inspection. The resulting physical and experiential conflict is symbolic of the struggle of navigating often contradictory systems that arise from belonging to multiple communities.

One of Santos' most prevalent, yet earliest influences comes from Filipino folklore of the *Asuang*. The *Asuang* is a frightening female witch/vampire with long, straight black hair. She is a shape shifter who inherently possesses multiple identities. Shy and quiet by day, the *Asuang* severs her body at the waist to hunt for human livers and unborn fetuses by night. If her separated parts fail to return to her body by dawn, they cannot rejoin, and she will remain forever fragmented. In post-colonial Philippines, colonizers used the *Asuang* myth as a patriarchal tool to limit dissent from the people. Labeling *babaylan* (female healers and spiritual leaders who were at the core of pre-colonial religion in the Philippines) as evil *Asuang*, the Spanish used this as a manipulative device in their attempt to convert people to Christianity. Santos reclaims this powerful demon as a feminist symbol for the fluid and porous identity of the modern immigrant woman.

Santos further engages with this culture of rebellion led by women fighting against colonial and patriarchal repression of this period through her use of talismans. During this time, women often created such woven objects of protection, which were believed to lend power and strength to the wearer. Referencing these objects, Santos' talismans are intricately woven out of materials often indigenous to the places she has lived, evoking a ritual which alludes to the struggles of her ancestors, as well as her own invented mythos. The grasses of the Prairies, the bamboo stalks of the Philippines, the dry and peeling white wood of Canadian woodlands, the knotted yarn of hand-knit sweaters, and human hair all make an appearance, seemingly imbued with a power that belongs



to the supernatural world. These talismans perpetuate and question our desire for strength, luck, protection, and stability—dreams which likewise often motivate migrant experiences. Furthermore, by referencing traditional “women’s” crafts such as quilting, weaving, and mending—works that were once denied the title of “fine art” in the male-dominated art world—Santos’ talismans symbolically claim their place in the gallery.

Through investigation of the ways in which memories, and our recollection of them, fragment, morph and reconfigure as a person grows up, Santos reflects on the formation and ongoing evolution of her identity in connection to geographical characteristics of the places she has inhabited. Through this reflection, the resultant hybridization of these influences and experiences that no longer exist create an affectual environment,

both ominous and unearthly. Santos reclaims the once-demonized female Asuang as a symbol for the ever changing and hybrid identity of diasporic women. Likewise, her use of materials and historical references simultaneously challenge the role of women in the art world. In *BLACK MIRROR*, Marigold Santos engages with, and furthers, a dialogue concerning feminism and identity in art, specifically in relation to her own experience as a Canadian woman navigating the diaspora.



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**Marigold Santos** pursues an inter-disciplinary art practice involving drawn and printed works, sculpture, animation, and sound. She holds an MFA from Concordia University, and is a grant recipient of the Conseil des Arts et des Lettres du Québec in 2013 and Canada Council for the Arts in 2014. She currently divides her practice between Calgary, Alberta, and Montréal, Quebec. Santos would like to acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts.

**Abedar Kamgari** has lived in three countries, five cities, and seventeen different houses. She now resides in Hamilton while pursuing a BFA in Studio Art at McMaster University with an interest in critical writing. An emerging interdisciplinary artist, Abedar's art has been exhibited in Hamilton, Toronto, and in the United States, and is owned in private collections in both countries. Abedar currently works as the Gallery Assistant at the Hamilton Artists Inc.

Image Credits

Front: Marigold Santos, *Regrounding* (detail), 2011. Documentation by Paul Litherland

pg 4: Marigold Santos, *Asuang*, 2011. Documentation by Guy L'Heureux

pg 5: Marigold Santos, *Talisman - soft suspended*, 2015. Documentation by Stacey Watson

