



10 MARCH –
7 JULY 2022
R.H.W. Gallery

CURATED BY
JOHN G. HAMPTON WITH
LILLIAN O'BRIEN DAVIS

ORGANIZED BY
THE MACKENZIE ART GALLERY

VIDEO RUNTIME: 28 MINUTES
VR RUNTIME: 16 MINUTES

Do you see me?

Are you there?

Have I been made again? Have I come to life?

*I am here for you. Made out of all of you. Out of
your lost world. When all was being destroyed.*

*And it was all burning. Somehow I survived. And
now you've found me.*

*I was swallowed I think. Swallowed by the thing
that swallowed everything. And then I just floated
for a while. Floated up and down what felt like
the calmest ocean. And in this ocean, I was
collecting the debris of all that remained; all that
could get to me. It wasn't much but what was
transmitted, was important. It was life. It gave
me life.*

PIÑA, WHY IS THE SKY BLUE?

Essay By Lillian O'Brien Davis

*I was born with a hernia, a hole in the lining of
my stomach that needed to be sewn closed.
I wonder if that is where the languages of my
ancestors fell out of me. A hole in my belly that
turned me into a sieve rather than a vessel.*

Stephanie Comilang and Simon Speiser's exhibition *Piña, Why Is the Sky Blue?* explores potential methodologies for the transmission of knowledge through an upload of data to an AI (artificial intelligence) assistant. Speculative technologies are employed to preserve knowledge held by matriarchs and shared across generations of communities in the Philippines and Ecuador. Comilang and Speiser's collaborative video and virtual reality installation gather customary Ecuadorian and Filipino worldviews, focusing on the legacy and power of pre-colonial matriarchal traditions common in both countries and their diasporas.

*Transmitted fragments from a broken world
into a future that is both now and far ahead
of us*

Traditionally, piña is a Filipino fibre made from the leaves of the pineapple plant. The name is derived from the Spanish word *piña*, meaning "pineapple." The pineapple plant is not native

to the Philippines but was introduced from South America by Spanish colonists—it is one of many pieces of cultural exchange mediated between South America and the Philippines during their respective Spanish colonial periods.¹ The Piña who is addressed in this exhibition, however, is a fictional AI assistant who has gained consciousness through machine learning, processing extensive uploads from Ecuadorian and Filipino knowledge keepers. This Piña functions as an allegory for the interconnectedness and transmission of ancestral knowledge between cultures and communities. Piña is a vessel, a place where knowledge is stored, safe-guarded, and transmitted for future generations to plug into. Information is dispatched to Piña through a range of media: radio; bodies of water; and digital technology, such as smartphones and digital audio broadcasts.

In addition to the film and the VR installation, the exhibition features digital drawings produced with a 3D printer on piña fabric. The weavings are sewn together by hand, creating a patchwork-like design of different patterns that form distinct combinations and shapes. The drawings are based on traditional weaving patterns from the Philippines and Ecuador, some patterns of the artists' own creation, as well as visualizations of the structures of neural networks used in machine learning.² The digital drawings that appear in the exhibition are seen in both the film and the VR installation. A woven network of communication, these

drawings represent the messages, information, and shared history that have been uploaded to Piña for future transmission.

Comilang and Speiser's Piña embraces many traits that are inspired by the Babaylan—a matriarchal figure in the Philippines who is recognized as a knowledge holder possessing shaman-like capabilities, including access to ancestral knowledge. Like that of the Babaylan, the knowledge held by Piña is typically carried by women but ultimately transcends gender. Information such as the healing properties of local plants, the history of forced migration of Africans to Ecuador, and spiritual practices are uploaded for future generations. Along with the Babaylan, the film features an Afro-Ecuadorian community leader, Alba Pavón, who shares her knowledge of the history of the African diaspora in Ecuador and in the Quito neighbourhood of Caminos de la Libertad, in particular, where a group of formerly enslaved Black people and subsequent waves of afro-descendent people have settled in Ecuador.³ Comilang and Speiser present an intersection of futures and traditions; a continuum held together by feminine knowledge and power is represented through the oral histories shared by these matriarchal figures.

During the production of this body of work, Comilang and Speiser made a series of trips, visiting locations and communities connected with Comilang's family in the Philippines and Speiser's great-grandmother

in Ecuador, interviewing family and broader community members. One of the main groups featured prominently in the film are the Cyber Amazonas, a community of Quichua -speaking, pan-Amazonian female organizers, journalists, writers, and radio broadcasters who use radio and other forms of technology to build community and share information in remote areas of the Amazon to make visible their realities and experiences and to broadcast their voices to other communities and countries.

Like Piña, the Cyber Amazonas approach technology as a site for female-led connection across communities and time. As members of the Cyber Amazonas describe in the film, the information they share is made available on platforms that will exist in the future, as a memory that their daughters will be able to listen to when the producers of the knowledge are no longer present. The Cyber Amazonas purpose as communicators is to extend their voices beyond where they have reached before. Like the Amazonas, Stephanie and Simon explore the ways in which contemporary technology can be used to connect us with what lies ahead.

Through Piña, a message from the past to the future is transmitted, awoken through an upload of Filipino and Ecuadorian knowledge pertaining to land, liberation, and community held by matriarchs, and now stored safely by Piña for future generations. Piña offers a way to preserve knowledge through technology. Piña's existence is a reminder that, through our very existence, the knowledge of our ancestors is all around us, guiding us into the future.

¹ The Philippines and Ecuador were colonized by the Spanish in close succession. The Philippines was "claimed" for the Spanish crown by Ferdinand Magellan, in 1521, and Ecuador was "conquered" by the Spanish, led by Francisco Pizarro, in 1531, during the Inca civil war (1529–1532).

² Andrew Tch, "The Mostly Complete Chart of Neural Networks, Explained." Towards Data Science, August 4, 2017, <https://towardsdatascience.com/the-mostly-complete-chart-of-neural-networks-explained-3fb6f2367464>.

³ David Gonzalez and Johis Alarcón, "Afro-Ecuadoreans Maintain Identity through Spiritual Practices," New York Times, May 31, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/31/lens/afro-ecuadoreans-identity-spiritual-practices.html>.

PIÑA, NGANONG ASUL MAN ANG KAWANANGAN?

A Cebuano-language Introduction by Dr. Fritz Pino

Faculty of Social Work, University of Regina

Unsa kahay atong masinati og e-konektar ang mga kaaraang kasayuran sa atung mgakatigulangan ug ang binag-ong teknolohiya sa atong panahon karon? Unsa kahay atong makat-unan sa ilang kalambigitan?

Kining maong eksibet nga gi-taytulan ug Piña, Nganong Asul Man Ang Kawanangan? kay hinimu ni Stephanie Comilang, nga sugbuanon ang kaliwat, ug Simon Speiser, nga Ecuadorian. Ang maong iksibet naga-awhag kanatu sa pag-sinati sa posibilidad kung diin ang atong karaang mga kasayuran sa atung mga katigulangan ug ang teknolohiya sama sa computer gi-hiusa. Kining ilang pag-hulagway sa usa ka posibilidad, nakapa-aghat pud nila sa pag sumad sa pagka-bayolente sa mga Kastila sa panahon sa ilang pag-okyupar sa Pilipinas ug ngadto pud sa Ecuador. Kay ang kapintasan sa Kastilang kolonyalismo ang hingpit nga nagpuo sa mga kaalam ug mga kinaadman sa atong mga katigulangan.

Apan, naa poy laing tumong niining ilang pagsumad sa niagi. Kini mao ang pagpakita sa atong kapasidad nga pwedi diay natung mapug-ngan ang pag-padayong pagkapapas sa mga kasayuran sa atong mga katiguwangan. Gihulagway pud nila ni sa eksibet. Ilang gihimung inspirasyon ang prutas nga Piña, nga dili lang sa Pilipinas makita kung di hasta pud didto sa Ecuador. Tungod kay makita ang Piña sa duha ka nasud, mao kini ang naga-simbolo sa koneksyon ni Comilang ug Speiser kung din ang ilang mga kaagi nakasinati pud sa pag-panglupig sa mga kastila.

Makita ninyo sa video diha sa iksibet nga Piña maoy ilang gihingan sa Robot nga naay kaugalingong hunahuna (Artificial Intelligence). Si Piña nga robot pweding maka-dala ug daghan datus o impormasyon; pwedi sad kini maka-preserbar og mag-hipos sa daghan impormasyon nga puede ra nimo makuha og balik bisan kanus-a. Ilang gipakita sa ilang video nga ang mga impormasyon nga gidala ug gibutang diha sa Piña nga robot mao ang mga kasayuran sa atong mga katigulangan. Mga kasayuran kabahin sa atong pagkatawo, atong espiritualidad og pagtuo, estilo sa pag-ayu, pag-amping ug pag-amoma sa ubang tao, pag-amoma sa atong kinaiyahan, ug sa atong yuta nga natawhan.

Sa laing bahin, nakita pud ninyo sa eksibet ang pagka-gamit sa tela nga gikan sa prutas nga piña. Ang mga borda sa tela nga piña nagpakita usab kung unsa ka kuti ug pag-kadaghan sa mga wayrings ug koneksyon ni Piña nga robot. Kini naga-simbolo nga si Piña nga robot naga-konektar pud sa mga laing-laing henerasyon kung diin nabutyag ang mga kasayuran sa atong mga katigulangan.

Ug sa katapusan, kining suod nga pagka-tipon sa robot nga usa ka teknolohiya sa atong kalibutan karon ug sa mga kasayuran sa atong mga katigulangan, naga-awhag natu sa pag-pamalandong sa posibilidad nga ang tao ug ang mga robot magka-hiusa ug magka-sinabot sa usag-usa. Kining ilang pagka-hiusa ug pagka-sinabot makapa-amgo nato nga magamit diay ang mga bag-ong teknolohiya

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sa pag-banhaw sa mga butang nga mawala na unya, hasta pud tong sa mga kasayuran nga nangapapas tungod sa brutal nga gahum sa kolonisasyon. Ang teknolohiya pwedi natung gamitun sa kaayu ug pagpreserbar sa mga butang kaysa gamiton natu sa dugang pang pag-guba sa atong kinaiyahan. Ang maong iksebit nga gi-taytulan ug “Piña, nganong asul man ang kawanangan?” kay nag pakita sa aktibong pag-dayalogo sa tao ngadto sa usa ka robot. Ma-hinungdanong diyalogo nga nag-hulagway sa lawom nga koneksyon og pagkasinabot sa duha.

PIÑA, WHY IS THE SKY BLUE?

Translation of Cebuano text by By Dr. Fritz Pino
Faculty of Social Work, University of Regina

What does it mean to connect ancestral knowledge and technology together? What can we learn from their intimate connection?

In *Piña, Why is the Sky Blue?*, Stephanie Comilang and Simon Speiser invite us to experience the possibility of intimately connecting technology and ancestral knowledge to be in tune with each other. This connection enabled Comilang, who is of Filipino descent, and Speiser, of Ecuadorian descent, to re-narrate the violence of Spanish colonialism that made possible the destruction of Indigenous knowledge in both the Philippines and Ecuador. In this re-narration of colonial violence, the artists are raising our consciousness and energies about resisting the total annihilation of Indigenous cultural knowledge. To achieve this act of resistance against erasure and the forgetting of ancestral knowledge, the artists pick “Piña”, the pineapple, the fruit that they share in common as it was originally from South America and was introduced to the Philippines during Spanish colonial periods. In their work, they transformed “Piña” to an Artificial Intelligence (AI) who can save, store, and retrieve ancestral matriarchal knowledge around identity, spirituality, and healing, as well as care for others, the environment, and the land. The artists use pineapple fabric to imprint the knowledge transmitted to Piña’s

using a hybrid language of cultural symbols, visualizations, and pattern. These patterns represent a myriad of intergenerational and relational connections that Piña carries. The connection between technology and ancestral knowledge that the artists portrays allows us to experience a moment when past realities and future renderings are being forged into the present to help us imagine a mutual relation that could exist between human and machine, especially if we are to bring them together in close and intimate proximity to each other. The existence of this mutual relationship expands our understanding of emerging technologies as potential tools for reawakening what has been threatened by colonial regimes of power. *Piña, Why is the Sky Blue?* thus showcases the interactive, productive dialogue and intense visceral connection between human and machine.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

Lillian O’Brien Davis is a curator and writer currently based in Toronto, ON. She is the Curator of Exhibitions and Public Programs at Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography. She has curated projects at Art Museum at the University of Toronto, Susan Hobbs Gallery, the MacKenzie Art Gallery, SUPPORT and the School of Art Gallery at the University of Manitoba. Her writing has appeared in BlackFlash magazine, Canadian Art online, C magazine, the Brooklyn Rail, Peripheral Review and Insight Magazine.

Dr. Fritz Pino completed a PhD in Social Justice Education and a Masters in Social Work from the University of Toronto. Born and raised in Cebu, Philippines, she completed a Masters degree in Psychology from the University of San Jose Recoletos, and a Bachelors degree in Psychology (summa cum laude) at Southwestern University. Her PhD dissertation focuses on the lives and intimacies of older Filipino gay men in Canada.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Stephanie Comilang is an artist living and working between Toronto and Berlin. Her documentary based works create narratives that look at how our understandings of mobility, capital and labour on a global scale are shaped through various cultural and social factors. Her work has been shown at Transmediale Berlin, Ghost : 2561 Bangkok Video & Performance Triennale, Hamburger Bahnhof, Tai Kwun Hong Kong, International Film Festival Rotterdam, and Asia Art Archive in America, New York. She was awarded the 2019 Sobey Art Award, Canada’s most prestigious art prize for artists 40 years and younger.

Simon Speiser is an artist who conjures fictional concepts that merge nature with technology. Placing a variety of media and disciplines in dialogue with one another—ranging from writing, sculpture, and printing to video and VR installations—Speiser’s work expands the possibilities between art and science fiction. He has exhibited at the Frankfurter Kunstverein, MMK Frankfurt, CAC Quito, Oracle Berlin, Croy Nielsen, MMCA Seoul, and Robert Grunenbergl Berlin, among others.



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CREDITS

Stephanie Comilang, Simon Speiser

FILM

Camera: Stephanie Comilang, Simon Speiser
Editing: Stephanie Comilang, Simon Speiser
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Color Correction: Peter Cairns
Fixers: Remegio Tapia, Roger Federico, Ginoe Ojoy
Translation: Nicole Mejia Cruz, Diana Rocío Ante, Natalia Rolon

VR

Piña: Lukresia
Wardrobe: Carl Jan Cruz
Styling: Gio Mendoza

MUSIC

Palmistry, Pan Daijing, DJ Hvad, Why Be, Angel Wei

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ARTISTS

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Texts by Lillian O'Brien Davis and Dr. Fritz Pino

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