

The Lingering Survival of the Unfit, 2018

Video Installation

Four projections with sound

I began interviewing my family over the past year with the intention of filling in the gaps in my knowledge about where our family comes from, hoping that in unpacking our immigration story I would find a new way at looking at identity. What I found was that our story was not a new one and my research did little to fill the gaps, but point to how vast the gaps in my knowledge were as they pointed to how American my experience of the world is. This walk sequence was created in contemplation of present day migration stories, an accumulation of repetitive gestures of labor inspired by my Filipino grandfather's participation in Bataan Death March during the Japanese occupation in WWII, a story that I never heard in school learning about American history. I'm interested in the ways that histories are perceived and how entanglements of hierarchies form from those perpetuated memory gaps and its influences on the world. I'm interested in my own gaps of experience as I reflect upon these stories as all too common negotiations of power. This stop motion has no established end — I will continue to walk these puppets until the puppets themselves are unable to function.

— Stephanie Williams, 2018
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Stephanie Williams

The Lingering Survival of the Unfit

August 25 – October 6, 2018

...m-a-r-c-h...

by John Ros

Flickering moving image. Picture after picture, frame-by-frame — moments transform to build narratives onto histories as formative ideas based in the lived experience. The moving image is so familiar; at once accessible yet so easily disregarded. Glimmering brightness and contrast allure as they confront our attention. They require little to view, but much to fully unpack. The moving image not only seeks our approval but does so in a way that comforts. Is this ancestral? Does our DNA reflect in the flickering fire of our ancient forebearers? Or is the recollection of the moving image nearer; memories laid flat before us in a way that bring us back to a comforting place — Saturday morning cartoons, first dates, historic news events, home movies? Regardless of instinctual attraction or not, the enigmatic moving image is mostly a passive interaction, echoing how much our overly-sensitized world has been placed before us.

Art is not passive, especially for the stop-motion maker. Moment by moment, Stephanie Williams activates directed spaces. Twenty-four frozen moments in time create one second of movement. Though rhythmic and perhaps largely automatic (or more aptly, reflexive) the process requires much time and energy. The thematic development of puppets, the carving, cutting, binding, layering, painting — all before they have even taken a step — creates inertia for the awaiting narrative. Researched source material cloaks the backdrop as Williams brings her characters to life.

Williams' grandfather, Saturnino, was a survivor of the 1942 Bataan Death March in the Philippines. Like many immigrant, first-generation American families, these stories become buried out of the necessity to move on and assimilate, building new life in a foreign land. Williams' situation is made more complicated due to the fact that her parents are not from the same cultural background. Like many mixed households, survival, identity and assimilation enact their own complicated negotiation within the black and white world upheld by the main; this blurred space creates a smudge of grey. Identity goes rummaging for cues throughout the cultural past that inform how we carve out the spaces we stand in and view the world. This mélange of memory and tradition surfaces throughout time and develops the core of who we are.

For many, food is a nucleus that keeps families together. Williams' experience is no different. She plays with materials much like she played with food as a kid in her mother's kitchen:

I used to think that when I grew up, I'd be a butcher. I had no interest in running a store nor providing any kind of practical service, but I liked that food as a raw material, when turned into a prepared meal, could be transformed into almost anything. I would prepare meals with my mother...Working together, I learned how to remove a turkey gizzard, how to prepare liver, how to clean a squid, about shrimp paste and fish sauce. This stuff is honest even in its pieces.

This sense of blurring food as material starts to orient us in Williams' visual flickering narratives; the primacy of devouring our fresh catch over the pulsing heat of fire. Here, Williams uses balut as a way to present and preserve her history. Seen to some a staple, others an exotic or daringly gross food, it was common in young Williams' childhood. This starting point flinches in a way that turns ideas and expectations on their heads, presenting notions of survival and comfort in varied light. These fetal ducks take the place of the American and Filipino prisoners of war who walk the 60-70 miles from Sains Point, Bagac, Bataan and Mariveles to Camp O'Donnell, Capas, Tarlac. Though details are obscured, this honest handling of material opens up the potency of the forced walk itself. The beat, the breath and the hum of Williams' mother's voice creates an anxious, orchestrated chorus of frenetic inertia winding us up like a toy with a key in its back, prompting each anticipated step.

Williams' investigations into her personal familial history represent a deeper interrogation of our collective culture. Histories told and disseminated are so often contrived and cultivated for control or justification. Williams' dedication to her craft, using the lens of personal identity and familial lineage, develops a larger story from which we can all learn. Formation lies in the resulting process. To be fully formed lies in the patience and fortitude from which time unravels. Narratives are built each and every day. The beat of slapping webbed feet forced to walk infinitum reinforces persistence — in integrity and discovery. This process unveils mysteries and uncovers truths in purpose which develops an honest history. Good, bad or ugly.