

WE EAT THIS BREAD

MARIKIT SANTIAGO

12 NOV 22—01 APR 23

EXHIBITION
CATALOGUE

LIST OF WORKS

CROSS, 2015

Acrylic, oil and pyrography on
MDF placemat, 31cm x 21cm

MALDITA, 2020

Acrylic, oil, pen, graphite and
pyrography on found cardboard,
167cm x 122cm

LECHON BUHAY, 2016

Oil, acrylic, imitation gold leaf on ply,
found cardboard, pen (pen and paint
markings by Maella Santiago),
114cm x 87cm

FILIPINIANA 2021

Acrylic, interior paint, pen and oil on
found cardboard, 110.5cm x 100.7cm

APPLE OF MY EYE, 2020

Oil, acrylic and pen on found
cardboard (pen and paint markings by
Maella Santiago, Santi Mateo Santiago
and Sarita Santiago), fabrication by
Nick Pedulla, 198cm x 185cm x 11cm

A SEAT AT THE TABLE (KAPATID), 2022

Acrylic, oil and pen on found cardboard
(collaboration with Maella Santiago,
Santi Mateo Santiago and Sarita
Santiago), 122cm x 83cm

LEGACY, 2020

Acrylic, oil, pyrography and 18K gold
leaf on found cardboard (collaboration
with Maella Santiago, fabrication by
Nick Pedulla). Trophies from friends
and family, (cloaks made by Zenaida
Santiago), 230cm x 190cm x 43cm

A SEAT AT THE TABLE (MAGULANG), 2022

Acrylic, oil, pen and 23.75K gold leaf on
found cardboard (collaboration with
Maella Santiago, Santi Mateo Santiago
and Sarita Santiago), 122cm x 83cm

**FOREWORD
BY CARMEL AIELLO
COORDINATOR, FCMG**

Fairfield City Museum & Gallery (FCMG) is delighted to present Marikit Santiago's first solo exhibition in western Sydney.

It has been over two years since I first viewed Marikit's work in an inner city art gallery. The artist's exquisite draftsmanship, the exotic imagery and the religious iconography not only drew me into the gallery, but I found myself connected to a place that was familiar to me.

Two of the carpentry installations that formed the basis of that exhibition are now on display at FCMG, alongside a series of existing and newly-commissioned paintings. *We Eat This Bread* marks both a continuation and expansion of Marikit Santiago's impressive body of work.

This exhibition continues FCMG's program centred on identity and place, on what it means to grow up, live and work in western Sydney. We are proud of our ongoing engagement with artists, creatives and audiences that inspire and redefine the cultural fabric of this country.

Marikit Santiago's *We Eat This Bread* is a personal and visually rich exhibition which I hope will resonate with all who view it.

CATALOGUE ESSAY
BY JUNE ACIDO MISKELL

We Eat This Bread by Marikit Santiago showcases a series of works that explore The Last Supper extending the story to consider the rituals, traditions, and structures that shape the artist's cultural and social identities. The title of the exhibition, *We Eat This Bread*, takes its name from the well-known Eucharistic Prayer which occurs at the heart of every mass: *when we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, O Lord, until you come again*. As the Church's grand grace before meals, it is considered to be a prayer to give thanks and praise. The origins of the Eucharist can of course be traced back to The Last Supper, the pivotal ceremonial feast in which bread and wine representing Jesus' body and blood are shared by his disciples before his impending crucifixion. This final meal is also the subject of one of the most recognisable Renaissance murals by Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper* (1495–1498) whose allegory and symbolism is a key influence throughout the exhibition. *We Eat This Bread* reorients these narratives, inviting us to examine the legacies we inherit, reject, reclaim, and nourish.

Deeply drawn to exploring the autobiographic throughout her practice, Santiago embraces and layers imagery from the canon of Western art history with rich cultural symbolism that calls upon

Philippine heritage, Catholicism, folklore, myth, and personal memories. What I admire and find most generous about her work and its representational capacity to weave together these stories, is that it negotiates the many socio-historical complexities that enshroud being of Philippine ethnicity and Australian nationality without being didactic. Indeed, a thread can be woven to connect Santiago's practice to these collective experiences of Philippine migration and diaspora. What is most profound throughout *We Eat This Bread*—and Santiago's oeuvre at large—is precisely the artist's investment in the autobiographic, which is acutely complex and contemplative.

Unveiled for the first time in this exhibition are two of Santiago's newest portraits, *A Seat at the Table (Magulang)* and *A Seat at the Table (Kapatid)*. In *A Seat at the Table (Magulang)*, Santiago depicts her standing *nanay* (mother) and seated *tatay* (father) at one end of the table where a dismembered *lechon* (roast pig), banana leaf, and an arrangement of a cut branch of bananas with a bird of paradise rests in front of them. Echoing Caravaggio's *Narcissus* (1599) in lighting and tone, Santiago juxtaposes her parents shadowed and sturdy gaze with the negative phosphorescent lower plane which invites *A Seat at*



A Seat at the Table (Magulang), acrylic, interior paint, pen and oil on found cardboard, 2022. Photography by Garry Trinh.





A Seat at the Table (Kapatid), acrylic, interior paint, pen and oil on found cardboard, 2022. Photography by Garry Trinh.

the Table (Kapatid) into dialogue. In *A Seat at the Table (Kapatid)*, Santiago depicts herself sitting next to her *kapatid* (sibling) at the other end of the table where a python—symbolic of temptation and sin, rebirth, and magic—and Narcissus daisies lie in front of them. Hung in dialogue with one another, *A Seat at the Table (Magulang)* and *A Seat at the Table (Kapatid)* lays bare what everyone brings to the table and suggests that the labour and sacrifice of migrant parents has allowed for the narcissism of their children—which for Santiago, lies in the narcissistic pursuit of being an artist.

One of the many recognisable materials of Santiago's practice—which is present throughout each of the works displayed in this exhibition except for *Cross*—is the use of flattened sheets of found cardboard as the primed 'canvas' for her paintings. Cardboard is a disposable throwaway material with a certain kind of ephemerality to it, always anticipating being recycled. Here, recycled cardboard functions as the foundation for which more 'precious' materials such as gold leaf, layers of acrylic and paint, and exquisite brushstrokes and markings are applied, reframing the supposed inherent value given to such materials. For Santiago, using cardboard within her work simultaneously references the Philippine



ethos of ‘making-do’ and the longstanding tradition of *balikbayan* within Philippine culture. Literally translated from the Tagalog language, *balik* means ‘to return’ and *bayan* means ‘country’. *Balikbayan* boxes are a culturally specific care package used by Filipino migrants worldwide to send useful items such as groceries, clothes, toys, and household items to their families in the Philippines. Indexed within the materiality of cardboard via the *balikbayan* box are the complexities of colonial benevolence and repatriation—the origins for which can be traced to the two-decade long dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos.

In *Maldita*, Santiago reframes an earlier portrait of Ferdinand Marcos’ wife, Imelda Marcos, which originally intended to highlight the dispossessive history of the Caluit Safari Park, but was misconstrued as a glorifying tribute. To this day, Imelda Marcos dismisses any critique of her actions and instead insists that everything she did was for ‘mothering’ the Philippines. Here, Santiago turns Imelda upside down, painting over her, and inserting her own personal history by reproducing an image from her childhood at the centre of the composition. The image captures a young Santiago at her *tita* (aunty) and *tito*’s (uncle) wedding standing next to the then president of the Philippines, Cory Aquino,



Maldita, acrylic, oil, and pyrography on found cardboard, 2020.
Photography by Garry Trinh.



A young Santiago at her *tita* (aunt) and *tito's* (uncle) wedding, standing next to the then president of the Philippines, Cory Aquino. Photography by Josefino Santiago.

who was the couple's *ninang sa kasal* (godmother) and whose leadership of the People Power Revolution led to the ousting of the dictator's regime. Santiago reveals to me that in this painterly reproduction, she has intentionally omitted relatives who were present in the original photo. For Santiago, the effects of these multi-layered political histories—which remain deeply felt today as Marcos' son 'Bong Bong' has been elected President of the Philippines this year—are redirected to consider the personal politics within her own family dynamics.



Cross, acrylic, oil and pyrography on MDF placemat.
Photography by Garry Trinh.

If we return again to the title of this exhibition, *We Eat This Bread*, and all that it entails with sustenance and sacrifice, there is a resonant thread to be traced between these newer works and Santiago's earlier works *Cross* and *Lechon Buhay*. In *Cross*, two large firearms are served on a scalloped white dinner plate which is positioned pointing down toward two flying bats, or *manananggal*—a terrifying winged vampire-like creature in Philippine mythology. Taken together, this scene engenders a haunting feeling of discomfort and unease as fear is instilled atop the dinner plate. In *Lechon Buhay*, however, Santiago depicts herself as an anthropomorphic and pregnant *lechon* (roast pig) who is served, so to speak, at the centre of a large banana leaf to resemble a kamayan-style feast. Derived from the Spanish word *leche* which translates to 'milk', the origins of the *lechon* dish used small young suckling pigs that were still nursing milk from their mothers. At the table and on the 'plate', Santiago renders her pregnant self at the precipice of her second childbirth and as a life force and source of nourishment for her children. This nourishment and sustenance is a cornerstone of Santiago's practice, which is deeply informed by her role as a mother and artist.



Lechon Buhay, oil, acrylic, imitation gold leaf, on ply, found cardboard, pen (pen and paint markings by Maella Santiago), 2016.
Photography by Cassie Bedford.

Almost all of the works displayed throughout this exhibition contain the fluid and gestural markings of Santiago's most important artistic collaborators—her children Maella Santiago, Santi Mateo Santiago, and Sarita Santiago. Writing on her collaboration with her children, Santiago shares:

Their naïve yet confident mark-making which is entwined with my sometimes rigid and refined technique adds a visual intrigue and deep sentimentality. Their collaborations with me are reserved only for the deeply personal and passionate pieces in which they are the muses.

In *Apple of My Eye* and *Legacy*, Santiago's paintings are inserted within custom-built wooden furniture that structures and reframes familial narratives of motherhood, legacy, and lineage. The open partition of *Apple of My Eye* reveals to us Santiago's appropriation of Michaelangelo's *Pieta* sculpture which casts the Virgin Mary cradling Jesus after his crucifixion. Here instead, Santiago mirrors herself in a dual-portrait across the frame. On the left panel, she is seated in the place of the Virgin Mary and nursing her youngest daughter Sarita while on the right panel, a tightly coiled python nestles into her collarbone—a reference to the biblical story of Eve's temptation which brought original



Apple of My Eye, collaboration with Nick Pedulla, oil, acrylic and pen on found cardboard (pen and paint markings by Maella Santiago, Santi Mateo Santiago and Sarita Santiago), 2020. Photography by Garry Trinh.



Legacy, collaboration with Nick Pedulla, acrylic, oil and pyrography on found cardboard (paint markings by Maella Santiago), 2020. Photography by Nick Pedulla.

sin into the Garden of Eden. In *Legacy*, Santiago evokes a domestic altarpiece and the arced shape of the refectory of the Covenant of the Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan where the original mural of da Vinci's *Last Supper* is painted. We encounter Santiago's son, Santi Mateo (the only son in her family) as the central figure of the work surrounded by brawling basketball players, Santiago's tatay in the window above, and delicately detailed Miss Universe crowns on either side. Here, symbols of masculinity and femininity are juxtaposed with one another in a state of negotiation, inviting us to challenge the inherited values and beliefs that our identities are influenced by.

Confronting these dualities and complexities through self-portraiture continues with *Filipiniana*. In *Filipiniana*, we encounter another dual self-portrait of Santiago in the poses of Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait with Monkeys* (1943) and Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503–18) with her hair braided (left) and loose (right) with arms poised. The title of the work, *Filipiniana*, refers to the sheer fabric and *piña* cloth seen in traditional Filipino formal garments typically worn over an undershirt, though here her nude body is partially revealed. Accompanying her are the expressive markings made by her daughter

Maella, who is credited as a collaborator of this piece. In the background are faint strelitzia (bird of paradise) flowers and vibrant leaves whose symbolism is threefold: firstly, it is a visual appropriation of Kahlo's self-portrait; secondly, it serves as a homage to Santiago's parent's garden which has an abundance of the species; and thirdly, the word 'paradise' within the flower's name recalls the Garden of Eden which is referred to synonymously as a biblical paradise. The exquisite layers of meaning that manifest in *Filipiniana* illuminate many if not all of the pervading themes that echo throughout Santiago's work.

And that is precisely what *We Eat This Bread* breaks and shares with us. The result is a culmination of work that extends the story of the Last Supper to reconsider the rituals, traditions, and structures that entwine the fibres of one's cultural and social identities. Through her mode of address and her works' materialities, Santiago examines the collective and personal with a reverent criticality that negotiates what is inherited, reclaimed, and nourished. It is a mark of generosity that Santiago lays bare these offerings and that we are invited to take a seat at this table.



Filipiniana, acrylic, interior paint, pen and oil on found cardboard, 2021.
Photography by Mim Stirling.



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I acknowledge and pay respect to the Cabrogal people of the Dharug nation on whose land Fairfield City Museum & Gallery stands. I also pay respect to the Burrumattagal people, a clan of the Dharug on whose land I live, work and raise my children. I extend this respect to the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to the land, sea and community - a land that provided my parents with opportunity and the privileges of my upbringing.

Maraming salamat Nanay and Tatay for always providing us with a feast—not only of exceptional culinary delight, but of strong familial tradition. *Salamat sa kapatid ko Jay* for being the delicious condiment that really enhances the meal.

Shawn, I owe all my achievements to your unwavering support and encouragement. Your love inspires and nourishes me.

Maella, Santi and Sari, you are my best collaborators, most enchanting muses and the treasures of my life. The three of you are, and always will be, my greatest work of art.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Working across painting and sculpture, Marikit Santiago co-opts her practice with references, imagery, and symbolism from her Australian-Filipino ancestry, Catholicism, and the Western Art canon. Within these pluralities, she interrogates their existing contradictory sensations, values, and ideas.

In 2020, Santiago won the prestigious Sir John Sulman Prize for her work *The divine*, which examines the concepts and principles surrounding faith, creation stories, motherhood, cultural heritage and gender roles. Santiago was also a two-time finalist for the Archibald Prize at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, a 2019 Sulman Prize finalist, and was shortlisted for Create NSW's 2018 Visual Arts Emerging Fellowship. In 2018, the Churchie Emerging Art Prize at the Institute of Modern Art awarded Santiago with the Sam Whiteley Commendation

Santiago's notable exhibitions include her recent solo show *For us sinners* (2022) at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, and her inclusion the *Bayanihan Philippine Art Project* (2017) which exhibited at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Blacktown Arts Centre, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Mosman Art Gallery and Peacock Gallery.

Santiago graduated with a Master of Fine Art (2017) from the University of New South Wales, and holds a Bachelor of Fine Art (Honours Class I) in 2011 and a Bachelor of Medical Science (2007). During this time, she was awarded a Dean's Award for her undergraduate degree and the Australian Postgraduate Award for her Masters degree. Her work features in private and public collections across Australia.



Marikit Santiago in her parents' garden in North Rocks, Western Sydney, 2021. Photography by Garry Trinh.

CREDITS

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