

The background features several large, overlapping, bright red shapes that resemble stylized leaves or petals. These shapes are layered behind the text, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall composition is clean and modern, with a strong color palette of red and white.

**Stephanie  
Comilang**

**SEARCH  
FOR LIFE**

**TBA21 Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary**

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Stephanie Comilang. Photo by Trevor Good

Stephanie Comilang is an artist living and working in 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 the Tate Modern, Hamburger Bahnhof, Tai Kwun Hong Kong, International Film Festival Rotterdam, Julia Stoschek Collection, and Haus der Kunst. She was awarded the 2019 Sobey Art Award, Canada's most prestigious art prize for artists 40 years and younger.



Stephanie Comilang. Photo by Trevor Good



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Stephanie Comilang. Photo by Trevor Good

Chus Martínez

## *Search for Life:* A Tale Told by a Butterfly

Film is a medium invented to allow for a succession of world projections. For the first episode of her diptych, *Search for Life*, Stephanie Comilang has developed an installation with a large-scale LED screen topped with a large mirror, as well as a projection and a series of textile works in rooms reminiscent of shipping containers in the center of the space. The work emphasizes how film is uniquely realistic as a medium, while it also nourishes its metaphysically hallucinatory character by virtue of causing us to see things that are absent. The mirrors, reminiscent of a Baroque-style hall of mirrors, accentuate this phantasmagoric effect.

What is absent that this piece reveals? When they arrived in the Philippines, the Spanish became aware of the inhabitants' navigation expertise. The Philippines is an archipelago that comprises 7,641 islands. For centuries, people traveled safely between them while cultivating the exchange with Chinese seafarers and traders. When the Spanish placed the shipyards of the Manila galleons in Cavite, south of Manila, they forced the islanders to work for them, starting a new era for Filipino seafarers on cargo ships, a forced fate that continues to this day. Two of the characters in the film—a painter and a florist—are former seamen, former workers of the global maritime industry that Filipino seafarers have become the backbone of. The film connects all the characters—a monarch butterfly, two seafarers, a historian, a scientist, and a child—with an idea: we all have the potential of becoming.

In today's world it is not difficult to imagine a story told by a monarch butterfly. Monarchs in North America undertake one of the longest migrations of any insect in the world, traveling several thousand kilometers each fall to their winter destinations in central Mexico. Not all survive this long trip, but every monarch born along the way remembers the goal and continues the collective march. Scientists found that successful migrants have less black on their wings. Migratory monarchs

had larger white spots, proportional to the wing area, than non-migratory ones. Alongside the routes to assure their survival, the butterflies also pass these color patterns in their wings. How do larger white spots aid their journey? How much do they remember of what they saw along these routes?

If these incredibly delicate animals, which weigh less than half a gram, told their stories, these would be intertwined with the lives of the millions of migrants around the globe, with the stories of the routes discovered and invented to survive, explore, exploit, exchange, and also enact extreme forms of cruelty and abuse. In the film and textile installation *Search for Life*, the butterfly takes on the task of weaving a story that brings together the Manila galleon trading routes connecting Mexico with the Philippines and the preponderance of Filipino seafarers in trading fleets. The butterfly is present as a voice whose tongue can be understood by animals and humans and is also present as a motif in the embroideries on piña fabric in the two rooms that house the two large screens and mirrors. The very form of this installation is driven by a desire to transcend dualities. No one is untouched by history. No one is unaffected by migration. No one is unmoved by culture. We are not spectators—we are also inscribed in the story because our image is constantly there reflected by the mirrors. We are constantly there because our present—the social, economic, and cultural form of our present—is dependent on our pasts and our pasts are present in the stories told by each character in the film, who recount facts, outcomes of past dominations, their cultural traces, and so on.

- I. Seeing a butterfly is like seeing a myth. For thousands of years, these animals have assisted humans in thinking about transformation and renewal. In ancient times, a caterpillar becoming a butterfly must have been an image as powerful as a machine being able to write a love letter. It would be intriguing to conduct research on how butterflies' metamorphosis may be at the core of humanity's obsession with transferring traits and forms of life to machines. An egg becoming a caterpillar becoming a butterfly...this has excited the imagination of life being an elastic substance that can mutate incessantly. Life as a force with the potential to express itself in millions of ways. The colorful wings of butterflies not only embody the grace of nature, but are also swinging gates opening up our world to a world where fantasy acts as the technology enhancing future

life. Fantasy here is another name for the butterfly, the animal connecting the different stages of life. Delicate and powerful, in this film the butterfly is the voice of myths and the site of biodiversity.

I grew up believing that if you touch a butterfly and then—without realizing it—your eyes, you may go blind. This legend originated in Korea centuries ago and spread around the world like butterflies themselves. Supposedly, butterflies carry a magical dust in their wings that affects the vision of those who dare to touch this delicate and frail being. This myth has many



Stephanie Comilang. Photo by Trevor Good

variations, one of which is the story of the magical talent of a man married to a very jealous woman. In order to prevent her from spying on him, he developed a magical trick. He claimed he could transform the colorful silks she was embroidering into flying butterflies. In an attempt to understand that miracle, she touched a butterfly and went blind.

Comilang's embroidered textile works are displayed in two rooms in the center of the exhibition. The rooms resemble shipping containers and the embroidered butterflies on piña fabrics recall the Chinese patterns in the Manila shawls that reached Nueva España in the Manila galleons. Piña textiles are made from the fibers in pineapple leaves. The fine inner fibers of the leaves have a beautiful ivory white tone and appear fragile, like the wings of a butterfly, but they are quite strong. Traditionally, this fabric—unlike silk—was embroidered in the same ivory-white color as the fabric itself, creating the effect of a shadow. The manufacturers of these garments, small family enterprises in the central region of the Philippines, flourished in the eighteen cen-



tury under the Spanish colonial occupation. This tradition continued and the last decade of the twentieth century saw a revival of the heritage cloth industry and piña is now used in haute couture garments. One could speculate that the butterflies embroidered on piña are there to undo the misunderstanding around the Manila shawls, which are actually made in Guangzhou, China, and not in Manila. Those pieces, though, are not here to expose any truths about other fabrics' origins and their cultural reception, but for us to gain an intimacy with the intricacies of their stories. If we think in terms of colonial appropriation, the way Manila shawls, which came from the overseas colonies, became a hallmark of Spanish culture may constitute a case study. But they can also be thought of as an example of one empire using another, since the great majority of the goods transported in the galleons were Chinese made. The shawls could then be read as the silent agents that infiltrated the highest classes of the Spanish Empire and its territories by becoming a symbol of elegance and cultural identity.

But the piña fabric itself is no less foreign to the Philippines than silks from China. The pineapple plant arrived in Manila aboard of the first galleon that managed to successfully sail between Acapulco and Manila under the leadership of Miguel López de Legazpi in 1565. This is a very powerful image. Imagine the relief of those plants in seeing the coast. Like all migrants, the pineapples were expecting the ground to be fertile, to provide life and success. Migration—be it natural or forced, as in the case of the pineapples—multiplies the encounters, the flows of goods and lives, forming new identities and embodying a resistance to those who label and claim ownership upon all they touch.

The piña textiles in the exhibition can be interpreted as having an epic-magical dimension. Epic because we can imagine the pineapple entering the folklore of the Philippines and being celebrated in its stories and songs. Magical because, like in ancient tales, we almost feel an impulse to touch the fabric and liberate the butterflies. Why is that? The whole environment created by Comilang departs from facts, testimonies, and elements that can be known or conceived rationally. The exhibition, however, acts as a space where realism dissolves and our cognitive abilities are boosted by reflections and presences that require our imagination and our fantasy to be put to work. Dreaming about liberating the

butterflies implies a reconsideration of the boundaries between reality and fiction. But once the butterflies are in the room, their presence implies the acknowledgement of a life that perceives the world completely differently. The acknowledgment of their right to have a say in this world. What is the world that the butterflies see? And, if they see the world differently, then is it the same world for both of us?

Butterflies see the world according to colors. They capture the color of the world with eyes adapted to perceive a broad spectrum of sunlight and its effect on plants, flowers, and fields. Their eyes have six photoreceptors instead of the three humans have, but their ultraviolet receptors also vary from species to species. The eyes of butterflies are very complex organs with a rare capability to measure and discriminate very subtle light wavelengths. This ability is key to understanding their behavior, their navigation systems, their brains, which, in the case of the monarch butterflies, is designed to survive a long and cyclical journey to preserve their lives.

Ancient myths, butterflies' vision, and the migratory "brain" of monarch butterflies are all important components in *Searching for Life*. The work explores how art can create links between the historical understanding of the Manila galleon function in the past and the present reception of Asia in the world as well as the trans-generational migration of the monarch butterflies and the evolution of seafarer culture in the Philippines and worldwide. Have you ever seen a lotus root? Imagine entering this large-scale installation as you would be able to walk inside an underwater lotus root. Since it grows in water, the lotus has oval holes for obtaining oxygen. The work assumes that we are all immersed in a flow of historical narratives that shape our vision of others and form our ideas of identity—of who we are in relationship with, and who the others are. In order to be able to transform these very sedimented, oftentimes rigid views that form our present, we need to create holes, porous spaces where we can breathe different stories we may not even be aware of. Comilang's filmic method is all about the creation of these holes, these perforations, through which we can see the world differently.

- II. The video grows from the presence and the voices of distant characters: a butterfly; the historian Guadalupe Pinzón Ríos;

Jade Aster T. Badon, a butterfly specialist from the Philippines; a florist, Michael John Diaz, and the painter Joar Songcuya, both former seafarers from the Philippines; and a boy named Simon from Michoacán, Mexico.

The work reflects on the multiple dimensions of migration and diaspora and how exploitation and extortion created routes, how migration involves a particular memory that passes between the members of different generations, and how humans perceive the movement of animals with awe and the movement of humans with fear and mistrust.

Rios explains in her interview on camera how, in searching for a topic for her academic research, she became interested in the Pacific maritime routes that were formed in the sixteenth century between Manila and Nueva España (Mexico). The Manila galleon trade route, established around 1565, was a powerful commercial structure that allowed Spain to gain access



Stephanie Comilang. Search for Life (still)

to the commodities of Asia via Mexico, with Asia gaining access to silver as well. The creation of the route is ascribed to López de Legazpi and it is presented as a personal effort rather than as the collective endeavor of unifying and interpreting different sailing traditions and expertise. The Manila galleon trading route is in fact constituted of two separate routes, since leaving Manila and coming from Acapulco the galleons followed two separate belts of trade winds across the Pacific to avoid heavy winds and difficult currents. López de Legazpi's endeavors granted him the position of governor of the Philippines from 1565 until his death in 1572. His skills as sailor and lawyer—his training—made of him the perfect CEO of an empire that conquered, exploited,

and transformed the finances of those new territories. Rios explains how Manila was a logistical center where the shipyards of the galleon's production was located and the goods from China, Japan, Ceylon, and India were shipped to Acapulco. The Philippines, she says in the video, were also key in combining Western forms of shipbuilding with the knowledge of the local population, who have been navigating safely between the different islands of the archipelago for centuries and have had a constant trading and knowledge exchange with China. The initial 500-ton galleons soon reached 2,000 tons. The galleons transported mostly Chinese porcelain and Chinese textile embroideries (like the Manila shawl for example), both of which were very valuable kinds of products throughout Europe and its colonies in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, but they also transported beeswax blocks and other spices from China and Ceylon. Over the centuries, there was also a remarkable increase in cargo space for smuggling goods—a way of avoiding taxes and creating additional revenue for the traders and sailors.

The impact of goods coming from Asia to Europe and its colonies was so immensely powerful that new identities emerged from these embroidered textiles and porcelains. The dress codes of many communities, from Mexico to Spain, were transformed and they adopted colorful flowers, magical butterflies, and other motifs as if they were their own. These complex histories of trading and the way new hybrid identities were created by the Manila galleons are discussed in *Searching for Life* through two subjects—first, the butterflies present on the Manila shawls, and second, the living examples of transgenerational migration memory and the predominance of Filipino seafarers in today's shipping fleet worldwide.

Learning to relate differently to the colonial past and its inheritance is a form of evolution. Comilang's work suggests that we learn about the traumatic pasts we come from and the possible futures we may form. The installation here suggests new forms of thinking about migration, where instead of binding it to territory, nationality, or given forms of identity, her visual language reveals its intersectionality and the resonances of past experiences with today's diasporas.

### III. *Search for Life: A Diptych*

Comilang's work is defined by attentiveness. Her artistic practice pays attention to certain elements in our culture and how they shape but also undo our interpretations of identity, our relationships with the past, and our sense of togetherness with nature. Ignored and unseen elements are combined with facts, personal experiences, and academic research, the impulse to know and to repair coexisting with the need to re-enchant the world. The exhibition presented by TBA21 at the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid is part of a diptych. Diptychs—common throughout the history of art—combine two elements brought together as a means of protecting the artwork encased within. It may be strange to think of two film installations coexisting with physical objects as a virtual cabinet, a repository of certain experiences and realities. Diptychs were developed as traveling artworks. They fold so that they could be protected when moved across different places and communities. This logic is still present in Comilang's work. Structurally, we can expect a symmetry between the two pieces. But the second episode will expand the landscape that the first installation has only started to portray. In this episode, Nueva España (Mexico) is present through the butterflies, the colony receiving goods coming from Manila. In the second, the focus shifts to the Philippines. The two chapters also unites two institutions, TBA21 and the Sharjah Art Foundation, where the second panel or episode of this work will be presented.

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Mara Coson

# Tomorrow you must paint us, that's why we came

«Fra Giovanni understood and said, spelling it out as one learning a code: "You've made a trip, it was too long." And then he asked: "Why do I understand what you say?" The creature opened his arms as far as his position allowed, as if to say, I haven't the faintest idea. So that Fra Giovanni concluded: "Obviously I understand you because I understand you."»

Antonio Tabucchi,  
*The Flying Creatures of Fra Angelico*

The form of a bird descended upon the garden where a monk named Fra Giovanni on a Thursday in June in the fifteenth century was gathering onions. Unsure of the reason for this event, the monk asked if the bird was calling him. "It was me calling me?" he asked the bird pointing at him.

Years ago, a parrot came to us on a branch outside the kitchen window. We named the parrot Sandi and wondered how parrots have evolved to be this green. Amelia got used to the bird's coming and going, this rhythm performed over and over, that they formed a relationship, as if she were her pet, a reciprocal nature that seemed to fit along our evolution that it was difficult to understand what happened the day Sandi left — did she die, was there hurt in her heart, or did she just fly away?

Out of the corners of both our eyes, the feral cat and I watch each other: she naked on the prowl, and I in the kitchen, fully clothed, boiling peanuts. The portable induction stove has a temper and needs my close attention, and as the bubbles emerge I think of the flock of pigeons above the market covering some sky as the crowd walks out of Sunday mass, feeling some of the world ending around arthritic acacia canopies and the thought left me as they dodged a single balloon escaped from the hand of a child, a metallic blue whale floating away on its stomach. And me, with the crowd, circling the stands of bananas and sayote in some lazy Sunday order, while the balloon seller pulls his tower of giraffes, a few big-eyed rabbits, and one deflating minion, trying not to get in the way.

Antonio Tabucchi once dreamed in writing about Ovid dreaming of becoming a butterfly, staging his own metamorphosis

in sleep. Before the Roman emperor, as himself, recited his poetry but the words came out “only the hiss of an insect.” Failing to be heard, he was fated to wake up anyway.

I sit at my desk thinking about where butterflies go, thinking about what the visit of a mariposa means, a fantail visits me by slamming its face against the glass really hard, as if it were seeing its reflection in water, over and over, and I am afraid that its beak or the glass might shatter. It visits me often, and each time is the same, it is trying to get at me or to get inside or get to the expanded plane of more garden that it sees, a mirror world I can explain but not to him. But from what I know from seeing birds looking at water, it’s probably desperately attacking an opponent looking, without curiosity, much like itself.

If a maya bird, which is a bird we mistake for a maya but is actually a house sparrow that we persist in calling a maya, enters your house it’s a good sign, but if a fantail enters the house—sorry, Raya interrupts me, *but are you asking because it is happening to you right now, has a fantail come in because it’s bad news*, and I say no, thank god. The fantail does this every afternoon, and so on the third day, as I sit to write about butterflies, all I can think of is me and birds.

Maria and I were under the mango trees doing jumping jacks and thinking about a friend who told me that “nature is so complicated now.” We spent a while thinking about what he meant by that, because where we found snakeskins, a cat is guarding on tiptoes; where the ripe bugnay berries were the galansiyang have gotten to; where I don’t walk is where the coconuts fall; and where the old man fell there was nothing for him to hold on to but the thorns of an old bougainvillea.

If you hear rustling above you, she said, cover your head. Back then, there used to be dew all over the grass and that row of townhouses over there were all cassava and there where our neighbors now sing “Shallow” was just a small mud pond hiding more than a pair of horns. Dew looks like diamonds on the grass. I wondered if I might still see that but I’m never here long enough to know. The coming of evening always gives me anxiety. I sit looking out at the armpit of the tree waiting for fireflies.

I grew up in the city, where nature is taming roots and lays scratchy rulers on our larger fractal universe, playing god with plastic kitchens and against my own nature I liken things to the natural world, and most recently I have developed the bad habit of calling many things low-hanging fruit. Ideas that seem so easy

to pick at, like birds to say that I am thinking of the way only we have the privilege of being unpredictable. But what if instead the low-hanging fruit is much like the thing? Could this bird outside my window appear to be a fruit?

And as the sun starts to set, the mosquitoes start to run laps around my dog-licked legs and I march involuntarily in place until the wisdom of going back home comes to me and I go into my bedroom, turn on the desk lamp, undo the curtains, and sit where I can still see four inches left of the day while hiding from it. Each time I look out the window it is darker and darker and I worry—was the day perfect? The cat I mistook for a ghost a moment ago will soon turn black.

In Ted Hughes's *Tales from Ovid*, the mortal weaver Arachne refuses to give credit to Minerva for her weaving skills and this offends the god disguised in the shape of an old woman. "I challenge Minerva / to weave better than I weave / and if she



Stephanie Comilang. Search for Life (still)

wins / let her do whatever she wants with me, / I shan't care." And so god and mortal challenged each other, pulling their shirts down to their breasts in the manner of rolling up their sleeves, pitting weeping stone and tangled olives to freckled serpents and grapes that are no grapes.... Arachne beat Minerva with just enough perfection that Minerva beat her with a boxwood shuttle between the eyes, four times, causing Arachne to give up and hang herself, causing the god to take pity upon Arachne and turn her hanging corpse into a spider—"now she's all belly with a dot of head"—condemned to weave forever and ever.

A friend who died suddenly tonight used to have an ostrich living in his workshop. I visited him because for my own reasons

I needed a deer made of mirrored glass and I'd never seen an ostrich before and like Arachne it was all belly with a dot of head and when it stood it was bigger than me. Years later, when we were all asked to stay in our homes, an ostrich ran loose in a village in Manila, it ran down streets and made it on the news, but it couldn't go any further, no matter how urgent or determined—the village guard didn't let it out because it had no gate pass. I wondered for a moment if it was his ostrich, but I heard it may have died swallowing Styrofoam.

To clear the air, I like to put on radio loudly. I imagine the way the switch ignites an electron cotillon, it swarms and flutters to create a current to accompany my singing along to Elton John "fly away, skyline pigeon fly," larger and larger waves of hot sound crowding the air. To me, electricity will always feel like magic. At night, somewhere in the world, a swarm of butterflies sleep like sleeping leaves in the forest night, dreaming of humans dreaming of them.

I am trying to remember a feeling in a movie because it came to me when Maria's mom hummed a less familiar tune and the words started to form, du du dudum du du dudum, like a something in a dudum, a dum within a dum...round a circle in a spiral, like a wheel within a wheel...never ending nor beginning on an ever spinning reel. *Frequency* is not a movie many people remember. But when Jim Caviezel says "Dad?" to his father on the radio I didn't know what string theory or quantum theory was, and I don't remember much of the movie except for the possibility that something in the sky and enough fiction might make it possible for a dead father to talk to his son again.

Some time ago my mother went to a memorial for a friend's son who died in an accident, and as they were saying prayers out in the garden and her mother was wishing for him to come home, butterflies started to rest on her knuckles and kiss her neck and she looked at her friends, astounded, and said something like "my son is here." But I wonder what perfume a person can wear to be mistaken for a flower.

Sometimes when a crime is committed, a young chick is set upon the coffin glass of the victim with some grain, following the faith that the chick will spend its life pecking at the conscience of the killer.

"You gotta believe me, it's me, Little Chief," Caviezel told Dennis Quaid, his father, who was putting out a small fire on his desk with a folded newspaper bearing the headline SOLAR

FLARES IGNITE THE NORTHERN LIGHTS both speaking on the same radio only thirty years apart. He said the elder Sullivan was going to die the next day in a warehouse fire. "It wasn't your fault, you went with your instincts, I am warning you.... If you had gone the other way, you'd have made it." The next day, just as Dennis threw his fireman's hat out the window, and Jim dropped his glass of whisky, everything had changed. Burning on the writing desk was a note with the words "I'M STILL HERE CHIEF."

Coco, thinking about me thinking about butterflies, sends me a meme with an anime character looking at a yellow butterfly with the caption: "Every Filipino: 'Is this my dead grandmother?'"



Stephanie Comilang, Search for Life (still)

This is the third time Thomas is explaining to me how the process of making a semiconductor is analogous to the process of making a batik wax resist and photolithography, over and over, both carrying human energies etched in their flowers and geometries obeying our likeness, as we've been taught we were made in God's. But all I take from what he repeats are the images of silicon crystals shimmering in the sand and the way the silicon wafers are sliced from a large arm of salchichon, my mind stubbornly preferring to think in the shapes and styles of magic, that magic is what powers everything.

I grew up in a big house full of big mirrors, and when the big door was open, maya birds would fly in. One time, I was six years old, wearing my pair of Speed Racer tsinelas, feeling the helplessness of chasing this bird around the house, this bird who was panicking too, who wanted to get out. I wanted to explain to the bird the difference between glass and air, until we both got exhausted and it concussed, and as I picked the sleeping bird up I realized that I had maybe killed it. I sat with the bird, a



bird that I could never normally hold, and then I got distracted by something I can no longer remember. When I turned back to look, it was gone.

When my father died, we moved to an apartment and left all our fish in the pond, the water in the pool, and our memories in the house. Outside our gate they were always exorcising the acacia trees. My aunt who wasn't from around here moved in when we left, and recently she told me that about the time our catfish—I told her we never had one, but she continued to say that she had invited her friends for a pool party and it must have crawled on the grass, because her guests were already swimming and nobody had noticed our catfish inside the bright blue pool until my baby nephew suddenly yelled "shark!"

This morning, the yellow-bellied plane landed on the tarmac and the passengers before us came down the stairs taking photos of themselves in front of the plane. It is unusual these days for planes to come and go on time. We are sitting on the gang chairs, using our duffel bags with bananas in them for pillows, sung to sleep by the songs of the blind guitarist, who even though he had no way of hearing the song in my head, also started to sing "fly away, skyline pigeon fly" and as he does he is looking at me. But soon he is interrupted by a man who stands in front of him preaching what he knows to be the good news, asking if we believe in Jesus, but nobody replies, and so drowned out, he prays for all the passengers and hopes to see us in heaven. The blind guitarist to my relief starts to sing again, but it's "God will make a way where there seems to be no way," a duet with the preacher who raises both his arms, and some of the waiting passengers sing too. Later, as we board the plane, I turn to look if he's still there.

Mara Cason is a writer based in Manila, Philippines. She is also the publisher of *Exploding Galaxies*, a press focused on rediscovering out-of-print Filipino fiction. Her novel, *Aliasing*, was published by Book Works in 2018.

# Home, and Home Away From Home

A conversation between Feifei Zhou  
and Stephanie Comilang

Having lived abroad in many countries since the age of fifteen, the concept of home has been a delicate and perplexing theme for me. I grew up learning this legendary tale, portraying the great devotion of a hero named Yu, who dedicated thirteen years to battling the great flood in ancient China. Despite passing the front door to his home three times during those years, he never entered. Instead of admiration, I couldn't help but feel a deep sadness for the hero's wife and child, who endured perpetual longing for his return. The front door of Yu's home was not only a physical barrier but also an invisible one; it created an intangible space that stretched the distances between the two parties on either side of the door, despite them being so close to each other, physically and mentally.

This invisible barrier is thoughtfully explored and manifested in many of Stephanie Comilang's works. Home, along with the experience of being away from it, consistently appears as a central theme in Comilang's art. Rather than approaching this conversation as an interviewer, I spoke to Comilang about family, identity, and the sense of belonging as another diasporic woman sitting on the other side of the screen, looking for answers about her work but also about myself. It was almost therapeutic. As we dive deeper into the subjects of her work, I found traces and reflections of my own journey in each piece. This resonance, I guess, is what makes Comilang's work so powerful.

Stephanie I'm a Canadian artist specializing in film and video installations. I was born during the Ferdinand Marcos era in the Philippines, and my parents migrated to Canada in the late 1970s. My dad, facing arrest days before leaving the Philippines, managed to join us in Canada under a migrant program. Growing up in multicultural Toronto with a significant Filipino presence, I experienced contrasting Filipino dynamics inside and outside of my household. This duality inspired my artistic reflections

on migrant experiences, particularly the concept of creating a home in a foreign space. The theme of “home” and considering what home means and how these meanings can change have consistently shaped my practice.

Zhou *In your recent work, the ship and the butterfly serve as central elements that thread through the current piece and connect to future projects. Your ability to assemble diverse stories and characters and merge them into an overarching narrative is fascinating. What’s the process behind navigating such complex narratives with numerous elements?*

S As an artist, I find the process amusing—a puzzle of elements working together without a clear way of seeing how they fit. While my work has a grounding theme, I simultaneously explore different ideas, histories, and time frames, and link them when I find a common thread that brings them together. The monarch butterfly, for instance, symbolizes change and migration and is a central theme of this piece. It takes them six generations and over 18,000 kilometers to complete their metamorphosis. My long-standing interests in the Magellan trade route and Filipino seafarers integrate well into the narrative too. I’m considering multiple perspectives, both human and nonhuman, and layering these ideas is crucial. Interviews and conversations with people inform the narrative I create, and visiting places and people on-site shape my understanding.

For the next iteration of this work, I plan to spend time on a ship, hanging out and talking to people. Engaging in conversations informs the way I think about the work and the perspectives I explore. While I’m deeply interested in documentary filmmaking, my approach is not a straightforward documentary. It’s challenging to claim that filming someone captures the absolute truth because there are always multiple perspectives. My aim is to convey these various viewpoints in my own way.

Z *Exactly. Because of diverse perspectives, there’s no singular truth. I’m intrigued by the fact that your work stems from conversations, which requires one to embrace uncertainty. Being open to not knowing exactly where the conversations would go allows for an organic development of a new body of work, which can be exciting but can also be scary sometimes. Given your experience*

*with interviews, what challenges do you face in deriving work from these interactions?*

- S I'm sure you have your own methods, likely involving numerous conversations and fieldwork interviews. For me, it's about being fluid with this approach, acknowledging that my planned questions may change based on the interviewee and the unpredictable nature of the conversation. Often, I find myself free-forming during conversations. While I have some prepared questions, I prefer to let the dialogue unfold and see where it takes us. It's always exciting because the direction is often unfamiliar, and people share things I may not be prepared for. Knowing that things won't go as expected or leaving things open is hard but also exciting.

In my project *Lumapit Sa Akin, Paraiso (Come to me, Paradise, e-flux, 2016)*, we used a lot of YouTube footage from a Filipina domestic worker in Hong Kong after finding out about her YouTube channel. It makes sense because she studied to be a journalist. She created videos advising other women on financial matters. Everyone has a unique personal story, and they are just human beings placed in atypical situations, dealing with uncertainties.

- Z *For sure. Connecting with people and forming bonds and connections makes their experiences relatable. I think the lack of willingness to relate and understand each other is part of the problem in our society. Years ago, when I first encountered Filipina workers in Hong Kong's public spaces on Sundays, I was fascinated and baffled at the same time by both the migrant workers and how everyone stormed past them as if they were invisible. It's similar here in New York—how people become so accustomed to the homelessness issue that it's the norm to ignore and detach. This unawareness and lack of relatability seem to be an important issue in your work too.*

- S It's still shocking, and I remember initial readings by the tourists would often mistake it for a festival or assume they were homeless. I can understand why; there's a celebratory feeling, but at the same time, everyone is sitting on cardboard, which might be reminiscent of homelessness. It exists within this middle ground, a strange blip in Hong Kong's normal way of life. If you're not from there or don't research it, you have no idea why a group of

people of the same ethnic background are gathered there. It's this unusual occurrence in the landscape of Hong Kong, and that, in itself, is super beautiful. It's strange that this is allowed to happen in Hong Kong due to its topography, architecture, and how domestic workers live with their employers.

Z *Yes, the architecture of public spaces creates these almost "leftover" spaces for secondary uses. The footbridges initially designed for constant flow of movement have now become places to stop, gather, and chat, which is interesting to me. The materiality of cardboard, used for shelter, seating, partitions, and later recycled for packaging, adds another layer to the spatial quality. The recycling of the same material for various purposes ties back to the theme of architecture as an intangible space in your research. I find it celebratory, not just in terms of feminism, but also in the sense of release and joy on Sundays, when they don't have to be at their workplace, which is also where they live.*

S Exactly, it feels good (for them) to be able to communicate and do each other's makeup, and to be provided with a liberating outlet for expression after their identities are erased by their work. It's dehumanizing in a way. In that situation, you have little leeway to be your own person; someone is always watching, and there's not much you are allowed to do. Sundays offer this opportunity to reclaim personal freedom and do whatever they want.

Z *You mentioned before that the status of Filipina domestic workers can be infantilizing, as they are constantly under strict supervision and surveillance by the families they work for. But they are also a mother figure to the children they care for, who often spend more time with the domestic workers than with their actual parents. It's a unique relationship, a story of pain—leaving behind your own family, sometimes your own children, to work in a different country, taking care of someone else's children.*

S It's a painful cycle, being close to home but unable to reach it. Seeing these Filipina women taking care of young children, it's impossible for me not to think about their own children at home. It always makes me sad. It's an ongoing, systemic problem. I have another project I want to work on about new housing developments just outside of Manila, where the families of these women can build their own homes, creating middle-class subdivisions. It's



super interesting, but also heartbreaking to see these kids growing up without their mothers, raised by grandparents or fathers. The architecture of these subdivisions, funded by women, presents a unique perspective for a new project.

Z *The struggle of not being able to be with your own children is a common and shared challenge faced by migrant workers across various countries and regions. I can relate to this personally, as my dad left home to work abroad just before I was born. I rarely saw him during my childhood, and him being absent was strange and confusing for me as a young child. It wasn't until I became an adult, with my own life experiences, that I could understand the sacrifices and persistence needed to make such a decision. It's a lingering, complex emotion.*

S How do you feel about your dad leaving to work? It's odd to say he left you because they're doing it for you.

Z *Well, I came to admire that, eventually. I initially thought he left for his own reasons. As I grew up, he shared stories about the extreme loneliness and difficult conditions he faced while working in Africa. What he described—the intense work environment, lack of amenities, and isolation—was something I didn't expect and couldn't imagine. But his hard work provided for us, especially for me. We clashed a lot during my teens when we both lived in Mauritius because of our unfamiliarity with each other—you know, we barely knew each other. I believe this is a common situation, where misunderstandings and frustrations happen when the parents are absent during the children's formative years. It was a challenging time for both of us, but we made it through, and I think it just takes time to understand what sacrifices mean.*

S I think being able to communicate with phones in the last few years has really helped the situation for migrant workers living abroad. Being able to talk to their kids almost every day and maintain a digital presence helps reassure the children of their parents' presence, even if they are not physically there. It was much harder years ago when technology like this wasn't available. Digital spaces were crucial when I was in Hong Kong, with the phone playing a particularly significant role in the film. It offers a very personal perspective, compared to other devices

like drones. Women always had their phones in front of their faces on Sundays, in constant contact with the Philippines or their family all day.

In contrast, it was challenging for the men working on ships as seafarers as the internet on ships is expensive. This made it very difficult for them to communicate and engage with the outside world through social media, something we now take for granted. They spent eight to ten months on the ships, and even when they get closer to land, better internet connections are sometimes elusive. This lack of connectivity, even more so than women living in Hong Kong, isolates them.

- Z *It's another level of loneliness, not only lacking fresh food, family, and stability but also lacking internet access.*



Stephanie Comilang. Search for Life (still)

- S It's truly isolating, especially being in the middle of the ocean all the time, claustrophobic and scary. I talked to some of them about the violence of the sea, as well as the emotional violence of being away from home without anyone close on the ship. These levels of disconnection and loneliness are intense and something I found so sad. The ideas of masculinity play a role too; they are trained in certain ways when they are in school. Two guys I spoke to in the film were gay, and they discussed how difficult it was to conform to these traditional ideas of masculinity, which is still inherent in seafaring. The majority are men, and there's a very small percentage of women seafarers. If you exist outside of that, it's even more isolating. So, it really is a crazy life.

- Z *Is there anything in the future you'd like to explore, or what's your vision or direction for the work ahead?*
- S The next iteration will take on a more musical form. I haven't practically figured it out yet, but since music is integral to my work, I want to collaborate with a choreographer and a musician for the piece to be showcased in Sharjah for the second chapter. That's the direction I'm leaning toward.
- Z *How did the idea of a musical come up? What inspired it?*
- S I think one reason is that Filipinos are naturally musical, and I saw potential in making it a musical, especially with the butterflies. It was part of the original idea. Incorporating choreography and dancing is something I need to think about more, but I'm certain that singing and being musical is inherent in our culture.

Feifei Zhou is a Chinese-born artist and architect. Her work explores the industrialised built environment's spatial, cultural, and ecological impacts. She currently teaches at Columbia GSAPP and lives and works between China and New York. Fei is a co-editor of *Feral Atlas: The More-Than-Human Anthropocene* (2021) and the upcoming *Field Guide to the Patchy Anthropocene: The New Nature* (May 2024).

# About TBA21, Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary

TBA21 Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary is one of the leading international foundations for art and public engagement. Established in 2002 by philanthropist and collector Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza, the Foundation operates through the TBA21 Collection and a significant program of activities, including exhibitions and public and educational programs. TBA21 is based in Madrid, working in partnership with the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, and has other important points of action in Venice and Portland (Jamaica).

TBA21's work is primarily driven by artists and the belief that art and culture serve as agents of social and environmental transformation, ultimately contributing to the creation of spaces for peace.

TBA21-Academy, the research center of TBA21 Foundation, seeks a deeper connection with the ocean and other aquatic ecosystems, functioning as an incubator for collaborative research, artistic production, and environmental advocacy. For over a decade, TBA21-Academy has catalyzed new forms of knowledge emerging from exchanges between art, science, politics, and conservation in a long-term commitment to collaboration through commissions, exhibitions, public programs, scholarships, residency programs, and other activities in a wide variety of formats.

Among its major projects are the Ocean Space art center (Venice), the independent study program Organism | Art in Applied Critical Ecologies (Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza), Alligator Head Foundation (Port Antonio, Jamaica), The Current Pacific/ Mediterranean/Caribbean, OCEAN/UNI, Ocean-Archive.org, and The Bauhaus of the Sea Sails.

# CURRENT AND UPCOMING PROJECTS

## Exhibitions

### Remedios: Directions to the Old Ways

C3A Centro de Creación Contemporánea de Andalucía, Córdoba, Spain  
Curated by Daniela Zyman  
14.04.2023 – 31.03.2024

### The Ecologies of Peace

C3A Centro de Creación Contemporánea de Andalucía, Córdoba, Spain  
Curated by Daniela Zyman  
Opening April 26, 2024  
26.04.2024 – 30.03.2025

### Re- stor(y)ing Oceania

Ocean Space, Venice, Italy  
Curated by Taloi Havini  
23.03 – 13.10.2024

### Climate Crisis and Cultural Loss

Ocean Space, Venice, Italy  
Curated by Ute Meta Bauer  
23.03 – 13.10.2024

### Tabita Rezaire

Museo Nacional Thyssen- Bornemisza, Madrid, Spain  
Curated by Chus Martínez  
8.10.2024 – 12.01.2025

## Research Programs

### Organismo | Art in Applied Critical Ecologies

Museo Nacional Thyssen- Bornemisza, Madrid, Spain  
Independent study program  
January to June, 2024

### The Current IV: Caribbean: "otras montañas, las que andan sueltas bajo el agua"

(other mountains, adrift beneath the waves)  
Curated by Yina Jiménez Suriel  
2023 – 2025

## Digital and educational programs

### TBA21 on st\_age

www.stage.tba21.org  
Season 05, 2024

### OCEAN /UNI Spring semester

Pacific Resistance  
January 31 – April 4, 2024

### OCEAN / UNI

Culturing the Deep Sea  
The Anglerfish Chronicles  
2022 – 2024

### Ocean- Archive

Seafloor Futures: Science and Fictions in Deep Dimensions  
Mae Lubetkin

Digital residence 2023/2024

## Loans

— CURRENT

**Olafur Eliasson "The glacier melt series"**  
**Walid Raad "The Constables"**  
**Jose Dávila "Woman in Bath"**  
**Asunción Molinos Gordo "¿Cuánto río allá arriba!"**

### **Water**

Curator: Louma Salamé  
Boghossian Foundation, Brussels, Belgium  
Duration: October 19, 2023 – March 10, 2024

### **Teresa Solar, "Tuneladora"**

**When Forms Come Alive**  
Hayward Gallery / Southbank Centre, London, England  
Curator: Ralph Rugoff  
Duration: February 7 to May 6, 2024

— UPCOMING

### **Omer Fast, "Continuity"**

**History Tales. Fact and Fiction in History Pictures**

Paintings Gallery, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Austria  
Curator: Sabine Folie  
Duration: September 27, 2023 – May 26, 2024

### **Patricia Domínguez, "La balada de las sirenas secas"**

**Songs for the Changing Seasons,**  
Klima Biennale Vienna, Austria  
Curator: Lucia Pietroiusti & Filipa Ramos  
Duration: April 5 – July 14, 2024

### **Patricia Domínguez, "Gaiaguardianxs"**

Triennale de Poli/Gráfica, San Juan, Puerto Rico  
Curator: Elvis Fuentes  
Duration: April 18 – September 15, 2024

### **Dineo Seshee Bopape, "lerato laka le a phela le a phela le a phela / my love is alive, is alive, is alive", 2022**

**The Atlantic Ocean, Myth, Art, Science**  
Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo, Norway  
Curator: Susanne Østby Sæther, Stefanie Hessler, and Knut Ljøgodt  
Duration: April 26 – September 15, 2024

### **Beatriz Milhazes, "Coisa Linda I", 2001 and Beatriz Milhazes, "Maresias", 2002**

**Beatriz Milhazes: Maresias**  
Tate St Ives, England  
Curator: Melissa Blanchflower (Curator at Turner Contemporary)  
Duration: May 25 – September 29, 2024



## Stephanie Comilang, *Search for Life*

### Public Program

TBA21 Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary and Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza

#### ***Do We Live in a Stupid World? Social and Artistic Practices in the Era of Artificial Intelligence and Shrinking Democratic Spaces by Marian Pastor Roces***

Online lecture

Thursday, April 4, 4:00-5:30 pm

Language: English

This activity is part of Organismo | Art in Applied Critical Ecologies Independent study program, a conjoined initiative by TBA21—Academy and the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.

The challenges to democracy have only intensified because of the multiple aftermaths of COVID-19, economic transformations, migratory waves, recurring international conflicts, and digital piracy. Attacks on civic space are just one part of this overall trend. This explains why more artists, cultural practitioners and policymakers are calling on the international community to broaden the narrative of shrinking democratic space and present not only disaster scenarios but also methodologies and strategies to regain control.

Marian Pastor Roces is an independent curator, cultural critic, and policy analyst based in Manila, Philippines. She founded and leads TAOINC, a corporation that curates the establishment of museums and develops exhibitions, parks, and publications. TAOINC recently accomplished the creation of the Cultural Center of the Philippines online museum, for which Roces supervised the creation of a new decolonizing Accession Record System (ARS).

#### ***Skinship and how literature and art counteract the toxic narratives of the real: Mara Coson, Mayte Gómez Molina and Chus Martínez***

Auditorium. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza

Thursday, April 25, 6:30-8:00 pm

Language: English with simultaneous translation into Spanish

Conversation. 90 min

This activity is part of Organismo | Art in Applied Critical Ecologies Independent study program, a conjoined initiative by TBA21—Academy and the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.

The design and maintenance of a society sensitive to the multiple transformations of the body and to a climate-sensitive planet is not an easy task. Literature and contemporary art are great grounds to test the functions that a social body performs. The continuous production of speculative narratives and simulacra, as well as the use of fantasy are presented not as mere “fictions” but as methods that help readers, viewers and citizens to gain an overview of the ongoing planetary transformations.

Mara Coson is a prominent Filipino writer, publisher and activist who is involved in multiple projects that advocate for equity in the Philippines.

Mayte Gómez Molina is a Spanish writer, researcher and new media artist based in Berlin, Germany. Her practice explores political corporeality, perception as a social contract and the difficulty of constructing identity in a world hyper-mediated by power and technology.

#### ***Search for Life: Migration as a More-than-Human Event: Stephanie Comilang, Feifei Zhou, and Chus Martínez***

Auditorium. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza

Friday, May 17, 6:30-8:00 pm

Language: English with simultaneous translation into Spanish

Conversation. 90 min

Organized by TBA21 in collaboration with the Canadian Embassy. This activity is part of Organismo | Art in Applied Critical Ecologies Independent study program, a conjoined initiative by TBA21—Academy and the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.

Delving into the intersection of animal migration –taking the case of the Monarch butterflies—with the migrant communities of Filipino seafarers, Stephanie Comilang’s work explores strategies for creating a reflection of how trade routes and exploitation systems are created. The global emergence coincides with a vision of a tamed planet where certain communities feel legitimized to own, build, and transform, displacing masses of animals and other humans.

Feifei Zhou is a Chinese-born spatial and visual designer. Her work explores the structural, cultural, and ecological impacts of the industrialized built and natural environment. Using narrative-based spatial analysis, she collaborates intensively with social and natural scientists to translate empirical observations and scientific research into visual representations that aim to both clarify intricate, more-than-human relations and open new questions.

#### ***A Filipino Film series curated by Raya Martín***

Auditorium. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza

Saturdays, March 23, April 6, April 13 and May 25, 5:00-7:00 pm

Language: Original version with Spanish subtitles

Film screening and discussion.

Co-organized by TBA21 and Casa Asia.

## Exhibition

Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza  
Paseo del Prado, 8  
28014 Madrid (Spain)  
[www.museothyssen.org](http://www.museothyssen.org)

March 5 - May 26, 2024

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## Artwork Credits

[Stephanie Comilang](#), *Search for Life*,  
[Diptych \(2024-2025\)](#)  
*Search for Life* is a work in the form of a diptych  
commissioned by TBA21 and Sharjah  
Art Foundation.

The work unfolds in two episodes that are  
composed of independent pieces but together  
tell a single story. The first episode of the work,  
curated by Chus Martínez, is presented at the  
Museo Nacional Thyssen Bornemisza, Madrid (5  
March- 26 May 2024) and the second episode,  
curated by Amal Khalaf, will be presented  
at Sharjah Biennial 16, United Arab Emirates  
(February - June 2025).

*Search for Life* (Episode one)  
Two channel video installation (color and  
sound), 20 min 40 sec

Embroidered piña fabrics.

[Philippines](#)  
Camera: Jose Olarte  
Drone Operator: Stephanie Comilang  
Sound: Fries Bersales  
Fixer: Lesley-Anne Cao  
With: Joar Sungcuya, Michael John Diaz, Jade  
Aster T. Badon

[Mexico](#)  
Camera: Mateo Fusilier  
Drone Operator: Stephanie Comilang  
Sound: Emiliano Mendoza  
Fixer: Antonella Rava  
With: Guadalupe Pinzón Ríos, Simon

[Berlin](#)  
Studio Assistants: Sofia Clementina  
Hosszfulussy, Muyao Zhang, Don Arentino  
Set Design: Celeste Burlina  
Translation: Anna Bernice de los Reyes  
Sound Mastering: Alex Iezzi  
Colour Correcting: Alaa Abdullatif  
Special Effects: Simon Speiser

[Music](#)  
«Sleepwalking», Canva6. (Ten Minutes To  
Midnight. Presto!? Records, 2022)  
«Raging Euphoria», Canva6 (Cco2. Presto!?  
Records, 2023)

«Galaxies in a Straight Line», Andrew Thomas  
Huang (Solipsist Soundtrack, Yegorka, 2023)  
«Lake», Chuquimamani-Condori (2021)  
«Search For Life», Dirty Projectors (5EPs, 2020)

Both tracks were written and produced by  
Marco Farina

Special thanks: Daniel Faria, JennyChert,  
Claudia Rech, Clarissa Tempestini, Florian Lüdde,  
Amal Khalaf, Markus Reymann, Rosa Ferré,  
Chus Martínez, Araceli Galán, Marivic Gordovez,  
Lumban Embroidery Association Multi-Purpose  
Cooperative, Joar Sungcuya, Michael John Diaz,  
Edgardo Flores, Angela Dimayuga, Adam Fearon,  
Caique Tizzi, Luci Deyhew, Sol Calero, Emily  
Comilang, Steve Comilang, and Simon Speiser.

## Booklet

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[Marco Zappalorto](#), Director of development  
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[Daniela Zyman](#), Artistic director

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