



External Space

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Maria Patricia Abuel

Oh Maria...

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“How do you solve a problem like Maria?
How do you catch a cloud and pin it down?”

These two lines repeat throughout “Maria (The Nuns),” a song from the 1965 American musical film, *The Sound of Music*, that plays in the background of Maria Patricia Abuel’s video work entitled, *Oh Maria...* This song, edited for Abuel’s work, begins at a higher pitch than its original tuning, and then switches into a lower, eerie pitch throughout the duration of the video. Using the altered voice of the performer, Abuel’s video-work weaves together a video-collage of pop-culture references in television and music videos in addition to symbols, and scenes from the Catholic church and videos of the artist herself. The collage of clips explores intersecting themes of purity and secrecy, virginity and sexuality, femininity and collectively idealized constructs of womanhood. The changes in pitch throughout the song trace a path between the polarities of innocence to rebellion as a Filipina woman from a conservatively Catholic family. *Oh Maria...* guides a reflection on how Abuel’s family’s connection to the Catholic church and Catholic Filipino community construct the

pressures and expectations of which her sense of womanhood and explorations through guilt are built upon.

Oh Maria... utilizes a split-screen, single-channel format to unravel the ways in which Catholic female tropes influence the artist's experience of individualized femininity. Through repetition, prayer, hymn and ritual, the excessive use of the symbol of the Virgin Mary is implied to be an overarching guide to the embodiment of an idealized Catholic woman. The camera pans over a table of scattered pamphlets with the Virgin Mary's image, and photographs of the stages of growth a Catholic woman undergoes as a member of her church. We see images of Abuel being baptised, and at with her hands in prayer at her first communion, as Abuel remembers and foreshadows the ways the image of Mary has instilled religious, cultural and communal beliefs of women as being pure from sin, sex, and tainted consumption.

In a recent essay by Manila-based scholar, Jeanne C. Peracullo, she challenges the loyalty that specifically Filipino Catholicism has to the symbol of the Virgin Mary, describing this cultural image as “a colonial trope to uphold a particularly harmful myth of a “good” woman. However, it turns out that this “good” woman is also both a weak and passive one.”¹ Peracullo continues by dissecting the expectation of the Filipina identity as obligated to mimic Mother Mary's nurturing and kind nature is a construct of the Spanish colonization of Philippines, the hierarchical rule of the Roman Catholic Church, and emphasized from decades of migration of Filipina woman to North America as nurturing nurses and caregivers. At 3:08 in the video, this echoes in taunting irony, when the artist unintentionally captures a video of her mother praying to the statue of the Virgin Mary in their church while holding a

¹ Peracullo, Jeane C. “Maria Clara in the Twenty-first Century: The Uneasy Discourse between the Cult of the Virgin

Hudson's Bay Company re-usable shopping bag, oblivious to the HBC's connection to colonization in Canada, and the violent involvement of the Catholic church.² In both Canada, and the Philippines, the imposition of the Catholic faith has been used as a tool of erasure and assimilation. Although, to a First or Second Generation immigrant, despite the ways colonial and religious collective constructs of womanhood have been instilled in the artist's experience of her femininity, she uses the medium of video to admit indulgences in what would be perceived as sin anyway.

Besides performative scenes that are recorded of the artist herself, all videos of spaces and objects where the subject of Mother Mary echo, appear to be footage that is unplanned and raw. As if we are following an intimate process of reflection, the collection of different ways the visual appears in the artist's life suggests an overwhelmed feeling of attachment to what the symbol of the Virgin Mary represents, and what she mirrors into Abuel's sense of self-fulfilment or self-lacking as a member of her family's practices of Catholic beliefs. The remaining song lyrics of "Maria (The Nuns)" speak about the titular character as being 'unfit' for the ideals of how a woman should act to become a nun of the abbey. In a playful, cheery melody, the song describes the movie character Maria as a woman that is clumsy and disorganized, too free-spirited and is therefore, belittled in a way that is comical to those around her. This connects to countless phrases that circulate Filipino culture, used by woman to judge other women. There are phrases for women that are too promiscuous, too social, too loud, and too sloppy. These phrases, like slang, are culturally specific and passed down by a lineage of Lolas and circulated amongst Titas.³ They are then, repeated from mothers to daughters in order to protect and forbid them from becoming another talk of the family or neighbourhood. Shameful talk becomes a tool to elevate others at the expense of another. When a collective

² Levesque, Olivia. "The Fabric of Colonialism". The Argus, The Argus.ca 5 Mar 2017, <https://theargus.ca/?p=20959>

³ Lola's is Tagalog for Grandmother, and Tita is Tagalog for aunties.

shames people outside of their own, shame is used to protect others from being subject to the same judgement and exclusivity, by redirecting their own fear and guilt towards somebody else. The pairing of uniformity and choir within Abuel's choices in mixed media questions the purpose of collectively imposed ideals over a woman as being more shameful, than they are supportive. The culture of shame is strong within the Filipino Catholic culture. Though mass is a place of prayer and forgiveness, religion is tied to socializing, and a place of gossip or, "tsismis."⁴ Especially within a family context, our actions as a woman represents the reputation of the other women in our lineage. When a mother scolds her daughter, she is also protecting her name within the gossip of her church, her community, her family. As if linked by a string, guilt is feeling that ties our actions to our perceived responsibilities as a member of a community, a family, a collective identity. Uniformity is explored as a system of safety, to not disturb the peace of synchronization, to not disrespect our elders.

A few seconds of the American television series, *Jane the Virgin*, shows a younger Jane being taught by her grandmother, in front of her own mom, to squeeze a white flower in her palm as a metaphor for the purity of virginity. The inclusion of this clip in Abuel's work, continues a prevalent presence of characteristics of the Virgin Mary in the artist's life. This series is about a virgin who swears not repeat her mother's mistake of early unwedded pregnancy but ends up accidentally inseminated. In this specific clip, the flower exists without its stem, playing into the pattern of hiding and uncovering between the polarities of pure and tainted, good and naughty. A woman's devotion to her 'purity' is represented only as white and pristine in site, though it is the sharpness of its thorns and the stiffness, and rigidity along the path of its stem that had carried it that far. This important detail connects to the perfectionism the nuns of the abbey from *The Sound of Music* expect from the character Maria, and that the Catholic Church presents the Virgin Mary as –

⁴ "tsismis" is a Tagalog slang word for gossip.

untainted, un-stemmed. In this scene, familiar themes bridge *Oh Maria...* to previous works by Abuel such as *#selfie* (2014) and *Islands* (2017), which use photography and video to speak to the overbearing presence of whiteness to the diasporic Filipina identity. Just as the whiteness of images of Mother Mary's Caucasian skin reiterate, in these past works, we learn about whiteness as a symbol of Spanish and colonial rule over the Philippines, and how it influences idealized beauty, even in the popularity of soap used to change brown Filipino skin, to a superior shade of white.

In another segment of the video, Abuel is getting dressed in a room alone; Maria documents herself layering clothing-pieces to complete her full Catholic high school girl's uniform over top of a black lace bra. Before buttoning her white blouse up, she holds her bra, presses it against her breasts, and has a moment to hold herself in her own hands. This gesture offers an acknowledgement of a feeling, belonging to her, from her, before becoming fully dressed into roles that connect her to others. She plays into a stereotype of promiscuity and Catholic misbehaviour as a silent reclamation of her agency and sexuality.

At the last minute of the Abuel's video work, the song fades to an end, and a moment of silence transitions into an audio recording of the Abuel reciting a prayer to Mother Mary. This audio is paired with a video clip of the artist flipping a wine bottle from a liquor rack at a local house party between its up-right label reading, "SAINT", to the up-side down text below it that reads, "SINNER". Conflicted, and suggestively mischievous in her contemplation, Abuel oscillates between the two labels in her hand. *Oh Maria...* is a playful and contemplative peeling away at the layers of instilled shame and guilt a conservative Catholic upbringing can instill. The work continues a conversation through Maria Patricia Abuel's body of work that use a range of performance to sculpture an installation, to journey through cycles of covering, and uncovering of sets of beliefs that have been taught and are now being

individualized in her own reflections as a Filipina-Canadian. Her mediums of choice become bridges of agency, to allow systems of morality the artist has grown into, to become individualized, questioned and more personally refined. Specifically focusing on the moralities of honing her own sexuality and femininity under her family's roof, Abuel is still in full receptivity of the gifts and impositions of her family's Catholicism and collective prayer. Though the artist still practices her self-explorations through art with a layer of guilt, and carefulness in respect to her family, Abuel's *Oh Maria...* is an honest pursuit toward of self-identification with full conscious of what it risks, and sometimes in irony of that. It is the conscious tainting of expectations of purity. *Oh Maria...* is accepting, yet playful into the upheld secrecy Abuel practices against her family in the ways she is learning to self-claim her agency as a Filipina woman and how these free explorations will always tie to challenging the expectations of her identity.

- Renelyn Quinicot Javier