

***Mothers / Gardens***

Miguel Caba

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Every year, a *balikbayan* box is sent back home to the Philippines. It is a large cardboard box that is packed with items of purpose, luxury, and souvenirs; items that are specifically requested for or are thought to be useful or needed. Senders spare no expense, the *balikbayan* box becoming so filled that packing it is often a performance: two or more pairs of hands pushing the flaps down as another hurriedly tapes it shut. It sits in the corner of the living room, practically bursting at the seams, awaiting the day that it will make its journey back home.

*Balikbayan* is loosely translated as ‘returning home,’ and a *balikbayan* box has become customary in Filipino households abroad, so much so that its practice is now a cultural norm. Its terminology is quite intriguing: its choice of words and its English translations betray its more emotionally resonant connotations that transcend its purpose as a care package. It asks: what—or, rather, *who*—is returning home when a *balikbayan* box is sent? It cannot merely be that the box itself and its contents are participating in this act of homecoming. Rather, the phrasing suggests that the box has become representative of Filipinos abroad, embodying the senders and their desires of returning home themselves.

*Mothers / Gardens*, Miguel Caba's exhibit in the Project Space of Xspace Cultural Centre, interrogates and positions itself as an answer to these definitions of *balikbayan*. Caba's sculptural paintings are deeply engaged in dialogue with each other as much as they are with what they recreate, reimagine, and redefine. Each painting is completed using the incisively precise technique of laser engraving, the images of its referents—gardens, flower pots, and parts of the house—incised onto their carefully crafted canvases. Caba receives these images from their mother and grandmother, who reside in Toronto, Canada and Kalinga, Philippines respectively; these images constitute a means of connection and closeness that they otherwise cannot have in light of their separation from one another. *Mothers / Gardens* responds to this challenge, contemplating the nature of the box as a container and the mediating role of technology with which these acts of care and connection are nurtured within and beyond corporeality.

Its eponymous series *Mothers / Gardens* consists of forty-eight sculptural paintings laser-engraved with images of gardens. Each painting bears the unconventional shape of a curved surface, like bellies protruding from the base of the wood on which snippets of flourishing flora are depicted. Upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that the precision of these curves allows each painting to fit into each other. Freed from the limitations of a four-cornered two-dimensional plane, these paintings can be freely arranged according to the needs and wishes of the artist: separately along rows and columns to evoke the referent, that is, the garden, or put together to form the familiar shape of a box.

Much of Caba's work engages with modularity, conceptualising it into reality as these sculptural paintings are separate and interchangeable entities that can be read—and felt—independently as much as when they are put together as a whole. *Mothers /*

*Gardens* is fascinated with this act of materialising the intangible, particularly that of the digital into reality. It examines the tension between real and non-real as well as the role of technology in facilitating connection. By curving the surfaces of these paintings, the images bulge past the two-dimensional planes of the image and the screen on which it is viewed. Although they bear human affectations of unsteady hands with their tilted angles and blur of motion, their originating images have already been transformed by the journey undertaken through the digital spheres of iMessage and Facebook Messenger. Low camera quality, image sharpening, and file compression signify the spatial distance between mother, grandmother, and child, which are then consequently embodied in the paintings upon incision. Caba elucidates that these paintings are “recreations that want to be the real thing but fail to do so,” describing them as “mimicries of reality,” which scrutinizes how technology gives a false sense of connection.

Yet, it would be remiss not to consider the technique employed in producing these sculptural paintings that alludes to their nature as decidedly *not just* a mimicry of the real thing. Laser-engraving is an immediate and irreversible technology, deliberately altering the properties of the wood to transfigure it almost entirely. As a mediary, it circumvents the deletion of the image file and all it contains and consequently brings them *back* into the three-dimensional *real* world. In this process, a sculptural painting becomes less of an image and more like the real, actual thing.

How does this recontextualize the understanding of *Mothers / Gardens*, then? Is the recreation of the image onto the material a means of grasping the referent—the real garden, the real house and its windows and flower pots—before it had all been transformed by time and space? Is it to reach out towards mother and grandmother behind the camera lenses, to bring them forth and exist in the same space that *you* occupy? Or is it a means for you to occupy *their* space—to situate yourself in the

moments preceding the image, even just for a second, before the shutter clicked and the moments became a static repository of memory and remembrance? *Mothers / Gardens* is certainly underpinned by a longing for reunion. Caba says as much as they explain how this longing informs their artistic practice: “I long for [my mother’s and grandmother’s] presence, yet I am only able to feel close to them through images sent through text or video calls.”<sup>1</sup> Beyond the fascinating and masterfully crafted works that offer a distinctly dynamic viewing experience, the exhibit is centred on the search for and manifestation of a remedy to spatial distances that can transcend the limitations of borders and plane ticket costs and the vastness of an ocean.

In this light, *Mothers / Gardens* is less about recreations of their real referents but more so about how these referents propel connections between each other and ourselves. Drawing on modularity, it reimagines the *balikbayan* box and its qualities of shape, function, and movement to negotiate longing and presence. Unlike the gardens they depict, these paintings can be packed and transported to occupy a shared space. In so doing, they imagine a reality without distance.

Recall the *balikbayan* box in its original conception: a three-dimensional container that carries all things wanted, needed, and appreciated that is sent back home. This act of care is an experience of bodies in motion that the *balikbayan* box embodies, by which senders subconsciously fit themselves inside it to participate in an act of homecoming themselves. To put together and send a *balikbayan* box is to reach across the distance between ourselves and our loved ones. In this, a *balikbayan* box is ultimately an act of *reunion*.

– Hannah Guiang

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<sup>1</sup>As described by Caba in their Artistic Practice Statement written for Xpace Cultural Centre.