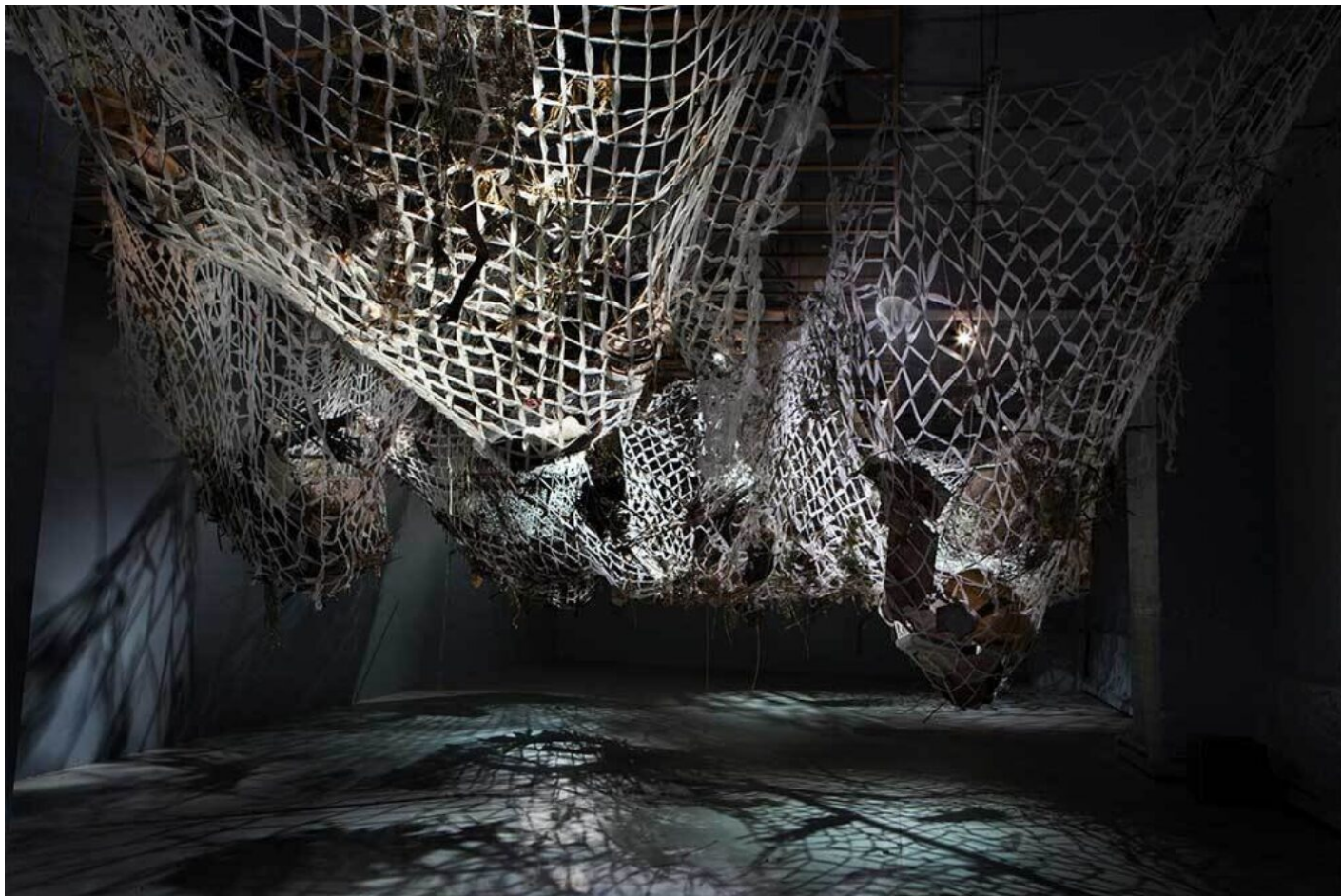




# BOMB

## Between a Body, a City, a Mountain: Sara Jimenez Interviewed by Re'al Christian

*Installations that investigate colonialist control.*



Sara Jimenez, *Abyssal*, 2016, hand-woven silk organza, sculpted organic matter, found objects, programmed dimming lights, 6 speakers with audio recording, 40 x 24 x 8 feet. Photo by Daniel Kukla. Courtesy of the artist.

During my first studio visit with Sara Jimenez over Zoom, we discovered many through lines connecting our respective practices: themes of landscape, embodiment, material, and memory have given shape to each of our felt experiences of cultural diaspora. As a multidisciplinary Filipinx Canadian artist, Jimenez's practice combines methods of excavation and transformation. Through sculpture, installation, performance, and collage, she draws upon familial histories and cultural artifacts to create visually complex metaphors for displacement, loss, and absence. Her exhibition *Roots Burrow Through Hard Stones and Facts* considers the legacy of Spanish colonization, boundaries, and borders in the Philippines, a topic that I happen to be concurrently researching in relation to Mexico City in my academic work. It wasn't until after our studio visit that we realized this unexpected coincidence. As our conversations have developed, we've lingered on the question of how to map the metaphysical traces of colonial borders long after they have faded away. In this interview, we continue to explore

common threads in our work, while addressing the fluidity of national borders and by extension the porousness of power.

—Re'al Christian

### **Re'al Christian**

We've talked a lot about our mutual love of Trinh T. Minh-ha. In her book *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event*, she discusses colonial boundaries—both material and immaterial—from the perspective of the Other, stating, "Outside and inside: again the pair hardly functions as a binary." This makes me think about your research on the Binondo district in Manila.

### **Sara Jimenez**

Yes, I am a big fan of hers. I love this quote you're referencing; it's very relevant to how I've been thinking about my work. For the past year, I've been looking into the history of the relationship between China and the Philippines, specifically around the early mid-Spanish colonial period. At the heart of my research, I was drawn to systems and strategies of control, containment, separation, and assimilation in an attempt to erase and maintain power over the Chinese and Filipino populations. I became really interested in the fact that the first "Chinatown," Binondo, came into existence in the late sixteenth century in Manila because of the Spanish Empire. It was a means to control, contain, and separate the Chinese population. The more I researched, the more I became interested in the strategies of urban planning and architectures that revealed the power dynamics of colonialism. For example, the center of the Spanish Empire was literally a walled city called Intramuros. Binondo was placed outside of the walls—close enough to economically benefit the colonial power but separated in order to be controlled and regulated. Spanish colonial cities throughout Central and South America and the Caribbean are also built on a grid structure, substituting the center of the cities with the Catholic Church. At the same time, there were other strategies of control, such as assimilation through conversion to Catholicism. Conversely, in the Philippines the Spanish language was only taught to the elite because language was considered power.





Sara Jimenez, *Roots Burrow Through Stones and Hard Facts*, 2021, fabric, foam and vinyl sculptures, wallpaper, multi-channel soundscape, 26 × 24 × 12 feet (image of work in progress). Photo by Sara Jimenez. Courtesy of the artist.

## RC

It's interesting to think about architecture and language as interrelated tools for regulating the colonial body; they're almost extensions of the grid. How did this research translate into your work?

## SJ

Yes, I'm also interested in how ideas of the sacred organize the construction of a city, whether it's Catholicism, Indigenous belief systems, or alignment with celestial bodies. The installation I built out of this research is in a circular formation, entirely shades of reds and pinks. The architectural facades of the sculptures reference Intramuros as well as Binondo. Surrounding them are translucent pink curtains with organic shapes, composited from zoomed in, digitized fragments of the original city photos. The walls, floor, and parts of the

sculptures are also covered in textile images from combinations of Spanish, Chinese, and Filipino lineages. I am collaborating with Finnish musician Lau Nau to create a soundscape. The center of this reimagined city is composed of human voices, while the outside soundscape will probably be a combination of volcanic and synth sounds. We are still figuring out the specifics of the sound.

## RC

Sound is an important component in your work; I'm thinking specifically of your installation *Abyssal* (2016) and video piece *...for the view was duplicated there* (2019), which was also a collaboration with Lau Nau.

## SJ

*Abyssal* was the first piece where I used sound collaboratively. For that installation, I collaborated with artist Or Zubalsky. *Abyssal* was an immersive environment of fabric, found objects, sound, and light; the space was a visual and sensorial metaphor for the bottom of the ocean, the Abyssal plain. For the sound, I interviewed my father and his three siblings. They each spoke about their experiences moving from the Philippines to New York City and how it affected their sense of identity and home. Their recordings were edited by Zubalsky and fragmented into six separate speakers which were hidden inside of the installation. Zubalsky also created a low, vibrating sound from a subwoofer that gave the felt experience of being deep underwater. When you entered the space, you heard murmuring and a deep rumble. Viewers were unable to experience the stories in one take. For *...for the view was duplicated there*, I gave Lau Nau vintage video clips of the Philippines, recordings of poetry related to the themes of displacement and loss, and field recordings from the New York City area. She created this absolutely incredible soundscape that felt like a mysterious combination of outside and indoors, intimate sounds, and sounds far away, mixed with voices, birds, wind, and a synth. In all of my experiences using sound, it feels like the spirit or pulse of the work. I think about the sound as the voice and energy of the sculptural environment.





Sara Jimenez, *Roots Burrow Through Stones and Hard Facts*, 2021, fabric, foam and vinyl sculptures, wallpaper, multi-channel soundscape, 26 × 24 × 12 feet (image of work in progress). Photo by Sara Jimenez. Courtesy of the artist.

**RC**

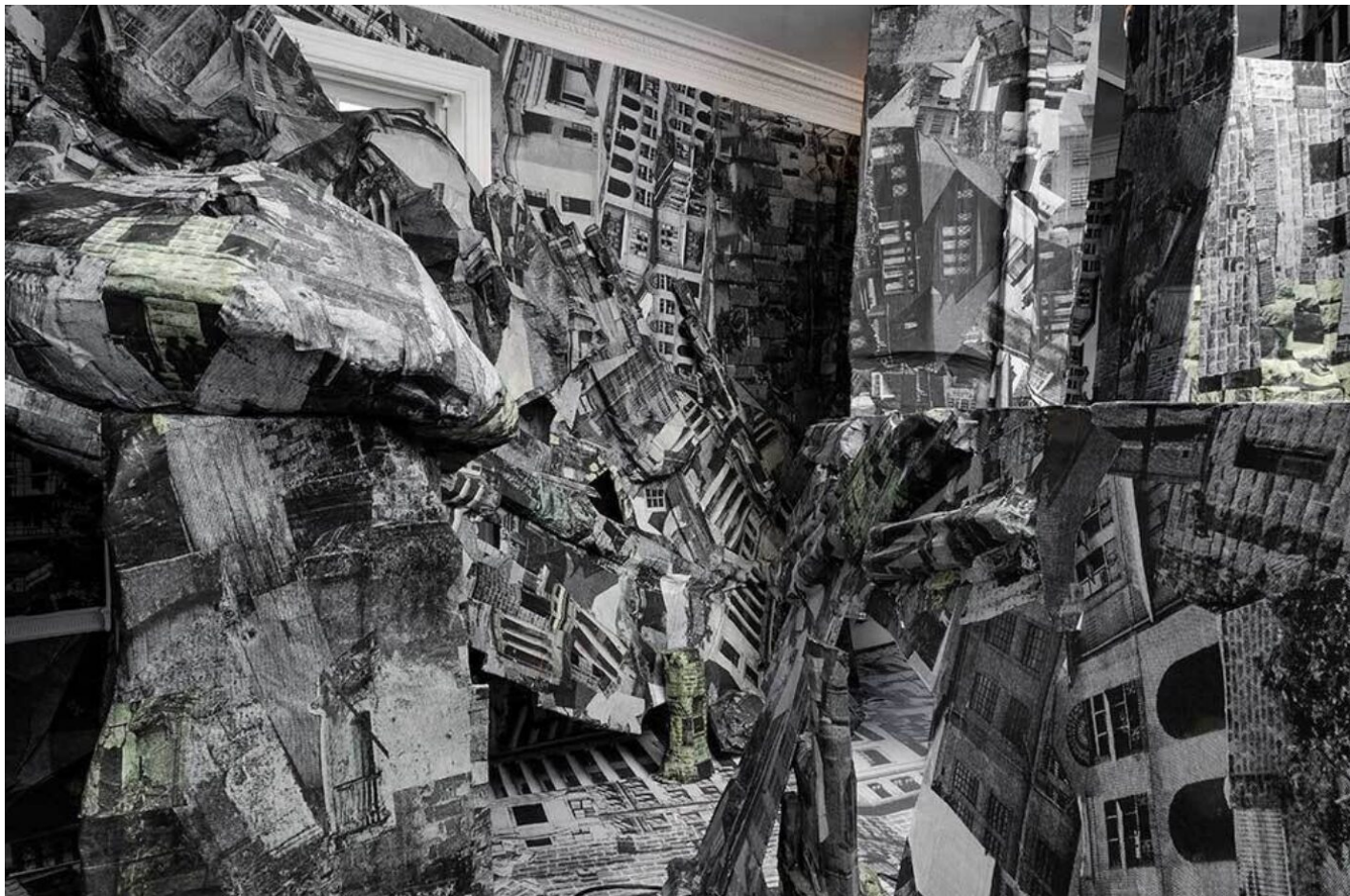
I love the way you describe the “felt experience” as part of the diaspora. In your work, these experiences seem to allow collective memories and somatic responses to transcend the here and now, and to resonate across geographies and time periods. I’m curious to hear more about the relationship between memory, language, and materials in your work.

**SJ**

It’s hard to put into words. I feel like the idea of a felt experience has been unpacked by writers I admire such as Sara Ahmed, Frantz Fanon, and Sianne Ngai. I am continually curious about the ineffable, about the experiences that intersect somatics, psychoanalysis, spirituality. I feel like that is always something I am looking for; it is always the thing that I seek to evoke in the work—the stuff that can’t be packaged neatly into language but that is experienced with a kind of sixth sense. I think about Resmaa Menakem, whose book I am reading now, and his description of the white supremacy body. He talks about—and I’m paraphrasing, hopefully in a way he would approve—how one of the strategies of white supremacy is to be disconnected from the felt experience, to be disconnected from the body, from the pain, from the effect that others and events have on us. This disconnection allows that continuation of violence. A lot of the histories that I am mining in my own work have been curated and shaped through a history of violence, through a history of erasure, through a history of white supremacy. And so when I look at photographs that have been taken primarily by Americans or Europeans in the nineteenth and twentieth century, I am not interested in these images as historical fact. I am interested in these images as fictions, as mythologies, as myth-making devices.

Does this make sense? I’d love to hear your thoughts on this as well, especially as it relates to your writing and your own research.





Sara Jimenez, *The Edge of Dwelling*, 2019, inkjet prints of colonial photography, papier-mâché, 3 channel sound installation (in collaboration with Lau Nau), 20 x 15 x 10 feet (dimensions variable of sculptures inside). Photo by Stefan Hagen. Courtesy of the artist.

## RC

That makes perfect sense! I'm also interested in the ways in which memory can be embedded, either in the body or in physical spaces. Performance can be a way of evoking these forgotten histories, of reliving or reimagining the bodily struggles of our ancestors. You've described your architectural spaces to me as something "between a body, a city, a mountain." I think that perfectly encapsulates the power in being able to embody a cultural past. It can be a way of finding unity in the diaspora. Performance historian Joseph Roach calls this a "surrogation of the dead." I think we're both interested in how these traumas manifest in an unlanguaging, or an inability to articulate that felt experience, which as you mentioned allows for a continuation of violence. This conversation also reminds me of Édouard Glissant's demand for "the right to opacity," a demand that allows Others to deny knowability, if they choose, as a means of subverting the colonial gaze. Your work beautifully weaves in and out of realms of transparency and



opacity. I see your collages of colonial photographs as a kind of opaque process. When you deconstruct these images, you question their indexicality and ultimately their authority. As you said, there's an inherent myth behind the medium.

**SJ**

Oooooo, I love that idea of “the right to opacity” as a means of subversion and this notion of “unlanguaging” that you mention. You hit the nail on the head. I feel like I am thinking about abstraction as a means of subversion while also defamiliarizing what is assumed to be true. Lately I have been thinking about imagination as a strategy. What do you do when the stories you want to hear haven't been recorded, at least not in the way that an American academic scientific framework would see as legitimate? What do you do when the only “legitimate information” is through the colonial lens? My friend, artist Zavé Martohardjono, reframed these ideas for me by saying that we can claim what comes to us in our bodies and in our minds as ancestral knowledge. There's a kind of knowing that is deep within, which is not contingent on a footnote. All this is to say that the recent materials I have been using—the scanned colonial photos—attempt to expand the frame of the camera to not only reveal the myth of the text but to allude to a different reality of haunting, loss, resilience, anger, passion, and transcendence.

**Sara Jimenez: Roots Burrow Through Hard Stones and Facts** *is on view at Smack Mellon in New York City until January 2.*

*Re'al Christian is a writer, editor, and art historian based in Queens, NY. She is a contributing editor at ART PAPERS, and the Assistant Director of Editorial Initiatives at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at The New School. Her writing has appeared in Art in America, Art in Print, BOMB Magazine, and Brooklyn Rail. She has written catalogue and exhibition texts for CUE Art Foundation, DC Moore, the Hunter College Art Galleries, and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., and has participated in conversations with Dieu Donn   and the Rubin Foundation. She is an MA candidate in Art History at Hunter College and holds a bachelor's degree in Art History and Media, Culture, & Communication from New York University.*

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