

DRAFT

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Here and Elsewhere

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I work from a chrome table: 59 Roxas Avenue, coordinates 14.621411, 121.053171.

Calais is a port town in northern France.

Oriental Mindoro is 140 kilometres (87miles) southwest of Manila, Calapan its capital city.

Places can be numbers or areas on a map, yet they are not only these.

They can be sites of refuge like this cafe awash in stark light or they can also be dark jungles. This place where I weave words and where I am virtually connected to the rest of the world, my imagination ferried to the recently demolished jungle in Calais, where close to 8000 refugees temporarily settled in its dunes. Artist Pope Bacay's childhood home stands along a main road in Roxas town, Oriental Mindoro.

We are nomads.

Pope recounts the numerous apartments he and his family rented in the city, the search flavoured by his perpetual quest for features that remind of his Mindoro home. Most my writing is accomplished at temporary stations: at well lit desks in cafes and libraries. The refugees in Calais mostly from Sudan, Afghanistan and Eritrea dreamt of travelling to Britain, which they hope to reach by way of the English Channel. Indigenous peoples have lost lands and homes, their protests often silenced through violence and death. A police mobile unit is driven across a crowd, its crazed driver high on rage in a recent protest in front of the US Embassy in Manila.

Places are about territories and demarcations, they are locations in space and time.

They contain stories and imaginations of the past and the future, much of them weighing on the present. Geographer Doreen Massey (1995, 186) cautions that while places are "bound up with histories told of them", we should closely attend to how these histories are told and which of them are dominant. She offers a useful manner of understanding place: they are "constantly shifting articulations of social relations through time", whose meanings are deployed and mobilised for specific ends. What remains and what changes? Not the self certainly, for identity is a project of constant revision, a process of ceaseless formation, "forever unachieved".

Pope Bacay paints architectural forms for his first solo exhibition: an eerie bungalow facade, shuttered louver windows, concrete balustrade, grill work, pierced concrete wall, patterned brick - all bits and portions of a home, a house that chronicles the past and perhaps summons the future. Yet Pope is careful to cite that the facade is unchanging, the screen wall has been there for years, this attribute gives him solace. He renders the bungalow front against a nameless sphere, much like a stage backdrop so the house appears like an object. And yet the darkened receptacles, the windows and doors speak volumes about the unseen. In reality, the Bacay household is located along a busy road in Roxas town. Like most homes, the structure is testament to various renovations that signify the ebb and flow of familial life.

The artist likewise enlarges and delicately paints details of the facade. The glass louver windows with half-shuttered panes and the poured concrete balusters, familiar features of houses from the 60s and 70s. They hark back to a time of building and modernisation and if considered closely, may speak to a family's fortune. Pope is surprisingly not so much after precision: from afar these architectural features and elements seem like photographic simulations but up close lines follow the stroke of a fine-haired brush not the dictates of a straight rule, the balusters curve out in proportion but do not strictly abide the principle of perspective. He renders the material details of a home: the dull surface of concrete and the tedium of patterned grill work. These minutiae are opaque windows to events - a sliver of time, a screen of form. The house and its details are transformed into aperture, a lens through which to gaze within.

Pope's home however is not confined to the house in Oriental Mindoro; it is also their farm, the city, the various rented apartments which bear the semblance of this bungalow in Roxas town. His work *My Third Home* is a striking, 34-piece polyptych from 2015. Shaped canvases were assembled to form the silhouette of the bungalow but its visual elements make an itinerary of travel: road signs, church bell towers, farm paths, towering city buildings. The artist records details and gathers them in a vignette of forms - a visual geography of place. Oddly he does not feel displaced and professes to seeing himself retire to their house and farm with age.

In transit is where I belong. I always sit by bus windows, as I do by plane windows when I travel. I spent long hours on buses growing up, my school and home the points that make departure and destination. I vividly remember the smell of burning hay as I imagine the daily routines of people in houses along the highway. The bus rides fuel my imagination and they also lull me to sleep. In the third decade of life, I lost the other point of travel that was my home to a fire. I am left with the acrid memory of ashes that were mine and my family's past.

The jungles in Calais were cleared and soon enough, fires were blazing among the makeshift tents. In the rubble were burnt implements of a precarious life. They were sent off to places in France and many had lost hopes of ever reaching Britain. To burn is to mark place in memory.

Places are endings. They are also beginnings.

Pope Bacay's visual renderings of architecture make for a geography of resonance. He visualises structures not as tepid containers of palette and form but channels and paths for imagining place. Massey argues that places are conduits of the past in a variety of ways: places can be materially present but they can also be made present through resonance (186). In Pope's paintings, places are paradoxically contained yet enlivened, unmoving and mysterious, arrested in the lineaments of painting yet encompassing. His works do not mimic the mechanical strictures of architectural drawing, they record instead a point in the process of making and building. But what is it exactly being built or formed? It is the structure of memory, the firmaments of place, and the self that is always contingent.

Bacay's works capture the anima of architecture, the manner he presents them makes them vessels of that which endures of places - our knowledge of them and the way these knowings persist, within space and across time. Place is the '*changing same*', its foundations are transformation and change.

Notes and sources

*an idea of tradition that is constant formation that is also the foundation of its vitality (Paul Gilroy 1993 quoted by Massey 1995)

"*Calais migrant camp is cleared, but problems remain*", 9 October 2016 The Economist accessed 29 October 2016 <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21709332-bilateral-tensions-britain-will-linger-calais-migrant-camp-cleared-problems-remain>

Massey, Doreen. Spring 1995. Places and their Pasts. History Workshop Journal 39, 182-192.