

## EAST CITY ART REVIEWS

# Isabel Manalo *Adrenaline*

By Claudia Rousseau, Ph.D. on December 18, 2018

A new body of work by Isabel Manalo is on view at Addison/Ripley Fine Art in Georgetown. Called *Adrenaline*, in some ways it is a departure from the work she showed last year full of textile patterning, while in other ways it's a continuation of the themes of Filipina identity and conceptual self-portraiture that are central to Manalo's thinking. The title refers primarily to a sense of powerful energies released in response to current events, particularly the global shift to the right and against immigrants, as well as to other issues in the artist's personal life.

Many of these paintings are large multi-media works that at first strike the viewer with their broad gestures and bold colors. The variety of media is evident, as is the sense of the gesture—pouring, spraying, scraping and pushing the paint around on the canvas worked horizontally on the floor. Manalo tends to stretch her canvasses first, and then set them on the floor so she can manipulate them as she works. Her process is both additive and subtractive, using tools to make sharp edges or wedges, swirling marble effects, and calligraphic marks.

This last is the hidden key to these paintings, and again, it explains how personal identity is at their heart. Manalo begins each work



Isabel Manalo, *Ethereal*, 2018. Acrylic & enamel on canvas, 40" x 40".

with a mark from the pre-colonial script of the Philippines. Called Baybayin, it is an especially cursive script that is best written with a brush. And, much like a number of other Asian scripts, its practice also involves a meditative tradition. Indeed, there are other contemporary Filipino-American artists such as Kristian Kabuay (currently based in San Francisco) who have

made an entire career around using the script as a springboard to performances in which, kneeling, he paints the letters on broad sheets of paper laid on the floor. For Kabuay, and for most Filipino people looking to connect to their pre-colonial identities, Baybayin is central. It is like a chain linking them to their collective past; before the Spanish, before the

IMAGE COURTESY OF ADDISON/RIPLEY FINE ART.



BAYBAYIN HAND WRITING CHART OF JACOB IRA AZURIN VIJANDRE

Baybayin alphabet; drawn by Jacob Ira Azurin Vijandre.

PHOTO CREDIT: BAYANI ART.

language, Tagalog, at the University of Wisconsin at Madison where the artist grew up. Her Filipino parents, who are now aging and infirm, were active advocates of sustaining, through knowledge of the language and the script, a connection to the family's ethnic past. Increasingly, people want to know about their ethnicities; where they came from. The possibility of getting a DNA test that will tell you about your ethnic origins has become a huge business. In this way, Manalo beginning her work with a broadly gestured character from this beautiful script constitutes a kind of self-portrait, a means of expressing something embedded deep within the self. The Baybayin characters are the vehicles of this expression in these forcefully layered works, speaking of who she is, and from whence she comes.

Making these paintings, like *Kabuay*, Manalo is working on the floor—not setting herself inside the canvas, but kneeling in front of it. Yet, her practice is far more complex and active than his. Having acquired a new studio where she can spread out and, as she says, “make a mess,” she has been able to work on a much larger scale and to use the encounter with the canvas as a way to interpret her emotional state. This, of course, recalls the Abstract Expressionist idea, and if one looks around, it's evident that the AbEx aesthetic is back. Manalo speaks about her work as a “self-portrait in many ways.” The Abstract Expressionists spoke about the content of their works being themselves, their psyche, their being. They were adamant that their work was full

IMAGE COURTESY OF ADDISON/RIPLEY FINE ART.



Isabel Manalo, *Sweet Tsunami*, 2018. Acrylic & enamel on canvas, 40" x 50".

Americans, and before the miseries of dictators and extra-judicial killings became commonplace. It made them stand out as literate at a time when this was not expected, as witnessed by the Jesuits who

came there in the very early 17th century.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of Isabel Manalo, the script is especially close. Her mother taught the Filipino



IMAGE CREDIT: GREG STALEY.

Isabel Manalo, *Hireath*, 2018. Acrylic & enamel on canvas, 50" x 72".

of content. We respond visually to the energy expressed in works like Manalo's. They are the result of the encounter of the artist with her media and the support on which she is working. In large paintings

like *Hireath* the repeated attacks on the canvas and the spreading of textures bear witness to that event. The title is a Welsh word that is almost untranslatable. It means a longing for home, a home to which

one cannot return. More than nostalgia, it's a deep seated pain that yearns for a place to which one can no longer return.

It's an interesting moment when issues of identity and self have merged once again with strong gesture in an effort to represent these fundamental ideas in the medium of painting.

#### ENDNOTES

1. "All these islands are much given to reading and writing and there is hardly a man, and much less a woman, who does not read or write in the letters used in the island of Manila, which is entirely different from those of China, Japan or India. This will be seen from its alphabets." Father Pedro Chirino, S.J., *Relación de las Islas Filipinas*, 1604.

<http://www.bayaniart.com/articles/baybayin/>

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Isabel Manalo: *Adrenaline*, at Addison/Ripley Fine Art, 1670 Wisconsin Ave. NW, Washington DC 20007, December 8, 2018-January 19, 2019.