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Small Encampments: Stephanie Syjuco Searches for Home

by [michele carlson](#) 04/29/09

We are not new to the idea of building homes -- places that make us feel like we "belong" there. Yet recently, the media has been inundated with television shows, magazines, websites and blogs dedicated to the idea of creating a "home" for oneself or family. One might repaint a neighbor's living room on a home makeover show, or have one's closet raided by the fashion police turned pseudo-celebrity. In the west, our identities have always remained connected to physical space. But for San Francisco-based artist [Stephanie Syjuco](#), the sense of belonging hangs in limbo, positioned in relation to -- though sometimes in reaction against -- her distant homeland in the Philippines. This is a place she has an ostensible relationship with through birth but feels disconnected to when she is actually there. She is a tourist at home.

These questions of belonging and identity permeate and are keenly exposed in Syjuco's *The Village* (*Small Encampment*) a work currently on view at [James Harris Gallery](#), in Seattle. She appropriates downloads of strangers' tourist photos, liberally exhumed from the graveyards of Google image banks. Syjuco then arranges and re-shoots them within the context of her personal domestic space, in her San Francisco apartment. Her use of found tourist photos combined with her own also speaks to the distance between herself and the place she seemingly should know. Syjuco is a tourist in her own homeland, until she literally brings the homeland home.

Pairs of photographs hang on the walls, along with a slide carousel that flicks through a round of 80 slides that offer close-up views of these small dioramas of homeland-within-a-home. They are coupled with wider shots of Syjuco's apartment where sometimes, if we look close, the small cutouts are found (and sometimes, they're not). We search, too. Syjuco forces us to travel with her as we zoom in and out of her dioramas. We traverse pixelated and canned photos of the way a stranger wants to remember or understand the Philippines (or maybe wants us all to remember or understand the Philippines). We are with her on this negotiation of represented and lived experience.

In *Bedroom/Jungle Valley*, the rich greens of an indistinctive tropical canopy are barely visible between the dark pillows of Syjuco's bed; the exposed sheets are still imprinted with the echoes of a night's rest (or unrest) while the covers remain haphazardly thrown and kicked back. One must look close. Without the partner photo, which shows a close-up of the cutout jungle tucked within the rolling mountains of flannel sheeting, we might misunderstand it for something else, or miss it altogether.

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Things are not what they seem: Syjuco exposes the frailty in the notion of an "authentic" homeland and the idea that she should know it. By default, she begins to unravel the lackadaisical assumptions of racial and ethnic connections to what are often diluted cultural representations of distant far-off lands. That farmer is actually ploughing a shag carpet; those beachgoers are really posing on a sandy colored terry cloth towel. The strength of Syjuco's work lies in the fact that even she is unsure of the line between fact and fiction in her own narratives of the Philippines and Filipina identity formation.

In *Skyscraper*, snippets of a metropolitan city, high-rises and city streets, are literally excised from their original context and carefully placed in what could be Syjuco's kitchen. This found bit of geography peeks out from behind what might be a garbage can, and leans close to the floor molding. An electrical cord cuts across the entire photograph, trailing in front of the appropriated cityscape placed within a home, as crumbs lay scattered across the linoleum floor. The pixilated, roughly cut edges are left as such; there is no attempt to "hide" the imperfections that expose the dioramic piecing together of this psychic space.

With her process revealed, Syjuco also shows us that the negotiation between home and homeland is not always neat and clean. Searching for and building such spaces is a messy process and may often seem quite different than what it is, or what we think it should be. We are reminded that after the reality show is over and the fashion police have moved on to the next closet, one must continue to build and complete their own stories -- their own home.

From the top: *Plowing (Living Room)*, C-print, 27" x 18"; *Skyscraper (Kitchen)*, C-print, 27" x 18"

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Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

Currently at Anton Kern Gallery, Brian Calvin exhibits new portraits of young, sl

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