

**Marcella Gabrielle S. Giron**  
**ID 10971106**

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**Ms. Sharon Arriola**

**“An Essay On BISA: Potent Presences”**

When I think of the word ‘potent’ I think about efficacy, change, powerful influence or something to that effect. I think the potency of an object or idea can be based on its impact on other people, and its ability to sustain that impact for a long period of time. Having visited the exhibit entitled “Bisa: Potent Presences” at the Metropolitan Museum, the experience gave me a better idea of what the Filipino ideology really is. Curated by the renowned Patrick Flores, the vibe of the exhibit was taken to a whole new level as he allowed himself to work his magic, and incorporate his vision into the pieces featured in the space. I believe he wanted to steer away from the norms of traditional art exhibitions. He had a message to convey to the audience. He wanted his audience to not just see the art, but to feel it, breathe it, and learn from it.

To curate an exhibit isn’t just about placing a certain piece in a specific manner, nor is it about arranging an entire collection in a way that it delivers a cohesive message. It is so much more than that. Curating an exhibit entails perfect understanding of Art, of the creative process, and of course, the mind of its audience. It has to be able to celebrate the power of art, and its ability to define and pay homage to a specific culture, which in this case is ours.

Bisa doesn’t seem like your average ordinary exhibit. Stemming from the fact that most of the pieces found here come from the abundant art Collections of individuals and institutional lenders, it also showcases a mix of different art forms. The exhibit features a wide array of pieces, each powerful in the messages they want to convey. Another interesting fact is the way Flores arranged the placement of each piece and divided them into four interesting sections, all of which touch on different concepts and stories about our identity as Filipinos. These four parts are known as Ibayo/After Life, Ganap/Here and Now, Tuwina/Time and Again, and Dayo/Far and Away. This can tell us that time and place do play a huge role in our development as a people. And that constant movement is important for us to evolve as a nation regardless of whether this change is good or bad.

This kind of arrangement is definitely one of the strong points of this exhibit. Although each artwork presents a significant place in the presentation of the Filipino identity, the exhibit's real potency lies in the collective impact it imparts on its audience. Some artworks invoke Nationalism and nostalgia or even amusement like *Ofelia Tequi's "Homage To Lorenzetti"* or *Fernando Amorsolo's portraits of Felicing Tirona*. I think for one to truly appreciate and understand this collection, the viewer needs to have a contemplative soul, an eager mind, and an open heart. Each segment is a journey inside the Filipino psyche at a given time in history, and its complexity can give its viewer an answer to one very simple question, "Who are the Filipino people?" Through the different works featured by Flores, we are able to arrange, like pieces of a shattered puzzle, the widely unique yet vital remnants of our past, thus shedding light on our present. These include the Pre-Spanish, Spanish, Western, and Contemporary influences that somehow glue together the Filipino persona.

Each segment has a great story to tell, but there are a few pieces that just stand out and make me want to delve deeper into the stories behind it. One eye-catching piece is Alfred Esquillo's "Mamakinley". To be honest, I have no interest in Philippine-American History, but this piece has this intense energy that just draws my attention to it. To see an American man, a political figure at that, portrayed as a grim and morose-looking woman holding a baby with features close to ours, one will have to wonder how is this relevant to the concept of our identity? How does Flor Contemplacion's death play a huge role in the Philippine Diaspora? *Kaninong mga pangalan ang dapat nating ilista na lang sa tubig? Kaninong mga pagkukulang ang dapat na lang nating kalimutan? Talagang nga bang kasama sa kultura natin ang magpatay-malisya sa mga pagkukulang ng iba?* These are just few of the many questions that will flicker while exploring this exhibit.

Going about most of its sections, I've realized that not all our questions will be answered by the art works themselves. To search for oneself does not actually require conversation, although sometimes it does help. I think it is our duty to do some soul-searching to realize that the answers can be found in us, and that these artworks are only stimuli to evoke a sense of understanding and appreciation for who we really are. In the quiet and ambient spaces of the museum, one will be able to realize and even meditate about what the real essence of being a Filipino is. I think Flores wants us to

realize that all the factors that have led us to this day played a huge role in molding our nation's identity, regardless if its good or bad, negative or positive.

I think it is evident that our identity is rooted on the fact that we Filipinos are naturally prone or open to the idea of change. We have been constantly immersed, since the days of our ancestors, in the different cultures of our colonizers, and there's no other way we can describe who we are. Up to this day, we still express our natural desire to constantly move forward through our nomadic impulses. It is a fact that Filipinos can be found all over the world, having said that, we can refer to *Bisa* as our passport, our real identity in this world. In this context the potency of our presence as Filipinos is a product of the constant waves of influences from external factors and our desire to constantly heed the call of the world.