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CARLOS VILLA



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17 – 21 May 2023

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Carlos Villa:

Illuminating Filipino American Futurism

In a recent interview relating to his exhibition *An Archeology of Silence* featuring portraits of fallen African American subjects, artist Kehinde Wiley explains why we need to dig out stories that were not necessarily previously given any light, so we can point light toward where we want to move. In making this statement, Wiley also illuminates the artistic project of his former San Francisco Art Institute teacher, first-generation Filipino American Carlos Villa, whose example helped construct the scaffolding for a future that we now inhabit, and who left us tools to further build a futurism which we are still in the process of imagining.

Carlos Villa (1936-2013) was born in San Francisco's Tenderloin, a highly urbanized ghetto neighborhood; today a ten-story tall mural of Villa's own 1971 Tat2 self-portrait by another former-SFAI-student (Mario Ayala) looks over a contemporary dystopic societal landscape as a beacon of transformation and hope. Villa himself was transformed multiple times through his own process of artmaking, writing "From then until now, through the practice of art, I became who I am." In part inspired by an ignorant statement by one of

his art school teachers in the late 1950s who said "There is no Filipino art history," Villa began his life's project to recuperate his own sources. After five years as a minimalist making sculpture referencing architecture in New York during the mid-1960s, Villa returned to San Francisco in 1969 which was then enmeshed in Third World Liberation consciousness of the Black Panther Party, and Indians of All Tribes Occupation of Alcatraz. He embraced that liberation ideology to counter the atmosphere of self-loathing he had grown up in and around. In response, the artist changed his art in the 1970s to reflect a socially engaged worldview, incorporating references to non-western traditions that included tattoos and feathered coats and capes that had roots in Pacific Islander cultures. Over the next decade he then produced an extensive body of work using his own body indexically as imagery. He then spent yet another decade exploring the experience of Filipino American immigrants of his parents' generation. All this before returning to a more abstract minimal approach at the end of his career, albeit one which was multilayered with the content of the prior personal and socio-historical investigations.



The current exhibition at Frieze features works from several of these critical decades. Drawings from the late 1960s introduce his search for imagery that could express an identity of difference. In these, we can sense Villa's gaze shifting away from the cloudy web of inherited mainstream artistic sources to an exploration of internal coiling mazes that eventually seemed emblematic of his own spiritual bowels. After he returned to San Francisco in 1969, Villa enlarged these roiling intestinal shapes on unstretched canvas to suggest an expansive ethnographic self. A brilliant example is Villa's untitled (1979), with its dynamic circular energy cyclones arising from a central core. Synchronous with Bettye Saar, Villa gained access to an important Africa, Oceania, and the Americas ethnographic museum collection and found inspiration there in objects including Australian Aboriginal Kurdaicha feathered shoes, and the bold patterns of tapa cloth. An unleashed tapa energy courses through this wonderful painting like a powerful electric charge.

One of the last of his feathered coats is also featured at Frieze, Villa's *Kite God Coat* (1979). Its exquisite fabric lining is filled with airbrushed hand-prints that recalls prehistoric rock art, as if Villa was digging deep into our collective past to discover our ancient shared roots as well as reaching across a more global conception of art history. The incorporation of paper pulp is evidence of Villa's love for collaboration – not only in his activist curatorial agenda but also in expanding the scope of his artmaking. In the late 1970s, various artists collaborated with printmakers to experiment with paper pulp in innovative ways, including David Hockney's iconic 1978 *Paper Pools*. *Kite God Coat's* paper pulp aura format with protuberant feathers evokes wings, the source of its title. Villa once told this writer that while his coats and capes were made as objects to suspend or display on the wall, he tried each of them on once (he only performed once using one of these coats, in 1980, in the work entitled *Ritual*). The visible crack in the paper sheet provides evidence of Villa donning his *Kite God Coat* after it was first finished.



Kite God Coat, 1979

rooster and pheasant tail feather;
paper pulp

87h x 109w in
220.98h x 276.86w cm

Price upon request

EXHIBITION HISTORY

Carlos Villa: Roots and Reinvention, The San Francisco Arts Commission, San Francisco, 2022

Carlos Villa: Worlds in Collision, The Newark Museum of Art, Newark, 2022

PUBLICATION HISTORY

Carlos Villa: Worlds in Collision by Mark Dean Johnson, Trisha Lagaso Goldberg, and Sherwin Rio, 2022

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Villa's spectacular decade of the 1970s was followed by another equally rich one in which he shifted the iconography of his exploration by foregrounding the Filipino body through the making of indexical body prints. Unlike the work of Yves Klein who used female models as printing tools, Villa's print paintings were made using his own body - as though Villa wants us to acknowledge his own Filipino presence. Two works from the early 1980s with body prints are displayed at Frieze. Three orange body prints circle the edge of the mural scaled *What Comes Again, Comes Again, Etc.* (1982); these are set against an animated field dominated by shades of blue and fleshy pink. Careful looking reveals additional collaged face prints on smaller pieces of canvas glued and almost camouflaged into the busy and colorful surface, and below that surface we can barely discern traces of a geometric

structure, drawn in charcoal. This layering suggests an acknowledgement of the artist's earlier geometric activity in New York and ongoing interest in painterly abstraction since his time as a student in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the *Tubby in Love* diptych, a hot Cadmium red panel on the right features multiple body and hand prints, while resolutely abstract riotous primary hues of the layered left panel conjure coxcomb forms. These parallel panels again convey the aesthetic layering that came to animate Villa's later work, pointing to simultaneous, interrelated interests. *Tubby's* coxcomb forms evoke the title of Ashile Gorky's 1944 masterpiece, *The Liver is the Cock's Comb*; the sexual innuendo of Gorky's ambiguous riddle parallels Villa's own amorous titling.



***What Comes Again,
Comes Again, Etc., 1982***
acrylic on unstretched canvas
with chicken bones

95h x 121w in
241.3h x 307.34w cm

Price upon request

EXHIBITION HISTORY

Carlos Villa: Roots and Reinvention, The San Francisco
Arts Commission, San Francisco, 2022

PUBLICATION HISTORY

Carlos Villa: Worlds in Collision by Mark Dean Johnson,
Trisha Lagaso Goldberg, and Sherwin Rio, 2022







Tubby in Love, 1980-1983
acrylic on canvas, diptych

Overall dimensions:
80.75h x 143.50w in
205.10h x 364.49w cm

Per panel dimensions:
80.75h x 71.75w in
205.10h x 182.25w cm

Price upon request



The black feathered *American Immigration Policy (2 of 2)* (1996), represents Villa's return to minimalist architectural abstraction; it also references Filipino American political history with a nod to David Hammons' famous 1969 *The Door: (Admissions Office)*. Many people may be unaware of the intricacies of how immigration to the US was strictly controlled by policies of the federal government. After the 1882 Exclusion Act and 1924 Immigration Act slammed doors on earlier Chinese and Japanese workforces, it was Filipinos who fueled America's hunger for cheap agricultural labor and domestic help. Filipino men, then American subjects but not citizens, were isolated in "bachelor societies" controlled by anti-miscegenation laws. This door is tantalizingly ajar - but not wide enough to walk through. There is no color here, but the feathers still shimmer and shine. In addressing the social history of the Manong, Villa refocused his narrative on a Filipino-specific story of his parents' generation and the uncles whose experiences he knew well.

American Immigration Policy
(2 of 2), 1996

black feather on found object (door)

79.5h x 30w x 7d in
201.93h x 76.2w x 17.78d cm

Price upon request

EXHIBITION HISTORY

Carlos Villa: Roots and Reinvention, The San Francisco
Arts Commission, San Francisco, 2022

Carlos Villa: Worlds in Collision, The Newark Museum of
Art, Newark, 2022

The Present Hour, Oakland Museum of California,
Oakland, 1996

PUBLICATION HISTORY

Carlos Villa: Worlds in Collision by Mark Dean Johnson,
Trisha Lagaso Goldberg, and Sherwin Rio, 2022



email

whatsapp



An important aspect of Villa's art was his concurrent commitment to teaching and an activist curatorial practice – threads that run from the periods of civil rights to multiculturalism, to today's diversity/equity/inclusion. Akin to his friend and California colleague Ruth Asawa, Villa's life/work was inextricable from a commitment to community. Although he died a decade ago, Carlos Villa's Filipino American futurism that marries a deeply felt social consciousness with a passion for artistic innovation lives on in our creative imagination.

Mark Dean Johnson

San Francisco

March 2023

¹ Kehinde Wiley, in Reshaping the Monumental (<https://www.famsforg/exhibitions/kehinde-wiley-an-archaeology-of-silence#film>). 2023, minute 6:50-6:57)

² <https://www.mosserliving.com/community/beautifying-the-tenderloin-mosser-towers-new-mural-is-a-tribute-to-a-tenderloin-born-artist/>

³ Carlos Villa, Sixty Forms of Utang, 1995, unpublished manuscript.

⁴ Villa's friend and later collaborator Thomas Seligman was then curator of the Arts of African, Oceania and the Americas at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco at that time.



Untitled (vertical colored pencil lines), 1960s

colored pencil on paper

18h x 24w in
45.72h x 60.96w cm

Framed dimensions:
25h x 31w in
63.5h x 78.74w cm

Price upon request

EXHIBITION HISTORY

Singapore Biennale 2019, *Every Step In the Right Direction*,
Artistic Directed by Patrick D. Flores, Singapore Art Museum





Untitled (lines and small circles), 1960s
colored pencil on paper

18h x 24w in
45.72h x 60.96w cm

Framed dimensions:
25h x 31w in
63.5h x 78.74w cm

Price upon request

EXHIBITION HISTORY

Singapore Biennale 2019, *Every Step In the Right Direction*,
Artistic Directed by Patrick D. Flores, Singapore Art Museum

Untitled (abstracted lines and dots), 1960s

colored pencil on paper

18h x 24w in
45.72h x 60.96w cm

Framed dimensions:
25h x 31w in
63.5h x 78.74w cm

Price upon request

EXHIBITION HISTORY

Singapore Biennale 2019, *Every Step In the Right Direction*,
Artistic Directed by Patrick D. Flores, Singapore Art Museum





untitled, 1968

colored pencil on paper

18h x 24w in

45.72h x 60.96w cm

Framed dimensions:

25h x 31w in

63.5h x 78.74w cm

Price upon request

EXHIBITION HISTORY

Singapore Biennale 2019, *Every Step In the Right Direction*,
Artistic Directed by Patrick D. Flores, Singapore Art Museum

untitled, 1968
crayon on paper

18h x 24w in
45.72h x 60.96w cm

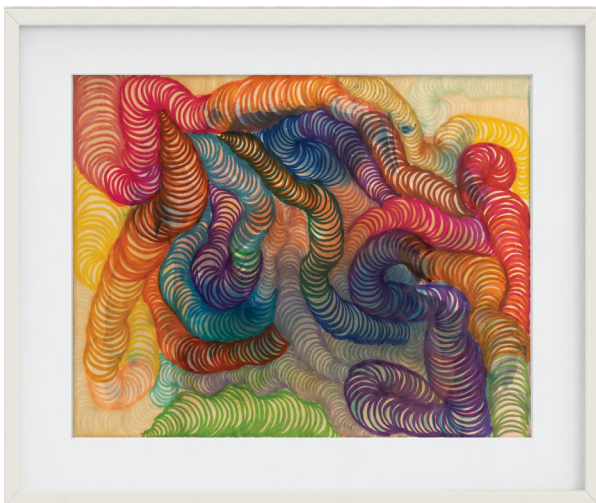
Framed dimensions:
25h x 31w in
63.5h x 78.74w cm

Price upon request

EXHIBITION HISTORY

Singapore Biennale 2019, *Every Step In the Right Direction*,
Artistic Directed by Patrick D. Flores, Singapore Art Museum





untitled, 1968

felt tip pen on paper

18h x 24w in

45.72h x 60.96w cm

Framed dimensions:

25h x 31w in

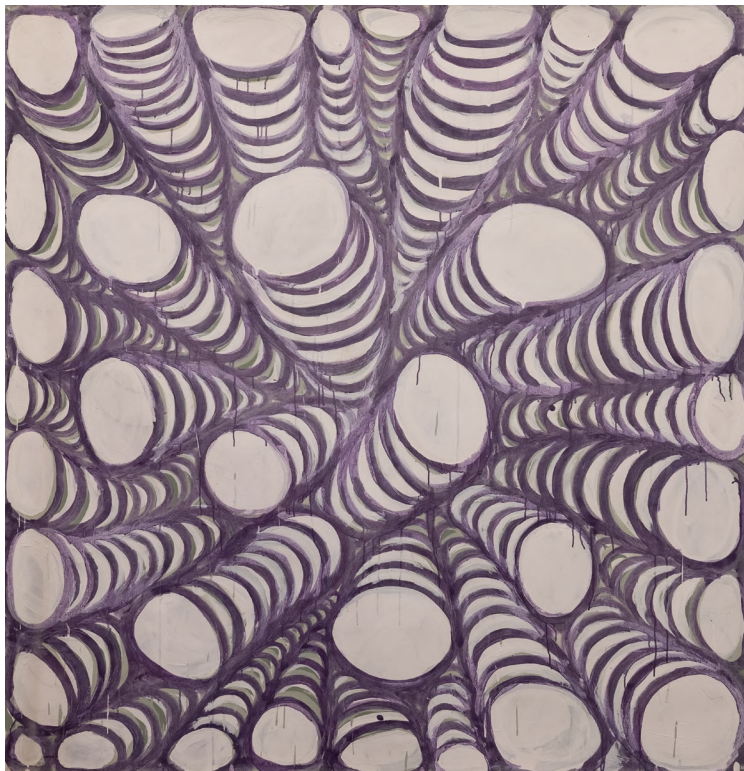
63.5h x 78.74w cm

Price upon request

EXHIBITION HISTORY

Carlos Villa: Worlds in Collision, The Newark Museum of Art,
Newark, 2022

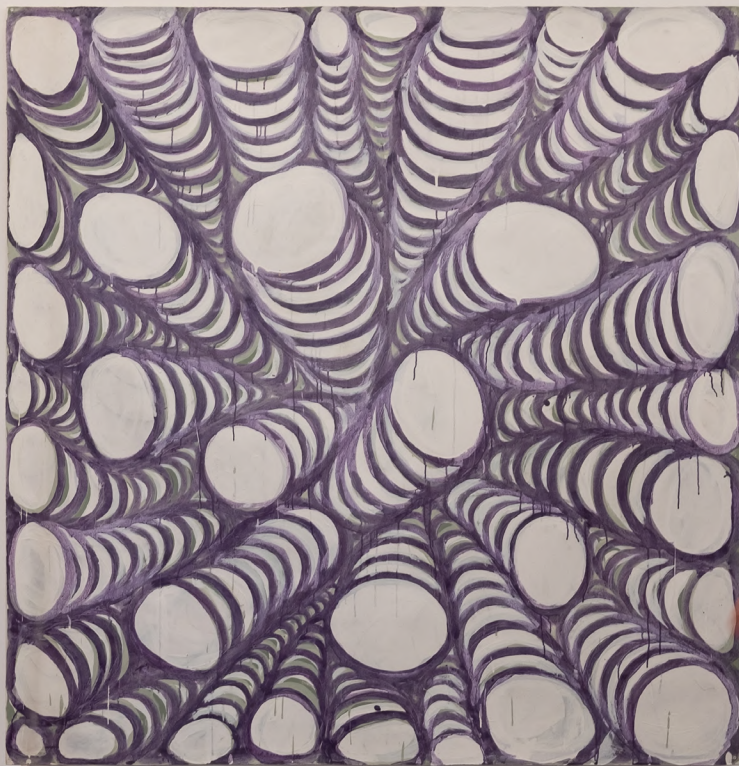




***Untitled (slinky painting –
purple, white, black), 1979***
acrylic on unstretched canvas

72h x 72w in
182.88h x 182.88w cm

Price upon request

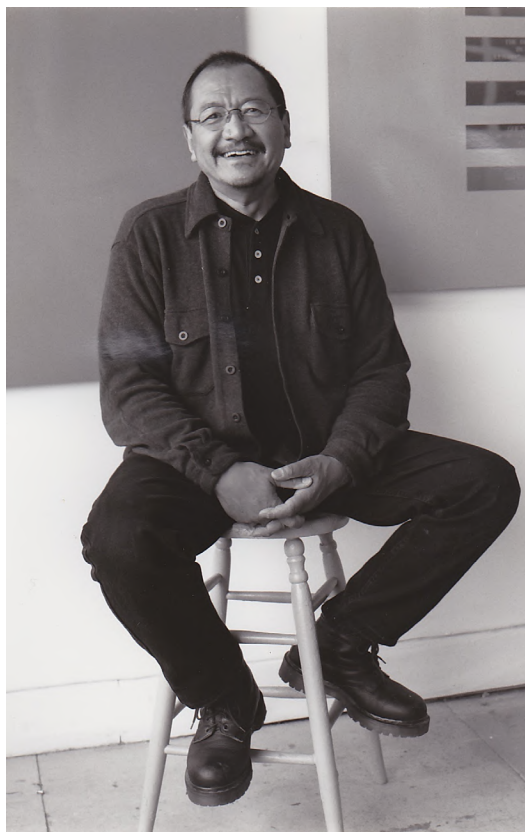


CARLOS VILLA

Bio

Carlos Villa (1936–2013) was a San Francisco-born visual artist, grass-roots activist, curator, author, and 40+ year educator at the San Francisco Art Institute, among other Bay Area institutions. His artistic origin story is often attributed to a single moment during his early education, when a professor told Villa, “Filipino art history does not exist.” A decade later, Villa abandoned a career in minimalism to begin his ground-breaking practice of culling materials from indigenous cultures across the globe. He collided feathers, bone, physical body prints, and sperm to create strangely-human works that challenged colonial perspectives and laid radical claim to a cross-cultural, diasporic identity. It was Villa’s chess move to render Filipino art history visible and incarnate a foundation for artists to come.

In 2022, Villa received the first-ever major museum retrospective dedicated to the work of a Filipino American artist, which toured bi-coastly from the Newark Museum of Art to the San Francisco Art Institute and Asian Art Museum. Additional accolades include Villa’s 2011 solo retrospective *Manongs*, *Some Doors* and *a Bouquet of Crates* at the Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts in San Francisco, and *Other Sources: An American Essay*, a multidisciplinary, multiethnic exhibition centered around women and artists of color, curated by Villa and presented in conjunction with the 1976 American Bicentennial.



Portrait of the artist courtesy of The Estate of Carlos Villa.

CARLOS VILLA CV

b. 1936, d. 2013,
San Francisco, CA, USA

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 *Frieze New York*, Silverlens, New York
- 2022 *Carlos Villa: Worlds in Collision*, Newark Museum of Art, Newark, NJ and Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, California
Carlos Villa: Roots and Reinvention, San Francisco Arts Commission Main Gallery, War Memorial Veterans Building, San Francisco, California
- 2021 *Carlos Villa: Walks of Life, Friends Indeed (Chinatown)*, San Francisco, CA,
Carlos Villa, Anglim Trimble, San Francisco, CA
- 2017 *CV Survey* at SFAI Fort Mason, San Francisco, CA,
- 2011 *Manongs, Some Doors and a Bouquet of Crates*, Mission Cultural Center, San Francisco, CA,
- 2007 *CV retrospective* at Hearst Art Gallery, St. Mary's College, Moraga, CA
- 1970 *CV solo exhibition* at the Richmond Art Center, Richmond, CA

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2022 *East of the Pacific: Making Histories of Asian American Art*, Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University, Stanford, CA
Dead Lecturer / distant relative: Notes from the Woodshed, 1950-1980, Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, NY
Carlos Villa: On Paper, Anglim Trimble, San Francisco, CA
- 2021 *Prospect.5: Yesterday we said tomorrow*, Contemporary Art Center, New Orleans
- 2019 *Singapore Biennale 2019, Every Step In the Right Direction*, Singapore Art Museum
- 2018 *Way Bay 2*, Berkeley Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley
Way Bay, Berkeley Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley
- 2016 *Trees In The Forest*, Yale Union, Portland, OR
- 2011 *Under the Big Black Sun*, MOCA, Los Angeles
- 2010 *Rehistoricizing*, Luggage Store Gallery, San Francisco CA
- 2006 *Leo Valledor & Carlos Villa*, Mendenhall Sobieski Gallery, Pasadena, CA
- 2000 Thatcher Gallery, USF
- 1998 Treganza Museum, SFSU
- 1996 *The Present Hour*, Oakland Museum
- 1987 *The Ethnic Idea, curated by Andrée Maréchal-Workman*, Berkeley Art Center, Berkeley, California
- 1985 *Carlos Villa: 1961-1984, solo retrospective*, C.N. Gorman Museum and at the Memorial Union Art Gallery, University of California, Davis
- 1980 SFMoMA, San Francisco, CA
ProArts, San Francisco, CA
Euphrat Museum, De Anza College, Cupertino

CARLOS VILLA CV

**b. 1936, d. 2013,
San Francisco, CA, USA**

- 1977 *Look, Touch, Rub, Pull, Smell, and Hear*, Artspace, Sacramento, California
1973 University of Massachusetts
1972 *The Whitney Annual*, Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC

AWARDS

- 2012 Guggenheim Fellowship, Creative Arts, Fine Arts
2000 Pamana Award, Filipino American Art Exposition
Guest Artist, American Academy in Rome, Rome, Italy
1998 Flintridge Foundation Grant
1997 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Award
1989 Distinguished Alumni Award, San Francisco Art Institute
1987 Guest Artist, American Academy in Rome, Rome, Italy
1973 Adaline Kent Award, San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI), San Francisco, California
National Endowment for the Arts Grant
1959 Honorable Mention, Richmond Art Center, Richmond, California

EDUCATION

- 1963 Master of Fine Arts in Painting, Mills College; studied under Richard Diebenkorn, Elmer Bischoff, Frank Lobdell, and Ralph DuCasse
1961 Bachelor of Fine Arts, California School of Fine Arts (San Francisco Art Institute)

TEACHING

Painting Department at the San Francisco Art Institute
California State University, Sacramento

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CARLOS VILLA CV

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San Francisco, CA, USA**

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MARK DEAN JOHNSON ABOUT

Mark Dean Johnson is Professor at San Francisco State University (SFSU) and a leading scholar on the artist Carlos Villa, among other accolades. He co-curated Villa's traveling retrospective, *Carlos Villa: Worlds in Collision*, which toured The Newark Museum of Art, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, and the The San Francisco Arts Commission in 2022. Prior to his tenure at SFSU, Johnson was a professor at San Francisco Art Institute alongside Carlos Villa, where they became friends and collaborators.

CARLOS VILLA

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MARK DEAN JOHNSON

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