

RYAN VILLAMAEL
A PARADISE LOST



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RYAN VILLAMAEL

A PARADISE LOST

With *A Paradise Lost*, his 7th solo exhibition in Silverlens, Ryan Villamael premiered a new body of work that builds upon his ongoing dialogue with the contentious subject of Philippine history. Villamael's fascination with history began when he came across some early maps in which the idea of 'the Philippines' first started to appear. During the period reflected in those maps, 'the Philippines' could be seen as just a random scattering of nearby islands, with various tribes (both warring and friendly) that were forced into a single, unified entity by an external power. This set forth more than three centuries of foreign rule that effectively dissolved all but a few links to pre-colonial origins. For Villamael, this fraught relationship with history is a powerful driving force that set fire to his nagging desire to read and know more, to dig deeper and sort through the entanglements of hearsay and facts—and so he began to piece together a picture that may shed light to how we, as a people, ended up where we are today.

In this show, Villamael returns to the intimacy of paper: hand-cut, made intuitively, and in isolation. Presented as a set of unfurled scrolls, which in total spans close to 20 meters stretched across the length of the gallery's inner walls, the work evokes a faint horizon seen from a distance, a distance that it is keen to preserve—as even up close, it remains elusive; blank, still, and nearly empty. While ancient scrolls served as one of humanity's earliest forms of editable record keeping, Villamael's sheets remain thoroughly white yet not unmarked: it contains a thoughtful and evocative lament not written in ink but is encoded by blade. From his earliest works on, Villamael has employed the process of paper cutting to create images, convey stories and ask questions through the calculated use of negative space. Here he sliced and slowly nibbled away at the paper, creating a network of lines that mirrors how certain pests burrow and eat their way through old books, leaving a distinct pattern of holes, pathways, and tunnels across the pages. And while images of hole-riddled pages and destroyed books carry with them the melancholy air of information forever lost, here they translate to the actual content that informs and cuts through the blankness of the page.

Still, in another light, the patterns could just as well be seen as overgrown sprouts of wild vegetation, hopeful and alive as they creep their way up through the rubble of an unseen, perhaps fractured world below the horizon.

— Gary-Ross Pastrana



Gary-Ross Pastrana: Hi, Ryan. Congratulations on your show and thank you for doing this, sort of, “post-exhibition dialogue.” What I’m hoping to flesh out in this conversation is how your works and the overall thematic framework of your show changed or evolved during the course of actually creating the works. I remember you were coming from a different angle the first few times that we began planning and talking about this show...

Ryan Villamael: Yes, in the beginning I thought I would approach it from a broader narrative context, a more general view of history. Then I found my ideas slowly shifting to a more personal one. At first, I resisted it. I’ve always hesitated using personal matters as subject or material for making art.

GRP: Is this the first time that you addressed your personal history in your work?

RV: Looking back, I think this actually began when I started using maps in my work. My “Isles” exhibit also dealt a little bit about personal history, but I think I wasn’t mature enough at that time to actually bring the work to where I wanted it to go. Maybe it really works that way: first you experiment and create models to test out things that you’re not quite sure of. I was also wary of how people would react to things that can be seen as too personal. But in this show, for some reason, things really seemed to be heading to this direction. I was having difficulties with creating, in my mind, a cohesive show (or at least something genuine) with the works that I had planned. I sought out friends and colleagues, people who understand my process, to really help sift through the noise and distill my ideas to just arrive at the very essence of what I really want to do.

GRP: Before this, you were making a lot of works using maps, history books, old photographs of Manila, etc. Could you talk a little bit more about your initial attraction to historical material? Could you remember the first work you made in this context?

RV: It had something to do with the first Philippine map, or the first map where the whole Philippines, as we now know, first appeared. It came from Sir Ambeth Ocampo, who I was consulting with at that time. I also asked myself, why history? Why this fascination with maps and other historical materials, why do I have this need to create an understanding of the narratives of the past? Maybe it comes from the times where I feel disconnected, too far removed from what happened before that it becomes unrelatable. But history is such a big subject, and sometimes the possibilities seem endless, and that’s why I always need to narrow things down. It’s the same with what I was trying to do recently, to simplify and distill the ideas, which for me actually need to come first, even before the material; I can only start working when I have a clear idea of what I intend to do.

GRP: When you started with your first paper cuts, I believe you were already dealing with some narratives, although there were not exactly historical to begin with, am I right?

RV: Yes, in the beginning I based the cutouts on folklores, tales, local stories.

GRP: It’s interesting how from folk tales, you then gradually shifted to more historical narratives. In a sense, one could even plot the trajectory in a certain manner: from islands, country, city, and then the most recent one, where it reached the personal, human level.

RV: I guess it sort of took that path. It really started out as a way of playing with the materials and the process, of making random cutouts from paper and felt, which as an activity, I just really enjoyed.

GRP: There’s also this shift in scale, from macro to micro...

RV: Yes, and the first ones where really large, black felt cutouts which could fill whole walls.

GRP: Back to current show—can you talk more about the personal history aspect, even in broad strokes? You don’t need to reveal anything you’re not comfortable with.

RV: Each time I visit my mom in Los Baños, it sort of became a habit to look through photo albums. There were also old letters from my father that I always see; they were never really hidden from me or anything. So for a while now, I’ve always toyed with the idea of incorporating these relics into my work, especially the old family photos and the letters, but the right idea just hadn’t arrived yet.

GRP: How old were you when your father started working abroad?

RV: I think even before I was born he was already working abroad. There were very few occasions of being with him that I remember, but the ones that I have are very clear and they are not sad or anything.

GRP: In the beginning, he was still able to come home regularly?

RV: He will be here for a time, then he’ll be gone again. But that wasn’t unusual for me and my family; it was just like that. The last time I

This is a conversation between the artist Ryan Villamael and Gary-Ross Pastrana that happened a few weeks after Villamael’s show “A Paradise Lost” opened at Silverlens.

actually saw him was 10 years ago, and before that, another 10 years, when I was in still in high school.

GRP: Do you still have any contact with him now?

RV: None, zero, totally cut off. Sometimes I wonder what his reasons could be for just disappearing like that. Sometimes, the thought still unsettles me a bit. And that's why when I was able to do this show, it became some sort of a relief.

GRP: How about with your family—is there any desire to locate him now?

RV: There are questions, but no real effort or initiative to find him anymore. Even his own relatives have no idea of his whereabouts.

GRP: This is the part that I find interesting, this state of being open-ended, unresolved...

RV: It's as if he got up one morning and went to the mountains without saying a word. I'm not sure if "amazing" is the right term, but it's really sort of amazing how one could just leave everything behind, and disappear without telling anyone where you're going. And somehow, these unsettled feelings, these unresolved and unanswered questions, really pushed me to do the show.

GRP: For me, as an outsider, there's also a kind of "mystery" element to the fact that you don't really know where he is at this moment, why he left, a lot questions left hanging...

RV: And now it has sort of gone full circle, my search for a path, my quest to find answers to certain questions about my past. Somehow, I finally made peace with the fact that people will do what they want, what they have to, even if goes against reason, even if it can hurt people along the way. We each have our own desires, weaknesses and failings.

GRP: How did your mom react upon seeing your show?

RV: We didn't talk about it directly, but I believe that she understood it. She liked how the maps were installed...

GRP: One of the materials that you ended up using to make a new work was the blueprints to a promised, perhaps, dream house that sadly, was never built. Did your mom see this as well?

RV: What she immediately recognized was our house in Los Baños. She later saw the blueprints and it was interesting that she didn't even question why I cut up those plans and she also recognized the form that I turned it into.

GRP: When did the idea of filling the space with white sand come into the picture?

RV: It came towards the end. Initially, I really just wanted to keep the distance between the viewer and the paper scroll cutouts, and I was thinking of different ways of achieving it.

GRP: In the end, the sand just made the most sense. How about the scrolls? I'm also interested how it evolved, from when you first thought about it, while you were making it, until you finally saw it up on the wall, when we installed it in the gallery.

RV: With this work, I also wanted to simplify the execution, even with how it was installed. I wanted it to be as raw as possible, without any other detail or object getting in the way. Remember in the beginning there was a plan to have carved wood at each end to reinforce the scroll idea. But then I realized that the material as it is, the paper presented as plainly and directly as possible, just the paper against the wall was already enough.

GRP: How about the patterns? They seem more abstract and free-flowing compared to your other works.

RV: I approached it in sections. After finishing one stretch, I just roll it back into the spool and start on a new section. So I really just saw them all, spread out and linked together when we unrolled them in the gallery. Sometimes, there were portions were I would play voice tapes that my father used to send us, I'm not sure, but I feel that it somehow went into the work. I usually work in silence, no music or any sound.

GRP: Oh, I didn't know that. Was there any conscious attempt at translating or encoding the sound/words in the way the you approached cutting into the paper?

RV: Maybe but if so, it was more on a subconscious level.

GRP: Or did it affect the way you worked, your mood?

RV: I started doing it towards the end, I'm still not sure how it affected me. Like I said, I'm more used to working in complete silence and I only listen to music after, when I'm already resting. But what I could say is that, in some way, I think this was my way of responding to the letters, it became a way for me to reply, communicate, to finally have

some kind of a conversation with him.

GRP: I like that. It may not have been a big cathartic moment, but of more of a gradual, slow burn form catharsis. I think this is a good point of winding down our conversation. Maybe just as a parting question: with all that you've experienced from making this show, do you have an idea what you'll be doing next?

RV: This experience was quite liberating, not just on the personal aspect but also in terms of how I approach my working process, how I see materials. My way of shaping things, how I break out of the normal tropes and even in the way I tell stories. Before, I favored highly precise, technically deliberate, and very detailed works. Now I feel that the process of cutting has become more of a tool to work with ideas rather than just a way to showcase skill.

GRP: Was it liberating because you became more comfortable with talking about your personal history in your work or maybe because of this show, you've already confronted it and won't have to deal with it again in the future?

RV: It could be somewhere in between the two, in the way that this marked the end of how I approached that part of my history and at the same time I gained more confidence in my ability to work with ideas, whether personal or otherwise.

GRP: I think that's a good point to end this. Thanks and congratulations again on your show!

RV: Thank you.



Terrain, After, 2019
acid-free paper
26.77h x 105.91w in
68h x 269w cm







K.S.A., 2019
blueprint
16.14h x 11.22w in
41h x 28.50w cm



Hoya, 2019
blueprint
24.21h x 15.75w in
61.50h x 40w cm





10°81'75", 2019
stainless steel
107h x 52w in • 271.78h x 132.08w cm
(set of 3)



RYAN VILLAMAEL

Ryan Villamael (b. 1987, Laguna; lives and works in Quezon City) is one of the few artists of his generation to have abstained from the more liberal modes of art expression to ultimately resort to the more deliberate handiwork found in cut paper. While his method follows the decorative nature innate to his medium of choice, from the intricately latticed constructions emerge images that defy the ornamental patchwork found in the tradition of paper cutting, and instead becomes a treatise of a unique vision that encompasses both the inner and outer conditions that occupy the psyche—which range from the oblique complexity of imagined organisms to the outright effects of living in a convoluted city.

Villamael was included in several group shows while still pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Painting from the University of the Philippines up to the time of his graduation in 2009. His works have been shown in Manila, Singapore, Hong Kong, the UK, Australia, and Paris. Although his persistence in sustaining a discipline more often subjected to handicraft has been evident from his works, Villamael maintains that his primary interest lies rather on the conceptual significance of craft in the process of creating contemporary art, and continues to recognize the possibility of how his works can still evolve under this light.

He is a recipient of the Ateneo Art Award in 2015 and the three international residency grants funded by the Ateneo Art Gallery and its partner institutions: La Trobe University Visual Arts Center in Bendigo, Australia; Artesan Gallery in Singapore and Liverpool Hope University in Liverpool, UK. He participated in the 2016 Singapore Biennale.

AWARDS

- 2015 Ateneo Art Awards, Winner
- 2013 Ateneo Art Awards, Shortlisted

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2019 Special Exhibition, Art Fair Philippines, Manila
A Paradise Lost, Silverlens, Manila
- 2018 Locus Amoenus, Ateneo Art Gallery, Manila
- 2017 Epilogue, Silverlens, Manila
- 2016 Unknown Land, La Trobe University, Victoria
- 2015 Behold A City, Silverlens, Manila
- 2014 Isles, Silverlens, Manila
- 2013 Territory, Silverlens, Manila
Kosmik, West Gallery, Manila
Flatland, Silverlens, Manila
- 2012 Richard Koh Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- 2011 New Specimens, West Gallery, Manila
Cut Felt, Silverlens, Manila

SELECTED GROUPEXHIBITIONS

- 2019 (upcoming) ON/IN PAPER, Mizuma Gallery, Singapore
- 2018 Finale Group Show 2018, Finale Art File, Manila
Biwako Biennale, Omihachiman City, Shiga Prefecture
New Specimens, West Gallery, Manila
Art Fair Philippines, Silverlens, Manila
DIASPORA: Exit, Exile, Exodus in Southeast Asia, MIIAM Contemporary
Art Museum, Chiang Mai, Thailand
Curated by Federico de Vera, Ayala Museum, Manila
- 2017 Sydney Contemporary, Carriageworks, Australia
Seascapes: Tranquility and Agitation, Metropolitan Museum of Manila
Art Basel, Silverlens, Hong Kong
Shared Coordinates, in collaboration with Edouard Malingue Gallery & ROH
Projects, The Arts House, Singapore
Translación, Inaugural Exhibition, Curated by Gary-Ross Pastrana, Silverlens, Manila
- 2016 Singapore Biennale: An Atlas of Mirrors, Singapore
Art Stage Jakarta, ROH Projects, Jakarta
Art Basel, Silverlens, Hong Kong
Art Fair Philippines, Silverlens, Manila
- 2015 In Transit, CCP, Manila
Secret Archipelago, Palais De Tokyo, France
Art Fair Philippines, Silverlens, Manila
Art Basel, Silverlens, Hong Kong
- 2014 Bookends, Blanc Gallery, Manila

- 2013 Art Taipei 2014, Silverlens, Taipei
Makiling X, Corredor Gallery, Manila
Tabletop, Altro Mondo Manila
Art Fair Philippines, Silverlens, Manila
Still, Blanc, Manila
- 2012 Art Taipei 2013, Silverlens, Taipei
Fundacion Broke, Art Informal, Manila
Ateneo Art Awards 2004 – 2013: A Restrospective, Ateneo Art Gallery, Manila
Relikt, Silverlens, Singapore
Ley Hunting, Silverlens, Singapore
Silverlens Gallery, Art HK 12, Hong Kong
Incidental Pleasures, MO Space, Makati City
- 2011 X-Mas Show, Manila Contemporary, White Space, Manila
Working in Progress, curated by Adeline Ooi, A Three-Man Show, Silverlens, Manila
On the Radar: 6 New Symptoms, Curated by Gary-Ross Pastrana, Silverlens, Manila
- 2010 12 x 9, West Gallery, Manila
- 2009 Atat, Tin-Aw Art Gallery, Manila
Degree Exhibition 2009, Corredor Gallery, College of Fine Arts, University of the Philippines, Manila
- 2008 Pre Thesis Deliberation: Symposium Series 2008 Curated by Virginia B. Dandan, Corredor Gallery, College of Fine Arts, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Manila
- 2004 Ingress / Egress (Philippine High School for the Arts Senior Exhibition) GSIS Gallery, Manila

EDUCATION

- 2004-2009 University of the Philippines - Diliman, Quezon City, Philippines
Bachelor of Fine Arts, Major in Painting
- 2001-2004 Philippine High School for the Arts, Mt. Makiling, Los Baños, Laguna
Major in Visual Arts Program

PUBLICATIONS

- Calasan, Pierre A. "The Everlasting Gaze." Town and Country Magazine. November 2016. p. 24.
- Jaucian, Don. "Filipino Artists Triumph at the Singapore Biennale." CNN Life Philippines. Accessed 4 November 2016. <http://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/arts/2016/11/04/singapore-biennale-2016.html>
- Jaucian, Don. "Studio Visit: Ryan Villamael." CNN Life Philippines. Accessed 2 November 2016. <http://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/arts/2016/11/02/studio-visit-ryan-villamael.html>
- Othman, Syahida. "Philippine Artists Draw Inspiration From Nature and Fishermen for the Singapore Biennale." Channel News Asia. Accessed 12 October 2016. <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/philippines-artists-draw-inspiration-from-nature-and-fishermen/3201084.html>
- Basa, Eva McGovern. No Chaos No Party. 2016.
- Ateneo Art Awards. Catalogue. 2015
- Art Taipei Catalogue. Taiwan Art Gallery Association. 2013



ABOUT SILVERLENS

Through its artist representation, institutional collaborations, art consultancy, and exhibition programming including art fairs and gallery partnerships, **SILVERLENS** aims to place its artists within the broader framework of the contemporary art dialogue. Its continuing efforts to transcend borders across art communities in Asia have earned it recognition from both artists and collectors as one of the leading contemporary art galleries in Southeast Asia. **SILVERLENS** was founded by Isa Lorenzo and Rachel Rillo in 2004.