

Review of: "The Aesthetic of the Nakikibakang Loob: Kiri Dalena's Militant and Transcendent Art"

Nicholas Birns¹

¹ New York University

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

This is a very interesting essay on the art of Kiri Dalana in terms of the Filipino aesthetic/conceptual categories of kapwa (relationality) and loob (affectivity, more or less). What is particularly interesting to me about it is that even though Dalana's art is on a very apparent level decolonial and articulating an aesthetic of resistance--altering as it does photographs taken as documents and instruments of imperial domination--the author nonetheless insists on the 'alterity' in Dalana's work. This alterity is not just cultural, but also spiritual: there is a sense of transcendence as well as immanence. The case of General Felizardo, for instance, is rescued by Dalana as an act of historical witness but also out of a more overarching sense of redemption or reclamation. A connection is made between the idea of the loob and Levinas's deployment of the face as an ethical construct. All this makes the essay not just valuable as an individual case study but potentially adaptable to a wider matrix. I do have reservations, though, about the use of the term 'social realism.' Certainly, Dalana's work is 'political art' or 'art with a social intent.' 'Social realism' to me, though, seems to suggest a kind of trompe l'oeil effect, of objectively depicting really existing conditions. Dalana's art, though, seems to operate through subversion, disruption, and reframing, and is, in Western terms, more akin to Dada, Surrealism, pop art, and the political art of someone like Richard Prince or Robert Colescott than to a "social realist" like Thomas Hart Benton. I would either define the term "social realism" more rigorously or use the term "political art" instead.