

Research Article

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

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This essay is a reading of the works of artist/activist Kira Dalena from a *loob* as *kapwa* perspective. Dialoguing with the theories of Alejo, Levinas, and Maritain, it will discuss the artists works as social realism that opens to the transcendent. It explores how social realist works make present the face/*loob* which call us to responsibility and in doing so opens the person who encounters the work to the trace of the Other.

Social Realism and Bringing to Light the Darkest Depts of the Loob

Kiri Dalena's works are in no way obscure or opaque, but they bear, in the profoundest possible way, the mystery of the transcendent. This is because her work is primarily a testimony and witnessing before it has a right to be anything else. This essay is a reflection on the work of this artist whose militant oeuvre is able to simultaneously advocate for social justice and presence the trace of the transcendent Other who calls all persons of good will to responsibility for the other. Using the theories of Alejo, Levias, and Maritain, we will explore Dalena's social realist art and articulate its aesthetic of the *kapwa* and *loob*.

The immediate prompt for this work was the joint exhibit entitled "Snare for Birds" held at the Arete Art Gallery of the Ateneo de Manila from 16 September 2023 to 27 February 2024.¹ "Snare for Birds" is a three woman exhibition which features works inspired by the artists' encounter with the photographic archive bequeathed by Georg Kupperts-Loosen to the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, Koln. These photographs were purchased as a lot from the infamous Dean Worcester who, while he was Secretary of the Interior administering to the Philippine colony, ruthlessly photographed Filipino

men and women in various states of objectivizing degradation. Dalena's works in this exhibition are composed of about a dozen digitally or manually manipulated photographs from that archive.

One set of photographs are of men being appropriated into civilization through the American constabulary. These sequence of photographs show three men in various stages of being superimposed upon. They are seated and, like paper dolls, are being covered in civilized clothing, i.e. militia uniform. Dalena shows how the native body was superimposed upon by American uniforms through a series of photographs. The sequence shows the men dressed according to their custom, then in succeeding photographs, a uniform is imposed on them from a state of transparency to opacity, until in the last of the sequence they are completely uniformed. In the early photos of the sequence, one sees the traces of the native clothing until it disappears as it is imposed upon by the foreign uniform. This same uniform will be used by natives recruited to subjugate other natives. There are four sequential photographs in the exhibition and in all of these we are made witness to the erasure of the native and the human.² We are left with a cutout doll dressed up for the occasion of colonization. Already, the photographs hint at the violence of erasure without trace, but a video work makes this violence more palpable.

Dalena accompanies the exhibition with one of her video meditations. This is not so much a documentary as a narrative positing deeper questions about a man's death, his place in history, and the betrayal by his brothers. The inquiry is focused on the autopsy photographs of a dead man identified as a bandit or ladrones. However, further investigation leads Dalena to believe that he is a Filipino general who continued the war against the United States, Major General Cornelio Felizardo. The images that dominate the film are pictures of the General's autopsied body manipulated to stand out against a stark white background. In the video, Dalena presents the story of his assassination as told by eye-witness stories. Felizardo was betrayed by his cousin and other Filipinos who served in the American founded constabulary for a 5,000 peso reward. The photographs are eerie because they are the pictures of a dead man who bears many wounds presented in a starkly sanitized way. His presence is disturbing because he is a true person who died violently, betrayed and labeled a bandit. And the more his story is told with other photographs from the period that en flesh his times, the more real he is and the more his life seems tragic. And yet, he is present as this dead body, stripped of his self.

These images of native men characterize Dalena's particular artistry. Her works make visible the dehumanizing and degrading effects of violence upon the marginalized. All these native men were so callously erased by the imposing rapaciousness of the Americans. The instrument of their erasure was

ironically the camera which made them present as objects to be studied, looked at, and dressed up. The person who had already invisibly suffered so much under Spanish callous cruelty was made present with the camera and then erased. And with the story of Felizardo, we see that their erasure as persons was so complete that they were transformed into instruments of colonial violence who would sell their brother's life for 5000 pesos. What Dalena does with these pieces is make us feel the erasure. There was a person who had a life, dignity, and selfhood all erased with the click of a shutter.

This painful truth is further articulated with the series of six photographs of women. They are specimens of the native women made to stand as objects. Documented like bird specimens for the ornithologist, they are made to dress and undress for the camera. Like paper dolls, they are clothed and made to stand uncomfortable before the male, white, hungry, colonizing look. They are the other utterly and absolutely reduced by the gaze of the same into digestible figures. Dalena's intervention in this piece is to black out the clothes the women are wearing. Black for mourning and protest for these women who stand looking baffled or angered by the strange photographic violence being imposed on their bodies.

The center piece is a larger than life photograph printed on a long white cloth. It is actually a picture of one woman from three different angles and poses. She is seated clothed in blouse and skirt, standing naked facing backward, and standing naked facing forward. When she is looking toward the camera she is defiant or angry. The pictures are superimposed upon each other. Dalena seems to have particularly strong feelings for this series. She said in a forum "These are the photographs that really angered me." Later she explains the piece: "I put all of them... so she's not alone... so the woman... all three women in one frame... so she's accompanied by... at least she's not alone.... So these photographs really made me cry." ³ The artist is right. She must have been alone before this dehumanizing gaze of white men. And yet, she stands so defiant and strong. Even with her back turned, she is never without her defense and her strength. But Dalena did not want her to be alone because that would be too sad and painful. So she let her stand in the trinity of herself against the male gaze.

"The Snare of Birds" (the title making a reference to the photographer, who, before he set his camera's violent gaze on the Filipino people, was an ornithologist) is a presentation of colonial violence in its appropriation and erasure of Filipino persons. Dalena shows and makes us feel the erasure realized in the photographing, and in presenting this, she makes us see or at least intuit what was lost. Not what, but who was lost. These unnamed persons who are our *kapwa* (fellow person)

whose *loob* (inner self) must have been so violated and hurt. But at the center of it is the woman who is a trinity—defiant and refusing to be reduced—gazing back.

This exhibit is a good reflection on the art practice of Kiri Dalena, and, from a wider perspective, what a kind of social realism accomplishes. On the whole, Dalena's works are a making present of her people's oppression in the clearest way possible. Social realism as an art form is meant to awaken our conscience and feel deeply against injustice.⁴ In the visual arts, it resorts to allegory, editorializing photographic realism, and other techniques to awaken the *loob* of the viewer to the *kapwa*. This art form is not meant to be overly subtle and too obscurely symbolic. It is meant to be accessible to the viewer by using the visual language that will awaken them to the kind of intuition, insight, sympathy, empathy, and deep fellow-feeling that will hopefully move them to action. Dalena is a master at this awakening.⁵

Certainly, her art is more layered than the murals and tarpoline paintings used in mass actions. Those are meant to make an impact immediately when seen even in passing as protesters move through the city. Dalena's art is meant to be dwelt with and dwelt upon, but the intension is the same. They are meant to disturb or agitate the *loob*. Thus, the photographs in the Snare are clear in their intention. They make present the humiliation, the degradation, and the erasures that were imposed upon our people. And, with the women particularly, they make present the erased. They look straight at us in their bewilderment, discomfort, anger, and defiance and we are aware that someone has been erased—although not completely because my *loob* in seeing this becomes aware of (feels with?) another *loob* being erased.

Social realism is the art of the *kapwa*. For its effectivity depends on our *loob*'s capacity to recognize the *kapwa*—at least this is how it is in Dalena's work. Her work is stirred by her being a *kapwa* to begin with. As she explained, she was moved to tears by the violation of the women in the photographs. Her *loob* was so disturbed that she could not let a woman, who seems to exist only in a photograph, stand alone in her nudity. She was so moved in her *loob* that, as a , she desired to give her a companion in solidarity even if this companion was only the woman to herself.

Social Realism as the Art of the Loob as Kapwa

Social realist art is not so much defined by its technique but by its social vision and by what it aims to achieve.⁶ What it aims to achieve is the moving of the collective *loob* to act in responsibility for the

oppressed *kapwa*. In Albert Alejo's study of self as *loob*,⁷ where he brings together in a coherent theory the research of Sikolohiyang Pilipino, Filipino Philosophy, and Pilipinolohiya social sciences, he speaks of the *loob* as an interiority with a deep connectedness to the other.⁸ Using the metaphor of an archipelago, Alejo speaks of a sense of oneness among *kapwa tao* among Filipinos. This oneness has a metaphysical dimension because it speaks of a shared being among all *tao*, or persons. This is why the title of his book is *Tao Po! Tuloy!* This is the greeting one gives when one seeks permission to enter a home. When a Tagalog knocks, she says, *Tao po!* Which means there is a person here. And the one in the interior of the house will say, *Tuloy* (come in) because she recognizes the shared personhood.⁹ Alejo puts much store in this shared personhood because it is a very real experience for Filipinos. He tells the story of one immersion trip with indigenous people. After a long trek in unknown jungle, they finally see a settlement. They approach it with apprehension as they meet a man who says something like, "Place your *loob* at ease. We are fellow *tao*."¹⁰ People, the *tao*, have a shared personhood in two senses. In one sense, that shared personhood means that we should respect each other because we are the same kind of being. What one deserves, the other deserves. Thus, we have the same rights and deserve to be cared for. In another sense, we have a shared personhood in that, in our deepest *loob*, we partake in one being. This is a metaphysical conception of self because the *loob*, although individual, is intimately connected to the *loob* of the other, the *kapwa tao*. This is not about identity as much as it is an unmediated connectedness, such that our *loob* intuit each other. We feel the joys and sorrows, the suffering and fullness of our *kapwa* because our *loob* are one in the sense of this unmediated connectedness.¹¹ This is the reason why Kiri Dalena felt so strongly about the nakedness and aloneness of the woman in the photograph. Although a person in the past who is long gone, she can intuit her *loob* and feels with her.

The self as *loob* in a dynamic interiority which is an openness to the presencing world.¹² The self has a shared humanity with all other selves and are all fundamentally connected by a sense of a shared self. This *loob* also has a deep capacity to open to presencing being. It is an openness that is intimately connected to other *loob* and is able to open to the presencing of other beings. It is not an objectifying interiority but one that reaches out to what presences in order to engage it meaningfully. Alejo refers to this capacity as the *loob's abot* capability. The *loob's* opening to the world is an *abot-dama* (an opening reaching out or the capacity to experience) and *abot-malay* (an opening reaching out or the capacity to be conscious).¹³ The other is that which is outside, exterior of the *loob*. However, the presencing other calls me to openness and response, especially the *kapwa tao* who shares a

fundamental connectedness with me, such that my well-being is only realized when I am attuned to and in solidarity with the presencing other. The well-being of the *loob* is particularly connected to my being responsible for the *kapwa tao*.

The Filipino *loob* has a deep intuition of the *kapwa* and has a deep sense of fellow feeling or *pakikiramay* (a deep capacity to sympathize) with which the *loob* feels with the other *loob*. And so it hurts to see another suffer because I don't just witness it: I feel it in my *loob*. This is why witnessing the dehumanization of the other *loob*, my *kapwa*, can ignite our righteous anger and our demands for justice. My *loob* is never separated from the other *loob* because it has a fundamental orientation toward and connectedness with the other who calls me to feel with and to be responsible for my *kapwa*. Social realist art, or at least one type of social realist art that does not appeal to ideas but focuses on making present the suffering of the oppressed, is an art form rooted in the experience of the *loob* as *kapwa*. It is the artist's response as a *loob* to the suffering of its *kapwa*. The works of Dalena are good illustrations of this kind of social realism.

In the "Snare for Birds," we are actually presented with the *kapwa* suffering the violence of their erasure and this hurts our *loob*—just as it hurt Dalena when she was moved to create with these pictures. This same resonance of pain must have moved her to create "Life Masks" (2019, Arete Collection).¹⁴ This piece is a photograph of a family who lost a husband/father to the drug war. In this piece, she poses a family in their home wearing rough-hewn empty faced masks. The masks render these people as persons with emptied *loob*. You see that they are people with a life. Their home is filled with the typical color and bric-a-brac found in a functional Filipino home. The walls and floors are unfinished cement. They have the pounded metal rendering of running horses which adorn many homes and the mishmash of kitchen utensils that signal that this is a home where people dwell. But the people who dwell in this home are seated on a red couch, two women and three children, wearing white, rough-hewn, expressionless, plaster masks in such neutral poses it is as if the fire of life has been drained completely from their *loob*. It is as if the murder of their beloved has deprived them of the capacity to live and so they are posed in absolute neutrality not knowing what to do with their bodies. They no longer have the right to a life. They have been deprived of any possibility of wholeness because that disturbance has left empty shells where there was a rich interiority. That is what happens to the *loob* in mourning, especially when it is mourning the absurdity and injustice of this world. Seeing this portrait of blank faces awakens the *loob* of the viewer. There is a resonance in my *loob* of the desolation of their *loob* like an echoing in the deepest chambers of my *loob*. With this portrait my

loob resonates the horror of this anti-drug war. Dalena's art can do this. It can create works that resonate in the depths of the *loob*. They create the occasion for the activation of my the capacities of my *loob*—my capacity for *abot-malay* and *abot-dama* –for the *kapwa*'s suffering.

Transcendence in Social Realist Cinema

Another work that focuses on the drug war and can illustrate my point further is her 2020 film *Alunsina*. This documentary presents the lives of a family that has lost the head of the household to this reign of terror. President Rodrigo Duterte in his obsessive war on drugs either gave license to the to the murderous *loob* of the law enforcement officials or his own bloodlust drove them into a killing frenzy. Whatever it was, tens of thousands of people were murdered with impunity in the Philippines. Dalena was active in the campaigns to document these killings with the hope of putting a stop to them. In her work, she was able to interview many families of victims and was allowed a deep participation in their sorrow, their devastation, and the sufferings of the aftermath of these killings. She wished to convey all that her *loob* had borne in a film that would hopefully awaken the *loob* of her people. In *Alunsina*, she chooses to tell the story of how seven children are left with their 88 year old grandmother to raise by herself after their father was gunned down by the police in their own home.

The film begins with scenes of the children in an art workshop learning to trace their hands to make pictures. Two of the children then explain their paintings which both convey how the happiness of the days when their family was whole ended abruptly with their father's murder. They speak of how they try to accept their fate, how they felt helpless and afraid at first but were helped to be strong by support groups, and how they still struggle to let their father go. There is an animation sequence that follows which takes off from the drawing of the children and tells in comics style the story of the death of their father. And at the end of this sequence, the scene transitions to scenes of their lives rendered upside down. The first sequences show the grandmother and the younger children coming home, settling down, getting ready for dinner, and then going to bed. This is a family filled with love. The young children are still occupied with playing and running around. And when they are put to bed, at least the three youngest, the grandmother sings to them soothing lullabies with sad lyrics or nationalistic songs about the longing for freedom. They are a family that your *loob* will reach out to embrace because you recognize the goodness in their *loob*. And your *loob* reaches out to them in fellow feeling because, as the film literally makes known, they are going through their day in a world that has been turned upside down and nothing feels right.

The scene when the children are being put to bed fades to black and words narrating the terror of the murder appear on the screen. They are the testimony of the victim's mother of that day. The words with no sounds but pensive music gives us a sense of what intrusive thoughts of a tragedy repeating in our heads would feel like. In the darkness of the *loob*, the words of the event would probably haunt us silently, obtrusively, repeatedly. And then the story quietly fades to a child's drawing depicting the children's situation: a mother in jail and a father in a coffin leaves a little girl sitting surrounded by black then by red with only an old woman's hand to comfort her.

The next scene is brightness and energy and play. It is the next day with children playing and eating and a lot of teasing, touching and embracing with the grandmother. There is clearly so much love among and between these children and their grandmother. All the day and through the night, in their upside down world, there is clearly the love flowing and overflowing from their *loob* filling each one and binding each one. And the love overflowing their collective *loob* can overflow from the screen to touch the *loob* of the viewer. More than a matter of identification through mirror neurons, we are drawn as *kapwa* into this realm of love. And in this realm of love, the unbounded joy of children flows and promises to triumph over this tragic darkness. This it seems is what the penultimate scene shows. As the little girl swings back and forth with a wide smile, the world turns to right. And this cuts into a montage of the children's drawings of themselves and of hands animated into movements of hope and releasement into light and symbols of life.

This is the art of the *loob*. It is precisely effective because it immerses us into the real life of the interior world which we all share and where in the depth of our selves, our *loobs* touch. This film precisely makes us aware of our being *kapwa* with the victims of the Duterte's Shakesperean death spree. At the very least, it awakens our hope for the children. At the very best, it awakens us into action because our *loob* too has been hurt with and for this family. And we cry "it should not be so" because the pain in the *loob* can translate into the *alab ng puso*, the fire in the *loob*/heart that moves us to fight for our *kapwa tao*.

However, beyond this awakening of the *loob* to its *kapwa loob*, there is another movement which Dalena's work, and which social realist works at their best, achieve. This last sequence, from the young boys running around in the bright day, their older sister setting off in a bicycle, and the little girl swaying in the sun. All these are shown in a slowing of time and with silence evoking music. In the movement of the children, there is a stillness as if it is the stillness in the heart of the world. And in this stillness we intuit how we value this children and why their vulnerability hurts our *loob*. Because

in that still point of the turning world, as T S Eliot points out well in “Burnt Norton” (Four Quartets), the transcendent whispers or issues a call and a promise. In order to understand this, we need to take a brief excursus into Emmanuel Levinas’ theory of the face.

The Trace of the Transcendent

Levinas speaks of the face as the point where we encounter the trace of the transcendent Other.¹⁵ Central to his philosophical theory is the idea that when faced with the face of the other, the ego-centered I is commanded to responsibility.¹⁶ His theory is ironic in a way because it begins with the phenomenon of the face’s nudity through which we encounter her vulnerability and, in this vulnerability, her authority.¹⁷ He arrives at this insight through a phenomenology of the face. The fundamental, although rare, encounter with the face is to meet it in its nudity. The face in its nudity is the face without defenses. This is the face without the armor of social position, posturing, authority, and its other masks.¹⁸ This is the face in the unguarded moment. Dalena is excellent in capturing the face. It is her particular genius demonstrated in her documentaries *Tungkung Langit* (2012) and *Alunsina*.

There are examples of the capturing of the nude face in *Alunsina*. There is a scene where the younger children, aged 10 to 3 perhaps, are gathered around the grandmother. The older girl is teasingly/ lovingly caressing her grandmother’s face while the other children run around and climb on her. Their happiness is fragile because they live in a world turned on its head. The genuine and unbridled happiness glowing from their faces reveals its fragility. Their being as persons, as persons who can be happy, is vulnerable and has been, continues to be, and will continue to be violated by the world’s violence. Levinas explains that to be before the face, even in this case when we encounter the other on film, the call to responsibility is a command. Do not let me die. Do not kill.¹⁹ Which of course is not always literal but usually means do not reduce me to the same. Respect my otherness without reducing me.

Another example of the face in this film is when the children explain their pictures. They speak directly to the camera, explain simply the meaning of their art work, but their sorrow spills over without defense or a mask, and we see the naked face. Defenseless against and exposed to whatever pain the world seeks to impose on them, we experience their face as a command. Protect me! Do not destroy me! And we are moved to respond—even at least to be moved to desire to do something about

the killings. Of course, beyond film there are even more experiences of the face. This is why we are hostage to our babies, who are the face par excellence, and our hearts break with the oppression and, now, massacre committed against the people of Gaza. Clearly, the encounter with the face is what calls activist artists like Kiri Dalena to risk to much and to work so much for social transformation.

I speak of the face because the face is the very premise of social realist art—at least the particular form that Dalena practices. Without the experience of the face moving us to responsibility, social realists would not be moved to render the face in its nudity. And this is difficult. How does one render the face in its nudity without reducing it into becoming an object of the gaze, of consumption, and interpretation? Dalena does this by creating the space for us to catch the glimpse of the face in its nudity. It is not the snare for the face to be caught by our acquiring gaze. Rather, her works are the space for letting the trace of the other disturb our totalities. Or better yet, it is the space for the presencing of the *loob* in its destitution or fragility to call to our *loob* to respond to our *kapwa*. Less Jewish, more Filipino, the works of Dalena allows for the resonating of the *loob* of the other in our own *loob* and in this way makes us aware of the ground of resonance which is the shared self as *kapwa*.

But I would like to focus on another occurrence when we are faced with the face in its nakedness. This is particularly poignant in Dalena's work. It happens in that scene in *Alunsina*, as the film comes to its end. She shows the children at first running, running and squealing, on an ordinary sunny day in their still upside down world. And then things seem to quiet and music takes the place of sounds—slow music to match the slowing of the action. One of the older girls walks with her bike and then mounts it, moving in space without a sense of time at the still point of the turning world. And the scene cuts to the little girl swaying in joy, with the widest of smiles, one that is enough to turn the world right side up, and the frame slowly does turn right side up. The effect of this scene is the making present of that which transcends this tragic, violent world. The scene makes us intuit how the children are embraced by the beyond time and finitude.

This aesthetic experience is also given in her *Requiem for M* (2010). This film is a reflection on the horrific Ampatuan massacre where scores of women supporters and journalists were viciously murdered by the private army of the Ampatuan clan. The short film shows the aftermath of that massacre, mostly the burial and memorial rites but all in reverse. People walk backwards, white balloons descend from the sky back to the hands for the mourners, and flower petals retreat from the ground. The reversal of time in this film, as the reversal of space in *Alunsina*, gives us a sense of that beyond being to whom time and space mean nothing, another *loob* witnessing all this, mourning with

us perhaps, but promising to absorb the tragedies of time and space. This is not said in the film. It may not even be intended. But the way the film is given awakens this.

Jaques Maritain, in his *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*²⁰ explains why the artist and her art can create this effect. To understand his conception of Creative Intuition, we must understand his theory of the soul, or the very ground of our selves. The soul has three aspects: the intellect is the part that opens to and understands the world using concepts and ideas. It is the aspect of our self that gives meaning to the presencing reality which allows us to comprehend what presences and to respond to that presencing meaningfully. The external senses is the aspect of the self which is open to the presencing external world and receives sensations. The imagination uses these sensations as the material with which it constructs explicit images. These are the active, processes of the soul.²¹ Although Maritain considers the movement of the external senses unconscious and the processing of the images by the imagination automatic, the soul actively creates meaning through the interplay of these aspects of the soul using the intellect. However, this is not the source of what he calls poetic intuition. This is the aspect of our selves which engages the world and goes about the business of being in the world. The source of the highest level of artistic creativity comes from a deeper level of perception. It is human knowing that does not produce or is reliant on conceptual comprehension.

For Maritain, there is another aspect of the soul that he calls the spiritual unconscious or preconscious of the intellect.²² This is preconscious because it is not an aspect of our selves that the conscious intellect engages when it is giving meaning to the world. It is a part of our selves that is a pure receptivity that opens to being without going through the aspects of our selves that process our experience of reality.²³ Rather, this is a part of our self that is an unmediated opening to the transcendent ground that gives being to presence. This language can certainly sound anachronistic to many art theorists, especially when it is tied to the language that talks about souls. However, it is useful to explain why human beings have seeming intuitions into the transcendent which make us aware that this reality, which is contingent and tragic, is not the final word of existence. And it could also help us understand the work of the artist.

Maritain believes that creative intuition is rooted in this preconscious or the spiritual unconscious of the intellect.²⁴ The spiritual unconscious is that aspect of our intellect that is in direct communion with the transcendent whatness of being or one could say it is the part of our selves which has a direct intuition into the eternal ground of being through connaturality.²⁵ The preconscious is the part of our selves that is directly open to this ground, or is rooted in it. It is the part of our selves that knows

without concepts or thought but through connaturality the presencing of this eternal ground. It knows this ground deeply but is not always aware of this presencing ground of being and when it does become conscious of its knowledge of it, it cannot articulate this knowledge conceptually or as an idea. There is no presencing form that can be translated into conceptual knowledge. However, there are times when an experience in the finite world leads us to become aware of what the preconscious is rooted in. That happens when phenomena in the finite world, a concrete image, a thing, or a gesture awakens an awareness of what we are rooted in. And this is what creative intuition is. It is the awakening of the conscious intellect to what the soul knows but cannot/does not articulate--its being rooted in the transcendent.²⁶ The trigger awakens the conscious awareness and this is when practical reason works on translating this intuition into a concrete manifestation: the work of art.

The work of art is the translation of this awakening to a concrete form, into a thing, which the artist hopes expresses her insight and also hopes to awaken the insight in others. The work of art can be a signal to intuition for others. Using the language of Marion,²⁷ the artist is the given to by the phenomenon. Whatever phenomenon resonates the intuition of the eternal is the given and the artist's intellect is the given to. What is given but the glimpse into the self's immersion in the transcendent that gives being? As the given to, the artist seeks to translate what is given in intuition into concrete form. Her genius is the openness of receiving in intellect what is intuited beyond concept or idea. Her genius is also the ability to use practical reason to translate the transcendent that is given in intuition to paint, wood, stone, canvas, film, and whatever finite medium to which she can project her intuition of the infinite. She does this in the hope that the work she gives is a given to to the viewer who in turn will be a given to and the awakening be realized in the given to as well.

One particularly fitting example of this is Dalena's short film *Tungkung Langit*. This film seeks to document the days of two children, Apolonio and Analou, orphaned by the tragic flooding of typhoon Sendong (Haiyan) in the Visayas. This typhoon dumped enough rain to bring flashfloods to Iligan City sweeping away scores in its wake. Like many people, the children lost their parents and sibling in this disaster. They survived only by clinging on to logs and branches the flood brought down from the mountains. Like the children in *Alunsina*, they are left to be raised by their grandmother. The film focuses on a few days in their lives in the aftermath of this tragedy that had killed their family. Watching this film without knowing what it is about, one would think that this was a quiet film about a brother and sister living a idyllic life in a mountain village.

The film starts in darkness with only the voices of Analou and Apolonio heard. What is this, he asks. "The sea. Coconut tree. Tree. Log. Snake. Me." "And this?" "A banana tree." "Why put this?" "The Snake? It was behind me." "And this?" "The water? The water was going toward our house." "And this?" "Flower. The flowers were not covered by the water. Maybe I should draw a child here." As they speak, the image of a child on a log shot just below the waterline, with all the serenity and peace that the sense of timelessness in water creates. They speak further as the ebb and flow of the water gently bobs the log with the child. Apolonio asks his sister if she was carried far away. She says no, just there. (She was found more about 40 kms away from their home.) He asks, "Were you scared when you were carried to the sea?" "I was scared." He asks, "Were you scared in the river?" She was. She says this and you can hear the shy laugh, taking away the gravity of her fear. This is her habit. Her brother continues, "How do you feel now that they're gone?" "I cry. I regret. I worry. That's all. Are you sad that they are gone?" "I'm no longer sad. Where can they be?" "Covered. I don't know. Do you know where they are?" "I don't know." This very clam night conversation opens the whole film. The fear, the sorrow, the pain, and the loss is spoken of so softly. The whole film is a quite meditation on surviving a horrific tragedy, perhaps here at the still center of the turning world.

The film is about the children's days. There is nothing extraordinary in these days: only drawing, running around, playing, walking, doing chores punctuated with talks at night. These almost whispered talks are about what they remember, about the extraordinary amount of death they witnessed, their tragedy and their own fears. All this happens with such quiet. The sounds of people hardly intrude in their surroundings. The birds and cricket are louder than the children. Clearly here, nature stands above all things. Even their tragedy is absorbed by nature. They are the children of nature who are nurtured by the earth. It seems they accept their tragedy as just something that happens to people who live with nature because they saw so many terrible things like dead cows, pigs, and babies, and they can talk about it without histrionics. Analou as a matter of fact speaks of how the rescuers made her empty her stomach of the mud she swallowed. That must have been very scary and painful, but all that tragedy has been absorbed by the peaceful days and the mountains. But still theirs is a deep sadness which shows in their faces when they talk late at night. In the penultimate scene, Apolonio asks Analou if she will sleep soon. She says she won't because, she kids, he is still talking to her. But when he asks if she wants to dream, we see in the apprehension in her face as she thinks about how she does not want to dream.

In one scene, the grandmother is combing Analou's hair and she is lovingly looking at her grandmother and speaking playfully. But, for a split second, a shadow crosses her face and it looks like she is fighting back tears. Throughout the film, there are moments where it seems that she is holding back tears. She is sad and wounded by the events but as children of nature, they know that it moves and can be violent, and that is just the way things are. With the mountain in its stillness looming throughout this film, we feel that nature is an embrace that heals even as it has destroyed and killed. We have a sense that nature is bigger than the follies of men who have allowed storms to be so grand and who have destroyed her protective forests. In the end, the great mother nature is an embrace, as the night is a blanket of peace. And all will be right because all will be as it must be. The viewers sense this assurance because the peace and healing which we intuit through the whispered conversations, the peace of the night, and the quiet of the world around them signals the transcendent to which they belong, and which promises healing.

The last scene is a beautiful shot of a tree half submerged in the water that has not receded. It stands against a dark, heavy sky in the aftermath of the great flooding. It reminds us of the great upheaval in the world of the children. And yet, there is stillness. The waves gently move because the violence that needed to pass has passed, and equilibrium is restored. This is the time for healing. Of course, these children will face more hardships since they are marginalized and are unprotected from the violence of men which is unnecessary and almost unforgivable. But at the end of this film, we are presented with how the transcendent can rise above all violence and tragedy. This makes us aware of what is above our foibles if we can only forgive it and accept its healing.

This is the other effect of Dalena's work: her films and photographic works awaken us to the face of the other. She presents people that have been hurt, broken, dehumanized by other people who have realized themselves as beings capable of great evil. When we witness the harm they do to others, it awakens us to the value that these survivors bear. The more people are hurt, broken, and dehumanized, the more we are aware that they have this quality of the transcendent about them. That is, they bear a value that ought not to be violated. This is why the violations hurt us so much to witness. If they were of no worth, their violation would not produce such great art. But it does because the artist recognizes that what is violated must not be allowed to be defeated or destroyed by the evil works of small men. The artist must restore, celebrate, mourn the disvalued other. This is the work of social realism at its best. However, Kiri Dalena's work achieves more than that—although it already does that excellently.

In this artist's work, the transcendent other seems to be able to insert itself as a disturbance. As the viewer witnesses the pain and the sorrow, the outrage and pain awakened by the degradation and the dehumanization is experienced as the disturbance of the intangible promise that this evil is not the last word. These people who are supposed victims are promised healing as the earth heals itself, and as the night embraces and heals all hurt and broken souls. Consciously or not, this is what the works of Dalena awaken as the fruit of her creative intuition and practice. The silence and the slowing of time is the insertion of the transcendent other, like an allergy, to disturb our finitude and the limits of our vision and intuition. The insertion of the disturbance like a trace of the Other,²⁸ like an incomprehensible and immediately doubtable presencing of an enigma is what is intuited by the creative intuition and what the artist tries to capture with their work in finite materiality.

To understand why this is so, we can return to Levinas' reflections on the trace of the Other. Levinas believes that the transcendent Other is absolutely irreducible to the totality of human experience and understanding.²⁹ The Holy Other, being that which is otherwise than being is not something we can think or comprehend. It is not a phenomenon that exists in space and time. It does not exist in any way that fits into our categories of feeling, experiencing, and understanding. The Other is wholly and absolutely other. And yet, we are aware of its existence and its engagement with the world. Thus, the philosopher proposes that the Other does not presence as a being that is present in the world. Rather, beyond presence, it is a trace. The Other is never present but is always already past. It is experienced as an irreducible past.³⁰ But how do we know that the Other is at all and that it is somehow in relation with us? Levinas explains this as the experience of the trace of the Other.

The Transcendent Other in its being as beyond being leaves a trace which is irreducible to comprehension. For Levinas, the trace traces in the face of the other.³¹ The human experience of the call of the face, the command do not kill and the call for responsibility for the vulnerable other is the experience of the command of the Holy Other. The command is the command of the Other itself left as a trace. And so every time we experience the face of the other in its vulnerability as a command to responsibility, we encounter the Other. The Other is the one who commands and this is the only presencing of the Other to finite persons. We are called by the transcendent Other to infinite responsibility and in responding we encounter the Other as trace in finitude.

Social realist art is one of the occasions which awaken us to the face, and in awakening us to the face, is capable of awakening us to the trace of the Other. The best social realist artwork presences the face and potentially awakens us to the trace of the Other because when art is done well, it can presence the

command of the Other. Beyond Levinas, we must note that the reason we experience the face as a call to responsibility is because we see the face as bearing value. The face cannot and ought not to be violated because it bears a transcendent value. They are valued. When we see the face that calls us to infinite responsibility, we also sense how it is valued by the Other. The trace of the Other is in the value of the face. The Other values that other and thus we are called to responsibility. In those quiet moments on film, when we watch the children and our *loob* reaches out to them, it is as if Dalena awakens in us the direct intuition into the *loob* of the Other looking upon its beloved and we see that they are valued and we are called to value them in infinite responsibility. Dalena's works do not only awaken us to the trace of the Other in the command to be responsible, but they also give us an intuition into the infinite *loob* that values them and calls us to respond in responsibility.

The "Life Mask" we previously discussed is one among other life mask photographs.³² These are photographic and video portraits of various persons who could be characterized as model persons or at least significant persons who have invested their lives to serving their community either as artists or activists. In all these portraits, the people are posed with masks seated in their own life's worlds. Like previously noted, the masks are rough-hewn and blank. This is ironic because death masks are usually made for the wealthy and are meant to preserve the countenance of power and prestige. Death masks are meant to keep the people, especially their power and prestige, alive in the memories of society. These life masks seems to do the opposite. They seem to drain the life from the living. Perhaps mainly because of the absence of color or eyes. However they are surrounded by all the signals of their having built good lives these portraits being shot in their living spaces. And if one knows anything about the subjects of these portraits we know that these are living people who have striven to build authentic human lives in service to the call of the face. Being an artist committed to human liberation and social justice, one would have expected that she would have made more life giving portraits to celebrate these people. Instead she erased their face, but not to erase their humanity or personhood. Rather, I believe, she intends to deepen the experience of the face in the Levinasian sense.

The portraits present people who are strong in character. They are persons who have a clear understanding of the meaning of their being persons. That is clear to the artist. Her erasure of their faces allows their personalities to still shine forth despite the erasures. Here is an artist, there a couple who have served their country as poets, in another a whimsical story teller, and in still another a peasant leader. Their seated bodies project their personhood, the strength of their *loob* exudes despite the erasure, which makes the strength of their *loob* shine forth even more. However, the mask projects

an emptiness as well. The face which emanates their powerful *loob* is covered up and that strength is not allowed to come through. Their eyes seem closed and the mask seems to remind us of the final erasure of *loob* in death—when the person is erased from the body and the face rests in neutrality. Around them are signs of a lived life, a being lived life. But in the emptiness and stillness again, it previews how this living abode will look when emptied of their activity and their living, and everything will be still without their presence. Without the face, Dalena presents us with the vulnerability of the face of the other. And in that stillness which is a reminder of the possibility of erasure, the erasure of good people who tried to live good lives, we once again intuit the trace of a promise that good people cannot be erased. That stillness and erasure are not the final word because the one who leaves the trace of itself in the command, thou shalt not kill, also leaves the trace of the promise, death is not the final erasure.

Kiri Dalena's works are not opaque. In many the pieces it is easy to read what she wishes to say. She is not the most complicated or obscure of artists. After all, she is through and through an activist, an advocate, first. But her poetic genius in Maritain's sense of this word is found in her ability to make present the trace of the Other who calls us all to responsibility and hope.

Footnotes

¹ There other other exceptional works in this collection by the artists Jacklyn Reyes and Rizza May David, however, I will focus only on Dalena's work because her work in this collection brought to clarity what her oeuvre could be an occasion to articulate a particular philosophy of art. Dalena's photographs and reflections can be viewed at the permanent website of her project, <https://www.snareforbirds.com/2022/02/19/counter-images/>

² Examples can be seen here.: <https://www.snareforbirds.com/2021/03/20/study-for-francisco/>
<https://www.snareforbirds.com/2021/03/20/study-for-a-constabulary-soldier/>

³ Leaky Archive—Online Access Tour with Kiri Dalena, [Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbcEoooBK6I).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbcEoooBK6I>

⁴ Chapter 2 of Alice Guillermo's *Social Realism in the Philippines* (Manila:ASPHODEL, 1987) is a clear discussion of what Social Realist art fundamentally aims at.

⁵ The idea of the *loob* and *kapwa* will be explored more in depth in succeeding sections. At this point our working understanding of the *loob* is the interiority of the Filipino subject. It is the term used to

refer to the interior of the self from which understanding, feeling, well-being, and will are formed. It is also the source of the sense of self. The *kapwa* is the other who the *loob* feels a deep bond with because of a shared humanity. Although the sense of shared being is not exclusive to other persons, the bond is most deeply experienced with the other person because they both have a *loob* and have a capacity of mutual care and understanding.

⁶ Guillermo, *Social Realism*, 43.

⁷ Albert Alejo, *Tao Po! Tuloy!*, (Quezon City: Office of Research and Publication, Ateneo de Manila University, 1990).

⁸ Albert Alejo, "Loob ng Tao," *Social Transformations Journal of the Global South*, May 2018, 6-7.

⁹ Albert Alejo, Magisterial Lectures: Fr Albert Alejo SJ-Tao Po Tuloy! Halina sa Loob ng Tao, <https://youtu.be/VEvVVJe-dgc?si=efUh3TkwcAvRGqiP>, accessed 21 December 2023.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Alejo, *Loob ng Tao*, 17.

¹² Alejo, *Loob ng Tao*, 22.

¹³ Alejo, *Loob ng Tao*. 9.

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/ateneoartgallery/posts/works-from-the-aag-collection-national-womens-month-2022kiri-dalenalife-masks201/4915491548541300/>, accessed 8 December 2023.

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, "On the Trail of the Other." *Philosophy Today*, 10:1 (1966, Spring), 44.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay in Exteriority*, (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 96.

²⁰ Jaques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, (New York: New American Library, 1953).

²¹ Jaques Maritain, "Creative Intuition and Poetic Knowledge," *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, 76-77.

²² *Ibid.*, 80.

²³ *Ibid*, 79.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

²⁷ Jean Luc Marion, *Being Given*

²⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, "Phenomenon and Enigma," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 64.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 65 ff.

³⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 179

³¹ *Ibid.*, 184.

³² <https://vintana.ph/article/kiri-dalena> and <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/life-mask-kiri-dalena/KgHthf1CW7N9AA> accessed 12 December 2023.

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