

## OMEHEN

Based in Metro Manila, Philippines

### ***Omehen: The Garden as Chronicle and Strategy of Resistance***

2019-ongoing

Audio testimonies and stories from the garden; original drawings and paintings from the Lumad Bakwit Schools; photos by Alfred Marasigan and Karl Castro

Organized in collaboration with the Lumad Bakwit Schools, Alfred Marsigan, Karl Castro, and Ateneo de Manila University

### **About Omehen:**

“The project *Omehen* (which means “harvest” in Manobo Talaingod, the Indigenous language of the Mindanao region in the south of the Philippines) was conceived by Alfred Marasigan, Karl Castro, and Guelan Luarca in collaboration with the Lumad Indigenous community in exile in Manila. Following the bombing of Lumad schools during the ongoing armed conflict in Mindanao, the Lumad people found refuge in various academic institutions in Manila, including the Ateneo de Manila University, where the artists teach.

Harvesting is an integral part of the cosmological practice of the Lumad communities, and therefore fundamental to their systems of education and knowledge sharing. Thus, the artists worked together with members of the Lumad community and students of the University to create a space of harvest within the academic institution and to facilitate the continuation of this practice and the mutual sharing of knowledges. Over the course of a year, the artists, students, and Lumad communities engaged in artistic and agricultural practice together. In response to the ideas of *Notes for Tomorrow*, the project Omehen was invited to present this ongoing work (presented here as audio testimonies and archival materials), which operates at the intersection of Indigenous knowledges, food security, forms of precarity and labor, and addresses questions that are central to thinking about the worlds to come.”

– **Abhijan Toto (based in Bangkok, Thailand)**

**Listen to the audio testimonies here:**

<https://anchor.fm/omehen-team>

<https://open.spotify.com/show/3szytyNDmSIUYHjtus2TN>

*Omehen* is one of the artistic projects included in [Notes for Tomorrow](#), a traveling exhibition organized and produced by Independent Curators International. The exhibition was made possible with the generous support of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, VIA Art Fund, and ICI’s Board of Trustees and International Forum.

**The following is a transcription of *Sayaw sa Papel / Paper Dance*, which you can listen to on [anchor.fm](#) or [Spotify](#):**

**Sayaw sa Papel / Paper Dance**

**Omehen Team (Alfred):** Right, hi Sir Andro! Good evening again!

**Teacher Andro:** Hello po! And hello as well to everyone who is listening...at this time.

**OTA:** Yes! Because we never know whether they will listen to this day or night!

**TA:** Right!

**OTA:** I was so excited when you sent me yours and Borj's paintings!

**TA:** Sure!

**OTA:** I was thinking of recording each of our conversations separately, so each of you get to talk individually. Maybe let's talk about yours first, and share some stories to us or our listeners, on your process. I know we've talked about it via chat, but I'm sure it would be interesting for our listeners.

**TA:** Alright! It actually began with me just joining Borj in painting because he wasn't able to attend the remote art workshop. I joined him so that he could also explore the paints we received from the workshop and also to guide him in painting. I don't have much experience in painting! [Laughs.] So, there, we first looked for a reference.

**OTA:** Right.

**TA:** We said we will try to paint a face. But [laughs] I thought I'll just do feet first, and then I found a photo from here, our photos from the Bakwit schools. It was a photo of someone playing the paper dance.

**OTA:** Aha! Ok.

**TA:** Yes. It was supposed to just be a square under the feet. I thought of just doing it.

**OTA:** You're too humble!

**TA:** [laughing] It's really my first time to paint. I just really tried painting feet. And I thought "what color should it be...of course it must be brown." But I couldn't create a flesh color! So I just added white to gain more resemblance. Then I left a square under the feet.

**OTA:** What do you mean square?

**TA:** Under the feet! Then I just filled the canvas. I used pula...I mean, red. [Laughs] I painted it red and some black to make it look like blood.

**OTA:** Right.

**TA:** I thought of blood to connect it with the struggle of the Lumad. The space given to them by the regimen or the state is so small, to the point that they had to take off their slippers just to occupy that small piece of paper. I thought it's some form of hope, especially whenever they're studying. Because their ancestral lands in Mindanao are consistently being stolen from, I thought why not just paint its borders.

**OTA:** I definitely see it! You know, I just, it looked to me that the paper is torn. And then when you were telling me about it, it clicked, and I thought, "Mindanao"! [Chuckles.]

**TA:** Yes!

**OTA:** I didn't immediately see it, but I'm happy that I recognized it.

**TA:** Yeah, I thought why not just include it because of people taking their land from them. And I made it a newspaper piece, because in Mindanao, news black outs are rampant there. News is limited, so that's why they evacuated here [to learn better]. Lumad news! Then July 24, 2017...I think that's the date that Duterte announced that he will bomb them if they don't leave. I remember when it was told to me, the students were crying and asking "why are we being attacked?" and "why us?" because that's where their schools are. That's what I remember. So I included those details on the newspaper part. It wasn't...how do I explain...I just kept adding details, then boom, it came together.

**OTA:** Right! I found it beautiful because there are so many meaningful layers within this. Because you understood the struggles of the Lumad Bakwit Schools from Mindanao to here...for someone who doesn't usually paint, [that story] came out very clearly visually. So I feel that's what fascinated me the most. You didn't need anyone to tell you how you should make it, you're just trying it out. Amazing! Maybe that's why the Lumad Bakwit students are interested in learning anatomy, it's because the human body is important in telling these kinds of stories and experiences. And you know, on a technical, it's good...actually it's difficult...Sir Andro the feet and hands are actually have a high difficulty level [in classical painting].

**TA:** [Laughs].

**OTA:** When people see faces, they immediately have an instinctive reaction to it. But for the feet, I really think you did a really great job of forming the feet realistically. If anything, the other side, could be a little curved, but it's just nitpicking. I was so happy that you shared it. So in using acrylic, it isn't your first time? Or do you just get nervous?

**TA:** I think I was the only one [among the students] who have done it the first time. I usually just use it for lettering. And it looks bad. [Laughs.] But I usually use Pentel pen.

**OTA:** It's alright to just do it in black and white. Actually whenever I teach painting, we haven't really had a full workshop yet, but for me, what I know and what I teach, I usually start with black and white because color complicates [painting]. And lettering is also actually good training when using a brush compared to Pentel pen.

**TA:** I think I actually made a mistake! Where do you paint, on the white or the brown [side]?

**OTA:** What do you mean?

**TA:** I mean which side to paint on [the canvas]?

**OTA:** Ah, you paint on the white side.

**TA:** [Laughs.] I painted it on the brown side!

**OTA:** No, that's fine. The canvas itself is made of a sack-like or burlap material. So the white part...it's almost the same, it's fine. It's only advisable to paint on the white side of the canvas, because one of my mentors told me before, when the canvas, because it's made of plant fibers, when it rots...it will rot first before the white side.

**TA:** Aha, I see.

**OTA:** The white side takes longer to rot. So when the canvas rots, people can still preserve the white site. Whatever you paint there, it will last longer. But in this case, I mean painting was invented around...I don't know, 12<sup>th</sup> century like really from a long time ago [laughs]. That was the practice before, but they didn't imagine that paintings can be digitized. But for next time, it would be good to paint on the white side.

**TA:** I think Borj also said to paint a base first, but I immediately painted [laughs].

**OTA:** Yeah, he's right. Sometimes the base is just white, but in traditionally, there's another differently colored layer, but I don't follow it a lot anyway.

**TA:** So there. Those are my thoughts after making it. The paint didn't stick much.

**OTA:** I see. For this, if you paint this more, the paint would move better. I noticed that you might have had difficulty covering the brown side of the canvas because it's rough. So there should be a lot of paint [base] before the paint moves smoothly. So if you look at the feet, it's less textured because it has a lot of layers already.

**TA:** Hmm what else, that's it!

**OTA:** Alright! Maybe next time if Borj is there I can call again. But for now, this is our conversation. Do you have a title for this?

**TA:** Uhhh...[laughs].

**OTA:** It's not mandatory! But sometimes we also think of it for identification purposes [among the many works you might be making].

**TA:** I was thinking "Sayaw sa Papel" or "Paper Dance". [Laughs].

**OTA:** That works! Think about it, you're the artist!

**TA:** Oh no! [Laughs].

**OTA:** I just suggested it for a label, but it's not the most important aspect of it. I was going to comment that the painting didn't use a lot of water because some parts have the canvas' texture. I didn't notice that you painted on the brown part.

**TA:** Right.

**OTA:** You know what I also liked about the painting is the shading? You know in cartoons like Mickey Mouse, they don't have much shadow. But here you can see that the complexion is brown, I'm not sure where the light source, is it lower right-

**TA:** It should be above the- in front of the feet.

**OTA:** I see, I see.

**TA:** Somewhere near the ankles.

**OTA:** Yeah, that's the only thing that can be developed further. So that people see that it's not flat. The newspaper's fine, it's graphic, and it doesn't need much shadow unless you want the surface to look like a floor.

**TA:** Yeah.

**OTA:** Beautiful!

**TA:** [Laughs].

**OTA:** How much is that canvas...just keep at it! You can use almost any kind of linen. I remember someone asked for hospital curtains because he liked painting large, so you just apply a base or primer.

**TA:** Right!

**OTA:** You know in UP, ask them to teach you how to frame paintings or stretch canvases.

**TA:** Wow!

**OTA:** I mean if you can do it yourself, it's also fine. It's good to display, but without it is also fine because it's easy to roll. But don't fold it because when you keep it, the folds will show or even crack the painting potentially. Alright!

**TA:** Alright.

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**OTA:** So there! Thank you so much, Sir Andro! We're adding this to the track so that people get to know what kind of art comes from both the pandemic and from the Lumad Bakwit Schools. If you have more artworks you want to talk about, just let me know and we will put it up. Thanks, Sir Andro!

**TA:** Thanks so much as well!