

GO AWAY WHITE¹²³⁴⁵The Unblinking Art of Bea Camacho⁶(Originally published 2009, *Art In Site* magazine, annotations by author in 2025)ERWIN ROMULO
20 JANUARY 2025

The art of Bea Camacho is one of recognition, that of sensing the patterns that emerge and recur on an otherwise unblinking, sparse façade⁷. In a sense, it also keeps its distance like perhaps an austere landscape that, when viewed too closely, becomes a lunacy of pointillism⁸⁹. In fact¹⁰, if not for the person of the artist herself—affable, intelligent and slightly¹¹ self-effacing¹²—would seem that the processes involved are borne of madness^{13 14 15 16 17 18}. Certainly, if one looks for evidence of it, one will surely find it¹⁹.

Perhaps the most lingering image from her work so far is that of her crocheting herself into a cocoon. Shot in real time, it takes several²⁰ hours for Camacho to engulf herself in yarn. Of this²¹, she writes that: “Solitary activities are performed in a way that is reminiscent of ritual...like the act of packing a person’s belongings into boxes, (it) happens consciously over time, generating an investment, which is directed inwards, towards the self.

“There is a withdrawal signaled by acts of hiding, putting away, sealing, and a rejection of external contact that

is demonstrated by monitor screens and cardboard boxes. Isolation can be something to escape from, but it can also provide refuge²².”

She adds^{23 24}: “It wants to be made public but needs to remain intimate,” writes the artist about her art. “You can never have access to the work in its entirety. There is always something hidden, something happening outside the space you are in, something that is not all there, something being packed away²⁵.”

This is oddly²⁶ reminiscent of Jung’s observation of how impaired we are upon viewing the actions of the mad. He comments thus²⁷: “All we see of mentally ill regarding them from the outside, is their tragic destruction, rarely the life of that side of the psyche which is turned away from us²⁸.”

However, to put down Camacho’s art as merely manifestations of madness, is limiting, as it is incomplete²⁹. Rather there is much more to compare or link her work to that of Jung’s analysis and writing rather than his patients^{30 31}. In fact, it isn’t disingenuous to remark that she’s probably the most literary of our local visual artists³²—not by forging tenuous links to any written work or by ascribing such value to them, but by eschewing the literal^{33 34} ^{35 36}. (Interestingly, her sketchpad is full of ideas in words and sentence form rather than drawings³⁷.) Her art is not the product of a disordered mind as it is of a wounded psyche³⁸.

At only age 11, Camacho left home for school. About *Blind Transmission*, her first exhibition in the Cultural Center of the Philippines, Camacho writes that, “Growing up away from my family produced an emotional distance between us that came to outweigh the physical distance and makes me feel removed from them even when I am with them³⁹.”

Much like her statement, the show was remarkable for its reserve—each piece delineating the theme of dislocation and



Picture 1
Bea Camacho
Enclose
2005

¹ I dislike this title. It makes it sound like the artist was working from spite.

² The title is from a record I was listening to a lot at that time, by a band called Bauhaus. They broke up in 1983, reunited in the late 90s, and broke up again in 2008, right before releasing this album. The acrimony in the songs appealed to me and I played it repeatedly and too much.

³ I was at a low-point in my life at that time. My marriage had ended and I got fired from a job I really loved.

⁴ That spite was mine. I don’t know if it was also Bea’s. It was unkind of me to ascribe it to her work.

⁵ I watched *Enclose* (2005) again recently for an exhibition I was curating that paired moving image works from the Philippines and the U.K. The video was projected alongside Grace Ndiritu’s *Sitting Down Textiles* (2005-2007). Instead of a bench, I put pillows and beanbags in front of the works. I wanted visitors to experience the work the way I did. At home, I projected them side-by-side simultaneously on my wall. I live alone so having them there made me feel less lonely.

⁶ This subhead was my attempt to produce a visual punchline to the title: of someone staring at a source of light growing brighter and defying it by not closing their eyes.

⁷ I have no idea what this means. My guess is I didn’t even know back then either.

⁸ I still somewhat like the phrase “lunacy of pointillism,” even if the language is overblown. I appreciate what I was trying to do with the sentence but I wouldn’t write this sentence today.

⁹ Not to mention what it’s saying has no relation to Bea’s work—at least not anything I can work out.

¹⁰ I would edit out “In fact” because it’s an unnecessary affectation.

¹¹ Also “slightly” for the same reason.

¹² This is the first time I don’t feel sick rereading this piece. How it describes the artist is all very true. I’d change “affable” to “kind” because it’s closer to the truth.

¹³ I really don’t like it that I used “madness” here, but I can tell why I did. It was a common reaction to her work. Why would anyone crochet herself non-stop for over 11 hours? Even more, how could it not be anything but a contemporary art gimmick? Easier to put it down to lunacy than to accept that an earnest action.

¹⁴ Maybe I did think Bea was mad. Back then, I considered it a compliment. I romanticized being mad as a prerequisite to make great art. I no longer believe this. Thank God.

¹⁵ For one it’s too convenient and reduces art making to a mere misfiring of synapses. It also says nothing of the process: the tedium, the ennui that sets in, the fear of terribly mistaking that your ideas were good to begin with.

¹⁶ It also lets artists off too easily when they act badly.

¹⁷ Both works, *Enclose* and *Efface* (2008), dismantle all that. They capture something of what art demands of the artist and what it asks its audience to consider/contemplate. Not with curatorial exposition or explanation but by doing something tactile, with one’s hands. In other words, by the virtue of its humility.

¹⁸ That isn’t madness. I refuse to call it that.

¹⁹ I’m 48 years old now and I’m still learning to tell the difference.

²⁰ Eleven hours to be exact.

²¹ Delete: “Of this”

²² The best sentences of the article so far and they are the artist’s.

²³ Ugh, delete “She adds”

²⁴ This item deserves another footnote because you’d expect this from a neophyte writer—not a professional journalist working for over a decade already. Even worse, I was also employed as a magazine editor. It’s unforgivable.

²⁵ Again, the best sentences so far and not written by me.

²⁶ Oddly? Is it really?

²⁷ Change: “comments thus” to “writes”

²⁸ “Regarding them from the outside, all we see of the mentally ill is their tragic destruction, rarely the life of that side of the psyche which is turned away from us” is a better translation.

²⁹ No shit

³⁰ Awkward sentence construction. Let me try to fix it: “Rather her work has an affinity with the clarity and insight of Jung’s writing than any of his subjects”

³¹ I should point out that I’m taking pains every second or third sentence to say the artist is not mad, but insist on insinuating that she is. Even quoting Carl Jung at length. Insufferable.

³² OK, this statement is something I still stand by today. I’d rewrite the sentence: “She is the most literary of our visual artists.”

³³ What I’m trying to say here is that when I describe her work as literary it’s an inherent quality or nature of her practice. It does what the best writers do: to say so much with so few words.

³⁴ Something I didn’t manage with this piece. Sorry again Bea.

³⁵ I think this is a reference to an unfortunate trend of using song titles for artworks or exhibitions. I call it unfortunate because it’s like a shortcut to some quality of cool. It’s lazy. And as annoying as an air-quote. Since 2009 it’s become more prevalent and not necessarily only name-dropping songs, but also books, movies and other media too.

³⁶ I am aware I’m guilty of this too. Many times over. See 1 and 2 above.

³⁷ 🙄

³⁸ This is arrogant. Whatever the truth is, it wasn’t my place to make that judgement.

³⁹ Tedious. Again let me try to fix: “Camacho left home for school when she was 11 years old. She writes in her statement for her first exhibition in the Cultural Center of the Philippines: “Growing up away from my family produced an emotional distance between us that came to outweigh the physical distance and makes me feel removed from them even when I am with them.”



Picture 2
Grace Ndiritu
Sitting Down Textiles
2007



Picture 3
Bea Camacho
Efface
2008

estrangement rather than needlessly adorning it — and overall clarity of expression^{40 41 42 43 44 45}.

Multi-awarded⁴⁶ writer Yvette Uy Tan writes, “Conceptual art, which places the artwork’s concept or idea before the physical material itself, has traditionally been hard to understand by the casual observer. Bea Camacho turns the idea of conceptual art as a distanced art form and makes it more personal ... (tackling) topics such as distance, separation, absence and personal space.” No stranger to bizarre imagery in her own work as one of the country’s leading horror authors⁴⁷, she further comments on Camacho’s piece, “Extensions”, wherein she “knits different kinds of sleeve-like gloves that serve to extend the arms, making them virtually useless.” She says, “The effect is cute, but disturbing, when one realizes that the fuzzy knitwear actually makes the use of one’s arms impossible, a juxtaposition of looks versus function, an exercise in isolation.”

For her exhibit, *Conversion Factors*, she again expounded on these subjects albeit with the attempt to quantify

and translate it further. Thus, in *The Distance Between Me and My Brother*, the 20-hour travel period between Manila and Boston (where her brother resides) is delineated in yarn crocheted for the same length of time. In *Ten-Minute Phone Call*, an amount of yarn equivalent in monetary value to a long distance phone call abroad is likewise crocheted. The use of crocheted fabric—that Camacho previously used to cocoon herself in her performance “Enclose”—gives the implied lacunae a familiar tangibility, even a seemingly sense of bonhomie⁴⁸.

More recently, for a group exhibit, Camacho collected some of the rubble she retrieved from the demolition of her childhood home. Unobtrusively placed within the gallery space, the piece entitled “half-full” sat there amidst the bang and bustle of the show opening, an idiosyncratic snow-globe of a world constantly retreating from the present.

Again, it’s only best that we find resonances to her work in literature or even the physical reality of a book that only yields its contents when opened.

⁴⁰ I would try to fix this one, but after a few tries it was too much work that I felt it was betraying the intent of this whole exercise.

⁴¹ What is the point of this exercise? Is it only to satisfy a Roman Catholic appetite for self-flagellation? Undoubtedly that’s part of it. More than that I wanted to emulate the artist and honor the event of her revisiting this piece and her return to doing performance after over a decade.

⁴² Time was always an essential component of the work—and given the years in-between since she last did *Enclose* at Green Papaya Art Projects, Quezon City, Philippines in 2008 and now for ROH, Jakarta, Indonesia this 2025, it blossoms with age too.

⁴³ It’s also my way of an apology to Bea. I really feel what I wrote back then did a disservice to your work

⁴⁴ Writers tend to do weird things like this.

⁴⁵ No other writer comes to mind though.

⁴⁶ The way I use “multi-awarded” is pandering. Not to mention that the writer, Yvette Tan, needs no help from me. The quoted passages demonstrate her mettle better than any epithets.

⁴⁷ See [Picture 4] and [Picture 5]

⁴⁸ Despite reservations about some words (and my fondness for alliteration) I can live with this. It does its job.



Picture 4
Yvette Tan's books
Waking the Dead (2021) and
Seek Ye Whore And Other Stories
(2023)



Picture 5
Yvette Tan's Wikipedia page

"Once and for all, I've declared myself against life and people, on the side of otherness and indifference, isolation, the mineral beauty of the nonhuman world," writes author Anna Kavan, who, despite being little more than a cult figure in 20th-century literature, was given the distinction of "Kafka's sister" by influential science-fiction writer and scholar Brian Aldiss. (Her best known novel, *Ice*, was described in *Cult Fiction: A Reader's Manual* as a "sci-fi book, as it detailed a bleak landscape in which nuclear tests had frozen the world... with the glacial imagery symbolizing the numbness and pain of the author's heroin addiction." Aldiss himself writes that it's "sci-fi, and only marginally science fiction, existing as it does in that fertile area... where unreality prevails and life strategies are not those of the false everyday world we have constructed between ourselves...(the) 'no-times.'"⁴⁹)

In this regard, Camacho's human cocoon and deliberate bareness is certainly heir to Kafka's insect and Kavan's ice⁵⁰, traversing an imaginative terrain that is chilly with the air of surreality and metaphysics⁵¹. But those two latter⁵²

words—weighty though they may seem—seem to still be merely litter caught in the updraft of Camacho's artistry^{53 54}. Her vision remains an enigma, a force-of-nature, ever mysterious but immutable^{55 56 57}.

⁴⁹ Even if I don't regret referencing the writing of Anna Kavan, I do think it's overlong.

⁵⁰ This isn't bad 😊

⁵¹ This is 😊

⁵² Delete "latter"

⁵³ Actually I wish I could delete this entire sentence.

⁵⁴ If I gave a title to this annotated piece, I'd call it TIME WOUNDS ALL HEALS.

⁵⁵ This makes her sound like a seer. Or like the ocean. Funny enough, that makes sense.

⁵⁶ I am not sure why.

⁵⁷ Maybe Bea will accept this apology and one day tell me.

ERWIN ROMULO

Erwin T. Romulo is a filmmaker, writer, and curator. He lives and works from Pasig City, Metro Manila and San Juan, La Union in the Philippines.

JALAN SURABAYA 66
JAKARTA 10310
+628118719066

ROHPROJECTS.NET