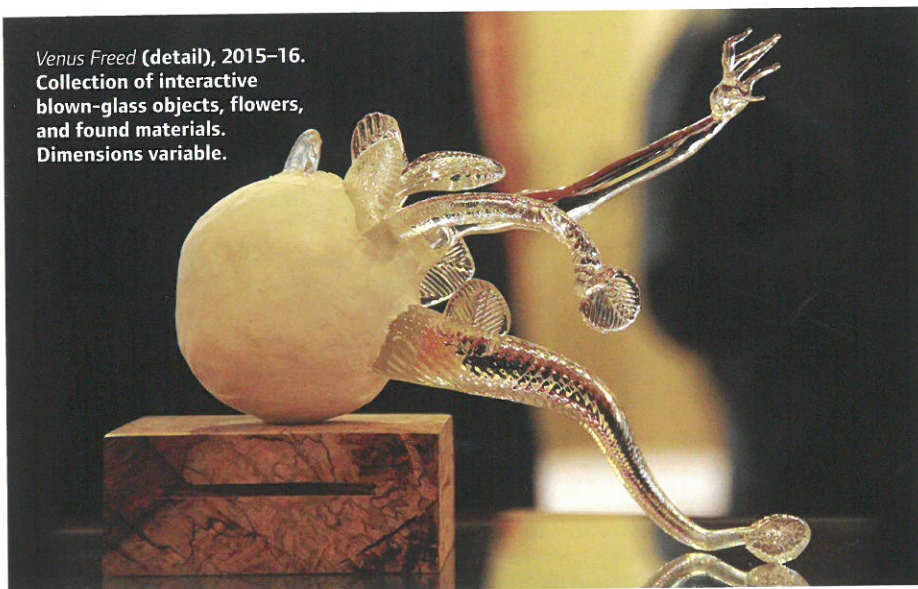


Venus Freed (detail), 2015–16. Collection of interactive blown-glass objects, flowers, and found materials. Dimensions variable.



Christina Poblador

“Venus Freed”

Philippine Center Gallery

New York City

March 21–April 15, 2016

When I visited the Philippine Center to view “Venus Freed,” Christina “Goldie” Poblador’s first solo show in New York City, the exhibition had been disrupted because of an event. The gallery is a multi-use space that the art must accommodate, and Poblador’s delicate glass sculptures were pushed up against the walls and roped off with stanchions. I could still see the artworks but not view them in the round. I returned a week later to find the same display, but now with additional works in the center of the room, accentuating the artist’s mixed-media approach with an installation of birch logs and glass. In two instances, essential oils were integrated into sculptures.

“Venus Freed” is a collection of blown-glass objects, flowers, and found materials such as seashells that reference the myth of the Philippine ylang ylang flower. As the press release states, Poblador laments the exploitation of the flower—both as a cultural icon and, ecologically, through harvesting the plant—by Western perfumers and their negligence in attributing the ylang ylang to its country of origin. Additionally, she sees the flower as a metaphor for the “Filipino woman, a colonized body” and decries her “loss of identity and empowerment ... in a global setting where consumerism and foreign cultural imperialism hold sway.” The installation at the Philippine Center gallery, however, is quite

far from *Venus Freed*, the original 2015 artwork as it is presented on Poblador’s website. Photographs show an Eden of live flowers surrounded by a variety of objects: colorless glass flower forms that seem to be ghosts of their former selves, illustrating the exploitative nature of their harvesting; seashells, wood, and flower petals that evoke nature; and variously shaped vials, mimicking a laboratory, filled with scented oils. It is a cabinet of curiosities with Poblador sitting at the center, playing the guitar.

The web presentation is far superior to the haphazard display at the Philippine Center, a result of the space being used for an event. However, unless a large portion of the artwork was deinstalled, pushing the art against the walls didn’t make a dramatic difference. The works around the perimeter of the room were displayed individually on gray pedestals that looked like stone or cement, and small groupings were placed on glass shelves that continued to the floor, the type you would see in a retail shop. The works in the center of the space were displayed on bar tables, encased in glass boxes. This presentation does Poblador’s work a disservice. When reviewing her portfolio, it’s clear that she conceives of her work on a project basis, and each project is treated as an installation or a performance. Displaying her work in a traditional, one-sculpture-to-one-pedestal format doesn’t take into account the cross-disciplinary, installation-based nature of her work and, in fact, accentuates its tendency toward decorativeness.

There is a quality about glass that makes it simultaneously desirable to artists and challenging to work with. Its loveliness as a material can stand in the way of its use in

conceptual art, particularly if the imagery being represented is traditionally beautiful. Poblador’s glass objects are so delicate that without proper installation, her fragile glass flowers could too easily evoke souvenir-shop tchotchkes. This is far from the case, however, and Poblador’s work is rich in concept and layered in meaning and presentation. The experimental nature of her process and installations—which incorporate performance, scent, and sound—is refreshing, and her interdisciplinary approach exemplifies the exciting embrace in contemporary craft and art of all art without boundaries.

Her conceptual projects are intriguing and address themes such as memory, sound, ecology, the divine feminine and spirituality, colonialism and oppression, and the intersection of the senses, all through a Filipino lens. Two of Poblador’s most interesting projects are *In Tune Both Poles of East and West* and *The Fragrance of the Marikina River* for “Riverscapes INFLUX,” which toured Goethe-Institut sites in Asia. *In Tune* draws on the technique of free improvisation or free music, which she uses to inspire the creation of shapes and forms while flameworking, while the olfactory element drives the musician’s performance based on emotive responses to a series of scents.

The *Marikina River* project tackles themes of ecology by documenting the environmental degradation of the San Mateo–Marikina River, the main river system in the eastern part of metropolitan Manila. Poblador created three perfumes to express the situation of the villagers who live nearby the river. She conceived of this work as a way for her to use “the olfactory sense of perception as a medium in fine art” and merge this with her interest in glassblowing. However, in a world facing a climate crisis, Poblador’s intimate response to the deterioration of an ecosystem dear to her and her neighbors illustrates the way artists are using their artworks as consciousness-raising endeavors.

Poblador was born and raised in Manila, where she was a figural painter and sculptor as well as a musician. She played electric guitar and sang in an all-girl punk band called Death by Tampon, and integrated music and performance into her visual art. Poblador received a B.F.A. in painting from the University of the Philippines Diliman in 2009, and subsequently moved to the United States to attend the Rhode Island School of Design, where she earned her M.F.A. in glass in 2015.

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