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DISSER

GALLERY SCENE

Dina Gadia's Collages Are Chopped and Screwed Visions of a Golden Age



"Antiquated Ideals," by Dina Gadia

Dina Gadia's pulpy, graphic collages, now on view at Greenpoint's **Owen James Gallery**, bring to mind a '50s wholesomeness and tropical kitsch while at the same time challenging it. Her collages are at once subtle and unabashedly clear, familiar and obscure, paradoxes that hold fast because Gadia, a Filipino artist living and working in Manila, is working in two, if not three registers by exploring the impact of Spanish but especially

American influence on Filipino culture.

I asked gallery owner Owen Houhoulis to sum up what he gets out of Gadia's work, which he and his wife (who is also from Manila) have been collecting for years. "There's a lot, and that's one of the things I like most about her work, there are issues of Filipino identity, what it was, what it's going to be, the effects of Empire— both Spanish and American— and aside from politics, there's sexual identity, how women have been shown in the past, and giving strength and power to women, and the conversation between Filipino culture and American culture," he explained. "How do you take all the stuff that's been shoved in your face and shove it back?"

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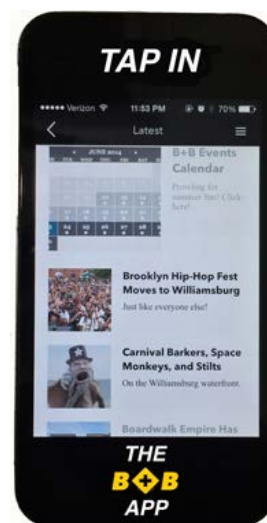
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"The Art and the Viewer Trying to Be Critical," (2015) collage by Dina Gadia (Photo courtesy of Owen James Gallery)

That kind of obstinance might seem in danger of being too obvious (as political art often is), but Gadia's work is surprisingly funny, stylish, and clever, making it a standout when it comes to art with a rebellious bent. "She doesn't hit you over the head at all," I commented.

"Exactly," Owen said.

At first glance, the images Gadia adopts for her collages might seem familiar. They're the stuff of comic books and mid-century advertisements that bear a strong association with a certain historical period and place, namely the post-war American time of plenty (however mythological *that* narrative is). But Gadia is working with Filipino publications, drawing from older advertisements, magazines, as well as comic books. "She specifically chooses to work with more vintage material," Owen explained. "Aesthetically, there's the older printing techniques, the patina of age, she tries not to mix and match old and new. There's a veneer she likes to maintain."



"Specific New" (2015) collage by Dina Gadia (Photo courtesy of Owen James Gallery)

"I'm interested in the graphic and raw qualities that I've encountered in album covers and zines before," Gadia explained. "At the same time, I'm also interested in old publications, and they possess the same qualities. The cut-up layout seen in old magazines and the stiff and visible cuts in collages are striking for me."

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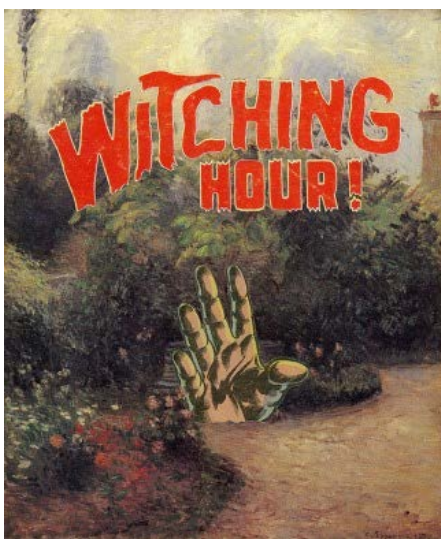
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Despite our vastly different upbringings, the pictures she adopts for her collages are just as familiar to her as they are to many of us and based on Gadia's manipulations, seem to invoke similar associations with the added complexity of empire. "There's some familiarity and some disorientation," Owen agreed.

In a way, these kitschy '50s images of men with slicked-back hair and winning smiles and prim women with minuscule waist lines and perfectly drawn lips, *are* sentimental as recognizable character-types imported to the Philippines from the U.S. Since the late 19th century, the United States has had a major presence in the Philippines since taking over Spain's position as imperial colonizer of the island nation after the Spanish-American war. Almost immediately American forces began clashing with Filipino revolutionaries who were fighting for independence (something not formally achieved by the Philippines until 1946). But even long after independence, the United States maintained a heavy military presence in the Philippines until 1991. Still, the U.S. continues to invest heavily in the Philippines.

Owen pointed out the connection between the influence of American rock music in Southeast Asia (as seen in the new documentary film *Don't Think I've Forgotten* which recounts the suppression of Cambodian rock n' roll by the Khmer Rouge) and the impact of visual pop culture. "I'm familiar with some of the images," she wrote to us over email. "Although I have encountered some of the images before, I've learned to let go of the sentimental part. They're images that I can repurpose."



"Return of the Dead Impression" (2015) collage by Dina Gadia (Photo courtesy of Owen James gallery)

But her pieces don't just project or mirror the American comic book culture they're drawn from, for example, or simply imbue it with a delicate sarcasm. Instead, Gadia's work call into question the assumptions they make.

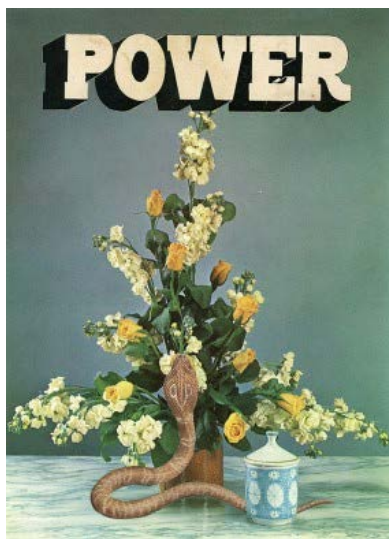
Gadia's women are strong figures: curling bones (see: *Antiquated Ideals, Culture and Water Buffalos*, 2015) towering over men, **smashing** the art world patriarchy (quite literally). The women of her work stand in stark contrast to the women of her source materials. By chopping, overlaying, and rearranging these subjects, she's brought them up to now, fast-forwarding them through decades of feminist action. But maybe the war hasn't quite been won yet (see: *The Art and the Viewer Trying To Be Critical*, 2015). Though I was surprised that, when I asked Gadia about women in her collages, she brushed off the idea that her art has a particular focus on women.

"I've asked her, because I see all this stuff going on here— I see the snakes, I see the hands a lot— 'Well, are you making this particular point that I'm thinking?' She goes, 'Well, no. It's there, but I'm not trying to make you think that. But I'm glad you see that,'" Owen explained.

Gadia manages to infuse pop art, a medium usually sapped of all depth, with feeling by transforming these recognizable images into something unexpected. In one work, a painting not on display at the gallery, a man and women look into one another's eyes, smiling innocent smiles. What looks like a rock is between them while bold letters hover above reading, "EVOCATIONS," calling ruse on this whole interaction. This catatonically happy neuroses appears in much of Gadia's work, but the artist conquers this insanity with humor.

Text is often a part of Gadia's work, including much of the stuff on display at Owen James. There are usually double, if not triple entendres at work, which highlight the artist's complex relationship with the visual sources. "Sometimes it's the images that inform ideas," Gadia explained.

There's definitely a conversation at work here, a push and pull with the past, and the creation of a whole new dialogue to discuss the old. "It's a very interesting time for young artists in Southeast Asia because the economy is doing very well, the art scene is changing rapidly, so you're seeing the work really on a global level," Owen explained. "It's not just about the region anymore, it can be viewed internationally, in a sense. The artists are seeing what's out there and they're contributing on a very major level."



*"Potential of a Triangular Composition," (2015)
collage by Dina Gadia (Photo courtesy of Owen James
Gallery)*

Gadia's work certainly plays with a variety of points. You'd be hard pressed to call her work obvious or banal, even if the problems she confronts seem commonplace, which is only because they're so deeply entrenched.

But that's what makes the work so fun. If you weren't paying attention, say you traded places with a zombie sheep for a day, you might not even *notice* what's happening here. By playing with the tools of the oppressor, the empire state, the images used by the TV dinner overlords and soul-sapped Bettys of the world, and through subtle rearrangements, real damage can be done to the status quo.

Humor has always proven to be a subtle but very effective tool in slowly disintegrating the legitimacy of regimes, overlords, oppressors. And

while overthrowing a regime might not be Gadia's aim exactly, she's definitely doing her part to destabilize some antiquated structures still hanging on for dear life.

Dina Gadia's "Non-Mint Copy" is on view at Owen James Gallery, at 61 Greenpoint Avenue, Suite 315 in Greenpoint from now until June 13; viewing hours Monday through Saturday 10 am to 5 pm, or by appointment.

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