

LONDON

"Motions of This Kind: Propositions & Problems of Belatedness"

The Brunei Gallery, SOAS
12 April–22 June 2019

Whiteness is a "moral choice", and not an identity, noted James Baldwin, astutely. It was legislated into existence in colonial North America by a slave-owning class bent on precluding workers' solidarity. By 1937, it was so naturalised that Walt Disney, without blushing, introduced a protagonist with "skin as white as snow" in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, his first feature-length animation. By equating paleness with beauty, this enforced a clearly racist standard.

Princess Studies (2019), a performance by Manila-based choreographer, dancer, and artist Eisa Jocson staged during *Motions of this Kind*, a group show of

Philippines artists at The Brunei Gallery, SOAS, unpacked this legacy, while highlighting its resonance with the labour conditions of Filipino migrant workers.

At the performance's start, Jocson, accompanied by Joshua Serafin, curtsied, unhurriedly, twice. We, their audience, like teenagers at a school dance, had been ushered up against two walls, and hushed. With their movements accented by the absence of music, the dancers swayed, like marionettes, at the hips. Matching Snow White costumes twinkled in the studio spotlights.

In unison, giggling and twirling through the gallery, Jocson and Serafin replicated gestures from the scene in *Snow White* in which the princess trespasses into the seven dwarves' house. "Just look at that fireplace, it's covered in dust", they swooned, voices two octaves high, swiping forefingers, like

wands, across an imaginary mantel-piece. The dancers' hands, like Snow White's, were frequently elevated, like they were tiptoeing, or conducting. Exaggerating and gesticulating, they channelled, like Disney, the era-defining beauty of the *ingénues* of silent cinema.

For Jocson, the symbolic meaning of movement, in dance, is deeply geopolitical. Hong Kong Disneyland, an accompanying brochure disclosed, employs "a legion" of Filipino dancers. Most play subsidiary roles – "a zebra in *Lion King*, a coral in *Little Mermaid*" – not princesses. Yet these entertainers are a fraction of the Philippines' estimated 2.3m overseas workers (some figures go as high as 10m), many of whom find domestic employment as nurses and maids. Hijacking the archetypal white princess, Jocson murmured bullshit on her innocence, positioning



Eisa Jocson, *Princess Studies*, 2019, 45 minutes
Performance, The Koppel Project Central, London, 13 April 2019
Eisa Jocson in collaboration with Joshua Serafin

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Part of the Motions of this Kind performance programme

Video stills: Jhenyfy Muller



her within a global labour force that is starkly gendered and racialized.

Compositionally, *Princess Studies* was a study of mimicry as a choreographic logic. Homi Bhabha called mimicry “one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge”. But mimicry is ambivalent: in the shadow of a smile, it can become mockery, at which point it conveys “at once resemblance and menace”. *Snow White* was made while the U.S. retained control over the Commonwealth of the Philippines, its prior colony; Disney is,

obviously, a franchisee of Western cultural imperialism. *Princess Studies*, I felt, though, made a more local assertion: that contemporary art is structured by demands for integration and assimilation into Eurocentric worldviews. As tension grew, the dancers toyed with their audience, asking us where we were from, and where we were *really* from. They cooed, in Tagalog, at how cute we were, objectifying and provincialising us as if they were giggling in the dressing room. The Filipinos in the audience laughed. The white gaze had been dethroned.

Voices dropping, Jocson and Serafin repeated, like deathcore chanteurs, one of Snow White’s most vulnerable lines: “I’m awfully sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten you. But you don’t know what I’ve been through! . . . What do you do when things go wrong?”

But no tweeting bird replied: “Oh, you sing a song!”

Collapsing into awkward triangulated poses, they shed wigs and costumes, revealing breathing bodies, and the labour beneath the act.

Harry Burke