

Exhibition Brochure

AGRARIAN REVOLUTION
IS JUSTICE!!

Solidarity with peasants,
farmworkers, fisherfolk
and indigenous peoples
in the struggle for
LAND, LIFE and JUSTICE

CIANDAYRIT LIBERTIES WERE TAKEN

Blaffer Art Museum

May 31—August 18, 2024

~~*Red Lines over Red Lines*~~

text by Erika Mei Chua Holum

“The question then should be: What is our art about? What is cultural work for, if not to contribute to raising the consciousness of the people?”

-Cian Dayrit

“We start with lines,” artist Cian Dayrit tells the room. “You can start with roads, rivers, creeks, or coastlines. Label and write your experiences there—the spaces of fear, pain, or trauma.”

These instructions, Dayrit explains, “narrate our personal accounts of abuse, land-grabbing, and other forms of aggression perpetrated by the so-called ‘authorities.’” With each line across a single A4 sheet of paper, participants in Dayrit’s counter-cartography workshop designate a boundary, border, or location to collectively map a community-authored geography.

Dayrit describes the beginning of his artistic practice as an expanded space between community-based participatory actions and solidarity work in the wake of the dictatorship of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. The artist began conducting counter-mapping workshops with the peasant and natmin groups, a colloquial term for the Indigenous national minority. During these sessions, narratives of everyday life, trauma, and collective aspirations are exchanged for narrative maps and drawings made by the participants. Labels, icons, and lines function as symbols that indicate one’s relationship to the land. They explain events such as

massacres and aerial bombings, or details about the site itself such as polluted rivers or trails that have been fenced off by developers. These workshops illustrate how cartographic representation of displacement, development, or dispossession can be rewritten by personal narratives.

This approach to mapmaking is called counter-cartography. It is a method that artists, scholars, and community organizers use to challenge dominant power structures and reclaim colonized territories. Counter-mapping practices chart histories of imperialism, industrialization, and systems of subjugation that shape geographical boundaries and cultural narratives. Counter-cartographic approaches upend the formal techniques of mapmaking historically restricted to specialists by inviting participants to inscribe their own stories into records. This approach generates knowledge through engagement with the intersections of social, environmental, and political issues to deploy mapping as a form of resistance in the reconstitution of power among historically marginalized people. In this sense, counter-cartography inhabits the nexus of artistic practice, liberatory pedagogy, and militant investigation.

Dayrit's participatory practice and community-centered pedagogy is situated in Houston at the critical juncture of U.S. imperialism and Filipino American community organizing. *Liberties Were Taken* brings together over twenty-five works made over the course of the artist's decade-long career to urge viewers to turn to the tools and practices within Dayrit's persistent investigations to lead the way for libertory work centering communal and collective knowledge.

Maps historically served as a panoptic technology to assist imperial powers in governance, discipline, and control, as state-authored records of "official" visualizations reinforce the dominance of colonial rulers while marginalizing entire regions and peoples. Mapmaking and cartography enforce the practice of seizing land from Indigenous peoples through the transformation of land and water into bordered territory, thereby allowing land and people to be claimed, surveyed, defined, depopulated, and resettled. With the enactment of a border, colonialism is inscribed into the Earth as

borders parcel land into property. Maps legitimize this inscription by writing it into a document, which then is deemed as fact. This produces a borderless, unrecognized, or "unclaimed" territory that equates Indigenous land with "empty."

As Andrew Hercher and Ana María León argue, this punitive emptiness is "an emptying-out," or conceptual deletion of Indigenous landscapes that precede, allow, and authorize the material erasure of those landscapes, and the human and non-human beings that sustain and are sustained by them.¹ The "frontier" enacts the border between land bordered by colonialism and un-bordered Indigenous lands. As an antithesis to these impositions, Brazilian scholar André Mesquita observes, "the practice of mapping with communities and social movements mediates a continuous process in which the act of listening and the systematization of data, as well as decisions regarding the means to make the maps are constructed, negotiated, and decided upon collectively."



Figure 2. *Frontiers of Struggle 1-10* (detail), Acrylic and collage on handmade paper, 2018. Courtesy the artist and NOME, Berlin. Photo: Gianmarco Bresaola.



Figure 5a. Cian Dayrit, *The Austere Enclave*, 2023. Installation view, mono8 Gallery.



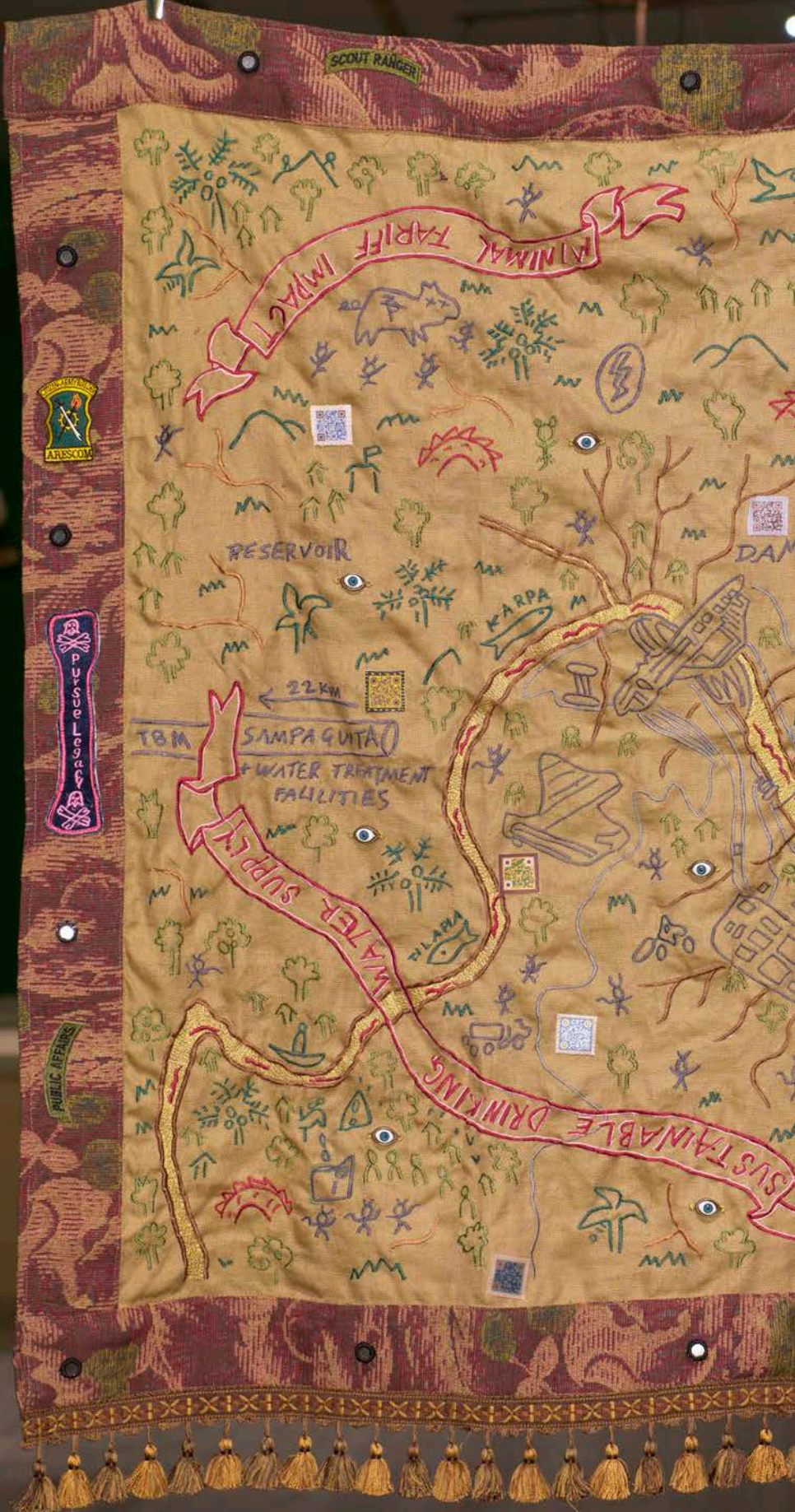
Figure 5b. Cian Dayrit, *Protracted Life*, Oil on canvas, 2021.

For Dayrit, the status of the map as a site of power and potential violence through the inscription of red lines is explored across a number of works, including the series *Frontiers of Struggle* (2019) and the exhibition *The Austere Enclave* (2023). *Frontiers of Struggle* (2019) consists of collages made from sections of maps from periods of European colonialism painted over in red acrylic. Dayrit's direct mark-making across archival materials are bold and declarative, likened to the impassioned scrawl of graffiti.

William Kherbek noted in a review of Dayrit's solo exhibition in Germany, *Beyond the God's Eye* in 2019, "The associations graffiti has with vandalism resonate with the destruction Dayrit depicts; scribbled smoke pours out from boxy factories while jaunty, almost childlike, renderings of helicopters vie for space in a sky crowded with surveillance technology."

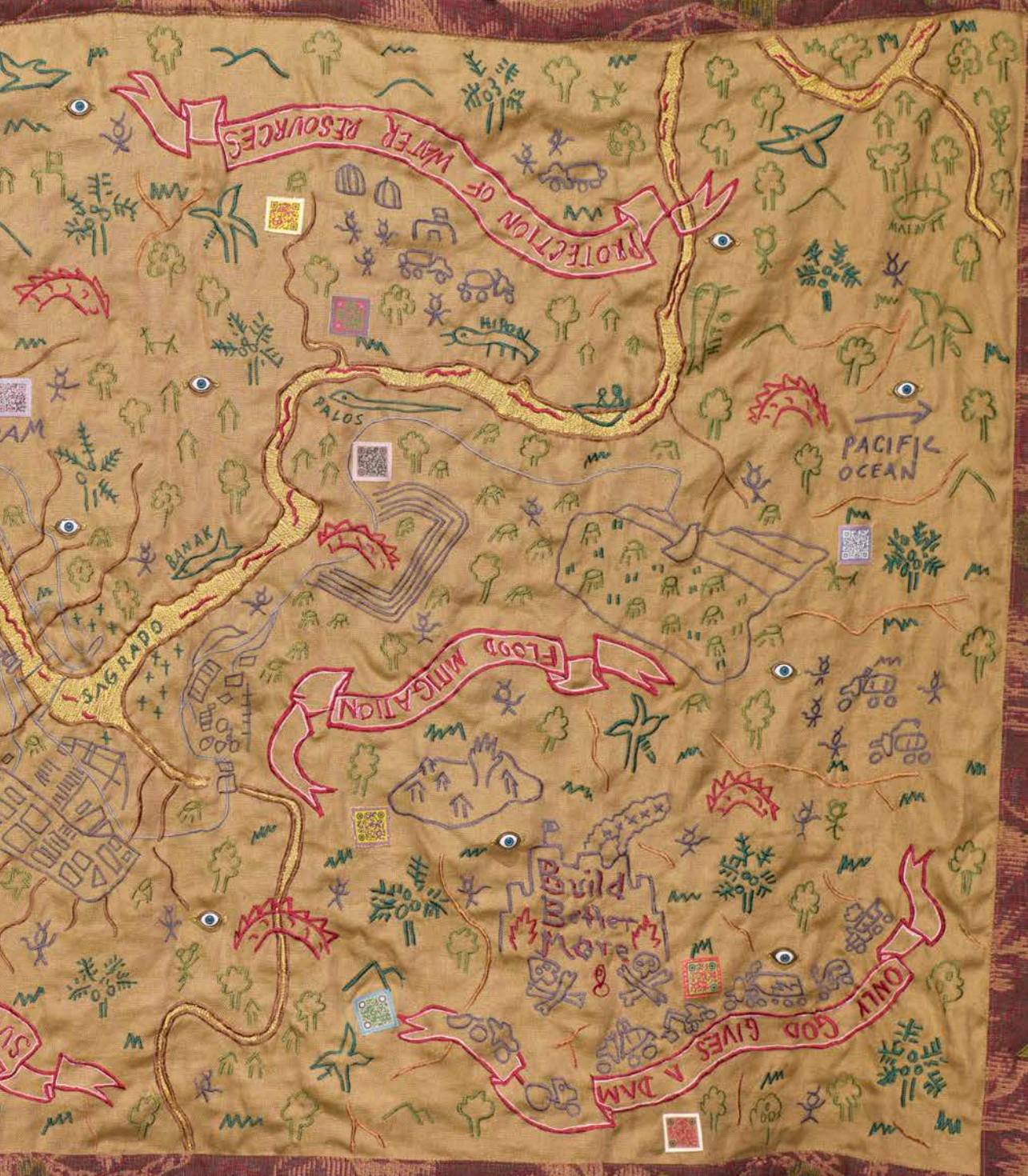
The system of artworks, *The Austere Enclave* (2023) (figure 5a), investigates how the logics of neoliberalism shape the landscape by examining dam building and banana plantations in the Philippines. The painting, *State of Plantocracy* (2023) (figure 5b), depicts an uprooted banana tree emblazoned by a gauge of twisted barbed wire, burning flames, and the text in brazenly glowing red neon: "Market As Ecosystem x Life As Commodity." The set of interwoven and entangled relations are revealed through Dayrit's intervention and annotations on the seemingly untouched or naturalized depictions of land.

Art history has a vexed relationship with the representation of physical territory. Dayrit's solo exhibition *Spectacles of the Third World* held at Tin-Aw Art Gallery in 2015 (figure 3) interrogated strategies of display by state institutions, including those in the genre of landscape painting. In the large-scale paintings,



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Make our History
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SMALL INDUSTRY
 2018

Atmosphere of high Expectation





Figure 3. Cian Dayrit, *Flavours of our Culture and Heritage*, table, various objects, ceramic, 2015. Installation view of Spectacles of the Third World held at Tin-Aw Art Gallery, 2015.



Figure 3a. Cian Dayrit, *seeds of deceit*, Oil on canvas, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist and Rocky David.



Figure 3b. *middle class suburbia*, Oil and collage on canvas, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist and Andrew Bendicion.



Figure 3c. Cian Dayrit, *heograpiya at klas-klasan*, Oil and collage on canvas, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist and Joevic Tanlayco.

Seeds of Deceit (2015), *Middle Class Suburbia* (2015), and *Heograpiya at Klas-klasan* (2015) (Figures 3a, 3b, and 3c) references to religious iconography, United States imports, or folk amulets are buried beneath or across constructed terrains. These landscapes—both social and political—chronicle beliefs rooted in mysticism alongside the geopolitical realignments in the wake of U.S. and European expansionism.

The paintings are displayed around a table set for a Philippine fiesta set in preparation for a celebratory feast with decorative banderitas, confetti, music, and festival games. The scene Dayrit builds in this installation

appropriates ritual practices from communities that commemorate harvest festivals or cardinals. In doing so, he questions the visual and performative strategies deployed at these gatherings, such as the honoring of patron saints, politicians, or significant historical moments to venerate the ruling empire. Brought together, the works evoke a sense of power located in the mundane, unmonumental contours of one's private or communal life. As described by Lisa Ito in the exhibition's accompanying publication, "[The artwork] produces a postcolonial pastiche that nonetheless captures with criticality the persistence of hegemony within and beyond the borders of the Philippines."



Figure 4. Cian Dayrit, *Ritual Components of Faith and Vulnerability*, painted wood, various objects, fabric, 2015. Installation view of Spectacles of the Third World held at Tin-Aw Art Gallery, 2015.

Writing on the struggle for U.S. divestment during apartheid South Africa in the 1980s, Audre Lorde powerfully reminded Black Americans: “We are citizens of the most powerful country in the world, a country which stands upon the wrong side of every liberation struggle on earth...We are members of an international community of people of color, and must see our struggles as connected within that light.” Lorde’s call for international solidarity redraws the red lines across maps, timelines, and state records to call attention to the interconnected struggle of the historically marginalized and those organizing for their freedom on a global scale.

Lualo Studios (in care of Christian Toledo, Jenah Maravilla, Rea Sampilo, and Trisha Morales) worked closely in the organizing of counter cartography workshops with Dayrit and the dissemination of the pedagogical practices of the artist to local communities in Houston. Lualo Studios is composed of four Filipinx multidisciplinary community organizers and artists



Cian Dayrit. *Hiyaw ng Tingga Asukal at Dugo*, 2019 Acrylic and collage on wood panel 243.84 cm x 243.84 cm; 4 121.92 x 121.92 panels. Private collection.

who built robust spaces, events, and multimedia content to center Dayrit’s artistic practice as a tool for community organizing and knowledge creation. These spaces offered cross-pollination and collaboration among communities of color in connection to land through map-making, storytelling, and political education.

The first workshop was held in collaboration with the Witness Series, a participatory public art engagement founded by Houston-based artists Kristi Rangel and Jaime Gonzalez. Rangel and Gonzalez believe that it is critical for communities of color to have connection to land, particularly in areas where the city’s divestment has led to the neglect and under-use of green spaces. Jenah Maravilla led a generative writing workshop that included guided meditation, the creation of body maps, and prose to illustrate the community’s relationship between self and “home.” By tracing the contours of one’s hands, each participant located a sense of place written across their palms and recorded the names of ancestors, siblings, partners, or neighbors to invoke a



Figure 6a. Counter Cartography Workshop at the Community Artist Collective on March 13, 2024. Image by Lualo Studios.

shared responsibility to the places we steward. Maravilla's mapping practice activated an embodied archive to be documented, spoken aloud, and collectively remembered.

On March 13, 2024, Dayrit led a counter cartography workshop for Houston-based artists, activists, and cultural workers at the historic Community Artists Collective (Figure 6a), which included Sheila (SB) Savannah, April Frazier, Kristi Rangel, Mich Stevenson, Anthony Pabillano, Zoe Gapayao, Amenta B., KillJoy, Tiffany Jin, Aaron Ambroso, Benedikte F. Ansell, Ibraim Nascimento, Jack Morillo, Trisha Morales, Christian Toledo, Rea Sampilo, Alice Liu, Carlos Casteneira, Aarohi Sheth, and Maha Abdelwahab, along with contributions from Royal Sumikat and Jenah Maravilla. The workshop taught the counter-cartography pedagogy that Dayrit uses in his artistic and activist practice and encouraged participants to use it as a tool to articulate our local spaces and sense of place among artists and organizers in Houston. The participants' artistic and activist practices ranged from organizing against resource extraction among Indigenous

communities in Brazil to distributing disaster preparedness kits to local neighborhoods lacking proper infrastructure. The participants took the counter-cartographic pedagogical approaches learned here and led their own workshops and community events. In doing so, counter-cartographic practices are re-taught and deployed by artists as a liberatory tool against hegemonic forces rendering land or spaces empty. Through the production of community-authored maps, participants redrew their relationships to land, enabling a reclamation of narratives and ontologies from historical marginalization.

The Filipino American National Historical Society organized their biennial conference in Houston in 2024, and as artists, historians, poets, and elders assembled, questions circulated among those articulating Filipino history in the U.S.: What are the methods to read across the history of the U.S.' articulations of power around the globe? Why are Filipino American communities preoccupied with assimilating into a society that is built on stolen land while we neglect the struggle for land rights in the Philippines? What other possibilities can be summoned through our collective imaginations?

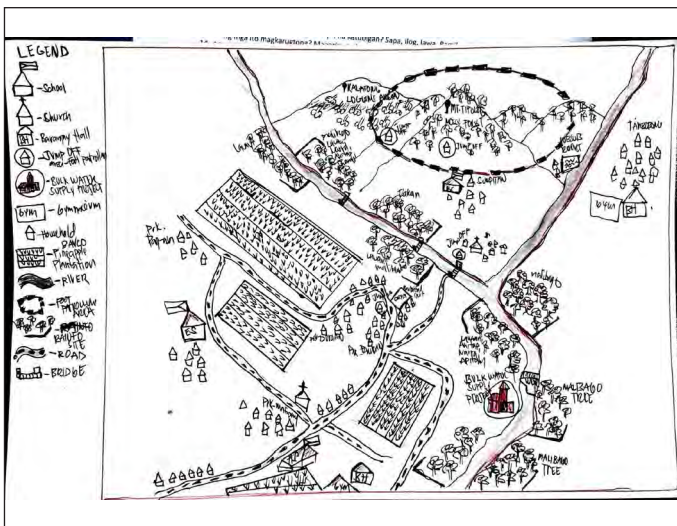
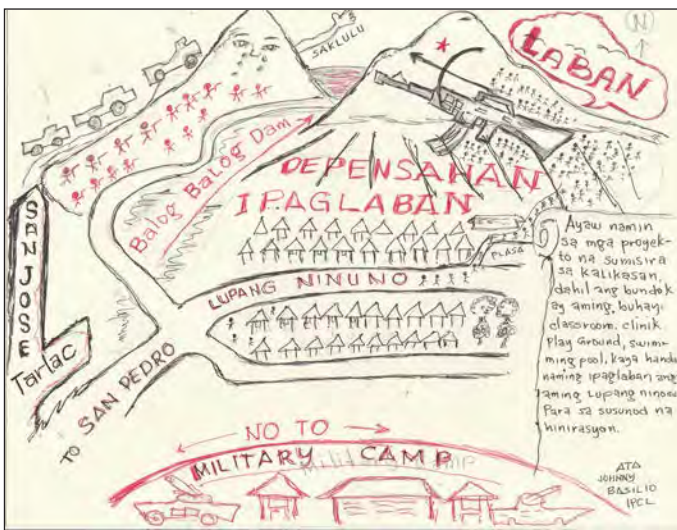
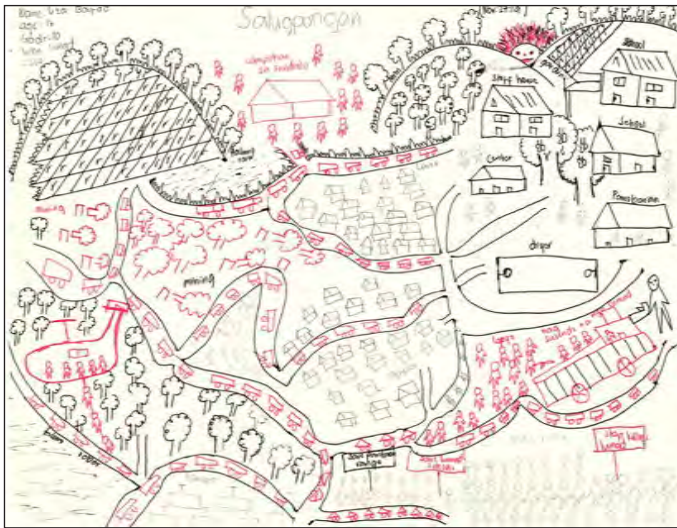


Figure 7. Reprinted counter-maps. Courtesy of the artist.

There is no better place to examine the tools and strategies than those organizing in the Philippines to connect struggles across time, space, and place.

Dayrit’s pedagogical practices and artworks created over the last decade offer tools to repair the severed connection between land and dispossessed communities and rewrite topographies from the memories, experiences, and accounts of those silenced. By tracing lines on our hands or recalling a space of trauma in our neighborhood, historically marginalized communities turn away from the imposition of geographies that does not include the stories of the people in struggle and co-stewardship of the land. It is in this turning away that we can move from the representational politics recorded on maps and toward the sacred connection of a community that wills to struggle and resist hegemonic control. Through this collective struggle, we insist on living freely on liberated lands.

Endnotes

¹Harris, L., & Hazen, H. (2006). Power of Maps: (Counter)-mapping for Conservation. *Acme International E-journal of Critical Geographies*, 4(1), 99–130. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0357973>.

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Cian Dayrit : Liberties Were Taken

May 31—August 18, 2024

The Blaffer Art Museum is proud to present *Liberties Were Taken*, the first solo museum exhibition in the United States of works by Manila-based artist Cian Dayrit. Known globally for cartographic artworks, Dayrit investigates notions of power and identity represented and reproduced in monuments, museums, and maps. The exhibition brings together site-specific installations, embroidered textiles, and elaborate paintings created over a decade of participatory actions and solidarity work in the Philippines and around the world. Deploying visual tools, such as written text, graphs, and symbols, the artist positions land as a site of struggle through archival references, protest imagery, and grassroots counter-mapping.

Disarming disciplinary bounds, the artist's practice charts alternative territories and fugitive landscapes scored through community-authored knowledge with landless farmers and displaced Indigenous communities, particularly in the wake of Rodrigo Duterte's militaristic policies. Through the works, the artist offers strategies and tools for historically marginalized communities in the global struggle against resource extraction, land grabbing, and dispossession. In doing so, artists and communities can reclaim mapping and place-making as an emancipatory practice. *Cian Dayrit: Liberties Were Taken* will be on view at the Blaffer Art Museum until August 18, 2024.

This exhibition is organized by Erika Mei Chua Holum, Cynthia Woods Mitchell Associate Curator, in collaboration with Lualo Studio in care of Christian Toledo, Jenah Maravilla, Rea Sampilo, and Trisha Morales. Major funding for *Cian Dayrit: Liberties Were Taken* is provided by the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts, Terra Foundation for American Art, the John R. Eckel Jr. Foundation, the John P. McGovern Foundation, the Stolbun Family Foundation, and Blaffer Art Museum Advisory Board members.

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Cain Dayrite : Liberties Were Taken is funded in part by
the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance

Front Cover: *When the Land Beneath Our Feet Shakes* (detail), 2021. Ink and digital print on board. Courtesy of the artist.

Centerfold: *to block the flow of a river is to reject the wisdom of the earth*, 2022. Installation view. *Stepping Softly on the Earth*, 2024 at Baltic, Gateshead. Courtesy the artist and NOME, Berlin. Photo Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, UK.

Back Cover: Cain Dayrite speaking at the Community Artist Collective, Houston, TX. March 13, 2024. Image by Lualo Studios.

