

ARTS

Wawi Navarroza uses her body as her artistic medium

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We spent some time with Wawi Navarroza at her recent opening at Silverlens Galleries in Makati to talk about the new show, being a wanderer and artist, and life in Istanbul. In photos: (left) "La Bruja / Vagus (Self-Portrait Rebirthing the Self)" and (right) "The Weightlifter Orans / Auit at Gaua (Self-Portrait with Blue Ribbon)." Photos courtesy of SILVERLENS GALLERIES

Wawi Navarroza is a master of the self-portrait. And yet, she says her medium is not photography, but rather, it is her body. The camera just happens to be a part of the whole process; the rest of it — from the curating of the rich, nuanced scenes that serve as the backdrop of each piece, the lighting that provides the atmosphere, the post-processing of the large format prints, even the artist frames — is all her.

Her show, titled "As Wild As We Come," is currently on view at Silverlens Galleries in Makati, after being shown at the Kristin Hjellegjerde gallery in London in 2022, her first solo exhibit in the British capital, and at Art Fair Philippines earlier this year.

Her works throb with life. They are playful and sensual, and at times, even kitschy tableaux she set up in her living room, where every object is a reflection of herself and of the myriad memories running through her head. There are the familiar patterns of plastic tablecloths seen in many Filipino homes, the stripes of a tarp tent, the crisscross weaves of colorful rags from the marketplace. These are juxtaposed against luxurious silk ribbons and pearls, lush carpets and ottomans, porcelain vessels, orchids and anthuriums.



"Todo Lo Que Tengo / Bottomness / Bereket (Self-Portrait with Vessels)" by Wawi Navarroza. Photo courtesy of SILVERLENS GALLERIES

"I use this visual language as practices to understand and possibly decolonize an interesting tapestry of identity through my lived experience as a woman, artist, Filipina, born and raised in the Philippines, educated in the West, lived in many places, multicultural, transnational, and a new mother (an artist-mother, to be exact)," says Navarroza in her artist statement. "I welcome this contamination/hybridity/syncreticity as points of inquiry and conversation."

Born in the Philippines, Navarroza has exhibited in museums and galleries around the world, including the National Museum of the Philippines, Metropolitan Museum of Manila, National Gallery of Singapore, Singapore Art Museum BQ, Hangaram Art Museum (Korea), National Museum of Fine Arts (Taiwan), Yogyakarta National Museum (Indonesia), Fries Museum of Contemporary Art & Museum Betvedere (Netherlands), and the Danubiana Meulensteen Art Museum (Slovakia).

She was awarded the Lucas Artists Fellowship Award for Visual Arts San Francisco, the Asian Cultural Council Fellowship Grant New York, Cultural Center of the Philippines' Thirteen Artists Awards, Ateneo Art Awards, Lumi Photographic Art Awards Helsinki, among others.

We spent some time with the artist at her opening at Silverlens Galleries in Makati to talk about the new show, being a wanderer and artist, and life in Istanbul

Your show is titled "As Wild As We Come." What does "Wild" mean in the context of the show?

It was called "Wild" in a colonial sense could mean: uncultivated, raw, mysterious, possibly dangerous. I revel in these and reclaim it as our source of strength and liberation.

When I say We in "As Wild As We Come" I bring with me We as women, We as artists, We as mothers, We as Filipino, We as Southeast Asians, We as diasporic transnationals, We in the multiplicity and porosity of identity and place, We in my own multifaceted self.



"La Bruja II / Vagus (Self-Portrait Rebirthing the Self)" by Wawi Navarroza. Photo courtesy of SILVERLENS GALLERIES

You've been a wanderer these last few years. Where is home for now?

I was in Istanbul when the massive earthquake hit Southeast Türkiye and Syria only a month ago. There was an eerie stillness while the temperature dropped to freezing and covered everything in snow — something major has shifted; dark difficult days ahead. I bolted out of bed and took the first flight out of Istanbul to Manila to be with my family. A lot of healing, aid and rebuilding is all over Türkiye and not a day goes by I don't think of my friends there and how we can all help. At the moment, I'm in Manila indefinitely.

If I may insert my advocacy, please consider [opening] your hearts and send your donations. Any amount will help a lot.

AHBAP- Turkish local NGO deployed across Türkiye - ahbap.org/disasters-turkey
UNFPH - Help Women and Girls in Türkiye and Syria - <http://bit.ly/3F3wW4S>
UNHCR - TÜRKIYE-SYRIA EARTHQUAKE EMERGENCY APPEAL - bit.ly/3YvXFOJ

Why Istanbul?

Constantinople called. I answered.

How have you and your art evolved since you last exhibited in Manila?

A lot has happened since my last exhibition in Manila, "Self-Portraits & The Tropical Gothic" (2019). My art took a two-year hiatus after I moved to Istanbul from Manila in the middle of the pandemic, three months after I gave birth to my son, and after moving a total of six times in Manila during the lockdowns while pregnant.

I went through a lot of intense changes — physically, biologically, psychologically, everything. It was not easy, coming to terms with a new life in a new place with a new baby and a new aspect of myself as a new mother, and also figuring out how art-making fits into all of these. The metamorphosis was gradual and it took a lot of work and fortitude to find that old knowing, that innate strength we have as women, that power source that's always been there — the unstoppable creator in each woman. When I was ready in 2022, I made a decision that my release and redemption would be to go back to making art, and here it is: "As Wild As We Come."

"At this point, I can consider myself as having a PhD on transformations and beginnings."

Your work now bursts with color vs. the black and whites and monochromes of your previous works. Is there a reason for this?

My work shifted to high-chroma full-color in 2016 after I survived debilitating dengue in Bali while doing an art residency. It must have been the fever, but I saw colors as the throbbing, vibrant pulse of life; the lushness of the tropics, the blinding contrast of a full noon-day sun, the clutter and chaos of our markets, the richness of our artisanal traditions, mixed with the mass-produced plastic wares, horror vacui, hybrids from our postcolonial history, Spanish-American-pan-Asian syncretic anomalies — all of these are celebrations of where I come from. I was born and raised in Manila; these are my roots. These are sensorial works, back to the body, back to the senses.

The monochromatic works in my landscapes are still me, tempered by my European education, western photographic art history, and living abroad. They were driven by the beauty of intellectual thoughts. These days, I'm more instinctive, savage.

In Istanbul, your work space is your living space. How do you compartmentalize your work mode from your life mode?

There was a period I was uncertain if I [could] ever return to making art — something time-consuming, demanding, solitary, costly, AND also something that gave me a lot of personal satisfaction and purpose. It's not overnight but I also came to a point of realization that it happens when I DECIDE it gets to be done. Often we can easily forget our agency, but every one of us is intrinsically capable. No matter what, I beat the obstacles one by one — time constraints, energy constraints (I was sick with two autoimmune diseases while doing the work), space constraints — all can be arranged one way or another. On the daily, I try to be kind to myself and know I have a very slow way of doing things now plus I have a son and a home to caretake. 10 new works are enough and I'm pleased.

Which leads us to why your works are vertical for this show when they used to be horizontal?

Yes, symbolically and practically the works are vertical because of the constraints I had to work with. I like how it stands. Living abroad, during the pandemic, no studio, I made and shot everything in my living + dining room at home in Istanbul.



"Portraits: Double Portrait" by Wawi Navarroza. Photo courtesy of SILVERLENS GALLERIES

We see different materials/images in your work that are distinctly Filipino. Can you tell us about them?

Each of the works is loaded with codes and eclectic cultural references. I like to play on the multi-cultures that have been layered on top of my identity as being Filipino. To the Filipino viewer, you could recognize familiar objects and material history — the basahan, local fabrics from the Cordilleras, banig, batik, inoleum, trapang, orchids, galm, etc. If one is familiar with Turkish/Levent cultures, you will see Anatolian kilim, nar (pomegranate), gül (rose), pottery, ancient vessels. To the Spanish, there's a hoodwink: a botijo. I like these Easter eggs that reveal and conceal themselves depending on the viewer and the place the works are shown.

How has your work changed since you've become a mother?

Now that I'm a mother, my work has become both stronger and more vulnerable at the same time. Very brave.

How have you changed since you've become a mother?

I've come to see that "Artist" and "Mother" are just two of the same modalities of being a creator/creator. One does NOT annihilate the other. They are in perpetual exchange and are fed by endless self-discoveries and rebirths. When you become a mother, it feels like you step into the sea of Time — you see everything from this ancestral timeline of your art before you and after you, every woman is you.

How do you find time for your art, how do you juggle all the different aspects of your life?

At this point, I can consider myself as having a PhD on transformations and beginnings. The more important thing now is I'm more attuned to my desires. What I desire gets to be done. I just know. Artists create. Women create. We are supported. Nothing is impossible.

Which work is central to this exhibit? Can you describe the thought process and physical process that went into it?

"The Weightlifter Orans / Auit at Gaua (Self-Portrait with Blue Ribbon)" Wawi Navarroza, 2022

For this piece, I was deeply moved and inspired by Hidilyn Diaz, the Filipino athlete who won Gold for Weightlifting at the Tokyo Olympics 2020, the first ever Olympic Gold in the history of the Philippines. At the height of the pandemic, she came as a renewed symbol of pride and joy for a country that had gone through so much. For me, her win transcends national morale and is also a contemporary allegory of the extremely important experiences of Women who, in one form or another, carry the brunt of the weight lifting at home, in society, in childbearing, caretaking, in labor, in her own complexities of the female Self.

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"As Wild As We Come" is ongoing at Silverlens Gallery, Makati through April 5, 2023.

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