

Wawi Navarroza and the Tropical Gothic

 responsafoundation.com/2022/11/04/wawi-navarroza-and-the-tropical-gothic

November 4, 2022

Spanning twenty years, Wawi Navarroza's self-portraits explore the hybridity of identity, colonialism, tropicality, and place.

A woman stands strongly in the centre of the photo, legs either side of a chair while artificial plants surround her, staring at the viewer. In the next photo, she appears draped in richly patterned fabrics, a pile of coconuts at her feet. The next, she's clutching an artichoke, hair wrapped in a towel upon her head.

These may sound like surreal dreams, but Wawi Navarroza's collection of self-portraits depict her vivid explorations into self-identity, place, and belonging. The Istanbul-based Filipina artist specifically focusses on the female experience, motherhood, and bodily transformation.



Creating constructed scenes in her self-portraits, her installations or 'mini-worlds' seek to highlight the notion of tropicality within a colonial dialogue. Specifically, honing in on the term 'Tropical Gothic' – a phrase coined by Filipino writer Nick Joaquin to depict a particular blend of Filipino culture which is, in Wawi's own words, "a combination of things that are opposing each other: Our post-colonial Spanish past, our roots with Mysticism and our pagan ancestries. There's also something of our Hollywood influence from the Americans when they were here. It's not a particular specific thing, but it's a way to describe the miasma and the wildness of it all." It's a heady blend of the traditional, with a strong mix of Spanish-Catholic and American pop, while remaining distinctly South-East Asian.

Drawing upon her own lived experience, she delves boldly into the amalgam of her identity and her belonging. In her most recent works, titled 'As Wild as We Come', Wawi notes that the term 'wild' is often used in association with the Orient to describe something unknown, dangerous or 'savage', but here she proudly reclaims the word as an expression of defiance.

She states, "tropical is lush, there's a lot of fecundity when you say the word topical, there's a too-much-ness. When you say 'too much', there's also a lot of life that happens, and when you have life, there's *drama*. We're living in that soup, that haze of melodrama which is particularly Filipino."



Every photo in its silence and stillness has a lot to do with conflict: the natural and the artificial: how much of self is authentic in a self-portrait? "Genuine fake-ness is something I think about a lot, especially in terms of the self."

Encompassing culture, heritage, colonial history, fiestas, celebration, the real and the fake, light and dark: Wawi's self-portraits seem to be a contradiction wrapped up in colourful fabrics. The power of her joyous scenes though, stems from this mix of potent hybridity: the creative curiosity and transformation that she continues to delve deeper into each time, as a female, as a Filipina, and as a human.

View more of Wawi's work at www.wawinavarroza.com