



ARTIST STATEMENT

My great-grandmother, who lived on a cocoa farm, often said “Ang guliay para sa baboy. Ang baboy ay para sa akin”. In English: The pig eats the vegetables. I eat the pig. My Mamita would say “Your Daddy got his pallet from me, and I got my pallet from your Lola. That is why you taste food like a Spaniard, Christoph”. In an age-grade society, food bound us from generation to generation.

Now, years after leaving my home behind for good, I have been painting food from memory. Painting has been somewhat like indulging in a comfort meal: good for the soul. Distance has a way of making people cling to the place they left behind. When I paint the meals that defined me for so long, I can relive. I can realize.

Still, the most important part of my paintings is painting. When I am painting, I am able to slow the world down. It is a ritual that gives me room to breathe and acknowledge my experiences. To me, painting is a place of meditation, of indulgence, and of sharing. Painting fills my soul just like a spoon full of adobo and rice.

I’ve never been a man of many words, so I use painting as a way to share my past. In the Third World, we have a more direct connection to our food than we do in the First World. On the islands, we pluck lobsters and eat them raw, and we don’t worry about microplastics. In the Philippines, we eat our island, Spanish, Malay, and Asian heritage every day.



PROJECT ABSTRACT

Upo Tayo is a body of oil paintings on table linens. The pieces were made as formal exercises in painting: each one is a record of experimentation with color, line, composition, and paint application. The work ranges in size and scale, but both subject matter and substrate unite all the work.

Aside from formal concerns, the paintings use food as a subject. These are foods from my upbringing in the Philippines. Food is arguably one of the most telling parts of any person's life: wrapped up in the food we eat is our identity, culture, history, socioeconomic class, relationship to nature, and more. Using food as subject opened a door to create paintings that are simultaneously intensely personal and public. They are meant to be shared. They are meant to be fun. And hopefully, they are delicious.



ORAL DEFENSE, TRANSCRIBED

Introduction

Hi everyone, I'm Christopher Camcam. I want to thank you guys for coming out this morning to see the work and for listening while I talk about it. Before I begin, I want to thank my mentor, Morgan Walker, for encouraging me to have fun while painting and for guiding this entire body of work. I also want to thank the other painting professors I have had this term: Daniela Molnar for your thoughtfulness and formal eloquence and Roy Tomlinson for giving me a deeper understanding of, especially, color. I also want to say a quick thank you to my wife, Maddie, who is always teaching me how to be a painter (even when painting is challenging.)

When I proposed my thesis, I proposed to make a group of five to six paintings that were of food. I have been thinking about the food as largely a simple subject- something to use to practice and experiment with formal painting concerns. My artistic practice is very young, and I had no interest in confining myself to a conceptual intent for the work. I wanted to keep growing formally. I especially wanted to focus on paint: application, color, composition. Creating strong paintings was my first and most important goal.

Finding food for subject

I began painting food two summers ago. Prior to the food paintings, I made a lot of abstract expressionist-type work. For a long time, I had used art as this

sort of outlet to deal with my pain. That was fine, and there were some good paintings that came out of it. But I've never been one to dwell in negativity, and I wanted my paintings to make people happy. In a quest to do so, I tried painting a plant who doesn't like plants? The piece was a huge agave, which reminded me of my tito's house. That was kind of a turning point for me. Painting the agave allowed me to use what I had learned from abstract expressionism while representing something that resonated with my own experiences. I truly did like the agave painting. But I didn't love the agave. You know what I do love? Food.

No really, I love food. I come from a culture where we are very proud of our love for food. We shamelessly wear extra pounds. We excitedly plan merienda and dinner while eating lunch. We know that a meal doesn't count unless there is rice and that pan-fried spam with a little bit of sugar is worth the risk of Type 2. Food was the thing that held my family together. My dad, a master chef, instilled its value in us from a young age. It was the love language we all used. A good meal could heal transgressions or celebrate a major milestone.

Now, I've left home. I probably can't go back for a long time. There are things that I can recreate or get here in the US. Of course, we can make adobo, or arroz a la cubana, or crispy fried lumpia and turon. But there's nothing like a fresh Philippine mango. And of course, there's nothing that can recreate the humor of chismosa titas raising their drawn-on eyebrows and fanning themselves at lunch. There's no kamayan after swimming from island to island. No matter how many Filipinos are in attendance, or how delicious the lechon is, there is no fiesta here where the cigarette smoke hangs in the air quite the same way as it does at home.

So I've been using all of that as an endless stream of content. There's all this beautiful food that is a part of who I am, so it's easy to generate ideas for a painting. With every dish, there are a million memories, so I can pull out the things that would make for an interesting painting and put them together. This natural flow of information means that I can use the rest of my energy to focus on how I'm painting the stuff, which is a lot of fun. It's nice to paint noodles in one wavy brushstroke. It's hilarious to frost a cake with oil paint just like you would frost a real cake. It's fitting to paint a teacup a la prima and to pay attention to the way light reflects on porcelain.

One of the really rewarding things about painting food is that I'm able to try different ways of painting to best represent an object. Food inherently comes with its own context: it is perhaps the foundation of most cultures and societies. There is countless research one could do (and I did do some, by the way) about the relationship between food and culture. Massimo Montanari wrote

"Like spoken language, the food system contains and conveys the culture of its practitioner; it is the repository of traditions and of collective identity. It is, therefore, an extraordinary vehicle of self-representation and cultural exchange."

Essentially, this means that as I paint the food from my home, I'm aware that doing so could make people think about countless memories, cultural identity politics, or socio-economic concerns. Later as I talk about each painting, I'll include some of these ideas and research that I find particularly compelling about each one. It is also important to know that I accept all of these concerns when I use food as subject; I am not concerned with pushing a certain one of these ideas that could be associated with the subject. Instead, I am embracing the complexity of food while celebrating its simplicity. A banh mi says a lot about Vietnamese history and French colonialism, but it also just tastes good. Similarly, these paintings of food reference complex things, but I just want the paint to look good.

When I proposed this body of work a couple of months ago, I left a few variables open. I knew that I wanted to continue using food as a subject. I wanted to continue making paintings that prioritized formal artistic decision making, and I was interested in experimenting with different substrates. I had previously created work on Dura-Lar, which I loved for its smooth surface. I then tried painting on a tabletop. This was alright, but I found that I mentally became really attached to the idea of the table. The painting that I made on a tabletop was more restricted than the Dura-Lar paintings. One day in the car, Maddie thought of using table linens instead. So we ordered a bunch of vintage tablecloths from Etsy, and I tried it out.

The table linen was a success. I found that the fabrics used on most of my stock were finely knit cotton or cotton/linen blends. After using either PVA size or clear gesso, they became very smooth as compared to normal canvas. This was much more like the Dura-Lar, but it was taking the work to a new place. I found that the patterns and embroidery on each linen sparked ideas for me, so the uniqueness of the substrates generated content for paintings.

Pia's Shower

The first painting I did on table linen is here (gesture to painting), *Pia's Shower*. It is a top-view tablescape full of party food. Like the long tradition of still life painting, this composition flaunts the lusciousness of plenty. Keeping the subject lifesize on a generously sized substrate allowed me to paint many different kinds of things... I tried to paint them in different ways that were appropriate to the character of the individual objects I was representing. The painting is clearly not a realistic depiction of the subject. Instead, the objects kind of float above the table.

The perspective is a little wonky, the colors are playful, and representation style shifts from drawing to full paint. I chose to break the symmetry of the patterned tablecloth and allow it to float in and out of representation. All these choices evoke a feeling of distance. When describing this painting, many people have brought up memory or a "dreamy quality". That feeling makes perfect sense since the content is a combination of my own memories and imagination.

Drawings

This painting also did something else for the rest of the work: it took me back to drawing. I have never incorporated drawing into my paintings very much- I have always focused on color, tone, and shape even in representational paintings more so than line. But I decided to paint the paella in the bottom lefthand corner differently- by making a 'drawing' first with paint. I really loved the way it looked, so I kept it. This then led me to begin drawing as a consistent practice during this process. Each week I would do quick, loose drawings... this also helped me build a library of content to pull from in my other paintings. The fruit bowl painting (mention where it is hanging) is very much rooted in this practice. I found that in many ways it propelled the other works as I tried new compositions and techniques.

Sari Sari

The first painting that I made after the fruitbowl is here (gesture), Sari-Sari. In Sari-Sari, palette and the lack of place lend to a mysterious vibe. The soda bags have been positioned as the central and only representative element in the painting. Their weight is supported by a pool of ultra-marine blue. Pink stripes show through a blueish field, made visible by a scrape that accentuates the embroidery on the table cloth. The border is something that I borrowed directly from some of my drawings: it accentuates the simple composition. Within the border are little scratched drawings of the pattern embroidered on the cloth.

In the Philippines, sari-sari stores are scattered throughout cities and dot roads in more rural areas. We drink soda from plastic bags like this. A woman always works the storefront, and usually her kids help or play nearby. There are bars on the windows, which inspired the pink stripes. The contrast between the abundance in Pia's Shower and the modesty of Sari-Sari may seem stark to American viewers. But in the Philippines, poverty and wealth are nearly inseparable. Not only are we a developing country, where the disparity between the rich and poor is typically much greater than what y'all are used to in the first world, but we're an overpopulated island nation. To increase jobs, there are helpers for everything. A typical "upper middle class" household has at least a cook, a driver, and a maid. Most have many. As privileged Filipinos, we don't just see the poor every day. We are raised by the poor, we are nurtured by the poor, and we are fed by the poor.

I didn't make a conscious separation about the nature of the feast in Pia's Shower and the nature of the soda bags until after it was brought to my attention. But I think that says something about being raised in the Philippines. Street food, bustling jeeps, and squatter villages are part of the same world as modern beach houses, designer brands, and fine dining. My family has a lot of privilege in the Philippines, and I lived a pretty great life there. But for every five-star meal I enjoyed, I probably had one hundred servings of street fish balls and dirty ice cream. Cuisine reveals a lot about the culture, and often the most humble foods become the most culturally beloved.

RIP Izzy's Friend

There is another interesting thing that cuisine reveals: the relationship of a people and their land. In *Food and the Filipino*, Doreen Fernandez wrote about native Filipino cuisine as a reflection of a closeness to nature. In one passage, she writes about a waste-nothing attitude that lends itself to creativity:

"We eat the head of fishes, savoring the eyes, the jaws, the brains; we suck out the fat in the heads of shrimps, we salt and pickle fish row; we know how to savor the goodness of watery creatures in all their stages of growth, from tiny fry to a giant breeder."

In another, she dishes out a snub toward European cooking, noting that 'Filipinos do not use too much sauce to hide the lack of freshness, instead, we eat things raw or pure with a little vinegar, butter, garlic.' And that, I can tell you, is true. *RIP Izzy's Friend*, this painting (gesture to painting), reminds me of this closeness. My littlest sister Izzy was five the last time we were together. She befriended a crab that we found on the beach and took it inside the house, where it lived for a couple of days. She then took her friend to the cook and asked that she prepare it. Izzy knew that the crab she caught was her friend and she knew that crab was delicious, but she did not realize that to eat her friend, he had to be dead.

At home, there is a much closer relationship between living animals and our food than there is here. A lot of Americans are surprised when they learn that I grew up catching lobsters and eating them raw or that I traded chickens for my tattoo. *RIP Izzy's Friend* is a full crab on a tablecloth. It kind of speaks to those memories and that whole idea. It is a mostly green painting, with bits of red popping through. The complementary color scheme is something I use in this painting as well as a couple of others; it lends itself to an energetic composition.

I applied thick paint to the shell with a knife in a smooth motion so that it would be hard, like a crab shell. The small bits of sand or rice dance around the crab and weave in and out of the charming palm tree embroidery. Both the embroidery and the original color of the table linen inspired the painting. The green of the linen had a massive influence on the palette for the entire painting. Like *Sari-Sari*, the painting has a relatively central composition. However, in this composition, the surrounding space is activated by pattern rather than by the presence of thick oil paint.

Tata's Leche Flan

Pattern- both the patterns on the table cloths and my own patterns- began to play a more crucial role in the paintings as I continued. This is partially because I saved the best tablecloths for last. In *Tata's Leche Flan*, (gesture to painting) the embroidery on the tablecloth loosely frames the painting. Flans of all shapes and perspectives float in a pink field. Thick, knifed on paint lends itself to the creaminess of flan. Small dots of paint, or what I would call rice, lead the viewer through the space situated between all of the objects. The

flan, the party napkins, and the party hat are all geometric shapes hanging in space, but the napkins and hat introduce another layer of pattern also. Plus they are fun. A floating ashtray gives a little edge to this pink party painting, which is fitting. My Tata, or great grandmother, like many other women of the Philippines, had some edge.

Tsokolate

The last and largest painting of the series is, to me, a painting of my other great grandmother's house. My Lola Diday owned a cocoa farm in the province of Cagayan. I will never forget her home, which looked like a smaller version of the houses printed around the border of this table cloth. Her walls were covered in blue and yellow wallpaper that in my mind made a jade glow around everything. (Actually, I believed that the walls were jade until I saw a photograph a couple of weeks ago.) Lola Diday made hot tsokolate by compressing cocoa into balls and mixing it with carabao milk.

My process changed pretty dramatically with this painting. Composition is one thing that I typically struggle through, but I didn't have much time to struggle on this. In my other paintings, the material is mostly generated in my mind. Occasionally, I find an internet reference for an object or shape or pattern. However, in *Tsokolate*, I relied much more heavily on appropriated references. I pulled a bunch of photos of tsokolate from the internet. I printed them and made multiples of most of the shots. I then cut and laid them out to create one big composition. I wasn't concerned about perspective or scale or shape. I hoped that using this collage method would enhance the nonsensical space that I was playing with in my other paintings.

This process ended up creating what I think is a very successful and interesting composition. I think that both the representational painting style and the collage aspects have a strong connection to photo. To me, the painting is a lot like the way that we remember things now. There are often photographs that help us remember our most vivid memories. The collage aspect did enhance the jumbled space I have been playing with, and the original pattern around the border flattens the space even more.

That border was just too great to paint over- it reminded me so much of home. This is part of the reason that it was so carefully preserved. The houses themselves and the rich brown and cream colors on the original table linen reminded me of the tsokolate. The print, especially as it wraps around the sides of the stretcher bars, show a colonial culture. If the Philippines have been one thing, it's colonized. Of course, that history comes with pain, suffering, and deep injustices. But it also means sisig, pan de sal, paella, tamales, and caldaretta. So, there's that. I decided to try another iteration of the funky border on *Sari-Sari*, which I think brings new life to such an old tablecloth.

This painting especially is a good example of something I have been interested in throughout my time painting and researching about food. In some paintings,

I have included items that are mass produced in the Philippines, like the mango cake in Pia's Shower or the dishes here. Other times, the foods are homemade-but often they are common foods. When an American person looks at the painting, the experience is probably much different than a Filipino. Of course, food is something we can all enjoy, and often something that may be super specific to us Filipinos is still close enough to something from American cuisine that everyone can have their own memories and connect to the painting. Public versus private memory, especially in relation to food, is something that I know my paintings are influenced by.

A while ago, a couple of friends from home were visiting our apartment and saw Tsokolate while it was in the works. This was one of a handful of times that I've been able to have a Filipino audience. She became really excited, listing all the individual foods and tools in the painting, and how they related to each other. Obviously, the public memory of people raised in the Philippines is different than the public memory of people raised in other places. Each of the things in the painting will have a more specific relationship to one another for a Filipino. My private memory may be directly from my Lola's house: the specific taste of her tsokolate and the color of her walls. For another Filipino, they may connect the tsokolate to another individual, or a specific time, or one place.

Conversely, when Morgan looked at this, the houses on the border reminded him of Louisiana and the drinks reminded him of coffee. Our food memories and experiences are strong ones, and I know that my viewers all come to these paintings with different histories and relationships to food. My hope is that the paintings are formally strong enough that they are fun and delicious to be in, no matter a person's history.

All the paintings

As I look at this work in the context of art history, I think of traditional still life painting. I also think of painters like Wayne Thiebaud, and the way that he utilized public memory to encapsulate a time and place through food. I also know that my work has a relationship to current food photography, especially with the top-view of food. Since I've sourced images from the internet, I definitely know that food photography has a relationship to especially Tsokolate. Great painters like Van Gogh and Gauguin taught me both color and application. James Ensor's attentiveness to space helped me see areas that my paintings were lacking. Modernist painting, like my paintings, often combined the idea of still-life with the priority of paint. And then there is the "Unswept Floor" mosaic preserved and copied in Roman dining rooms, a charming array of food stuff tiled into the floor. These mosaics taught me about shadow and how fun it is to make food float.

I named this exhibition "Upo Tayo" or "Come Sit with Me." Sharing a meal with someone is a gesture of good faith and generosity.. I wanted my paintings to work in a similar way. I wanted them to be inviting and accessible. These paintings are full and hopefully fun. They allowed me to learn and experiment

with paint, but they also allowed me to savor some of my sweetest memories. After painting all of these, I realized while titling them that so many of them are connected to the strong women of my home. Filipino society is in many ways matriarchal, and women are the heads of the households. It only makes sense that these paintings, so strongly situated at the table, would be closely tied to the matriarchs of my family.

And so, in the words of my grandmothers, "Anak, handa na ang pagkain."
"The food is ready."



THESIS PROPOSAL

Kamayan

1 May 2019

Morgan Walker, Daniela Molnar, Barry Pelzner

Food is at the center of all culture. It is immediately necessary for our survival. It often takes many hands to produce, and it connects us directly to our environment and to one another. Food is rooted in survival, but our intimate connection to it has made it so much more than that. Like art, food has this spiritual aspect. A shared meal is perhaps one of the most universal gestures of unity and respect. Our food- the way we cultivate it, the way we prepare it, and the way we share it- acts as a window into culture, identity, and community. I've been thinking about food for awhile now: where it comes from, what it looks like, how it tastes. I've been painting the food I grew up eating. I've found that these paintings, although simple in nature, reference some pretty fascinating ideas. For the past semester, I've been researching food and tradition and food in art.

Food can do two things I'm interested in: act as clue and as glue. Food as glue has allowed evolving dishes and recipes to carry a great deal of information. Food as clue allows us to taste a dish, or even look at it, and surmise a history, equatorial location, lifestyle of the maker, or other cultural ideas. The idea of using food as clue and as glue has made painting food a fertile field for me.

I began painting food because I learned to paint what I love. There are few things I love more than food: it has been the structure to my life.

I was born and raised in the Philippines. We are obsessed with tradition. We are obsessed with food. There are traditions (and meals) for nearly everything. The typical Filipino is deeply superstitious, Catholic, and always looking forward to the next fiesta. An important aspect of all of our celebrations is sharing a meal. We do not take food lightly. If you enter a home, you will eat. The host will serve you, no matter how little they have for their own family. In *Philippine World-View*, Doreen G. Fernandez attempts to describe the relationship Filipinos have to food.

Food punctuates his life, is a touchstone to his memories, is a measure of his relationships with nature, with his fellowmen, with the world. [...] Even after much travel and acculturation, even after taste buds have been attuned to wine and caviar and French sauces, the Filipino will speak longingly of silver-grey shrimps jumping in the basket, of bungus stuffed with tomatoes and onions and thrown on a fire till black and crusty, of sawsawan and pamutat and kamayan.

Where some families cement themselves in religion, or music, or athletics, my family is food-oriented. My father was the catalyst to our love for food. He was a master chef; he loved to cook. He loved to cook for us. He loved to teach us how to eat. Now, I've realized that wrapped up in images of food are all the topics that I touched on earlier and more. There's never ending subject matter, and creating compositions bursting with the flavors of a meal is as exciting as eating one. I've always wanted to be a chef like my father, but I didn't realize I'd use painting as the medium for my culinary journey.

When I paint, the subject comes from memory. If I need to look up a reference, I do, but every painting is this kind of collage of meals I've had in my life. In the last two semesters, I've tried different ways of painting these food paintings. I mostly paint on dura-lar. It reminds me of placemats. Dura-lar has been a trusty substrate because it is smooth; building with paint is faster. I can accomplish generous paintings. Paintings are meant to be celebrated, enjoyed, and shared. These pieces are a new step for me; I previously had a strong interest in abstract expressionism. I was making work that was about the paint, about composition, and about the importance of being present— I was making work that documented an event. My paintings today still satisfy this credo. The difference between my past work and this current work is that I've found a representational language that allows me to infuse the paintings with all kinds of delicious content. The work not only changes based on my moods and feelings, but is also composed of subject matter that is forever changing in our globalized world.

For my thesis, I propose a visual feast. I want to prioritize painting: that's really the subject of my thesis. The content of the paintings, however, has this amazing ability to become a celebration. I have these ideas of creating paintings on table tops or painting on placemats and table cloths, but I also have interest in treating canvases with oil bases to evoke the smoothness of

dura-lar. I'm not opposed to returning to dura-lar completely. However, I want to experiment with painting on other substrates as well.

I want to fill up a gallery with these robust, lively food paintings. I want the paintings to be beautiful and formally strong. This is my top priority.

Over the summer break, I plan on continuing my search for the proper substrate that will satisfy the paint and translate my work into the proper context. I've found that with dura-lar I am able to reach the viewer through nostalgia and peak the viewers' interest at looking back into their memories- to dig up moment where they may have been eating meals with their family, friends, loved ones, and taste the food again. I'll be painting on a couple of wooden table tops and some primed canvases and playing around with the installation of the work before making a final decision. I may incorporate a few different substrates into the thesis work. I think that it is important that the paint, substrate, and concept all are in coherence. Just like a perfect meal, the ingredients should all sing together in harmony with every piece that is taken in.

Plutarch wrote "we do not invite each other simply to eat and drink, but to eat and drink together". It's this idea that I'm particularly fascinated with right now: food, although necessary, is also a place for togetherness. It's a place for tradition, for innovation, for generations, and for the individual. When I paint food, I think about this idea; it reminds me of my family and my first home. For my thesis, I plan to create a body of paintings of food. I plan to experiment a little bit, like a chef in the kitchen. I plan to bring it all together beautifully and serve it for us all to share.

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