

## ***Stain as a mark, celebrated.***

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What is a stain? A mark left behind, whether by accident or design. An imprint on the thing it touches—whether textile, land, psyche, skin, even history. A stain resists disappearance or forgetting. Sometimes it lingers, sometimes it spreads. Always there, ghostlike, no matter how much therapy you get or Vanish Oxi Action you spray on it.

The aswang, too, refuses erasure and containment. She can split herself in two, transform into human, monster or animal, shifting continuously. Speaking to the diaspora, the aswang becomes a queered, racialised counter-myth for those of us who don't see ourselves in narratives of nationhood, productivity, or an easy belonging.

Her myth can be seen as a way of connecting with the past (sometimes monstrous, fragmented, unsettling) and letting it speak back to a complex living present. The aswang becomes a conduit for Filipino women to articulate unwieldy stories, deviant desires and tangled selves that refuse colonial, patriarchal and heteronormative frameworks. The aswang is both alluring and grotesque, and she exists at an intersection of multiplicity and resistance. A figure through which we can imagine alternative ethics and modes of power exchange, she offers a different way to survive—perhaps even thrive.

Stories of aswang have followed me since childhood, but as an entity, she is no fixed thing. Her legend shifts from place to place, province to province, but the anxieties underneath them stay the same. Fears about unruly women and their desires that can't or won't be disciplined. About ways of surviving that fall outside what the church or the state approves. Before colonisation, women and gender-diverse figures such as the babaylan held roles of spiritual and sociopolitical leadership, inseparable from people and place. Threatened by this power, Spanish colonisers and missionaries recast them as witches, painting them as evil, unnatural and morally deviant. From there, the aswang emerged as a thing of fear, a tool to enforce gendered and moral hierarchies in the archipelago. And yet, although she was demonised, she persisted. Shapeshifting, hiding and returning again and again in our stories.

Fast forward to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. American forces and their Philippine allies picked up her tale and deployed it as psychological warfare against insurgent groups such as the Hukbalahap. Once celebrated as guerrilla heroes who resisted Japanese occupation during World War II, the Huks were later vilified by successive Philippine governments for opposing American imperialist policies (such as the Bell Trade Act which increased U.S. control over Philippine trade and economy). CIA-led counterinsurgency operations included staged killings designed to mimic the lore of the aswang. Bodies drained of blood, organs removed, corpses planted in known Huk areas to demoralise the resistance and terrify the rural communities who supported them. It's also interesting to note that women were central to the Huks; women like Remedios Gomez-Paraiso (Kumander Liwayway), Simeona Punsalan-Tapang (Kumander Guerrero), Felicidad Sicangco del Rosario (Kumander Sisa) were crucial to the resistance. How vile that the state, in turn, appropriated female violence as something evil and self-serving in attempt to justify and mask their own violence—while these women took up arms as acts of resilience, resistance and service to their communities.

The spirit of aswang can be found in Pari's group exhibition, *Stain*, which reckons with the body as mutable and rebellious. Here, the artists reckon with the body in its many forms: as a thing to hide or to hide inside; something to use, hold, or measure; a site for transmutation and transformation, for deformation and performance, for pulling apart and putting back together. Bodies that resist, that push back. Each artist approaches the body differently—in stasis or in motion, in crisis or in flux—offering not one simple understanding of self but a constellation of selves, done up, undone, reimagined. It is also an exhibition about looking: how the body is seen, shaped, surveilled, and mythologised.

Joshua Di Mattina-Beven's multi-channel video project and performance, *Tussle* echoes the malleable, relational body of the aswang. Performers push, pull, collapse, and cushion one another, creating intimacy and vulnerability as well as tension and play. Each tussle negotiations questions of presence and control, exploring how bodies interact, touch, separate and collaborate. The live performance extends this out further, turning the audience into both participants and witnesses to this tension play. Like the aswang, *Tussle* makes us reconsider what we know about the feeling of bodies meeting, colliding, and being strained.

Lois Waters' printmaking and beading similarly engages with the aswang's mutability. Her work evokes the medical body: blood, ligament, healing, vitality. It also explores the slow,

ritualised remaking of the self. The meticulous process of beading reflects the ongoing negotiation of the body, where transformation is accumulative and intimate. In her dangling, experimental forms, the body is connected to nothing and everything, much like the aswang's ability to traverse spaces, species and forms without containment.

Annabelle McEwen's selected works speak to the hunger of the virtual gaze and the way it demands, distorts and reshapes body and psyche. In her sculptures and images, the gym becomes a stage where the body performs its own becoming: fuelled, surveilled, disciplined, encouraged to transform. She plays with digital and physical materials—protein powder, scanned skin, photography—to expose the body as a funhouse mirror, stretched between truth and artifice. Her pieces are propped up on iPad stands, fed through apps, bent and processed by algorithms that purport to know what perfection looks like. Here, McEwen touches the aswang's terrain in the expectation to split in two—one body for the gaze; another pulsing with private hunger. She shows how identity is shaped not only by what we feed the machine, but by what the machine feeds back to us.

Fiona Lee's *The Interruption* is a sound installation in a found, rusted jerrycan, already bearing the scars of its own history. Lee creates auditory and tactile hostility: harsh, discordant sounds that feel toxic in the body, speaking to how violence on land seeps into the people who live with it. Lee brushes against an aswang logic of inheritance: state violence absorbed, never entirely contained.

M. Sunflower's appropriation of Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* channels the rhizomatic, interconnected quality of the aswang, imagining Medusa as a fat woman of (green) colour slaying Perseus. In her practice, Sunflower explores how connection persists even in the absence of visibility, and questions how communities, care, and resistance can flourish underground and offline. During her artist talk, Sunflower emphasised the role of the artist in cultivating humanity—making by hand and producing traces that persist against the machinery of surveillance and corporate control. There is a healing quality to her practice, echoing the aswang's persistence. Something indestructible, that refuses to be erased—a conduit for survival and imagination.

Michail Mathioudakis/Marcia Manhunter performs gender in ways that echo the aswang's fluidity and defiance, her refusal to be singular or static in her identity and her desire. Their

work riffs on the extremes of the binary, emulating passport photos, ID cards and drag that twists the concept of identity into playful, fluid forms. Drag here becomes a theatre of the self, and the performance foregrounds multiplicity, resistance, and pleasure in inhabiting multiple bodies at once. In *i. d.*, the aswang is present in the refusal to be fixed or disciplined in her desires.

Runa Vasile engages with imperfection, decay, and ruin, echoing the aswang's celebration of the marked and the fractured. Her materials—grass, clay, and circles—demonstrate transformation, impermanence, and the beauty of what is in flux. Where perfection is hostile, Vasil transforms mistakes into possibility, where ruin can guide new forms and shapes.

In *MYTH*, Oliver Whitehouse turns to folk memory and propaganda, weaving found and archival footage into a personal mythology shaped by his own interpretations. His work circles around Meng Po, “goddess of oblivion,” a figure who feels uncannily close to the aswang, haunting cultural memory and the old technology he resurrects—young artist, old ghosts.

Myra Javaid's paintings navigate interior and exterior geographies of Karachi and her diasporic experience through works that play with place and musings of the female body. Her paintings reflect the aswang's multiplicity: delicate, grungy, rooted yet untethered, considering (in)visibility and the different ways one person can take up space. Her practice reflects the aswang's persistence as a figure who inhabits multiple spaces and identities simultaneously, rooted in a feminine experience of presence and place.

Jenny Trinh/Wytchings projects trauma and intimacy onto a mannequin, creating quiet intimacies with the uncanny. Watching her video installation, *Fear Is A Cold Star*, the mannequin is companion, ghost and interlocutor. Her plastic body becomes stand-in for Trinh's herself, a site where memory, self-protection and projection converge. The piece folds in Trinh's musicality, giving the mannequin voice, in which the artist can both hide and speak unfiltered through layers of emotion. Here, Trinh echoes the aswang's liminality—the space between intimacy and distance, a cold star.

Across these works, the aswang's ethos of persistence, transformation, mutability and resistance, can be found. In *Stain* we see the body, identity, and myth as sites of negotiation

and play; that what is marked, fractured, or stained can be generative. Survival and imagination demand fluidity and adaptability, the aswang asserts.

*Stain* explores how bodies shift and collide, decay and reassemble. How we perform identities; how we resist and form networks that persist underground. In reflecting on these works, the aswang becomes a lens for understanding the ways we survive, remember and create.

She allows us to see the ways the body, the self, and the collective can find agency in deviance and fragility. To transform what has been flayed or damaged into sites of power and possibility. Like *Stain*, the aswang refuses containment and insists we see ourselves in our own histories, our own bodies, our own communities. She becomes a way of celebrating the fractures—not hiding or fixing or erasing them, but honouring the stain.