

Mahal Kita, Mi Amor

by

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Through mixed media prints and drawings, my works focus on culture and identity as an American of first and second generation mixed background – Filipino, Italian, Puerto Rican – I am interested in how we have become Americanized. I am especially focused on how food is a way of sharing experiences, and how branding can be used as an identifier to understand foreign experiences. The westernization of the Philippines and the colonization of Puerto Rico, has had a large impact on both of their relationships with the United States. This is shown in popular meals, and snacks. These works are cited from my personal interactions with overseas family members and experiences in American culture as a comparison. I create portraits using food to depict cultural identifiers and the western influences that have changed how my family expresses themselves today.

Many of my influences come from multicultural artists who use food, fabric and symbolism to depict the experience of how diverse their cultural upbringing was. Rikrit Tiravanija cooks during exhibits and shares food from both Thai and Argentinian culture to give visitors a sensory, savory understanding of a part of himself. Lucia Hierro uses branding in sculptures to recreate the Dominican American narrative. In my project I include Filipino snacks that emulate American junk food as a reference in my pieces to the cultural diffusion I have experienced. Companies like *Jollibee*, whose orange and red *Chickenjoy* box is depicted in my print *Inang's Birthday*, are modeled after many American fast food chains and have become so successful in the Philippines and Southeast Asia that they have migrated over to the United States with gaining popularity. For Puerto Ricans residing in mainland United States, the most popular brand is *Goya*, which is used in almost every ingredient you can find in Puerto Rican cuisine. Both multimedia prints depicting my Puerto Rican family members' favorite meals

contain many a *Goya* product, which is also an identifiable company to many Americans for selling canned beans, sauces and vegetables.



Inang's Birthday, Monotype, 22x30", 2018



Inang's Birthday Reimagined, Woodblock w. Chine Collé, 22x30", 2018

Growing up, many of my aunts and uncles lived around the world in countries other than the motherland of the Philippines which is a common trend – they depended heavily on emigration to financially prosper. I spent much of my time in America with visiting relatives that came and went – many of them being 35 and older. As a child, my family shared an apartment with my great-aunt and uncle where *Arroz Caldo*, Fig Newtons™, and prune juice were considered a normal meal for me. After overhearing stories of my aunts and uncles struggles with cultural assimilation, I have employed the role of American family member to myself. It has become necessary to defend them from the xenophobes of today, as I have a better understanding of the culture. An aunt who babysat a rich white couple in Manhattan, an uncle who came to send money to his wife and children back home, a cousin who emigrated to Dubai with her boyfriend to pay for a brand new home - all cultural stereotypes we embrace due to neocolonialist rhetoric that is constantly chanted in the culture.

I am theoretically a historical reverence in Filipino and Puerto Rican culture, the idea of a mixed person is considered a rare beauty. The idea of whiteness in my blood was a colonist ideology that still affects the Philippines and Puerto Rico's beauty standards today, only a recent beauty standard in America. Although the idea of mixed beauty is one ideal, growing up amongst people of a singular background made it uncomfortable for them. I was an outsider, a reminder of the different people that existed outside of the culture. Unable to even understand the mother tongues of my parents cause relatives to pause and laugh asking, "Oh, you understand, but you can't speak it back?" a common answer spit out by other first generation Americans. A question I cannot affirm because my parents spoke only English, as it was the only language they could share. Constantly being approached in rapid Spanish because I look the part, but I do not "act"

the part. Being given disdainful looks by elderly Latina women, and side-eyed by Latinx of my generation for not speaking the native tongue of my grandparent. Mastering the phrases “No hablo español, no entiendo.” People disbelieving me after I inform them that I am also Italian, telling me I should not lie about *my* race. People constantly guessing my ethnicity like I am a mystery to be solved and being told how *exotic*, how *interesting* I am for being mixed, like I am some new discovery. Being made to feel as if I cannot belong with either side of my family, because I did not have a full Pinoy or Boricua upbringing. These encounters have ostracized me from both sides of my family.

But these experiences did not stop me from learning more about each culture as I grew older, despite the forced social expectations based on how I look. In fact, it drove me to learn about cultures outside of my own, and being in a place as diverse as New York City has helped these kinds of experiences grow. Each of my prints depicts a family member whose palate influenced my life, from childhood to my adulthood, where I still learn more about myself and my cultural background. These pieces are paired with recipe cards that list the ingredients and side notes about their relevance. In *Uncle Frank's Snack Time*, I included the well known Puerto Rican favorite, *pasta de guayaba y queso blanco*. This is my uncle's favorite snack, and mainly because if he could, he would just eat the pasta de guayaba by the spoonful. Typically this is served with ritz crackers and those same crackers can be served with *cafe con leche*, all snacks that can be eaten together. I thought this meal would appropriately describe my fun loving Uncle, a true Sunset Park Puerto Rican.



Uncle Frank's Snack Time, Monoprint, 18x18" 2018

In the piece, *Titi Monique's Pastelillos de Carne*, I included the key ingredients my aunt uses to create her version of the popular fried meat turnover, also known as *empanadas*. Those products are mainly from *Goya*, except for her special *sofrito* and *recaito* that she makes from scratch with plants from Puerto Rico. My aunt has a big personality that makes up for her size and her food reflects that. The olives used in her pastelillos aren't just *any* olives, they are *alcaparrado* olives, which many people get confused with regular salad olives. They *must* be this specific type of *Goya* olives or they aren't truly right. Each bite is packed with a punch, from the tart acidity of the brined olives, to the velvety texture of the well seasoned ground meat, and the crunch of the salty shell, you're bound to grab another one after the last bite. Just like her food, the stories she has told me about my family keep me reaching for more.



Titi Monique's Pastillos de Carne, Monotype, 15x18", 2018

My relationship with my mother is a complex one, just like her favorite soup. To many Latinx, tamarind is seen as a fruit, candy or juice. To Filipinos, or *Pinoy*, it is a fruit and a seasoning in savory food. *Sinigang* is a popular type of soup that is eaten in the Philippines by many – it can have almost any type of meat, but the main ones are pork (*baboy*), prawns (*hipon*), or milkfish (*bangus*). My mother's favorite from as young as I can remember is *Sinigang na bangus*, otherwise known as sour fish stew. I fondly remember being served both the pork and fish version of this soup and hating it as a child. I grew to like it as an adult because this is definitely an “adult” flavor. Introducing this to friends causes mixed reactions and when I finally tried *tamarindo* for the first time, I actually hated it because I was so used to drinking hot tamarind broth. My mother comes from a culture that is so different and much more conservative than American culture that we butt heads a lot. We don't have the same life views and it can create a lot of tension. My relationship with tamarind flavors and experiencing it in

both very different but similar parts of my culture and in this dish is how I would describe my relationship with my mother.



My Mother's Favorite, Monotype, 15x18", 2019

The last dish I chose to create into a monotype was *Chicken Adobo*. In the piece titled, *My Childhood Fave* I have listed all the basic ingredients you need to make this dish, which can be tweaked depending on what part of the Philippines you are from. For me, I sometimes add tomatoes because they add a thicker texture and a flavor boost that complements the soy sauce and vinegar really well. I like to think that the little addition is me creating my own new version of a dish that I can fuse to other influences. Usually this is served with rice, but I have also deboned the chicken post cooking and put it onto a toasted roll as a sandwich. I see this dish as an inviting way to introduce other people to Filipino cuisine, and was my first experience with truly loving the food from my mother's country.



My Childhood Fave, Monotype, 22x30", 2019

Smaller prints I have made re-create snacks in isolation, like online shopping or on a grocery shelf. Alcaparrado olives are also snacked on before dinner, and I recreated the branding to a common phrase in Spanish that I hear my aunt say while gossiping and cooking. “¡Ay dios!” she would say while being a chismosa about the family with me. *Adobo* is a well known seasoning many Latinx use for all purpose seasoning, and you can find this on any American grocery store shelf in the “Hispanic Foods” aisle. I chose to create this print because I thought it was funny to talk about the two different “adobos” in my pieces. Chicken Adobo and chicken seasoned with Adobo are two very different dishes that can easily confuse people who don’t know the differences.



Adobo (left), Monotype, 11x15” 2018 ¡Ay Dios! (right), Monotype, 11x15”, 2018

Other snacks included are *Hopia Ube*, which you can find in Asian grocery stores as a prepackaged mass produced item by *Eng Bee Tin* – ironically a Chinese company – that otherwise is homemade. It is sweet purple yam paste inside a baked flour crust and my favorite Filipino snack. Like my Uncle Frank, whenever I get the chance, I would eat the filling – which you can buy alone as *Ube Halaya* – by the spoonful. Purple yam, *ube* has become a big gourmet flavor in America now, and I am worried this will skyrocket the price of the produce making it inaccessible to Filipino immigrants as it grows in popularity. Another snack is *Sunflower Crackers*, which are literally what it is, crackers made with sunflower oil. They are bright warm yellow salted crackers that can be different flavors, but my brother’s and my favorite flavor are the cheese ones. They don’t actually have much of a flavor, but they are the most similar to club crackers, which are equally as good. We would go through boxes of these, and *Skyflakes* (the less tastier ones) as kids.



Hopia Ube (top), Monoprint, 11x15", 2018



Sunflower Crackers (bottom), Monoprint, 11x15", 2019

My culturally diverse background has given me an understanding of the different peoples I come from, and how common it is to be of mixed race and of immigrant parents in America today. These experiences have become “The New America”, a concept of what our predicted population is to look like in the next 20 years with more openness to cultural diffusion. There is a fine line between diffusion and assimilation; those lines are blurred when you are of mixed race. There is this constant social pressure to assimilate to the popular culture, and to give

into the cultural stereotypes of what a mixed race person may be visually perceived as. The term “passing” is a phrase used frequently when speaking about this identity as a way to force a label onto a mixed race person. Although an individual like myself has an ethnic background from more than one country, I pass to many others as only one identity. I want to share these experiences to show that although different, we are not uncommon individuals. I am using branding and recipes to create portraits of the many parts of my identity, specifically family members that have impacted my life. My pieces represents parts of my cultural experiences that I would like to share with others. Many facets of my cultural background have similarities and differences, but they are all equally a part of me. I will continue to explore these nuances through food, branding and recipes to express my multicultural identity in prints, drawings and paintings.

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