

# NICOLEI BUENDIA GUPIT

*"She's my mom, and she's also my dad... I learned everything from my Nanay Dela."*

Members of a Filipino family reminisce over their late matriarch, Fidela "Nanay Dela" Raqueño Gregorio, as they share a meal together. We hear their conversation wash over a tableau of their dinner: paper that has printed and cut out to mimic banana leaves cover a table, and spilling over it is a massive spread of Jufran banana ketchup and soy sauce, dragon fruit and jackfruit, empanadas and lumpia, a lucky cat statue, and a small Mother Mary. These objects have been cast in resin and paper clay and are garishly painted in a bright neon, the same shade as a cinematic green screen. Five white paper clay plates are set at the table, and projected over each plate is video footage of a different Filipino dish— iconic dishes from kare-kare to adobo— diminishing over time as it is eaten; hands and forks appear in the frame, as evidence of a meal enjoyed. It is a spectacular, beautiful rendition

of a mundane dinner, preserving a fleeting moment of connection forever....and yet.

In this installation, the first of three iterations to be exhibited at The Broad under the title *Pamilya*, artist Nicolei Buendia Gupit has produced an outsized mimicry of remade objects to fantastically re-create home and its pleasures. In *Pamilya - March 12th, 1922, in memory of the artist's grandmother, Fidela "Nanay Dela" Raqueño Gregorio, who was born on this day*, what first appears as homage or monumentalization of a domestic scene is a dissemblage, however, with the connections of this family being as fragile as the paper pulp used to make the plates. Without their late *nanay* to bring them together, and the demands of late capitalism pulling them in every direction, this family has remained scattered across the globe; some have not shared space with one another in a decade or more. Separated by thousands of miles across land and sea, each person spoke individually to Gupit of their

memories, and it was Gupit alone who edited these sound bytes into an imbricated environment.

In this layered simulacra, *Pamilya* does not fetishize the past but rather imagines other ways of being in relation across borders material and metaphorical. The taste of home and family are bittersweet as *ampalaya*, with internet connections and video projections serving to connect in the absence. These meals are meant to be slowly savored by the viewer, who must work to fill in the missing bodies at the table as well as the details of history with their own assumptions or even their own recollections. When I encountered this table, I have taste memory of homes on both sides of the Pacific: sitting at the kitchen table of my lolo's house in Quezon City, my yayas peeling *atis-atis* and *mangosteens* for me to eat at the end of a hot day riding jeepneys all over town; at Christmas dinners in Jersey City, Tampa FL, and wherever my extended family rooted down, listening to my mom arguing with

one of her brothers over some long-standing family drama while my aunties gossiped and my little cousins played all around us. The food was always the only thing my loud and sprawling family could all agree on— that it be delicious; that most of it be Filipino food; and that we would have more than enough to eat, to save, and to share.

The late, great Filipino food writer, Doreen Fernandez, reminds us that food is inevitably connected to love; she goes on to give an example of a friend who expresses their love not only through the food itself, but through the "total menu-performance."<sup>4</sup> In the total menu-performance of Nicolei Buendia Gupit's *Pamilya* series, Filipino food as binding agent is the constant. The project reminds us why people in the diaspora remain so attached to our food as a material and metaphorical symbol of lifeways left behind and then remade: in the face of so much unspoken and unacknowledged losses, it is evidence that love still remains.

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Clockwise from Top Left:

*Pamilya - April 17th, 1942, in commemoration of the artist's grandfather, Francisco "Tatay Kikoy" Hebreo Buendia, who survived the Bataan Death March on this day, On view: March 17 – April 17, 2022, Resin, paper pulp, paper clay, video projection, printed image, wood, LED diodes, and sound equipment, Table 10 x 3 x 3*

*Pamilya - March 12th, 1922, in memory of the artist's grandmother, Fidela "Nanay Dela" Raqueño Gregorio, who was born on this day, On view: February 26 – March 13, 2022, Resin, paper pulp, paper clay, video projection, printed image, wood, LED diodes, and sound equipment, Table 10 x 3 x 3*

*Pamilya - May 1st, 1898, in remembrance of the period of American colonialization of the Philippines which began on this day; May 1st, 1934, in observance of the Philippine Independence Act which took effect on this day, On view: April 21 – May 15, 2022, Resin, paper pulp, paper clay, video projection, printed image, wood, LED diodes, and sound equipment, Table 10 x 3 x 3*