



Written by JE

# Imprinted in the Water: An Ecological Art Exhibition by Nicolei Buendia Gupit

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I visited and sat looking at the 'Imprinted in the Water' by Nicolei Buendia Gupit at the Sining Makiling Gallery literally sitting underground of D.L. Umali Hall inside the University of the Philippines in Laguna. The gallery serves as an oasis for arts and humanities in a college of hard sciences. The small exhibit consists of just a wall and two places and everything can be walked in about five-steps; all can be viewed in a few meters distance.

Nicolei seemed to have dipped the canvas in the nearest creek before rendering the images. The images were pressed in hues of murkiness, dearth and turbidity but the clear narratives of the element are reflected on its diverse vessels, forms and flows.



*Nicolei Buendia Gupit's Imprinted in the Water was inspired by her surroundings in Los Baños, Laguna*

The exhibit will flow from the piece 'Contaminated', the drinking water suspended in a familiar blue jug from your nearest water station to 'Exposed', the rainwater uncontained in typhoon's gusts. Water in the form of a commodity to catastrophe. The works are a reflection of the conflicted relationship of people [*barangays* (the smallest unit of local governance), or the society and its systems] with water in all its diverse forms.

In 'Extracted', an image of a *poso*, a hand water pump with all its parts on pitch black highlighting its assembled iron parts, an aged human ingenuity to extract water from an aquifer; with splats of rusts on its wetted canvas. In this frame alone, a discourse on access, extraction rate, and the right to water and sanitation may spring forth. Citing the policy of urban places against *poso*, due to emptying of water tables and subsequently land subsidence; will lead to questions of where and who to go to in delivery of such basic rights or services. How capacitated are local waterworks to deliver domestic water supply? Can an average family afford a water line and monthly bills? Can the *barangay* waterworks measure the life expectancy of their aquifers? The math of the growing households, extraction and recharging rate of the groundwater will not catch up to each other. Who should ensure water in the faucet? If the corporations have more capacity to respond to these questions, maybe the currency of convenience privatizes this ecosystem service. Following this note reflects 'The Value We Put in Water' which are water bottles full of resin with play money suspended inside confronting the concept of ecosystem services such as water that should have been free but now a right on retail.



*"Commercialized"* is an art piece by Filipina American artist, Nicolei Buendia Gupit from her 3rd solo exhibition entitled *"Imprinted in the Water"*

Besides human and water dynamics, the work also extends to aquatic nonhuman communities. In the piece 'Monocultured', the images of tilapia are observed in the shade of

a turbid fish cage lake water. Aquaculture directly pollutes the freshwater ecosystems. The excessive production of only one or two species of fish can drive out native and endemic fishes changing the biological landscape of lakes. Forced fish reproduction, hormonal sex-reversal, and overstocking is both for the name of profit and food security. This is evident in the fish inventory from nets in the cases of *Tawilis* in Lake Taal, and *Ayungin* and *Biya* (native fish species to Philippine notable lakes) in Laguna de Bay.

The piece 'Dammed' is a modification of a water body that can be controlled. A suspension and accumulation of water in a giant block of concrete built within the ancestral lands of cultural communities. The recurring stories of dams are the same, only the name of the river and the indigenous people are changed; disturbing sacred and associated cultural practices. And to think that this only answers to "Where does the city get more water?"



*Nicolei Buendia-Gupit's "Imprinted in the Water" uses a range of mediums and processes that highlight the impact of human activities on water resources.*

There were a few more pieces before landing at the end of the exhibit, but a highlight to 'Exposed' will be explored in this review. 'Exposed' can be about revealing connivance or partnerships [enabling systems] that intensify the climate crisis, specifically the birth of numerous super typhoons but can also pertain to the vulnerability of communities. Looking at the image of the dark skies and the piece of the galvanized iron roof in the storm gusts, I can see our family sheltering in the part of our house whose roofing had not yet peeled off by the raging Super Typhoon Glenda in 2014. The Pacific waters literally in our home.

Nicolei is an educator with her visual aids on water, climate and environment issues that the majority would need an awareness as a starter. The university is also a good place to see and spark conversations on how entangled the future professions as development workers in some sense to the element of water. Apart from reconsidering relationships to the subject

element, it is as turbid as the creations of what can be done on the personal or communal level in the state of our water bodies due to the ecopolitical poverty of many and the gigantic capitals of the few. In ecological arts, there is always this unquenchable thirst to solve 'the problem'. The answer can't be solely found in the exhibit, but maybe we ask more from our public institutions and industries. In another perspective, the exhibit can also be a reiteration of us as consumers, capitalists, flowers/restrictors, governors and evacuees.

Sitting in the front of the 'Imprinted in Water' is uncomfortable yet essential coming in out of the rain.