

MJ Torrecampo
Away Back In The Long Time Ago
Solo Show
Critical Essay **Sasha Bogojev**

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C+N Gallery CANEPANERI
Foro Buonaparte, 48 – 20121 Milan

“You can only keep mining personal history so much,” MJ Torrecampo mentioned while discussing the sharp thematic shift from depicting personal experience to painting visualization of Philippine myths, which marks her second solo exhibition with C+N Gallery CANEPANERI in Milan. Yet, as the conversation proceeded, it became evident that the current body of work depicting a selection of folkloric tales is, in a way, also touching the themes of cultural identity, the immigrant experience, and family dynamics - only this time, as observed *Away Back in the Long Ago*.

Like most Southeast Asian and Pacific mythologies, Philippine mythology speaks of life and nature as forces governed by gods and spirits. They narrate the world's creation, origins, and the emergence of humanity while conveying moral lessons and teaching cultural values. These myths address themes such as harmony between humans and nature, the balance between opposing forces, reverence for ancestors and the spiritual world, and gender equality. During colonial times, they helped preserve connections to roots, traditions, and ancestors, serving as acts of cultural resilience, resistance, and spiritual sustenance. Today, these stories remain vital to artistic, moral, and ethical heritage, primarily manifesting in local festivals and traditions.

While Philippine myths have long appeared in traditional art forms such as textiles, weavings, woodcarvings, ritual masks, costumes, and tattoos, they were primarily passed down through oral storytelling rather than depicted in a painterly format. With her ongoing interest in graphic novels, MJ Torrecampo was initially drawn to the narrative structures of these myths and how they might function within her distinct approach to perspective, depth, and storytelling in general. Often perceived from a unique overhead viewpoint, her past depictions of personal and familial scenes appeared both intimately close and distantly observational. The ability to capture both sides of the coin (the essence of daily life and the complexities of human relationships) felt especially fitting for transforming the stories about the supernatural or sacred in a pictorial format. This also informed her choice of canvas format, which, beyond breaking the traditional rectangle, provides a broader, more navigable surface where different sections, moments, or even timelines can coexist within a singular perspective. Using the act of painting as a narrative device, Torrecampo constructs layered stories that offer contemporary interpretations of ancient myths, interwoven with personal and modern perspectives.

With figures based on her image and elements borrowed from other traditional arts (Ukiyo-e clouds or symbolic ways to depict water), these paintings are characterized by their narrative depth and inventive layouts. By placing figures in fantastical scenarios and blending various types of visuals, Torrecampo crafts stories set in unspecific prehistoric times that are as enigmatic as they are evocative. As such, they invite viewers to sincerely engage and uncover multiple layered fables weaved within the spirited and stimulating compositions. Further, repeating certain elements encourages exploring how to depict them differently, informing a technical exploration of handling the paint. With this, Torrecampo is applying the freedoms of fine art to the storytelling of illustration and different framing devices used in graphic novels. This is evident from the dedicated mark-making, the painstaking building of textures and surfaces, and emphasizing the volumes within essentially flattened perspective and depth. Through such a peculiar approach, she is conjuring up fictionalized folklore paintings that pursue artistic whims and passions unbounded by societal or commercial demands. Using the myths as a structural skeleton, they are equally exciting when observed as storytelling devices as well as cleverly resolved painterly tableaus. Making sure she's not merely illustrating the tale, Torrecampo constructs compelling images that expand the space within a Western canon largely devoid of such narratives. As such, these canvases offer a fresh, painterly perspective on timeless fables *from Away Back in the Long Ago*. - Saša Bogojev