

# AN AESTHETIC OF THE TRACE: KIRI DALENA'S MILITANT AND TRANSCENDENT ART

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*This essay seeks to articulate a philosophical theory about Philippine social realism rooted in the Levinasian concept of the face and the Filipino conception of *loob* and *kapwa* through a reading of the works of artist/activist Kiri Dalena. Dialoguing with the theories of Alejo, Levinas, and Maritain, this paper will discuss how Philippine social realism is rooted in the experience of the face of the other and the call of the transcendent to responsibility. This essay explores how social realists' works make present the face of the other as *kapwa*, which awakens the *loob* to *pakikipagkapwa* as infinite responsibility.*

*Keywords:* *Kiri Dalena, social realism, *loob*, *kapwa*, the face, poetic intuition, infinite responsibility*

## INTRODUCTION

This essay is a philosophical reflection on Philippine social realist art, grounded in the theories of the communion of *loob* and infinite responsibility for the *kapwa* through Alejo in dialogue with Levinas and Maritain. The paper aims to show how philosophy can help us understand how social realism, as an artistic response to marginalization, enables the viewer to open up to the reality of social injustice and violence and awaken to the call of responsibility for the oppressed other. This essay uses a Filipino philosophical lens to examine the work of contemporary social realist Kiri Dalena, whose art is a continuing call for responsibility toward the *kapwa* whom she makes present in her work.

During the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, Sr., social realist visual art rose to prominence. One could find the works of these artists in the editorial pages in magazines, in progressive galleries (like the Hiraya and Ateneo Art Gallery), in protest rallies as portable murals on cloth, and as posters on various walls for various occasions. Social realism was one way artists could bring to public awareness the injustice and exploitation perpetrated in Philippine society, and so artists actively presented their art to the public in order to conscientize the people. By presenting the plight of the oppressed workers, peasants, and women in various media and styles (e.g., pen and ink, realistic murals, and surrealist paintings), their objective was to move the populace to fight for justice (Guillermo 1987, 49). Many university students were educated about the darkness of the Marcos dictatorship through these works. The

authoritarian regime worked hard to censor all forms of mass communications so that the people remained blind to its atrocities. But these works made the faces of injustice present to a wider audience. I can say that these works were my first education about the truth of Philippine socio-political inequalities.

My regular exposure to Philippine Social Realist art came from the Heritage Gallery and the Boston Gallery, as well as from the various protest rallies that led to the EDSA Revolution and the posters that circulated around the Ateneo de Manila campus during my college days in the mid-80s. However, the Ateneo Art Gallery, which then shared a space with the Rizal Library's reserve section, was the venue that allowed me to contemplate this art more deeply. When I would spend hours studying my philosophy class readings, I would take breaks by looking at the works of Pablo Baens Santos, Edgard Fernandez, Imelda Capije Andaya, and Antipas Delotavo. These works immersed me in the world of the people's struggle in a way that moved me to commit my life to working for social justice. Although my own social realist teachers were the masters of the Martial Law period, the work of more contemporary social realists, like Kiri Dalena, led me to ask why social realist art was so effective in my socio-political education, and why artists, decades after its dominance, still choose this art form to deliver their call for liberation.

One can say that the genre of Philippine social realist art is still practiced today because it is an effective instrument for awakening the *loob* to social injustice by making present the suffering *kapwa*. Its militant art practice is able to advocate for social justice by presencing the call for infinite responsibility to all persons of goodwill. In order to understand this philosophically, we will theorize the experience of communion and infinite responsibility, building on the theories of Alejo and the other philosophers of *loob* because this explains the possibility of awakening to infinite responsibility through the face of the *kapwa*. The conceptual framework of the *loob* as *kapwa* can be used to articulate how the presencing of the face as *kapwa* stirs the viewer to experience the work of art as a call for justice in their deepest self. Levinas' theory of the face and infinite responsibility as well as Maritain's theory of the ground of creative intuition and the viewer's experience of the work of art in the intuition into the infinite self can help deepen the explanation of how the encounter with the face of the other calls us to infinite responsibility and how that call to justice comes from a deep groundedness of the *loob* in the transcendent. With this frame built from dialoguing philosophical traditions, the essay will immerse into the works of Kiri Dalena.

## SOCIAL REALISM AND THE DARKEST DEPTS OF THE LOOB

The immediate prompt for this work was the joint exhibit entitled *Snare for Birds* (Dalena, et al. 2023-2024) held from 16 September 2023 to 27 February 2024 at the Arete Art Gallery. *Snare for Birds* is a three-woman exhibition featuring works inspired by the artists' encounter with the photographic archive bequeathed by Georg Kuppers-Loosen to the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, Koln. These photographs were purchased as a lot from the infamous Dean Worcester, who, while he was Secretary of the Interior of the Philippine colony, ruthlessly photographed Filipino men and women in various states of objectivizing degradation. Dalena's works in this exhibition are

composed of about a dozen digitally or manually manipulated photographs from that archive.

One set of photographs is of men being appropriated into civilization. Dalena shows how the native body is superimposed upon, like paper dolls, with American constabulary uniforms. The photographic sequence shows the men dressed according to their custom, then a uniform is imposed on them from a state of transparency to opacity, until in the last of the sequence, they are completely uniformed. Similarly dressed natives will be used to subjugate other natives. There are four sequential photographs in the exhibition, and in all of these, we are made witnesses to the erasure of the native and the human (Dalena et. al., 2023-2024). We are left with cutout dolls dressed for the occasion of colonization. The photographs hint at the violence of erasure without trace, but a video work makes this more palpable.

Dalena accompanies the exhibition with a video narrative presenting the autopsy photographs of a corpse of a supposed bandit, as well as photos of the Filipino American constabulary. In this film, she poses questions about a man's death, his place in history, and his betrayal by his fellow natives. Further investigation about the autopsied corpse leads Dalena to believe that he is a Filipino revolutionary, Major General Cornelio Felizardo, who continued the war against the United States after President Aguinaldo had surrendered. The images that dominate the film are pictures of the General's autopsied body manipulated to stand out against a stark white background. In the video, Dalena presents the story of his assassination as told by eyewitnesses. Felizardo was betrayed by his cousin and other Filipinos who served in the constabulary for a 5,000-peso reward. The photographs are eerie because they are the pictures of a man killed violently, sanitized and laid out on a table, stripped of himself.

These images of native men characterize Dalena's particular artistry. Her works make visible the dehumanizing and degrading effects of violence on the marginalized. All these native men were so callously erased by the imposing rapaciousness of the Americans. The instrument of their erasure was ironically the camera, which made the men present as objects to be studied, looked at, and dressed up. The people who had already invisibly suffered so much under Spanish cruelty were made present with the camera and then erased by the Americans. And with the story of Felizardo, we see that their erasure as persons was so complete that they were transformed into instruments of colonial violence who would sell their brother's life for 5000 pesos. With these pieces, Dalena makes us witnesses to their erasure.

This painful act is further articulated with the series of six photographs of native women specimens. Documented like birds for the ornithologist, they are made to dress and undress for the camera. These paper dolls are made to stand uncomfortably before the male, white, hungry, colonizing gaze. They are the other utterly and absolutely reduced by the camera of the same into digestible figures. Dalena's intervention in this piece is to black out the clothes the women were made to wear. Black for mourning and protest to redress the indignity they suffered with this strange photographic violence.

The centrepiece is a larger-than-life portrait printed on a long white cloth. The work is composed of three superimposed pictures taken from different angles and poses of one woman. She is seated, clothed in a blouse and skirt, standing naked facing

backward, and standing naked facing forward. When she is looking toward the camera, she is defiant or angry. Dalena seems to have particularly strong feelings for this series, which she said angered her. She says:

I put all of them... so she's not alone... so the woman... all three women in one frame... so she's accompanied by... at least she's not alone.... So, these photographs really made me cry (Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum 2022).

No doubt, the woman must have been alone before this dehumanizing gaze of white men. And yet, she stands so defiant and strong. Even with her back turned, she is never without her defence and her strength. But Dalena did not want her to be alone because that would be too sad and painful. So, she let her stand in the trinity of herself against the colonizing camera.

*Snare for Birds* (the title making a reference to the photographer, who, before he set his camera's violent gaze on the Filipino people, was an ornithologist) is a presentation of colonial violence in its appropriation and erasure of Filipino persons. Dalena shows and makes us feel the erasure realized by the photographing, and makes us intuit what (or more properly, who) was lost. These unnamed persons who are our *kapwa* (fellow person) whose *loob* (inner self) must have been so violated and hurt. Yet, at the centre of it, is the woman who is a trinity gazing back.

This exhibit is a good example of Dalena's art practice, and, from a wider perspective, what Philippine social realism accomplishes. Overall, the works make present her people's oppression and is meant to awaken our conscience so that we feel deeply against injustice (Guillermo 1987, Ch. 2). She works on these photographs to awaken the *loob* of the viewer to the *kapwa*. The *loob* refers here to the Filipino's interiority, which is the site of the realization of the self. From this interiority, one's identity and will are formed. It is the inner space where the person opens to and receives the presencing world, and in the interior play of receiving what presences, the self is called to will its creative participation in the outside world. In this external world, the self meets the other, the *kapwa*, who is not itself but is a self to which it is inherently bound. As another *loob* like me, I recognized the *kapwa*'s inherent value and good, and I can somehow intuit their suffering and joy, their consolations and desolation. This is the experience of the Filipino self as *loob* and *kapwa*.<sup>1</sup> The Filipino self finds itself bound to its *kapwa* and is unable to realize itself without being responsive and responsible to its *kapwa*. Philippine social realism is crafted using the visual language of *loob* and *kapwa* that will awaken the viewer to the kind of intuition and insight that awakens the deep fellow-feeling that will hopefully move them to action.

Certainly, Dalena's art is more layered than the murals and tarpaulin paintings used in mass actions. Protest works are meant to make an impact immediately when seen, even in passing, as protesters move through the city. Her work is meant to be dwelt with and dwelt upon, but the intention is the same. They are meant to disturb or agitate the *loob*. The photographs in the *Snare for Birds* exhibit make present the humiliation, the degradation, and the erasures that were imposed upon our people by making them present as the erased. They look straight at us in their bewilderment, discomfort, anger, and defiance such that we cannot deny that someone has been

erased—although not completely because my *loob* in seeing this erasure becomes aware of (feels with) another *loob* being erased.

Social realism is the art of the *kapwa*, for its effectiveness depends on our *loob*'s capacity to recognize the *kapwa* as the other who bears a *loob* as I do. Dalena's creativity is stirred by her being a *kapwa* to begin with. As she explained, she was moved to tears by the violation of the women in the photographs. Her *loob* was so disturbed that she could not let a woman, who seems to exist only in a photograph, stand alone in her (Levinasian) nudity. She was so moved in her *loob* that she desired to give the woman a companion in solidarity, even if this companion was only the woman to herself.

## SOCIAL REALISM AS THE ART OF THE *LOOB* AS *KAPWA*

Social realist art is not so much defined by its technique but by its social vision and by what it aims to achieve (Guillermo 1987, 43). What it aims to achieve is the moving of the collective *loob* to act in responsibility for the oppressed *kapwa*. In Albert Alejo's study of self as *loob*, where he brings together in a coherent theory the research of Sikolohiyang Pilipino, Filipino Philosophy, and Pilipinolohiya social sciences, he speaks of the *loob* as an interiority with a deep connectedness to the other (1990, Ch. 5). Using the metaphor of an archipelago, Alejo speaks of a sense of oneness among *kapwa tao*. This oneness has a metaphysical dimension because it speaks of a shared being among all *tao*, or persons. This is why the title of his book is *Tao Po! Tuloy!* This is the greeting one gives when one seeks permission to enter a home. When a Tagalog knocks, they say, *Tao po!* Which means there is a person here. And the one in the interior of the house will say, *Tuloy* (come in) because they recognize the shared personhood (Alejo 2020). Alejo tells the story of one immersion trip with indigenous people. After a long trek into an unknown jungle, they finally see a settlement. They approach it with apprehension as they meet a man who says something like, "Place your *loob* at ease. We are fellow *tao*"(2020). People, the *tao*, have a shared personhood in two senses. In one sense, that shared personhood means that we should respect each other because we are the same kind of being. We have the same rights and deserve to be cared for. In another sense, we have a shared personhood in that our *loob* partake in one being. This is a metaphysical conception of self because the *loob*, although individual, is intimately connected to the *loob* of the other. This is not about identity as much as it is an unmediated connectedness, such that our *loob* intuit each other. We feel the joys and sorrows, the suffering and fullness of our *kapwa* because our *loob* are one in this unmediated connectedness (Alejo 2018, 17). This is why Kiri Dalena felt so strongly about the nakedness and aloneness of the woman in the photograph. Although a person in the past who is long gone, she can intuit her *loob* and feel with her.

The self as *loob* is in a dynamic interiority, which is an openness to the presencing world (Alejo 2018, 22). This *loob* has a deep capacity to open to presencing being. It is an openness that is intimately connected to other *loob* and is able to open to the presencing of other beings. It is not an objectifying interiority but one that reaches out to what presences in order to engage it meaningfully. Alejo refers to this

capacity as the *loob*'s *abot* (reaching out) capability. The *loob*'s opening to the world is an *abot-dama* (an opening reaching out as experience) and *abot-malay* (an opening reaching out as being conscious) (2018, 9). The presencing other calls one to openness and response such that one's well-being is only realized when the *loob* is attuned to and in solidarity with the presencing other. The well-being of the *loob* is particularly connected to one's being responsible for the *kapwa tao*.

The Filipino *loob* has a deep intuition of the *kapwa* and has a deep sense of fellow feeling or *pakikiramay* with which the *loob* feels with the other *loob*. And so it hurts to see another suffer because one doesn't just witness it: one feels it in one's *loob*. This is why witnessing the dehumanization of the other *loob* can ignite our righteous anger and our demands for justice. My *loob* is never separated from the other *loob* because it has a fundamental orientation toward and connectedness with the *kapwa* who calls me to responsibility. Social realist art, the type that does not appeal to ideas but focuses on making present the suffering of the oppressed, is an art form rooted in the experience of the *loob* as *kapwa*. It is the artist's response as a *loob* to the suffering of its *kapwa*. The works of Dalena are good illustrations of this kind of social realism.

In the *Snare for Birds*, we are presented with the *kapwa* suffering the violence of their erasure, and this hurts our *loob*. This same resonance of pain must have moved Dalena to create *Life Masks* (2019). This is a photograph of a family who lost a husband/father to the drug war. In this piece, she poses a family in their home wearing rough-hewn, empty-faced masks which render them as persons with emptied *loob*. One can see that they are people with a life. Their home is filled with the typical colour and bric-a-brac found in a functional Filipino home. The walls and floors are unfinished cement. They have the pounded-metal rendering of running horses and the mishmash of kitchen utensils that signal that this is a home. But the people who dwell in this home are seated on a red couch, two women and three children, wearing blank-faced plaster masks in such neutral poses as if the fire of life has been drained completely from their *loob*. The murder of their beloved has deprived them of the capacity to live; and so they are posed in absolute neutrality, not knowing what to do with their bodies. They have been deprived of any possibility of wholeness because that disturbance has left empty shells where there was a rich interiority. That is what happens to the *loob* in mourning, especially when it is mourning the absurdity and injustice of this society. Seeing this portrait of blank faces awakens the *loob* of the viewer. There is a resonance of the desolation of their *loob* in the deepest chambers of my *loob*. Dalena creates works that can make the suffering of the *kapwa* resonate in the depths of the *loob*. They create the occasion for the activation of the capacities of the *loob*—*abot-malay* and *abot-dama*—for the *kapwa*'s suffering.

## TRANSCENDENCE IN SOCIAL REALIST CINEMA

Another work that illustrates my point further is her 2020 film *Alunsina*. This documentary presents the life of a family that has lost the head of the household to this reign of terror. President Rodrigo Duterte, in his obsessive war on drugs, gave license to law enforcement officials to engage in a killing frenzy that left tens of thousands of people murdered in the Philippines. Dalena was active in the campaigns to document

these killings with the hope of putting a stop to them. In her work, she was able to interview many families of victims and was allowed a deep participation in their sorrow, devastation, and suffering. She wished to convey all that her *loob* had borne in a film that would hopefully awaken the *loob* of her people (DaangDokyu 2020). In *Alunsina*, she chooses to tell the story of seven children who are left with their 88-year-old grandmother after their father was gunned down by the police in their own home.

The film begins with scenes of the documented children in an art workshop. Two of the children explain their paintings, which both convey how the happy days when their family was whole ended abruptly with their father's murder. They talk of how they try to accept their fate, how they felt helpless and afraid, how they were helped by support groups, and how they still struggle to let their father go—all through their artworks. There is an animation sequence that takes off from the drawing of the children and tells, in comics style, the story of their father's death. And at the end of this sequence, the screen transitions to scenes of their lives literally rendered upside down. The first sequences show the grandmother and the younger children coming home, settling down, getting ready for dinner, and then going to bed. The young children are still occupied with playing and running around. And when the three youngest are put to bed, the grandmother sings to them soothing lullabies with sad lyrics or nationalistic songs about the longing for freedom. They are a family that your *loob* will reach out to embrace because you recognize the goodness in their *loob*. And your *loob* reaches out to them in fellow feeling because, as the film literally makes known, they are going through their days in a world that has been turned upside down, and nothing feels right.

The scene in which the children are being put to bed fades to black, and words narrating the terror of the murder appear on the screen. They are the testimony of the victim's mother. The appearance of her words on screen, accompanied by music, gives us a sense of what intrusive thoughts of a tragedy would feel like. In the darkness of the *loob*, the words of the event would probably haunt us silently, repeatedly. Then the story quietly fades to a child's drawing depicting the children's situation: a mother in jail and a father in a coffin leaves a little girl sitting surrounded by black, then encircled by red, with only an old woman's hand to comfort her.

The next scene is brightness, energy, and play. It is the next day. There is a lot of playing, teasing, touching, and embracing with the grandmother. There is clearly so much love among and between these children and their grandmother. All day and through the night, in their upside-down world, love clearly overflows from their *loob*, filling each one and binding them to each other. And the love from their collective *loob* can overflow from the screen to touch the *loob* of the viewer. More than a matter of identification through mirror neurons, we are drawn as *kapwa* into this realm of love. And in this realm of love, the unbounded joy of children flows and promises to triumph over this tragic darkness. This, it seems, is what the penultimate scene shows. As the little girl swings back and forth with a wide smile, the world turns to right (literally, right side up). This cuts into a montage of the children's drawings of themselves and of hands animated into movements of hope and releasement into light and symbols of life.

This is the art of the *loob*. It is effective because it immerses us into the real life of the interior world which we all share and where, in the depth of our selves, our *loobs* touch. This film precisely makes us aware of our being *kapwa* with the victims of

Duterte's Shakespearean death spree. At the very least, it awakens our hope for the children. At best, it awakens us into action because our *loob* too has been hurt with and for this family. And we cry "it should not be so" because the pain in the *loob* can translate into the *alab ng puso*, the fire in the heart, that moves us to fight for our *kapwa tao*.

However, beyond this awakening of the *loob* to its *kapwa loob*, there is another movement that Dalena's work, and which social realist works at their best, achieve. This last sequence, with the young boys running around in the bright day, cutting to their older sister setting off on a bicycle, and then to the little girl swaying in the sun, is framed by a slowing of time and silence evoking music. In the children's movement, there is a stillness as if they are moving in the "still point of the turning world" (Eliot 2001). And in this stillness, we intuit how we value these children and why their vulnerability hurts our *loob*. Because in that still point, the transcendent issues a call and a promise. To understand this, we need to take a brief excursus into Emmanuel Levinas' theory of the face.

## THE TRACE OF THE TRANSCENDENT

Levinas speaks of the face as the point where we encounter the trace of the transcendent Other (1966, 44). Central to his theory is the idea that when faced with the face of the other, the ego-centred I is commanded to responsibility (1966, 41). His theory is ironic in a way because it begins with the phenomenon of the face's nudity through which we encounter their vulnerability and, in this vulnerability, their authority (1966, 40). He arrives at this insight through a phenomenology of the face. The fundamental, although rare, encounter with the face is to meet it in its nudity. The face in its nudity is the face without defences. This is the face without the armour of social position, posturing, authority, and its other masks (Levinas, 1944). This is the face in the unguarded moment. Dalena is excellent at capturing the face. It is her particular genius demonstrated in her documentaries *Tungkung Langit* (2013) and *Alunsina*.

There are examples of the capturing of the nude face in *Alunsina*. There is a scene in which the younger children, perhaps aged 3 to 10, are gathered around the grandmother. The older girl is teasingly/lovingly caressing her grandmother's face while the other children run around and climb on her. Their happiness is fragile because they live in a world turned upside down. The genuine, unbridled happiness glowing from their faces reveals its fragility. Their being as persons who can be happy is vulnerable. It has been, continues to be, and will continue to be violated by the world's violence. Levinas explains that to be before the face, even in this case when we encounter the other on film, the call to responsibility is a command. Do not let me die. Do not kill (1969, 96). Which, of course, is not always literal but usually means do not reduce me to the same. Respect my otherness without reducing me.

Another example of the face in this film is when the children explain their pictures. They speak directly to the camera, explaining their artwork, their sorrow spilling over without a mask, and we see the naked face. Defenceless against and exposed to whatever pain the world seeks to impose on them, the children, through the

command of their faces, are encountered by the viewers. Protect me! Do not destroy me! And we are moved to respond, at least to be moved to desire to stop the killings. The encounter with the face is what calls activist artists like Kiri Dalena to risk too much and to work so much for social transformation.

I speak of the face because the face is the very premise of Dalena's social realism. Without the experience of the face calling us to responsibility, social realists would not be moved to render the face in its nudity. And this is difficult. How does one render the face in its nudity without reducing it to an object of the gaze, of consumption, and interpretation? Dalena does this by creating the space for us to catch a glimpse of the face in its nudity. It is not the snare for the face to be caught by our acquiring gaze. Rather, her works are the space for letting the trace of the other disturb our totalities. Or better yet, it is the space for the presencing of the *loob* in its destitution or fragility to call to our *loob* to respond to our *kapwa*. The works of Dalena allow for the resonating of the *loob* of the other in our own *loob* and, in this way make us aware of the ground of resonance, which is the shared self as *kapwa*.

But I would like to focus on another scene in which we are faced with the nudity of the face. It happens as *Alunsina* comes to its end. Dalena shows the children at first running and squealing, on an ordinary sunny day in their still upside-down world. When things are quiet, and music takes the place of sounds—slow music to match the slowing of the action. One of the older girls walks with her bike and then mounts it, moving in space without a sense of time at the still point of the turning world. And the scene cuts to the little girl swaying with joy, with the widest smile that could turn the world right side up, and the frame slowly turns right side up. The effect of this scene is the making present of that which transcends this tragic, violent world. The scene makes us intuit how the children are embraced by the beyond time and finitude.

This presencing of the transcendent is also given in her *Requiem for M* (2010). This film is a reflection on the horrific Ampatuan massacre, where scores of supporters and journalists of the opposition leader were viciously murdered by the private army of the Ampatuan clan. The short film shows the aftermath of that massacre—mostly the burial and memorial rites—but all in reverse. People walk backwards, white balloons descend from the sky back to the hands of the mourners, and flower petals retreat from the ground. The reversal of time in this film, as the reversal of space in *Alunsina*, gives us a sense of that beyond being for which time and space mean nothing, a transcendent *loob* witnessing all this, mourning with us perhaps, but promising to absorb the tragedies of time and space. This is not said in the film. It may not even be intended, but the way the film is given can awaken this intuition.

Jacques Maritain, in his *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1953), explains why the artist and her art can create this effect. To understand his conception of creative intuition, we must understand his theory of the soul, or the very ground of our selves. The soul has three aspects: the intellect is the part that opens to and understands the world using concepts and ideas. It is the aspect of our self that gives meaning to the presencing reality, which allows us to comprehend what presences and to respond to that presencing meaningfully. The external senses are the aspect of the self that is open to the presencing external world and receives sensations. The imagination uses these sensations as the material with which it constructs explicit images. These are the active processes of the soul (Maritain 1953, 76-77). Although Maritain considers the

movement of the external senses unconscious and the processing of the images by the imagination automatic, the soul actively creates meaning through the interplay of these aspects of the soul using the intellect. However, this is not the source of what he calls poetic intuition. This is the aspect of our selves which engages the world and goes about the business of being in the world. The source of the highest level of artistic creativity comes from a deeper level of perception. It is human knowing that does not produce, nor is reliant on, conceptual comprehension.

There is another aspect of the soul that Maritain calls the spiritual unconscious or preconscious of the intellect (1953, 80). This is preconscious because it is not an aspect of our selves that the conscious intellect engages when it is giving meaning to the world. It is a part of our selves that is a pure receptivity that opens to being without going through the aspects of our selves that process our experience of reality (Maritain 1953, 79). This is a part of our self that is an unmediated opening to the transcendent ground that gives being to presence. This language can certainly sound anachronistic to many art theorists, especially when it is tied to the language that talks about souls. However, it is useful to explain why human beings have seeming intuitions into the transcendent which make us aware that this reality, which is contingent and tragic, is not the final word of existence. And it could also help us understand the work of the artist.

Maritain believes that creative intuition is rooted in the preconscious or the spiritual unconscious of the intellect (1953, 80). The spiritual unconscious is that aspect of our intellect that is in direct communion with the transcendent whatness of being, or one could say it is the part of our selves which has a direct intuition into the eternal ground of being through connaturality (1953, 86). The preconscious is the part of our selves that is directly open to this ground, or is rooted in it. It is the part of our selves that knows without concepts or thought but through connaturality the presencing of this eternal ground. It knows this ground deeply but is not always aware of this presencing ground of being, and when it does become conscious of its knowledge of it, it cannot articulate this knowledge conceptually or as an idea. There is no presencing form that can be translated into conceptual knowledge. However, there are times when an experience in the finite world leads us to become aware of what the preconscious is rooted in. That happens when phenomena in the finite world, a concrete image, a thing, or a gesture awaken an awareness of what we are rooted in. And this is what creative intuition is. It is the awakening of the conscious intellect to what the soul knows but cannot/does not articulate—its being rooted in the transcendent (Maritain 1953, 84). The trigger awakens the conscious awareness, and it is then that practical reason translates this intuition into a concrete manifestation: the work of art.

The work of art is the translation of this awakening to a concrete form, into a thing, which the artist hopes expresses their insight and also hopes to awaken the insight in others. The work of art can be a signal that awakens intuition for others. Using the language of Marion (2002, 50), the artist is the given to by the phenomenon. The given stimulates the intuition of the eternal in the artist's *loob* and the *loob* gives back the intuition as the work. What is given is the glimpse into the *loob*'s immersion in the transcendent that gives being. As the given to, the artist seeks to translate what is given in intuition into concrete form. Their genius is the ability to translate into a

work what is given as insight into the transcendent. Their genius is also the ability to use practical reason to translate that insight into the transcendent through paint, wood, stone, canvas, film, and whatever finite medium with which they can project their intuition of the infinite in the finite.

One particularly fitting example of this act of creation is Dalena's short film *Tungkung Langit*. This film makes present two children, Apolonio and Analou, orphaned by the disastrous flooding of typhoon Sendong (Haiyan) in the Visayas. This typhoon dumped enough rain to bring flash floods to Iligan City, sweeping away scores in its wake. Like many people, the children lost their parents and siblings in this disaster. They survived only by clinging to logs and branches that the flood brought down from the mountains. Like the children in *Alunsina*, they are left to be raised by their grandmother. The film focuses on a few days in the aftermath of this tragedy. Watching this film without knowing what it is about, one might think it is a slice-of-life film about a brother and sister living an idyllic life in a mountain village.

The film begins in darkness with only the voices of Analou and Apolonio heard. "What is this?" he asks. "The sea. Coconut tree. Tree. Log. Snake. Me." "And this?" "A banana tree." "Why put this?" "The Snake? It was behind me." "And this?" "The water? The water was going toward our house." "And this?" "Flower? The flowers were not covered by the water. Maybe I should draw a child here." As they speak, the image of a child on a log shot just below the waterline (with all the serenity and peace that the sense of timelessness being in water creates) comes into focus. They speak further as the ebb and flow of the water gently bobs the log with the child. Apolonio asks his sister if she was carried far away. She says no, just there. (She was found about 40 km away from their home.) He asks, "Were you scared when you were carried to the sea?" "I was scared." He asks, "Were you scared in the river?" She was. She says this, and you can hear the shy laugh, taking away the gravity of her fear. Her brother continues, "How do you feel now that they're gone?" "I cry. I regret. I worry. That's all. Are you sad that they are gone? "I'm no longer sad. Where can they be?" "Covered. I don't know. Do you know where they are?" "I don't know." This very calm night conversation opens the whole film. The fear, the sorrow, the pain, and the loss are spoken of so softly. The whole film is a quiet meditation on surviving a horrific tragedy here at the still centre of the turning world.

The film is about the children's days. There is nothing extraordinary in these days: only drawing, running around, playing, walking, doing chores, punctuated with talks at night. These almost whispered talks are about what they remember, about the extraordinary amount of death they witnessed, and their own fears. All this happens with such quiet. The sounds of people hardly intrude in their surroundings. The birds and the crickets are louder than the children. Clearly, nature stands above all things here. Even their tragedy is absorbed by nature. It seems they accept their tragedy as just something that happens to people who live with nature because they saw so many terrible things, like dead cows, pigs, and babies, and they can talk about it without histrionics. Analou, as a matter of fact, speaks of how the rescuers made her empty her stomach of the mud she swallowed. That must have been scary and painful, but all that tragedy has been absorbed by the peaceful days and the mountains. Still, theirs is a deep sadness that shows in their faces when they talk late at night. In the penultimate scene, Apolonio asks Analou if she will sleep soon. She says she won't because, she

kids, he is still talking to her. But when he asks if she wants to dream, we see the apprehension on her face as she thinks about how she does not want to dream.

In one scene, the grandmother is combing Analou's hair, and she is lovingly looking at her grandmother and speaking playfully. But, for a split second, a shadow crosses her face, and it looks like she is fighting back tears. Throughout the film, there are moments where it seems that she is holding back tears. She is sad and wounded by the events, but, as children of nature, they know that it moves as it will and it can be violent, and that is just the way things are. With the mountain in its stillness looming throughout this film, we feel that nature is an embrace that heals, even as it has destroyed and killed. We have a sense that nature is bigger than the follies of men who have allowed storms to be so grand and who have destroyed her protective forests. In the end, the great mother nature is an embrace, as the night is a blanket of peace. The viewers sense this assurance because the whispered conversations, the peace of the night, and the quiet of the world around them signal the transcendent to which they belong, and which promises healing.

The last scene is a beautiful shot of a tree half-submerged in the water that has not receded. It stands against a dark, heavy sky in the aftermath of the great flooding. It reminds us of the great upheaval in the world of the children. And yet, there is stillness. The waves gently move because the violence that needed to pass has passed, and equilibrium is restored. This is the time for healing. Of course, these children will face more hardships since they are marginalized and are unprotected from the violence of men, which is unnecessary and almost unforgivable. But at the end of this film, we are presented with how the transcendent can rise above all violence and tragedy and offer healing.

This is the other effect of Dalena's work: her films and photographic works awaken us to the face of the other. She presents people who have been hurt, broken, and dehumanized by the evil works of men. When we witness the hurt in others, it awakens us to the value that these survivors bear. The more people are hurt, broken, and dehumanized, the more we become aware that they bear a transcendent value. That is, they bear a value of one that ought not to be violated. This is why the violations hurt us so much to witness. If they were of no worth, their violation would not produce such great art. But it does because the artist recognizes that what is violated must not be allowed to be defeated or destroyed by the evil works of small men. The artist must restore, celebrate, and mourn the disvalued other. This is the work of social realism at its best. However, Kiri Dalena's work achieves more than that—although it already does that excellently.

In this artist's work, the transcendent other seems to be able to insert itself as a disturbance. As the viewer witnesses the suffering and the sorrow experienced in the degradation and the dehumanization of the other, the disturbance of the intangible promise that this evil is not the last word is given. These people who have suffered are promised healing as the earth heals itself. Consciously or not, this is what the works of Dalena, as the fruit of her creative intuition, give. The silence and the slowing of time is the insertion of the transcendent other, like an allergy, to disturb our finitude and the limits of our vision and intuition. The insertion of the trace of the Other (Levinas 1987, 64), like an incomprehensible and immediately dubitable presencing of an enigma, is intuited by the creative intuition and is given in the work of art.

To understand why this is so, we can return to Levinas' reflections on the trace of the Other. Levinas believes that the transcendent Other is absolutely irreducible to the totality of human experience and understanding (1987, 65 ff). The Holy Other, being that which is otherwise than being, is not something we can think or comprehend. It is not a phenomenon that exists in space and time. It does not exist in any way that fits into our categories of feeling, experiencing, and understanding. The Other is wholly and absolutely other. And yet, we are aware of its existence and its engagement with the world. Thus, the philosopher proposes that the Other does not presence as a being that is present in the world. Rather, beyond presence, it is a trace. The Other is never present but is always already past. It is experienced as an irreducible past (Levinas 1987, 179).

The Transcendent Other, in its being as beyond being, leaves a trace which is irreducible to comprehension. For Levinas, the transcendent traces in the face of the other (1987, 184). The human experience of the call of the face, the command do not kill, and the call for responsibility for the vulnerable other is the experience of the command of the Holy Other. The command is the command of the Other itself left as a trace. And so, every time we experience the face of the other in its vulnerability as a command to responsibility, we encounter the Other. The Other is the one who commands, and this is the presencing of the Other to finite persons. We are called by the transcendent Other to infinite responsibility, and in responding, we encounter the Other as trace in finitude.

The best social realist artwork presences the face and potentially awakens us to the trace of the Other because when art is done well, it can presence the command of the Other. Beyond Levinas, we must note that the reason we experience the face as a call to responsibility is because the face cannot and ought not to be violated, as it bears a transcendent value. They are valued. When we see the face that calls us to infinite responsibility, we also sense how it is valued by the infinite Other. The trace of the infinite Other is in the value of the face. The Other values that other and thus we are called to responsibility. In those quiet moments on film, when we watch the children and our *loob* reaches out to them, it is as if Dalena awakens in us the direct intuition into the *loob* of the infinite Other looking upon its beloved, and we see that they are valued and we are called to value them in infinite responsibility. Dalena's works do not only awaken us to the trace of the Other in the command to be responsible, but they also give us an intuition into the infinite *loob* that values them and calls us to respond in responsibility.

The *Life Masks* (Dalena 2019) we previously discussed is one among other life mask photographs (Dalena 2013/2018 and vintana.ph 2021). These are photographic and video portraits of various persons who could be characterized as model persons who have invested their lives in serving their community, either as artists or activists. In all these portraits, the people are posed with masks seated in their own life's worlds. Like in the other work, the masks are rough-hewn and blank. This is ironic because death masks are usually meant to preserve the countenance of power and prestige in the memory of society. These life masks do the opposite. They seem to drain the life from the living, mainly because of the absence of colour and eyes. However, they are posed in their living spaces surrounded by all the signals of their having built good lives. If one knows anything about the subjects of these portraits, they will know that

these are people who have striven to realize lives in service of the face. Being an artist committed to human liberation and social justice, one would have expected that she would have made more life-giving portraits to celebrate these people. Instead, she erased their face, but not to erase their humanity or personhood. Rather, I believe, she intends to deepen the experience of the face in the Levinasian sense.

The portraits present people who are strong characters. They are persons who have a clear understanding of the meaning of their being persons. Dalena's erasure of their faces allows their personalities to still shine forth despite the erasures. Here is an artist, there a couple who have served their country as poets, in another, a whimsical storyteller, and in still another, a peasant leader. Their seated bodies project their personhood, the strength of their *loob* exudes despite the erasure, which makes the strength of their *loob* shine even more. However, the mask projects an emptiness as well. The face that emanates their powerful *loob* is covered up, and that strength is not allowed to come through. Their eyes seem closed, and the mask seems to remind us of the final erasure of *loob* in death—when the person is erased from the body and the face rests in neutrality. Around them are signs of a lived life; a life being lived. But in the emptiness and stillness again, it previews how this living abode will look when emptied of their activity and their living, and everything will be still without their presence. With their faces masked, Dalena presents us with the vulnerability of the face of the other. And in that stillness, which is a reminder of the possibility of erasure, the erasure of good people who worked to live good lives, we once again intuit the trace of a promise that good people cannot be erased. That stillness and erasure are not the final word because the one who leaves the trace of itself in the command, thou shalt not kill, also leaves the trace of the promise, death is not the final erasure.

Kiri Dalena's works are not opaque. In many of her pieces, it is easy to read what she wishes to say. She is not the most complicated or obscure of artists. After all, she is through and through an advocate first. But her poetic genius, in Maritain's sense of this word, is found in her ability to make present the trace of the Other who calls us all to responsibility and hope. Her work and its effectiveness in opening the *loob* to the face of the *kapwa* and awakening the command to infinite responsibility is the fundamental accomplishment of social realism. It is the reason why social realist art moved my generation to social action and continues to move the present generation.

## CONCLUSION

There are a few philosophies of art grounded in Filipino thought. Most Filipino philosophers who turn their gaze to art are dependent on the application of Western aesthetics to Filipino works. Thus, we see our works through foreign eyes and are often unable to explain how they shape us when we look at them. This essay attempts to show how it is possible to build a philosophy of art rooted in our own way of doing philosophy. We began by showing how the theory of the *loob*, which seeks to find its wholeness as *kapwa* explains why social realist works like Dalena's have a deep resonance with the Filipino viewer, such that we deeply feel the injustice they suffer. From this, we dialogued with Levinas' theory of the face and infinite responsibility to further deepen how this *loob* is called to infinite responsibility and how this call to

infinite responsibility is an opening to the trace of the transcendent. Finally, we engaged Maritain's theory of creative intuition in art to show how the artistic work is an intuition into the infinite *loob*.

This framework of the presencing of the *kapwa* in art as a call to infinite responsibility and as a making present the infinite that calls us to responsibility can be used to explain much of social realism, which is a genre focused on making present the *kapwa*. It is the author's hope that more philosophers engage in reflection on Filipino art using philosophical lenses grounded in the lived experience of their people in order to help viewers appreciate the genius of making present that the Filipino artists, not just social realists, excel in. Because this praxis of making present the face of the *kapwa* is also the excellence found in other forms of art, like our songs, novels, and plays. We need to philosophize on these works from the *kapwa* framework, as much as from other indigenous frameworks, because it could clarify what drives many of our greatest artists to create and what calls us to heroism.

## NOTES

1. I discuss these themes in detail in Agustin Martin G. Rodriguez, *Mula Bayang Sawi Tungong Lupang Hinirang*. Quezon City: Ateneo University Press, 2024 and *Stories We Tell When We Tell Stories About Ourselves*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2025.

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