

PRESS RELEASE

Worm Universe by Julio Jose Austria

22 May – 4 June 2017 at the Makati Shangri-La, Mezzanine Level, Makati Metro Manila

In *Worm Universe*, Julio Jose Austria presents his reflections on the everyday struggles of finding a home in a foreign land. This series depicts a parallel narrative: that of Austria's immigrant experience and of the refugee community in Bruchkobel, Germany, where Austria completed a two-month residency with Hiraya Deutschland. Within the abstractions and erasures that Austria often uses to tell a multi-layered narrative of migrancy and mobility is the reality of life on the ground, alluded to in the title *Worm Universe*. This is where Austria invokes the everyday life of the immigrant – a backstory consisting of logistics, of getting one's body off the ground, of paperwork, of the red tape that precedes the moment when one is able to gaze, awestruck, at new (and strange) horizons.

CATALOG ESSAY

JULIO JOSE AUSTRIA

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Life on the Ground

For years, Julio Austria has shown canvases inundated with lines: sometimes signifying borders, sometimes speaking of connections, but always describing a landscape forever changed by mobility. "Every day a Filipino leaves

home. Somewhere a Filipino lives out what is left of home. Every day, too, a Filipino returns, finding a home elsewhere,” wrote Patrick Flores in “Everyday, Elsewhere: Allegory in Philippine Art” which tracks “this sense of the elsewhere” across Philippine Art History, from the Academia de Dibujo to contemporary conceptual practice. Coming from a country with a population as dispersed and archipelagic as its geography, we see how the complexity of being in perpetual motion is articulated through art.

Yet, despite Julio Jose Austria’s paintings often being prompted by a deep concern with our shared humanity, there is a curious absence of figures in this exhibition. The closest he comes to drawing a person in this series in *Half-Liberty* – which depicts, above a horizon marked with barbed wire, the Statue of Liberty erased from the canvas, showing how security can only come at the cost of certain freedoms. Against the blue sky is a barely perceptible outline of that familiar crown, atop the concrete folds that costume this symbol not only of freedom, but of “real” (read: American) democracy and the greener pastures sought after (by Austria, like so many others) in search of safety and stability.

It is thus made clear in this series that Austria’s places speak of people: that his landscapes are portraits. Such a proposition—that places define people—is evident in the postcard-like depictions of actual settings, specifically Bruchkobel, Germany, where Austria was in residence with Hiraya Deutschland for two months. There, he regularly interacted with the occupants of a refugee settlement nearby, taking in the uneasy mix of heartache and relief that is embedded in the story of anyone forced to leave home. The result is a body of work that is equal parts tension and release, burdened by the losses and the constraints that come with adjusting to a new society, as well as the occasionally flattering light that softens the memory of where we are from.

This testifies to a larger truth about what we misconstrue as the human, in that something as seemingly natural as survival, as the truth of continuing to exist, can only be articulated in the abstract – through allegory as well as poetry, hence the lines.

Within the abstractions and erasures that Austria often uses to tell a multi-layered narrative of migrancy and mobility is the reality of life on the ground, alluded to in the title *Worm Universe*. This is where Austria invokes the everyday life of the immigrant – a backstory consisting of logistics, of getting one’s body off the ground, of paperwork, of the red tape that precedes the moment when one is able to gaze, awestruck, at new (and strange) horizons. This mundane reality of life on the ground is, after all, what bring us back to earth – a reminder of what it really means to belong to a place.

Julio Jose “Jojo” Austria is a Filipino painter. He is now based in New York City, where he has lived for the past six years. *Worm Universe* is the product of a two-month-residency in Bruchkobel, Germany with Hiraya Deutschland.