

# PROOF

## STEPHANIE SYJUCO | NEW EDITIONS 2023

In 1971, scientists and representatives of the Philippine governmental agency Panamin “discovered” the Tasaday, a forest-dwelling indigenous people seemingly untouched by modernity; they quickly became the subject of media speculation and anthropological inquiry in the Philippines and globally. Just as quickly, however, the Tasaday were disappeared from public view by the Marcos regime under the guise of indigenous protection. When the tribe was contacted again in 1986– after the People Power revolution which ousted the dictator from power– they were “revealed” to be a hoax perpetrated by the government to cover its resource extraction and extrajudicial killings in the region. Over the ensuing decades, the Tasaday’s veracity has never satisfactorily been proven, yet they have remained a subject of curiosity by researchers, journalists, and artists alike.

Interdisciplinary artist Stephanie Syjuco revisits the Tasaday controversy with a critical optic in *Invented Eden: Research material from the Center for the Study of the Study of the Tasaday*. In this series of three highly textured prints created while in residence at Island Press in 2021, Syjuco defers engagement with the fruitless debate over the Tasaday’s authenticity, and instead presents us with a meta-archive of the news clippings, ethnographic photos and documentary film stills which produced the Tasaday people as innocent primitives in need of protection from an encroaching modern world. Her refusal to verify Tasaday indigeneity informs the aesthetic and material decisions guiding the *Invented Eden* prints, ironically titled *Stone Age Serenity: General Clippings [CSST.005.12]*, *This Remarkably Beautiful Photograph: 1971 [CSST.023.01]*, and *Sensitively Filmed: 1972.3 [CSST.023.06]*. First, while neocolonial discourses tried



*Stone Age Serenity: General Clippings [CSST.005.12]*

Relief with silkscreen, pigment print, transfer, tape, and scored paper on Coventry Rag. 23 x 33 inches 2023



*This Remarkably Beautiful Photograph: 1971 [CSST.023.01]*

Relief with silkscreen, pigment print, mylar sleeve, and scored paper on Coventry Rag. 23 x 33 inches

to reduce the lifeworlds of the Tasaday, Syjuco undoes this imperative by making them hyperreal and larger than life: the manila folders encasing these artifacts have been enlarged at 2x scale and printed using a CNC cut board that has been scored to look like the real thing. To play with the manipulation of information practiced by state administrators and anthropologists, the artist makes visible her own hand in assembling a counter-archive of knowledge– each folder’s contents are created through a combination of relief printing, silkscreen, hand-rubbed transfers and collage. The contents we are allowed to see are only partially visible: photographs are turned over; images are stacked and buried in a pile; and the Tasaday appear only as blurred silhouettes. Taken together, Syjuco’s methods perform a politics of Filipinx diasporic opacity reiterated in several other series produced in 2021, namely *Pileups*, *Afterimages*, *Headshots (Witnesses)*, and *Overlays*,



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which tackle the photographic legacies of the earlier 1899 Philippine-American War and the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Contained within the ubiquitous manila folder, the Tasaday can never be self-sovereign; yet what the artist can do is to shield their bodies from being further consumed by our western gaze.

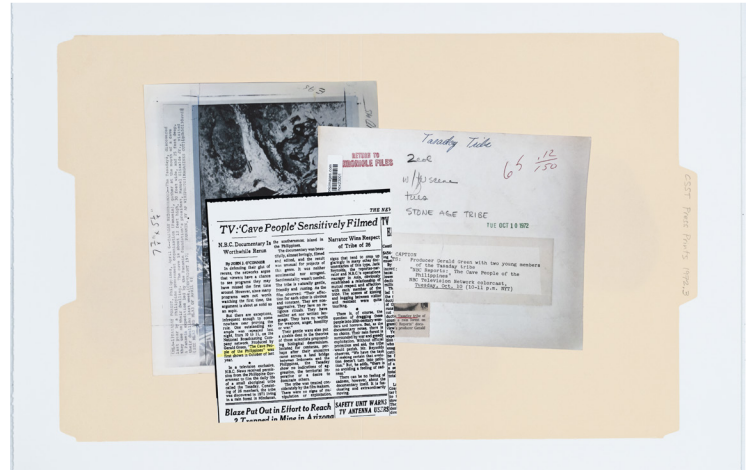
With *Invented Eden*, Stephanie Syjuco extends the timeline of her probing and poetic investigations into the heart of whiteness, or the nexus where the colonial technologies of the camera, the government report, and the sympathetic white anthropologist meet to construct indigenous people from the Philippines as subjects alternately worth saving, reforming, or outright killing. From the 1899 Philippine-American War and the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, to the Marcos dictatorship of 1973-86, to the disappearances and murders of indigenous land defenders under the Duterte and current Marcos Jr. regime (all history repeats as farce), there is, unfortunately, endless material for her to excerpt from and reassemble. Placed alongside the work of other artists, scholars and activists organizing for native self-determination, Syjuco's lens-based archival interventions make a case for indigenous peoples' right to be sovereign over their likenesses and the very condition of their lives.

(Series title taken from this book: *Invented Eden: The Elusive, Disputed History of the Tasaday*, Robin Hemley, U of Nebraska Press, Jan 1, 2006.)

by Thea Quiray Tagle, PhD, Associate Curator of the Brown Arts Institute and the David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University

#### ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Stephanie Syjuco works in photography, sculpture, and installation, moving from handmade and craft-inspired mediums to digital editing and archive excavations. Recently, she has focused on how photography and image-based processes are implicated in the construction of racialized, exclusionary narratives of history and citizenship. Born in the Philippines, she is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and has exhibited widely, including at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, among others. She is an Associate Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and resides in Oakland, California.



*Sensitively Filmed: 1972.3 [CSST.023.06]*

Relief with silkscreen, pigment print, and scored paper on Coventry Rag. 23 x 33 inches 2023

## IslandPress

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