GIAN
CRUZ

LINGUISTIC SYNCHRONICITIES: (re)DRESSING and (re)PRESENTING THE FILIPINO SELF-IMAGE THROUGH THE TROPES OF THE TRANSOCEANIC AND INCESSANT PLURALISMS

I. LINGUISTIC SYNCHRONICITIES: INTRODUCTION

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I,began,to,Die,and,I,began,to,Grow.
\- José Garcia Villa, *Divine Poems (134)*
(from *Doveglion: Collected Poems,* 1941)[1]

In this time of madness
To join the mad is unbearable
Anguish to the suffering heart
Yet not to join
Means losing all
Starvation at the end

Amenengi jaman édan
Éwuh ayahing pambudi
Mèlu édun nora tahan
Yèn tan mèlu anglakoni
Boya kaduman melik
Kaliren wekasanipun.
\- Raden Ngabehi Ronggawarsita, *Serat Kala Tida*, Poem of a Time of Darkness,
Surakarta: Persatuan, 1933[2]

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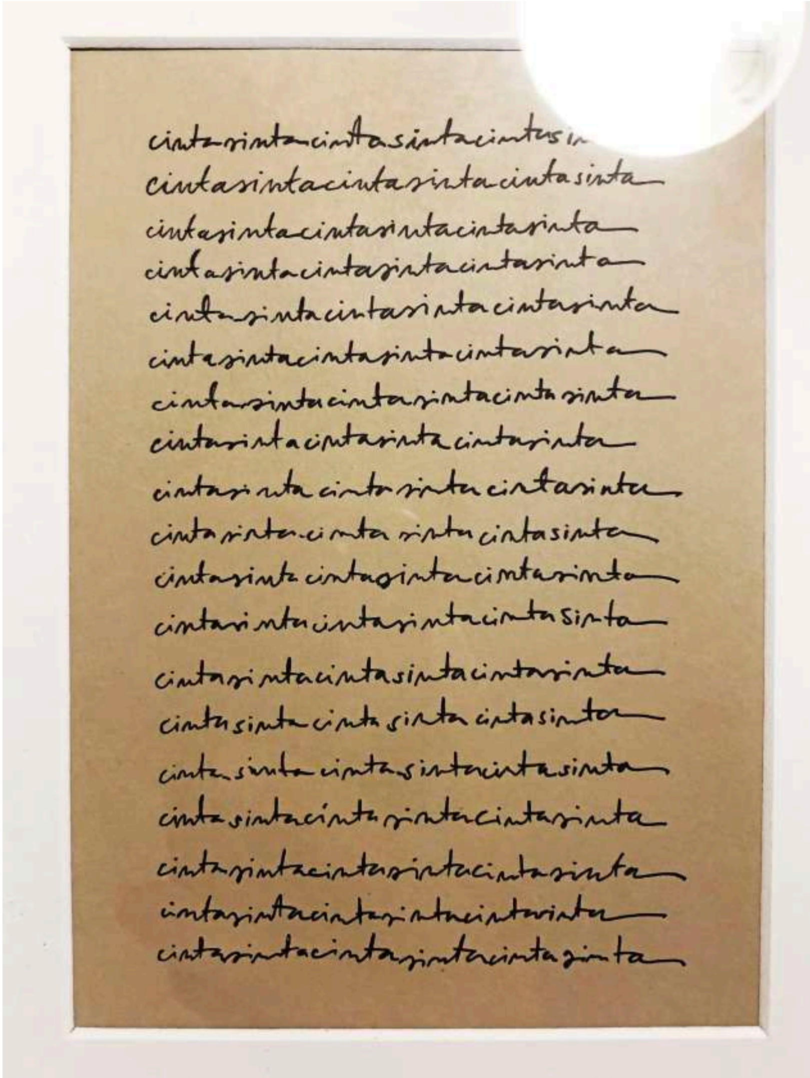

IMAGE: cintasinta, 2021, meditative ink writings on Clairefontaine natural paper, 250 g/m^2, 14,8 x 21cm

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Creating words from languages arising out of different families, cartographic inscriptions, historical and socio-political contexts could elicit an epistemic abyss. In a way, in a manner this is a grand gesture of alluding to my melancholy correction of mastering a foreign tongue before my mother tongue as a consequence of multiple colonial epochs (from the Philippine experience that is).

From here, I'd like to perceive different languages transparent to each other, permeating each other fluidly, then plotting undefined terrains of possibilities of elsewheres. So, in brief, this work charts the deliberate and at times non-deliberate (to a point of innocence) mirroring languages and allowing them to interpenetrate each other with Tagalog, English, French, Spanish, Catalan, Hokkien, and Bahasa.

Being a Filipino of Chinese and Spanish ancestry, I came from a generation who would be more adept in English more than Tagalog. Besides a Spanish surname, I never felt a strong connection with my Spanish roots other than the recurring narratives of a seemingly immaterial yore—ancestors from previous generations speaking Spanish and those resembling our peninsular ancestors being deemed more beautiful (or a proximity to a more Spanish or Caucasian physicality). There's a sentiment of great unease with this part of me that I thought needed healing and somehow find a currency where these different languages can easily mirror each other and no matter how disparate fluidly converge.

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Other than my mother tongue, since childhood French persistently holds in me an impression of unquantifiable affection and imagination. But English, Tagalog and French form part of a past that's familiar and the present involves my relationship with Spanish and Catalan as I am currently residing in Barcelona. And then there's Tagalog featuring a spectrality of a diverse assemblage of connections and borrowings to Spanish, English, Malay, Sanskrit (Malay, Javanese and to some extent Bahasa Indonesia), Hokkien, Japanese, Arabic, Persian and Nahuatl. This then incites a transoceanic realm through a language stringing together distant cartographies and reflecting the myriad marginalisms and exchanges that go beyond binaries of East and West in a uniquely Southeast Asian perspective.

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Building further on this peculiar sense of unrest emanates through an excerpt from José Garcia Villa and R.Ng. Rongawarsita about darkness and light of reactivating traumas from my own origins, the misplaced and often misrepresented self-image of my nation and being in an uneasy state to come and find the light at the end of the tunnel particularly amid the backdrop of being a migrant Southeast Asian artist supposedly expanding my artistic practice in Catalunya because of MACBA's Independent Studies Programme and in the Iberian Peninsula where Asian contexts and voices are ontologically silenced or given little or no attention at all or having no complete autonomy to present my identity and contexts the way it should be. And as John Clark (well-known for his extensive work on Asian modernities) would add such contexts as mine alongside other Asian contexts are enmeshed in "an intellectual self-distancing from habitual modes of thought of practice… disruptive of comfortable art history within a received Euramerican frame" (6). Also, in a time with the upheaval of re-attributing spaces and narratives to their rightful owners or autonomies it also is immensely necessary to distinguish within the course of Asian identities which ones have colonial pasts and those that are imperial in nature.

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IMAGES (L-R): Sea Drawings n˚4, 2020, drawing on paper, Hahnmühle 600g/m2 280 lbs, 24 x 32 cm,
unique edition (detail; L), Sea Drawings n˚4, 2020, drawing on paper, Hahnmühle 600g/m2 280 lbs, 24 x 32 cm, unique edition (R)

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II. Linguistic Synchronicities: Oscillations between the Personal, theTransoceanic, and the Incumbent Southeast Asian Imaginaries

Revisiting history finds this vexed actuality, which directs me back to José Rizal (1861-1896) and the looming nationalist sentiment during the final stages of the Spanish colonial epoch as illuminated by Resil Mojares in a chapter in Isabelo's Archive entitled "José Rizal and the invention of a National Literature" which he says:

> The issues Rizal faced at the close of the nineteenth century continue to challenge Filipino writers at the beginning of the twenty-first. To assert difference not merely for the sake of being different, but difference that meaningfully revises and renews not only how we Filipinos see ourselves but how others see us and themselves. To reconcile "internationalizing" and "nationalizing" positions: recognizing, on one hand, the danger of being absorbed and lost in the discourse of dominant others; on the other hand, the danger of being trapped in a conversation that does not open out into the world; in either case, the prospect of being barely visible in the world. To widen the social and material space that allows us to do our work and be read and heard (104).

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And this perspective permeates through the present outside of Filipino writers but also to artists and in the broader spectrum of cultural workers. Framing the timeline from the close of the 19th century to post-Marcos dictatorship (1986 – present) and the neo-liberal globalized space in the Philippines is rooted in this polemic brought about by Neferti Xina M. Tadiar in her seminal book *Fantasy-Production: Sexual Economies and Other Philippine Consequences for the New World Order*: "… or perhaps we have not been dreaming at all and instead, have lived in the rote mythographies of our given social identities" (5).

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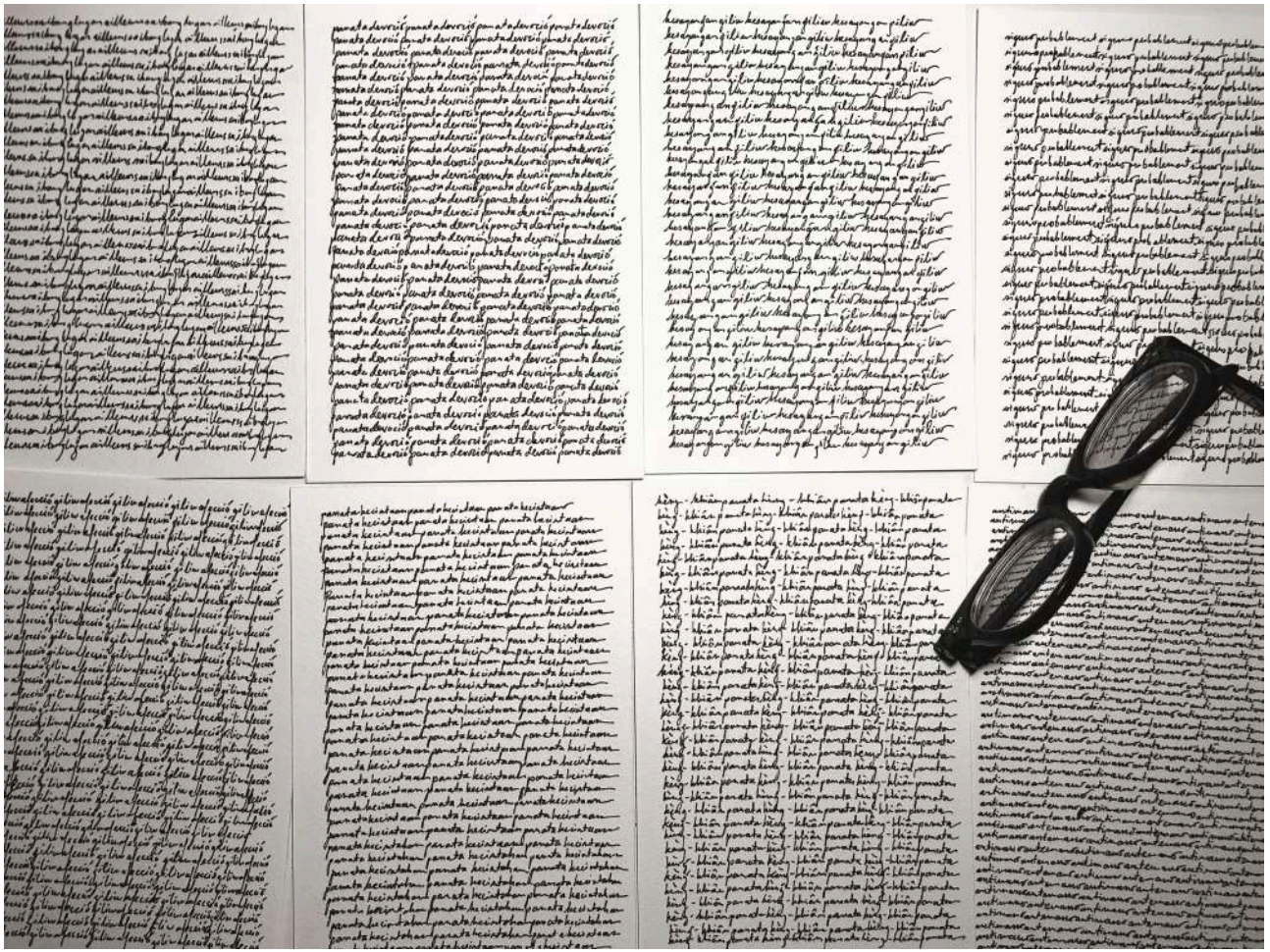

Top (L-R): ailleurssaibanglugar, panatadevoció, kesayangangiliw, siguroprobablement, 2021, meditative ink writings on Fabriano paper, 50% cotton, 300 g/m^2
Bottom (L-R): giliwafecció, panatakecintaan, siguroprobablement, 2021, kèng-khiânpanata, antimanoantemano, meditative ink writings on Fabriano paper, 50% cotton, 300 g/m^2

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Reclaiming the Filipino self-image within a global context attentive to the dynamic and loaded conditions brought about by the Filipino Revolution as the first exhibition of “successful transnationalization of Pan-Asianism, involving cross-political practice and revolutionary networking toward the goal of overthrowing two Western imperial powers” (Aboitiz 26) as elaborated in the crucial interventionist attempt by Nicole CuUnjieng Aboitiz in her book called *Asian Place, Filipino Nation: A Global Intellectual History of the Philippine Revolution, 1887-1912*. The Philippine revolution, which before the recent and more extensive scholarship of significant interventions in Southeast Asian histories has often been discussed as if it occurred in the Western world leaving behind that it, took place in Southeast Asia. Hence, CuUnjieng Aboitiz’s referring to it as the “Asian Philippine Revolution” becomes very fitting

Lastly, going back historically, there exists the 400-year-old Dictionario Hispanico-Sinicum wherein equivalents of Spanish words into Chinese characters and Mandarin terms but also including their equivalent in Hokkien (which is the language spoken in parts of Taiwan and Fujian province in China). And this book in the University of Santo Tomas archives, where I used to work as a professor in Manila and the oldest university and first in Southeast Asia founded in 1611 by the Dominican friars. The controversial part of this dictionary was despite the presence of the Hokkien-speaking Chinese community in Manila as co-authors, the perspectives were given a solely a European perspective. In any case, it wouldn’t have been possible for the Dominicans to collect these data without their involvement.

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From my peculiar heritage as a Filipino with Spanish and Chinese origins, in this state of spectrality of comparisons and alongside the perils and pleasures of variegated cosmopolitanisms from a Southeast Asian point of view, I’ve also learned of the central and at the same time marginal role of Chinese immigrants all over Southeast Asia and our models of cosmopolitanism and diverse exchanges date back to Maritime Southeast Asia (c. 1400 -1800) encompasses interactions with the Spanish, Portuguese, British, Dutch, French and to a wider extent American and Japanese. And affixed within are the broad spectrum of natives or indigenous people of a wide array of backgrounds and origins. The comparative tendencies and transcultural and transoceanic exchanges did not simply exist from a binary and quantifiable categories of East and West but it has been far too complex already from that time. Furthermore, this cornucopia of diverse narratives and transgressive actualities are only giving me more material to work with and uphold in the presentation and performing of my own unique and special identity here in Europe. And in line with Catalunya as my present localization and the Mediterranean as my immediate universe, these transoceanic spectralities can birth anew conceptually and materially an otherworldly reality on how to view multiculturalism and transoceanic cosmopolitanisms.

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IMAGE: Detail from the dictionary referred to as Dictionario Hispanico-Sinicum dating from the 17th Century, © National Tsing-Hua University of Taiwan

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III. Positing Transoceanic Elsewheres: Linguistic Affinities and Peculiar Cosmopolitanisms: Language, Territory and Aligning Revisions of Established Histories

In my displacement and a time of great unease and feeling silenced, lost and placeless as a Southeast Asian in the Catalan artistic ecologies and at large artistic ecologies around the peninsula remain sparse with visible Asian voices and contexts in constant dialogue with the recent developments in the Spanish cultural sphere, an informal conversation with Thai curator (who has extensively curated the travelling exhibitions of Thai filmmaker and multimedia artist Apichatpong Weerasethakul) tells me in a very endearing way: “being outside made you see much clearer.”

Within the context and the struggle of finding spaces here in Catalunya or in Spain at large where my Southeast Asian context alongside the reverberating anti-Asian sentiment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic isn’t particularly given its proper space in the cultural dialogues (in comparison to the more diverse artistic ecologies of London, Paris, Amsterdam or Berlin for instance), it has brought upon me to re-discover and see anew what elsewheres and futures I can create from this displacement by getting to know the contours of my peculiar universe. And such continues to actively live in the seductions of Southeast Asia as a model of pluralities for today as Amitav Acharya puts it as not being a “natural region” but rather an “imagined and socially constructed community” (Abdullah et al. 5).

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In the sharp and at times life-altering effects brought by the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, there came a strong need to dress my fears with a certain structure to discover more about my often misrepresented and misunderstood identity first as a “Filipino” and secondly as a “Southeast Asian” and into the more overarching, generalizing and neutral identification as “Asian.” There was a need to strategically filter the noise as the pandemic brought about a delirium of fears and discourses that rescuscitated a lot of racial designations of virality and systemic othering which should not continue to have a place in today’s contemporary landscape.

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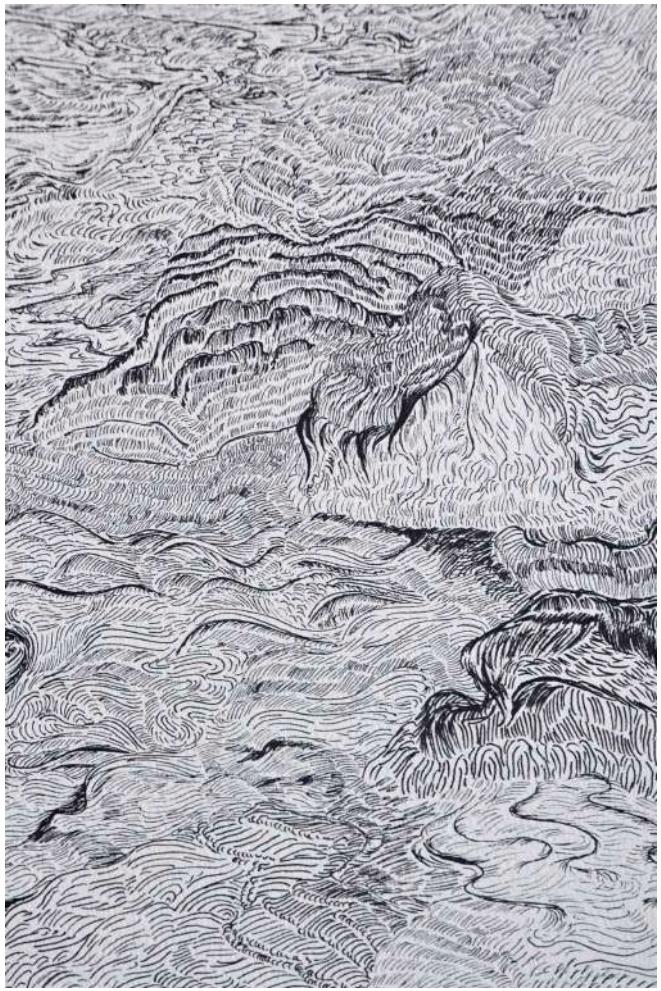

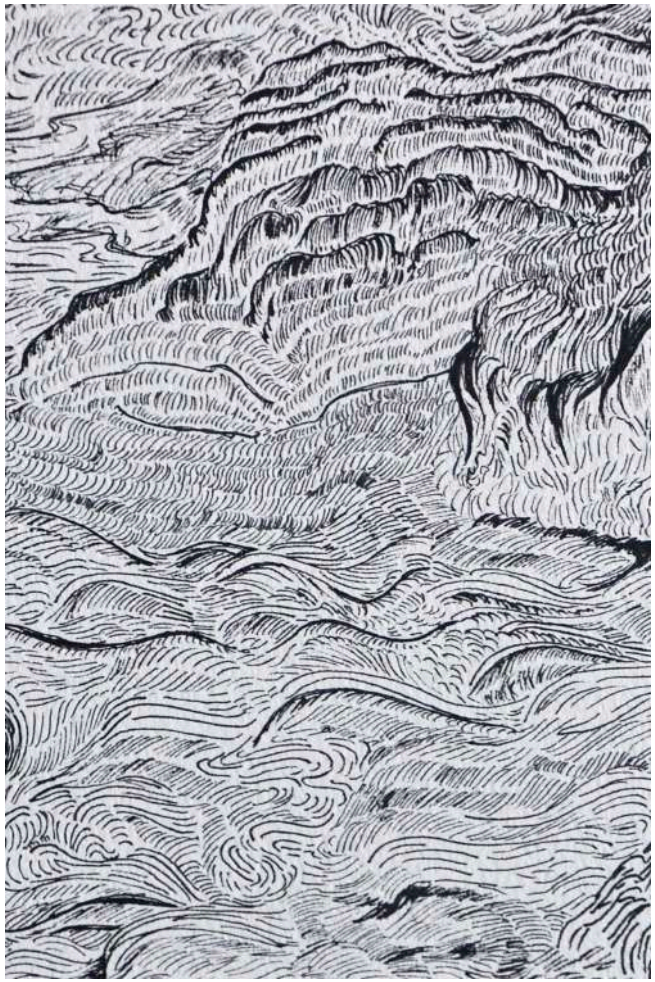

IMAGE: Sea Drawings n°1, 2020, drawing on paper, Hahnmühle 600g/m2 280 lbs, 24 x 32 cm, unique edition (L);
Sea Drawings n°1, 2020, drawing on paper, Hahnmühle 600g/m2 280 lbs, 24 x 32 cm, unique edition (R; detailed view)

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In reference to my Southeast Asian positionality and finding elsewheres I discovered Southeast Asian artists both actively working in a regional sense and within diasporic contexts, I discovered artistic practices that have a conscious engagement with spirituality and an attention to the relationship with nature and society. So, in the context of an ethnolinguistically diverse region where modernities do not necessarily align but somehow the imaginary that there is a possible cooperation and continuity within such a region offers such great promise and a model for the future of how we could live together embracing pluralities particularly.

I started to silence my mind through meditation and found comfort with the expanse of my transoceanic identity as a Southeast Asian where the trajectories to my universe are well-defined by the Pacific Ocean, the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean where multiple flows of incessant migrations exist hence exchanges and relate it to the Mediterranean through a repetitive series of sea drawings corresponding to the gesture of fluidly connecting these bodies of water in a transversal manner and one that blurs the lines of distance and borders and otherings. It was a way of being present and the process almost meditative while also leaving a slight defragmentations depending on my current dispositions while doing these writing meditations on paper. These in turn become potent gestures of linguistic reclamation that includes no borders and transgresses the tropes of the personal into a more universal optimistic gateway to unforeseen and limitless possibilities. Finally, inscribed herein are tropes of unintelligibility or imagining a shared understanding arising… a serial plethora of linguistic synchronicities.

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NOTES:

1. Doveglion is a collection of poems by Filipino poet José Garcia Villa (1908-1997) and remains a significant reference for his contributions to both Philippine literature and the global literary scene at large as he was the only Asian poet among a group of modern literary giants during the 1940s New York alongside W.H. Auden, Tennesse Williams, and a young Gore Vidal and was known as the “Pope of Greenwich Village” (from Penguin Random House biographical note on José Garcia Villa).

2. R.Ng. Ronggawarsita is one of the last great Javanese pujangga (court poets) and Serat Kala Tidha (Poem of a Time of Darkness) and this is a free translation of Benedict Anderson from the Javanese in a chapter from his book *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* in a chapter called “A Time of Darkness and a Time of Light.”

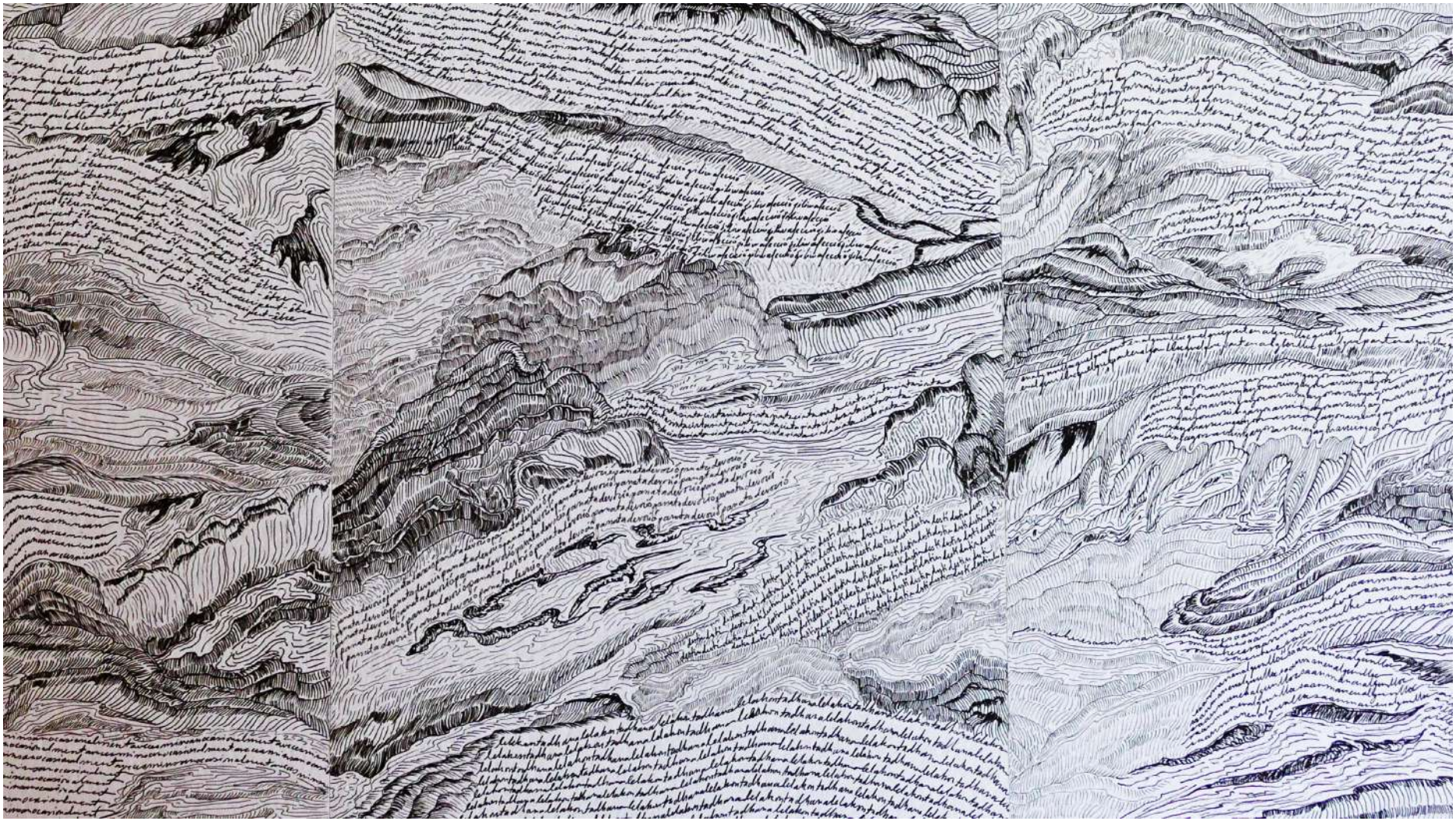

IMAGE: Detail of a triptych of Transoceanic Synchronicities, 2021, drawing on paper, Hahnmühle 425g/m2 200 lbs, 24 x 32 cm, unique edition,
Private Collection of Valles Family, Pla de Penedès, Barcelona, Spain

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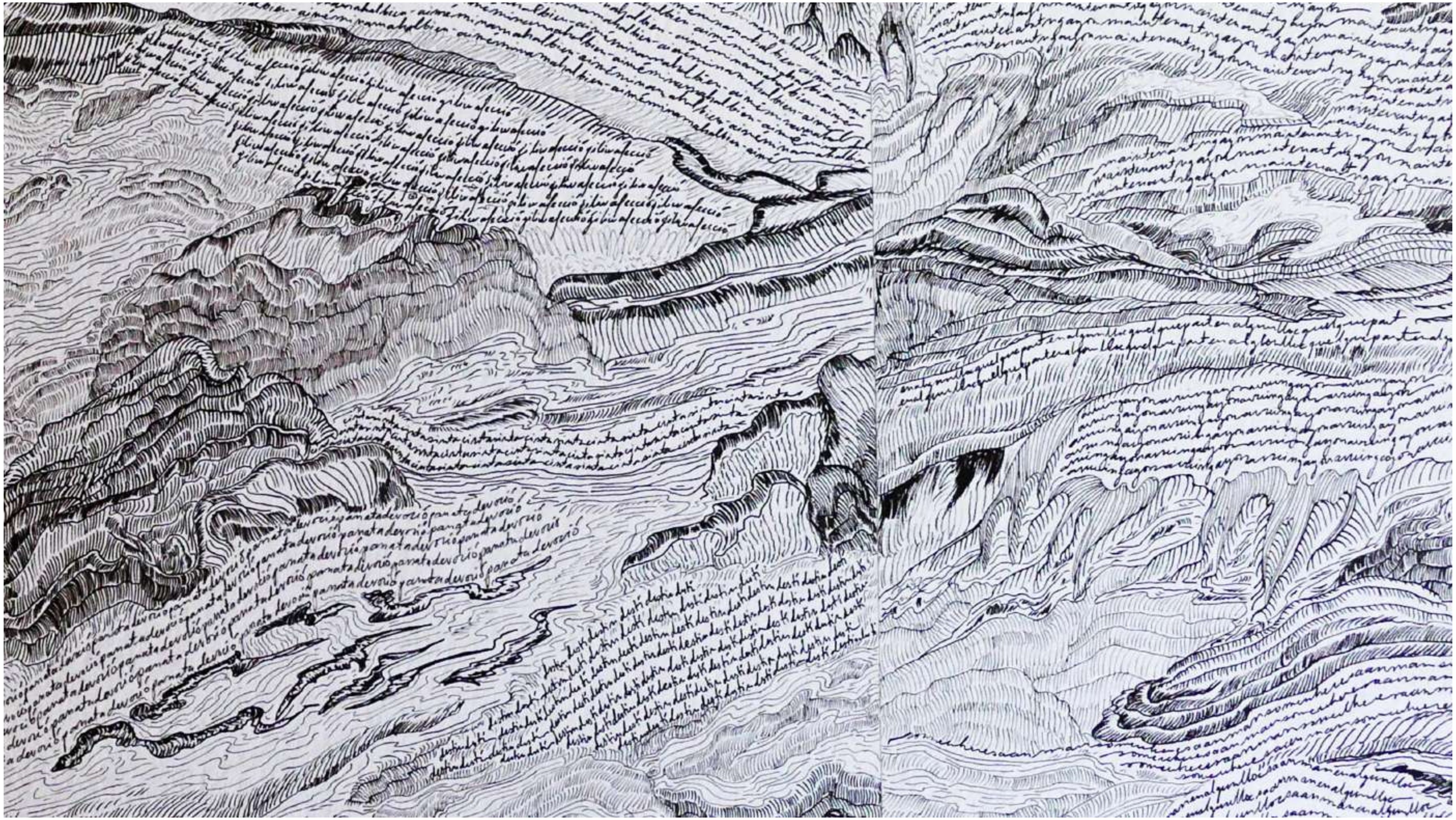

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