Silent Shouts: Michael Arcega’s Code-Switching

Curated by Thea Quiray Tagle
University of Washington Bothell, Washington, USA
tqtagle@uw.edu

As of late 2015, approximately 460,000 migrant workers (mostly hailing from the Philippines and South Asia) have landed in Bahrain, a tiny island nation in the Persian Gulf that remains an important ally to the US and Saudi Arabia.1 Protected by both nations for sometimes contradictory geopolitical factors—its strategic location allows for US Navy ships to be stationed near Afghanistan and other frontiers of the ongoing Gulf Wars, and its oil reserves are precious to the Saudi elites—Bahrain today imagines itself as a more welcoming haven for migrant workers than its neighbours, even as it has failed to enforce labour laws and has left grievous abuses of workers unaddressed. Those who have dared to protest human rights violations have been spectacularly punished, as they were during the Arab Spring of 2011, when Bahrain’s revolutionary Shiite Muslim majority was violently suppressed with the financial and military backing of its biggest allies. More recently, in January 2016, Bahraini activist Nabeel Rajab was sentenced to six months in prison for posting a Tweet critical of the monarchy, demonstrating the continued silencing of dissenting voices.2

In this charged political landscape, how does an artist working from within Bahrain’s borders speak back to power?

For Filipino American artist Michael Arcega, to comment on migrant rights and failed revolutions manifests as a speaking alongside; a lover of puns and

---

other wordplay, Arcega deploys these lexical strategies in his 2013 work *Code-Switching: Ya3ni, a conversation about things*, the culmination of his one-month residency at Al Riwak Art Space in Adliya, Bahrain. In the piece *A Tautology: Bohn, Boan, Bone, Bown, Bon, Bauwn* (fig. 1), Arcega pairs six renderings of a human bone with one of the aforementioned descriptors. The faux bones (made of cotton, wood, foam, ceramic, and watercolour respectively) are attached to non-words, suggesting one of two possibilities: first, that there is only one “real” bone (word and object) among a group of imposters; or, following the piece’s title, that all of these bones are equally as real or as imagined as we believe them to be. In a clever reversal of Magritte’s *The Treachery of Images* (1928–29)—perhaps it is a pipe, and there is no separation between the thing and its representation, after all—*A Tautology* asks viewers to question from all angles the veracity of the information they are given. Its embedded commentary slyly critiques the discourses of liberation and freedom promised by all groups involved in the failed Bahraini uprising—the Bahraini monarchy, Saudi Arabia, and the US.

The exhibition’s other sculptures made from found objects contain the sedimented, material evidence of the labour conditions, social conditions, and trans-oceanic transit routes which brought them into existence and into the