

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Jasmine Agnes T. Cruz, "Questioning images and aesthetics", *Business World Online*, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2015

*ON A WHITE wall that's almost nine meters high, there's a video that's just a little bigger than your hand. If there is a crowd of people at the exhibit, you'd think that the wall is empty. Where is the art? When the crowd parts, it is there. Further on you see a sculpture, photographs, and videos projected on larger screens. This is the telling characteristic of the exhibit of Filipino-American artist Paul Pfeiffer that's curated by Joselina Cruz at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD).*



**VITRUVIAN FIGURE (2015) by Paul Pfeiffer, plywood and mirror**

Entitled *Vitruvian Figure*, the exhibit is Mr. Pfeiffer's first major solo museum show in the Philippines and the first time that MCAD has just one artist taking up its entire exhibition space that spans 523 sq.m. "She encouraged me to not be afraid of the bigness and emptiness of the space," said Mr. Pfeiffer, referring to Ms. Cruz, and this is why there are only a few pieces in that vast area.

The two worked from last July til this February to create a mini retrospective of Mr. Pfeiffer's works from 1998 to the present, including new pieces commissioned by the museum.

The older pieces are *Empire*, a video that runs for three months capturing a hive being built; *Morning After the Deluge*, a 20-minute video of a sunset; *Fragment of a Crucifixion (After Francis Bacon)*, a manipulated video of a basketball game; *Desiderata*, a video of a game show; and *24 Landscapes*, a wall of photographs of shorelines.

The new works are *Vitruvian Figure (2015)*, a two-channel video showing a stadium in Bulacan and the building of a miniature version of it; *Vitruvian Figure (2015)*, an installation of half of a model of a stadium done with plywood and bisected by a mirror; and *Boomerang*, a video with a group of kids reciting

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the words said in a 1974 video called *Boomerang* by Richard Serra and Nancy Holt with the 1974 video showing beside the one Mr. Pfeiffer made.

Before this exhibit, Mr. Pfeiffer has had solo exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago; and the Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, among others. His numerous awards include a Fulbright-Hayes Fellowship to the Philippines (1994), the Bucksbaum Award from the Whitney Museum (2000), and the Alpert Award from CalArts (2009). His artworks are found in the Guggenheim Museum, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, and the Centro Arte de Contemporanea Inhotim in Brazil.

### ARCHITECTURE AND AESTHETICS

It was in the mid-1990s that Mr. Pfeiffer began using “Vitruvian Figure” as a title for his artworks. His affinity to this title is due to his interest in the Vitruvian man -- the famous drawing by Leonardo da Vinci, which had notes based on the writings of the architect Vitruvius -- which he stumbled upon when he was doing research on classical architecture.

Vitruvius talked about ideal human proportions and how this is the basis for the aesthetic standards in classical Western architecture. In the book *De architectura (Ten Books on Architecture)*, Vitruvius said that these geometric rules do not just apply to architecture but also to music, to the formation of society, and to the entire cosmos.

By following Vitruvius’ guidelines, one can make creations that are closer in line with perfection -- but the perfect body does not exist, and so these rules on perfection seem to be founded on something that isn’t real. “I want to question these ideas of perfection,” said Mr. Pfeiffer, explaining that he does this by repeating and taking on those classical forms and challenging the concepts that they champion.

These rules also produce hierarchies of beauty, society, and race, said the artist. He explained that society feels like it has to adopt these geometric rules in order to “carry the torch of power from ancient Greece to the present” so as “to be the legitimate inheritor of civilization” and remain as “the cultural and political authority” -- a societal agitation that Mr. Pfeiffer wishes to expose and debunk through his art.

### IDENTITY POLITICS

The Vitruvian man was a symbol that helped Mr. Pfeiffer discuss identity politics without being stereotyped as an artist who talks about race. Born in Hawaii, raised in the Philippines, having gone to high school on a Navajo reservation, Mr. Pfeiffer’s upbringing exposed him to different cultures.

“I spend a lot of time in the Philippines, and I celebrate my Filipino roots,” he said. “But I think there is a tendency for people to create a box around specific identities, and I think that’s not helpful. It’s part of the challenge of an artist to escape the constraints of nationalism.”

For the show at MCAD, the Vitruvian title is given to artworks with images of stadiums, including the wooden sculpture that’s as tall as a person. The stadium is another image that Mr. Pfeiffer has produced in the past, and for him, the stadium doesn’t just reflect his interest in sports per se but it highlights sports’ focus on the individual body -- the eyes of the audience and the flash of the cameras fixated on the athlete. Also a staple in classical architecture and invoking images of the Roman colosseum, the stadium is a place where a crowd gathers, and in that place, they expect to be entertained.

The stadium is also connected to Mr. Pfeiffer’s interest in mass media. “The stadium is like a recording studio,” Mr. Pfeiffer said, explaining that cameras capture the spectacle at the venue and broadcast it to the

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public. For Mr. Pfeiffer, images in mass media are things that need to be questioned. He explained that Hollywood movies and news reports are constructed from a certain vantage point and are distorted by the politics of those in power, but most people swallow them whole, thinking they are “natural” narratives of real life.

This is why Mr. Pfeiffer placed a mirror in his stadium sculpture, so that whenever you are looking at the piece, the mirror completes the image. “You think you’re seeing the whole thing, but in reality you’re looking at something that is partially real and partially just a reflection,” said Mr. Pfeiffer.

“Media images are different from real images,” he said. “You shouldn’t confuse reality with reflection.”

*The exhibit runs until April 16 the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design is located at the ground floor of De La Salle College of Saint Benilde, School of Design and Arts Campus, Dominga St., Malate, Manila. For details, contact Patricia Paredes (patriciaana.paredes@benilde.edu.ph), or call 230-5100 loc. 3897.*

<http://www.bworldonline.com/content.php?section=Arts&Leisure&title=questioning-images-and-aesthetics&id=104495>