

PAOLO ARAO

IN DIALOGUE WITH DRAWING



THE COLUMBUS MUSEUM

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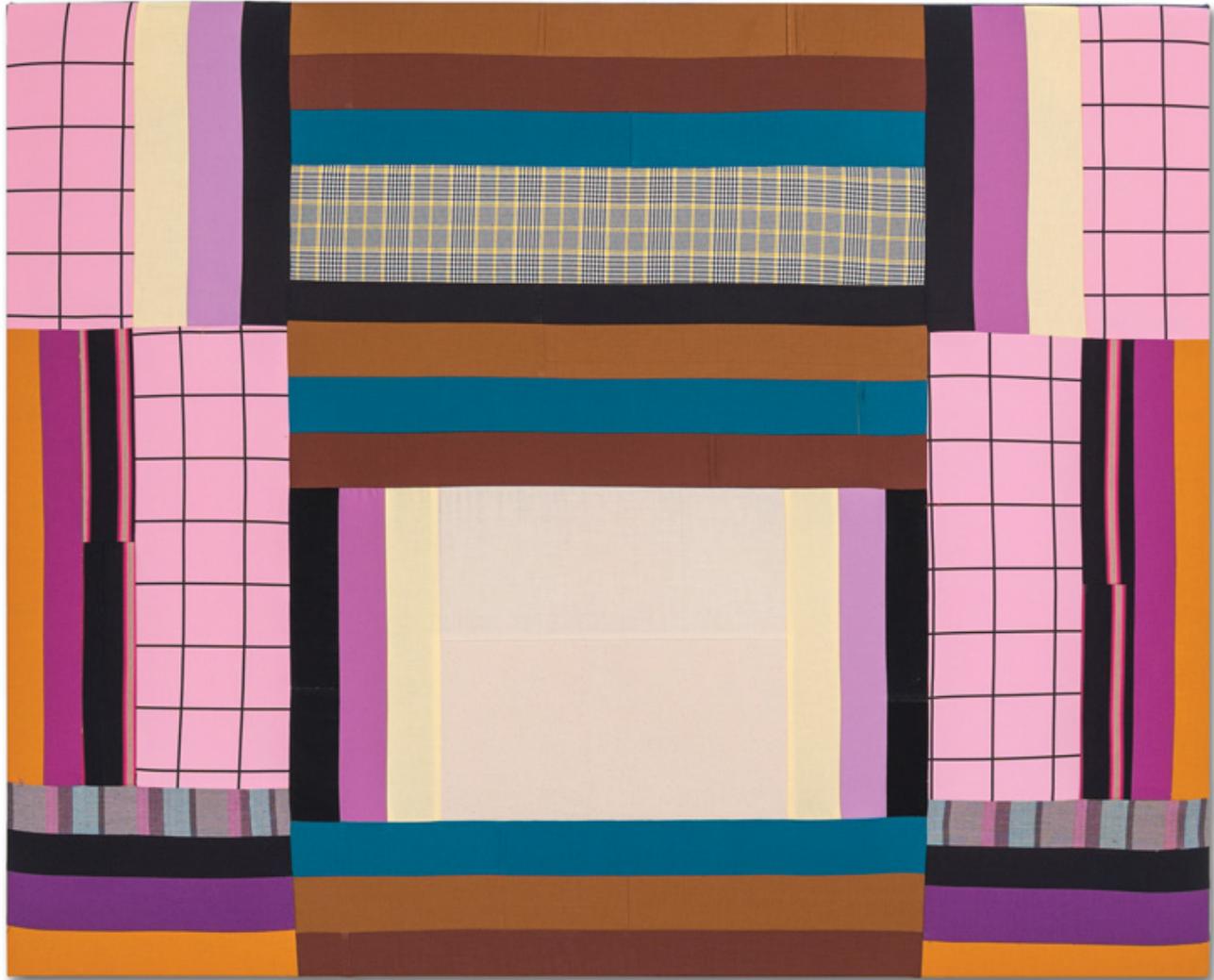
PAOLO ARAO IN DIALOGUE WITH DRAWING

The Columbus Museum has commissioned Brooklyn-based artist Paolo Arao to curate a group of works on paper from the Museum's collection. Individual sheets or groups of drawings have served as the stimuli for visual responses by the artist. As the title implies, *In Dialogue with Drawing* will feature multiple pairings, matching Arao's newly created works with "dialogue partners" from the Museum's holdings. The installation also includes several plates from Josef Albers's foundational textbook *Interaction of Color* as well as a handful of drawings by St. EOM, on loan from Columbus State University and Pasaquan.

Arao is a Filipinx-American artist whose most recent exploration in the studio combines the traditions of textiles and painting. His work is rooted in modernist geometric abstraction. He creates his current work by machine stitching second-hand clothing, hand-dyed fabric, and weathered canvas together. These unique objects straddle the fertile area between 2D and 3D.

Arao received his BFA from Virginia Commonwealth University. He has exhibited in numerous group exhibitions nationally and internationally and has presented solo exhibitions at Western Exhibitions in Chicago, Franklin Artworks in Minneapolis, Jeff Bailey Gallery and Barney Savage Gallery, both in New York. Arao has held residencies at such prestigious programs as Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, The Studios at MASS MoCA, Bemis Center for Contemporary Art, and the Fire Island Artist Residency. As a 2019 artist-in-residence at the Museum of Art & Design in New York, he created a series of intimate, multi-dimensional objects with bold colors and repeated geometries; that body of work disrupted perceived symmetries and asked visitors to reconsider their expectations of what queerness looks like. He is a recipient of a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in Drawing and his work has appeared in *New American Paintings*, *Maake Magazine*, and *Esopus*. *In Dialogue with Drawing* marks the debut of Arao and his work in Georgia.

Left: Paolo Arao / *Natural Rhythm*, 2020 / Sewn cotton, hand woven fibers, canvas, and colored pencil / Courtesy of the artist



Paolo Arao / *Into An Other*, 2020 / Sewn cotton, canvas, acrylic, and nylon / Courtesy of the artist



The artist Paolo Arai in his studio. Photo: Kristina Williamson.

AN INTERVIEW WITH PAOLO ARAO

by Jonathan Frederick Walz, Ph.D.

Jonathan Frederick Walz: Previously in your career, you were making traditional paintings. Could you tell us how you found your way to making fabric-based objects?

Paolo Arai: Yes! As you mentioned, I was making paintings prior to working with textiles. In 2016 I was invited to be a visiting artist in the Fibers and Materials Studies department at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. I had the wonderful opportunity to create a woven textile based on a painting of mine on a Jacquard TC2 loom. It was my first experience with weaving and I produced three weavings while I was there! I fell in love with the process. This experience had a profound impact on me and it marked a pivotal turning point from painting to textiles.

JFW: One reason I felt it would be productive to collaborate is that Columbus's history has been so bound up in the textile industry. The Chattahoochee River provided waterpower for the many mills in the area.

For a mid-sized museum, we have a notable collection strength in geometric abstraction. Are there particular artists from art history with whom you believe you are in conversation? Is your approach more about extending their

research, questioning it, or something else altogether?

PA: There are too many artists to mention! And the list evolves depending on what I'm working on in the studio. While my work is in conversation with various artists from multiple points throughout art history, my focus is on making work that stems from my own lived experiences, but still remains open to interpretation to engage a wider audience.

I'm inspired by an array of Indigenous textile histories (from the Philippines in particular), as well as Bauhaus textiles, abstract painting from the late 1960s/early 1970s, the Pattern + Decoration movement, and quilt making traditions from Gee's Bend and the Amish.

JFW: The Columbus Museum also has a strength in American drawings. Thank you for accepting my challenge to make some new work in dialogue with objects from our collection! Given the range of works from which to choose, how did you narrow down your final selection?

Right: Paolo Arai / *Tokyo Techno*, 2020 / Sewn cotton, hand woven fibers, denim, canvas, felt, acrylic, and colored pencil / Courtesy of the artist



PA: I was happy to accept the challenge! There are so many beautiful drawings in the Museum’s collection. In thinking about what drawings to choose, my decisions were motivated by particular qualities in the drawings that resonated with me (materials, line, shape, color, repetition, a/symmetry) rather than a direct re-imagining or re-interpretation of specific artworks.

JFW: In 2005 you received an artist fellowship in drawing from the New York Foundation for the Arts. Could you tell us about the making of drawings in your own studio practice?

PA: As mentioned earlier, I was making paintings before I started working with textiles. Prior to painting, I had been making and exhibiting drawings in New York City. My first solo exhibition in New York was in 2004 at Jeff Bailey Gallery and I exhibited charcoal drawings. The drawings I made were representational and based on composite photographs that I had collaged together.

In my current studio practice, I do keep a sketchbook for visual notes—but I rarely translate these into larger works—the sketches function as a means of generating rough ideas for composition or color. They are the blueprint from which I develop my sewn paintings and I consciously am open to changes that occur in the process of making.

JFW: I know from past conversations that you have begun investigating your Filipinx heritage. Where has that research taken you—physically or conceptually?

PA: For quite some time, I had been thinking about ways to acknowledge my heritage in a way that felt genuine to my work. I began reading about Indigenous textiles from the Philippines and felt a strong connection to this tradition—a



Above: Paolo Arao / *Aubergine Queen*, 2020 / Sewn cotton, canvas, nylon, hand woven fibers, corduroy, and denim / Courtesy of the artist

tradition that I was unfamiliar with, but curious to know more about.

In November of 2019, my husband and I took a trip to the Philippines and Japan. We visited Manila and it was the first time I had been to the Philippines without my family. This permitted me to experience and “discover” the city in a different and more personal way. I visited Divisoria, an outdoor market/garment district, and found some great textiles, most of which appear in the sewn paintings for this exhibition.

By referencing (and transforming) various motifs, patterns and color palettes, from Philippine textiles, I’ve found one small way to honor my ancestral heritage. But more importantly, I’m interested in giving visibility to this rich textile history, while pushing it forward into a contemporary context. There is fertile ground here that I’m only just beginning to discover....

JFW: In Columbus, we are proud of artist Alma W. Thomas, who was born here. One thing that

has really struck me in learning more and more about her is the importance for sketches and studies ahead of working on a large canvas. She would make dozens and dozens and then invite trusted friends and colleagues over to think through which were successful and might look good at a larger scale. She knew a lot about color theory and particularly responded to the ideas of Johannes Itten, who taught at the Bauhaus. Did you study color theory when pursuing your art degree? How do you decide which colors to use?

PA: I LOVE Alma Thomas’s work and her use of color! And yes, I studied color theory in my foundation year at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU).

Prior to becoming a visual artist, I was a classical pianist. I was originally awarded a scholarship to attend VCU as a music performance and composition major, but halfway through my first semester, I came to the realization that I wanted to be a painter. I applied to the visual arts program and was accepted, but I lost my music scholarship. In the end, I’m happy I made that decision!

Color and music share a similar language and I’m conscious of this when making decisions about color. Sometimes, I’ll begin a sewn painting by stitching multiple strips of color together to form a “chord” and this establishes the “key” of the painting (whether it’s in a major key or minor key). My decisions about color are intuitive and improvised, and a sense of harmony or dissonance is achieved through color and pattern (rhythm).

JFW: Alma Thomas also saw the connections between color abstraction and musical compositions. To help inspire herself in the studio, she listened to LP records and the radio. Do you listen to music or podcasts or other programming when you’re working? What’s on your playlist?



Above: The artist Paolo Arao in his studio. Photo: Kristina Williamson.

PA: I used to listen to music all the time in the studio. Recently, I've been enjoying the sound of silence. Deep focus is really important to me when I work. However, if I do listen to music while working, I prefer instrumental, classical, or ambient music. I'm a fan of contemporary composers like Philip Glass, Nils Frahm, or Alvo Noto. Bach's two and three-part inventions for the piano make a great studio soundtrack and are a personal favorite of mine (particularly Glenn Gould on the piano.) If I'm performing tasks that don't require too much focus like stretching sewn paintings, packing artwork, or organizing the studio, then I'll listen to music with lyrics.

JFW: Was there a particular book and/or exhibition when you were pursuing your art degree that really changed your thinking?

PA: *Interaction of Color* by Josef Albers. The language he uses to describe color has social implications that allude to human interaction. Thinking about color in this way was a revelation when I first read it. And it continues to be an important reference to this day.

JFW: Is there an American artist today whose work you find especially compelling?

PA: There are so many artists making compelling work! That being said, most recently I've been delving into the work of Sam Gilliam. He is a true artist whose fearless experimentation, work ethic, and aesthetic philosophy are a source of inspiration.

JFW: We're also fans of Gilliam; we have a great early hard-edge painting in the Museum's

collection. He didn't make many in that style, so I feel really lucky that we have such a terrific example.

So, in your practice, over time you've investigated different materials and ways of making. Is there a medium or process you are dying to try?

PA: Weaving is what led me to working with textiles in the first place so I've begun to re-visit and develop this process by incorporating different textures and patterns into newer work. I picked up a 4-harness floor loom recently and I can't wait to experiment further!

JFW: I like to ask contemporary artists about what they would tell an aspiring artist today. What advice would you give to students in Columbus and elsewhere who are considering pursuing a career in the visual arts?

PA: GREAT question!

- 1) Make A LOT of work! Most of it will be bad, but some will be game changers.
- 2) Don't be afraid to take risks and fail.
- 3) Stop comparing yourself or your work to others, especially with regards to social media. The joys of making work can be found in personal moments of pure discovery and the highs and lows along your artistic path are unique to you and your lived experiences. Learn from them! Don't let the smoke and mirrors of social media cloud your vision.

JFW: Thank you, Paolo! We so very much appreciate your sharing of your handsome work and thoughtful insights with us.



ARTIST'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I'm immensely thankful to my dear friend and wonderful artist, Douglas Witmer, for introducing my work to Jonathan Frederick Walz. Thank you to my cousin, Erwin Brillante, and my Aunt Cleofe Cruz in Manila—and to Roko Takiwa in Tokyo—for accompanying me to source the various fabrics that are incorporated into these paintings. I am additionally grateful to Cary Whittier, who has beautifully documented my work over the years, and to Kristina Williamson for faithfully capturing the portraits in my studio. Thank you to Jeffrey Barron and his team at BarronArts in Brooklyn for crafting the supports on which my paintings are displayed.

My deepest gratitude goes to my husband, Shannon Logan-Torres, for his endless support, encouragement, and love.

Left: Paolo Arao / *Peach Kiss*, 2020 / Sewn cotton and canvas / Courtesy of the artist

Front cover: Paolo Arao / *Divisoria*, 2020 (detail) / Sewn cotton, acrylic, canvas, hand woven fibers, felt, and denim / Courtesy of the artist

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This exhibition is sponsored by WC Bradley. 