



Photo: Ian Byers-Gamber

Jasmine Orpilla

Born Bronx, NY
Lives and works in Los Angeles and abroad

Education

University of California, Berkeley

Selected Performnces

- 2022 *Benevolent Assimilation (Variation: Oro, Plata, Mata)*, LAX Festival at MOCA, Los Angeles
- 2021 *TALGED, Her Body She Cares for, Her Soul/s (She) Guards*, REDCAT, Los Angeles
- 2020 *SUNGKA: A Civil War, a Civil Marriage*, Human Resources, Los Angeles
- 2019 *Go Home: Where the Heart Is. Feed My Heart. Free My Hate*, Oxy Arts Center, Los Angeles
- 2018 *How Many Years Did We Fight the Beast Together*, REDCAT, Los Angeles

www.jasmineorpilla.com

what we're doing to the land that was previously called home

Jasmine Orpilla laughs, taps her glasses, shrugs, “A callback to Larry Itliong.” She blinks, throws on her cap, points to it. “Carlos Bulosan.” She walks fast, with aim. Eagle Rock mall. We’re headed past Wetzels Pretzels, past Chowking and Jollibee. A restaurant owner recognizes us. How can anyone forget Orpilla’s wiry, fierce, wondrous energy? She travels with sparks, with acute observational skills, always intimately attuned to her environment. She notices the restaurateur’s son doing homework on the table next to the kitchen, a store shut down across the way. Seated, she lays down a concept: the knife. A knife enters, twists, opens, clarifies. A voice, Orpilla’s voice, a voice inextricable from its slender body, leans into the blade, hard into the cut. It spills the animal’s histories, political and personal. Air is the blood that jets into the audience, her audience, of ancestors. Her studies of the kulintang, the songs of her childhood, the harana serenades, postwar kundiman folk songs, her grandmother’s lullabies, are codes of communication in performances that stun the living. But the performances are not for them. They are for the dead, the unattended, the forgotten, for the lands laid waste by the effects of war.

How often do we describe performance as ritual but neglect the requisite of harm and benefit that occurs with true ritual? How often do we use the word *disruption* to mean “a little bit of something different” when our spirits might want union through the body’s fire? What help can come to those maimed by war’s barbarous erasures of eyes and tongues if we don’t risk evisceration, even a little public humiliation, ourselves? What if we, as witnesses of an art act, can’t stand its effects? If we must be lulled by explanation, exception, and inclusion?

Orpilla’s performances are not necessarily rituals, but they are requests, and they do call up. Her voice, her body, hair, feet, mouth are harrowing instruments of power and retaliation. Her heroes are revolutionaries and poets, with whom she is in psychic conversation. Through object-beings—family-inherited rusted knives, chipped hand-thrown pottery, dresses made of fragile piña, her own hair—her acts are pleas for ancestral forgiveness. They are requests for justice, reverberations of the memory of memories fading as fast as the many languages that she speaks and the land previously named home, once cared for by humans and attendant spirits, die.

An actor, a composer, a singer, a musician, a historian, a dancer, a student of martial arts, Orpilla is a multiple. When she performs, a confluence of forms flow through her with the intelligence and precision of multiple spirits, cultures, and epochs. Her voice pierces, drills, accuses, offends. It contains the high glittering force of one astonished and affronted by life. Her body bends to the will of the multiplicities that course through her. As she embodies, she weaves elements of the nonhuman—like the giant *kapre*, who watched over farmlands in the Philippines for generations—and the human, fragments of speech from revolutionaries whose histories are being erased.

I who have waited nameless. Repeated insistently, these words of Carlos Bulosan, poet-activist, are mantras. *Nameless in history / who will remember the hour.* “I’m fighting to keep these names alive.” The names are Carlos Bulosan—laborer, organizer, and poet who fought American racist exploitation of Filipino laborers—and Larry Itliong, or Manong Larry—in Ilokano, Brother Larry—who was also called 7 Fingers, the tough, cigar-smoking labor leader who founded the United Farm Workers alongside Mexican American leaders. Orpilla’s family are farmers and soldiers. Her relationship to the politics of labor, to anticolonialism, is very personal, as she sees the struggles against oppression being overshadowed by fascination with material goods like those sold in the shopping mall we’re in, like fast food and fast culture. “This is why I ask the ancestors’ forgiveness,” Orpilla says. “After all of these grand movements, this is what we have. I’m sorry, ancestors. But this is what I can do with my voice, wielding justice in this sense. I’ll hold the knife.”

Justice makes the invisible visible. As Orpilla uses elements of song, speech, and personal relics in her work, she also weaves as an act of closeness to indigenous Filipino culture, a means of keeping people of the diaspora and the present Filipino American generation close. The tapestries in her work contain protective patterns descended from women and shamans in the dream state. These patterns, like the whirlwind, can be found reflected in martial arts and in Orpilla’s choreography. They bring harmony to the body. The weaving of languages, of music and sound, of fabrics and histories, of movement in her indefinable performances, feels like a passageway through time for those from the past who are present to those who are preparing for the future. Expressed with her penetrating voice and her dexterous body, Jasmine Orpilla’s justice is a reunion of elements spread out over the earth from a land once called home and a radical plea for a reassembling in a form still unknown.

—Asher Hartman