

Planting a Kiss: Rodolfo Paras-Perez and the Woodcut's Retrieval

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ABSTRACT

Using Rodolfo Paras-Perez's print practice and scholarship, this essay illustrates how the notion of the kiss came to be the artistic and transmissive device for the woodcut's revival in Manila. Reflecting on the trope of the kiss in its capacity to operate pictorial lineage, two woodcut works by Paras-Perez (*Kiss*, 1962 and *Florante at Laura*, 1977) are foregrounded, alongside the artist's milieus and influences, to highlight an interchange spanning Europe, the United States, Mexico, and the Philippines. While both woodcut and kiss first arrived through colonial contact, they later served as agents of a postwar modernism in Philippine graphic arts, enlivening and disrupting its genealogy.

CATECHISMS OF PRINT

In 1593, under the auspices of the Dominican friars, the *Doctrina Christiana en lengua española y tagala* (*Christian Doctrine in Spanish and Tagalog*) (see Fig 1) was printed on rice paper using carved woodblocks in the San Gabriel Church of Binondo, the Chinese settlement outside Intramuros. Book historian Patricia May B. Jurilla (2006, 36) attributes the catechist manual's execution to local Chinese craftspeople by way of the workmanship of its illustrations. On the *Doctrina's* title page, the very emblem of Santo Domingo betrays the Church's task in its new islands. He holds on one hand a stalk of lilies, a symbol of chastity, and on the other a rule book. Two edifices in the Romanesque tradition loom in the distance. On the left, a stronghold indicative of the Kingdom of Castille and on the right, a cloister resembling the Casa de Espiritualidad in the saint's birthplace of Caleruega, Spain. On the meadow where he emerges from castle and convent, the preacher sets out to govern his subject's body, mind, and spirit—initializing 'the manifold changes colonialism sets in motion [in the revision of] how "natives" compose their bodies, cover and ornament them, feel or think about them, use them' (Mojares, 2002, 171).

Historical overviews like those by critic Leonidas Benesa (1975; 1980; 1982), historian Santiago Pilar (1975; 1993), and visual artist Imelda Cajipe-Endaya (1980; 1993) narrate print history as a succession of events where different printing practices are time and again supplanted by new methods—from the publication of the *Doctrina* in 1593 to the mid-American colonial period in 1928. The overviews look at print works as developing from the same passage of time and place, split only by an interval where the lacuna of print comes into being. Pilar



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1. Title page of the *Doctrina Christiana en lengua española y tagala* (1593). Woodblock print on paper. Library of Congress, Washington, DC

Figure 2. *Kiss* (1962) by Rodolfo Paras-Perez. Woodcut print on paper, 520 x 800 mm. Ateneo Art Gallery, Quezon City

(1993, 22) describes this moment between 1928—when Victorio Edades instigated modernism—and the late 1950s, as an expired intermission when rotogravure and offset methods ‘efficiently printed pictures by the thousands.’ He contends, ‘The printmaker had to wait for some 30 years more before he would have the chance to match the creative vigor of his marvelous predecessors,’ because, as Cajipe-Endaya (1998) explains, ‘Until the 1960s, Philippine colonial prints, published as illustrations for books or posters, were largely unknown and unappreciated.’ The general history of Philippine print thus portrays print works as running on a continuum without break from the *Doctrina*, the xylographic ground zero of Philippine printing.

Following this frame of mind, it was therefore expected of writers to ensure the progression of print history by examining emerging graphic artists of the 1960s who had studied abroad, and whose customary methods—such as relief, intaglio, and lithography—were kindred to those employed during the Spanish and early American colonial periods. The woodcut reemerged tremendously in the early 1960s through the prints of Rodolfo Paras-Perez, who was deemed by critics its primary resuscitator. Their bespoke praise testified to the success of the Philippine Association of Printmakers (PAP) after it was formally registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission in 1968, which according to Cajipe-Endaya (1998), was to ‘establish printmaking as a major form of artistic expression equal to painting and sculpture.’ Even Manuel Rodriguez Sr, considered to be the main proponent of the modern graphic arts movement, first thought of the medium as a minor form of art used entirely for commercial purposes (Flores, 2018). By the late 1950s, woodcut had already been wielded by Filipino painters like Juvenal Sansó, Romulo Olazo, Vicente Manansala, Arturo Luz, Anita Magsaysay-Ho, and Fernando Zóbel de Ayala. They acquired technical skill either through the instruction of Rodriguez Sr, their studies abroad, or through self-instruction. Around the mid-1960s, Hilario Francia, Cenon Rivera, Florencio Concepcion, Mario Parial, and Virgilio Aviado also started making woodcuts. Shifting from painting to printmaking in 1960 just as he was leaving for Minneapolis (Hattis, 1969), Paras-Perez committed to the woodcut as his primary medium. He was later joined by printmakers Manuel Soriano and Efren Zaragoza while others devoted their practice to oil painting or other printmaking methods.

In 1964, Paras-Perez joined the University of the Philippines’s (UP) Department of Art Studies. In the department’s first publication, Paras-Perez contributed woodblock prints and essays on Philippine art and literature. Mirano and Lopez (2011, 44) submit, ‘These members of the faculty brought with them a broad, interdisciplinary outlook which [...] helped the department develop a cadre of scholars capable of using an array of disciplinal methods and techniques to study the arts.’ By this point Paras-Perez’s works, practice, and techniques had already long informed those of young printmakers Lucio Martinez, Zaragoza, Rodolfo Samonte, and Parial (Benesa, 1975, 12; Guillermo and Chu, 1994, 385). Even then, Paras-Perez still refrained from teaching the xylographic method. Instead he continued teaching courses



Figure 3



Figure 4

Figure 3. Copy of *The Kiss* (1929) by Auguste Rodin. Marble, 1815 × 1125 × 1170 mm. Rodin Museum, Philadelphia, PA

Figure 4. *Kiss* (1965) by Rodolfo Paras-Perez. Woodcut print on paper, 630 x 890 mm. Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA

on humanities, art history, and aesthetics at the University of the Philippines (Benesa, 1975, 14–15; Mirano and Lopez, 2011, 43; NCCA, 2019, 11). ‘The influence he wielded was not through the workshop or the classroom, but through his authoritative exhibits of very limited editions’ (Benesa, 1982, 25).

ROD’S KISS

Rodolfo (Rod.) Paras-Perez was born in Manila on April 7, 1934. His early engagement with printmaking, painting, curation, art history, criticism, and book design, was best outlined by Mary F. Gray (1967) of the Asia Foundation who in a letter of recommendation addressed to the JDR 3rd Fund (now the Asian Cultural Council) wrote, ‘His artistic training and his creativity were well developed when I first met him. Since that time, he has remarkably improved in research techniques, so that he would appear to be a rather rare person who is both artist and art historian.’ After completing two masters’ degrees—Master of Fine Arts, 1961 and Master of Arts, 1962 at the University of Minnesota—Paras-Perez returned to Manila with a body of xylographic work which was showcased in his first solo exhibition at the Luz Gallery. It was in this 1962 exhibit where he first presented *Kiss* (see Fig 2), a large format woodcut print made using two blocks (Hattis, 1969) depicting a couple in tryst. On the first layer of black, the clearing of the background using large V- or C-gouges occasions the tautness of positive and negative space. Fine strokes are incised on the remaining black, consequently silhouetting the couple. The second layer of blue runs along the bottom, accentuating the surrounding vegetation. On the same layer, a subdued red is cast upon a bloom slipped into the hand of the male. The composition of the arched male and the female in recline, populated by foliage of different shapes and apexes, intimates that while the two are exchanging amorous attention in open air, they are incognito and hidden from public view. They are locked in a private moment whose carnality is underscored by nature encircling and running wild.

Kiss won first prize at the Art Association of the Philippines (AAP) graphic art competition of the same year, which was then the authoritative prize that launched the careers of budding Filipino artists. In describing *Kiss*, Cajipe-Endaya (1994, 254) in the *Cultural Center of the Philippines Encyclopedia of Philippine Art (CCP EPA)* establishes that, ‘The *Kiss* became a high mark in Philippine graphic art. The uniqueness of Paras-Perez’s artistry is found in the way he melds primordial Oriental feeling with a highly disciplined Occidental intellectuality.’ In 1994, the CCP EPA was first published with the participation of numerous scholars who identified and indexed works which were thought to be significant in the development of Philippine visual arts. In a list of 130 or so works—some dating back to the pre-Hispanic period—*Kiss* was the sole work executed using the woodcut printing method. Benesa had earlier reported in *The Printmakers* (1975, 15–16)—a slim catalogue which identified the most active printmakers of the time—that, ‘No other Filipino artist comes close to Paras-Perez in the artistic handling of the tension of opposites, of the *yang* and the *yin*, which is



Figure 5



Figure 6

Figure 5. Sniff kissing in *Biyaya ng Lupa* (1959), directed by Manuel Silos. LVN Pictures

Figure 6. *The Kiss IV* (1902) by Edvard Munch. Woodcut print on paper, 525 × 494 mm. Art Institute Chicago, IL

represented if somewhat literally in [...] *Kiss*.'

After his inaugural show, Paras-Perez would produce such an extensive body of work done in the woodcut format that he would be credited as the medium's trailblazer by art writers (Hattis, 1969; Benesa, 1982, 25; Cajipe-Endaya, 1998) and by no less than the UP president Carlos P. Romulo (1967): 'In the art of printmaking, he is internationally recognized, and in this country he is considered a pioneer if not the best authority in this particular type of creative endeavor.' *Kiss* was approved by critics and award-giving bodies who saw the work to be thematically and technically outstanding. Keeping in mind the peripheral status of printmaking then, it became the woodcut work hitherto most representative of the medium's significance as far as the writers and institutions were concerned.

ON EITHER SIDE

In 1957, Paras-Perez, who was student council president of the UP School of Fine Arts and Architecture, graduated cum laude with a Bachelor of Fine Arts. Paras-Perez, schooled in the UP—a university founded by the American colonial administration in 1908—and at the time under the directorship of the Western-educated Guillermo Tolentino, was witness to a postwar period shifting away from tradition. In 1936, Tolentino, the vanguard of the conservative school, had been embroiled in a heated polemic against Victorio Edades of the modernist camp which lasted until after the war in 1948. Paras-Perez's attendance of two schools is best seen in his authorship, between 1971 and 1990, of monographs of the most sought-after artists, among which was 'Tolentino', a 1976 study of his mentor. Later in 1995 he curated 'Edades and the 13 Moderns' at the CCP, an exhibition which celebrated works of Philippine modernism and its main proponent. To cement his place within the debate, Paras-Perez (1995, 13) wrote in its catalogue, 'Edades and Tolentino were able to clarify the basic differences between each group's attitude without necessarily coming to grips with the aesthetic issue involved. For essentially the issue was between *feeling* and the *ideal*, between the ideal that wrought forms into perfections and the emotion that charged forms with human imperfections, with a sense of uniqueness'. For him, 'These were ancient issues [that] had returned in such guises as to ring with the urgency of contemporary life.'

Art historian Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez (2017, 37) illustrates the attendant machismo of Paras-Perez's milieu, citing how 'the venerable critic Leonidas Benesa could utter a sloppy sexist comment in regard to the only reason the AAP functioned at all: "The trick seems to be to elect as many women to the board as the men could bear, and let them manage the business side."' Reuben Cañete (2008, 258) similarly described Paras-Perez as 'a critical personality in which a possessive aestheticism is combined with connoisseurship, Hegelian metaphysics, and (what passes for) formalist description, resulting in a hybrid character that still delineates its authorial voice within the master narrative of the hegemonic masculine...' The problem of nationalism, modernism, and gender in the visual arts was further complicated by



Figure 7



Figure 8

Figure 7. *Las antorchas* (1948) by Leopoldo Méndez. Linocut print on paper, 388 x 504 mm. RISD Museum, Providence, RI

Figure 8. *Florante at Laura: Quartet* (1977) by Rodolfo Paras-Perez. Woodcut print on paper, 268 x 427 mm. Cultural Center of the Philippines, Manila

art critic Patrick D. Flores (2010) because even as modernism became more established, its female initiators such as Purita Kalaw-Ledesma—the main patron of the PAP and founder of the AAP—prejudiced against artists who persisted in the conservative school. Kathleen Ditzig (2017, 48) additionally cautions on the AAP’s involvement under Kalaw-Ledesma in the circulation of American prints in Southeast Asia in the late 1950s, ‘as a stand-in for technical advancement and a wholly American development of painting, seen as the highest form of modern art.’

Flores (2020, 31) postulates how the weakness of Paras-Perez came from his obsession with precision. He adds, ‘[Paras-Perez] cannot seem to live with the modernist aporia so much so that he needs to endorse an almost hermetic dichotomy between sense data and precision, connoisseurship and dilettantism, art criticism and art appreciation, and art criticism and aesthetics.’ Noting how he had already been conversant with critical theory, Flores however underlines that Paras-Perez (1971, 64) endeavored to combine art criticism with ‘strands of other activities—for example ethics, politics, religion, philosophy, and science.’

In discussing the features of transfer between colonizer and colonized cultures, art historian John Clark (1998, 49) asserts that ‘It is an art historical fact that modernity in all Asian art cultures has developed out of contact with that of Euramerica.’ Clark identified three modalities of transfer, namely producer, educational, and consumer. In describing producer transfer, Clark (52) defines it as follows:

This occurs at the level of the individual artist seeking access to non-local forms and techniques usually via looking at reproductions or sometimes originals, and by further analysis and experimentation via art manuals and catalogues. This might be thought to be a situation found in some Asian countries during the 1960s.

John Clark (1998, 52)

He adds that producer transfer ‘seems to change its structure when the artist can go abroad to the sending culture, or when cultural contact is of a scale and intensity that the non-local art culture is effectively brought to the artist.’

ROD AND RODIN

Kiss, in fact, references the 1882 marble sculpture by Auguste Rodin of the same name (Cruz, 2014) (see Fig 3). Rodin was regarded for his figurative nude images which challenged the ruling conventions of sculpture in the late 19th century. Commissioned by the French state, Rodin’s *Kiss* alludes to two adulterous lovers described in Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*. The sculptor depicted Paolo and Francesca in the very moment before they were caught by the latter’s husband and sentenced to hell. In Rodin’s *Kiss*, the woman consummates the almost stationary man. A quick look at their postures evinces how it is the

female eagerly adapting to the male's formidability. She is the ravenous one, willingly compromising her position to respond to her lover. In Paras-Perez's *Kiss*, the woman is supine, sickly, yielding to the towering figure of the man and his overtures. Whereby she is surmounted by the weight of her partner, the disparity sprouts 'a wealth of fruit, flower, and leaf forms' (Cajipe-Endaya, 1994, 254), obfuscating her figure into the undergrowth.

Art critic Cid Reyes (1989, 189) once regarded Paras-Perez as a recognized authority on Rodin. In 1967, as a doctorate candidate in art history at Harvard University, Paras-Perez's study of Rodin's sketches was published in the summer edition of the Detroit Institute of Arts' *The Art Quarterly*. In this report, Paras-Perez described Rodin's sculptures to be 'Conceived and molded in clay, [...] later multiplied in either bronze or stone.' Bearing in mind a common reproducibility, he opened his article with the bold affirmation that 'Rodin's sculptures are in a sense like prints.' In one section of the study, Paras-Perez took notice of the 'abstract lines' in which Rodin had typically isolated the movements of his figures. He dredged up Rodin's journal entry in which the sculptor wrote, 'But I have added a third movement, a triangle, into which I composed my group, *The Kiss*.' Agnes Mongan (1969), writing in support of Paras-Perez, confirms:

'His recent article on Rodin's drawings, published in The Art Quarterly, has become fundamental reference work for all who are interested in separating the many and troubling forged Rodin drawings from the relatively few genuine ones. Its importance was tacitly acknowledged recently when Stanford University, which is assembling a large exhibition (contrasting real and fake works) which will circulate to major West Coast Museums, sent the Curator assembling the show East, with instructions to consult with [Paras-Perez]. This he did.'

Agnes Mongan (1969)

In 1964, Paras-Perez produced a restrike edition of 200 of *Kiss* for the International Graphic Arts Society (see Fig 4). He gifted the artist proof to Mongan who bequeathed it to Harvard University's Fogg Museum in 1993. Mongan was known to be keeper of Fogg's drawings, cataloguing its collection of works on paper until she was designated curator in 1947 (Smith, 1996). Many of the drawings which Paras-Perez studied for his 1967 article were from the collections of the Fogg and other institutions like the Smith College Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago. Capistrano-Baker (2015, 284) explains, 'Paras-Perez passed on to his students at UP, and across other institutions through time, methodologies and perspectives developed in close intellectual engagement with his Harvard professors, colleagues, and advisers, among them James Ackerman and Agnes Mongan, herself a pioneer in the study of drawings and the first female director of Harvard's Fogg Art Museum.' She adds, 'Rodin's *Kiss* looks very Western. In Dr. Paras-Perez's *Kiss*, the couple seems to be lying on the ground with lush vegetation in the background. There is a link between Paras-Perez's scholarship and study of art history and the themes and motifs

that preoccupied him as a practicing artist' (Cruz, 2014).

Another work that instances Paras-Perez's history and literary grounding is *Phaedra*, 1963, which alludes to the 1889 painting of the same title by Alexandre Cabanel. Like *Kiss*, it is a woodcut work indicating a literary subject. Paras-Perez also touched on biblical tales in works such as *Theophany I*, 1974 and *Adamah*, 1975 while the erotic would continue to appear in his subsequent series of prints such as *Lotus Odalisque*, 1974, *Moon Maiden*, 1975, *Poinsettia Odalisque*, 1978, *Yantra Odalisque II*, 1979 and *Tantric Spring*, 1980. Without question, a sensual-cerebral element powerfully imbued Paras-Perez's copious oeuvre of woodcuts.

SNIFF KISS

It is observed that among Filipinos, the *beso* or cheek-to-cheek kiss (from Spanish *beso*) is performed between young and elderly, regardless of sex, to express respect. The cheek-to-cheek kiss done twice—once on either side—or the *beso-beso* meanwhile is occasionally performed between middle to upper class women; male and female family and friends; and gay Filipino men. In this current pandemic age, viewing artworks which illustrate a kiss is reminiscent of a time when it was free to be in the company of others without attending to physical distancing protocols. The Tagalog word *tigang*, meaning 'parched'—used to describe dried-out land or a person who is lacking sexual activity—befits this current moment. If only to underline the idiomatic 'plant a kiss', to be fertile and abundant therefore is to regain contact.

These days we are made aware of the hazards of touching and coming into the proximity of others, elucidating the strength of the kiss and the peril of inhaling droplets and drawing in the virus. The manner in which the virus is spread circles back to the linguistic significance of the kiss in Philippine languages. 'To kiss' is in Manobo *hazik* or *hazek*, in Tagalog *halik*, in Hiligaynon *haluk*, in Cebuano *halok*, in Bikol *hadok*, in Aklanon *harok*, in Ivatan *harek*, in Maranao *arek*, and in some Ilokano dialects *agek*, all deriving from the Proto-Malayo-Polynesian *hajek*, meaning 'to smell, sniff, or kiss' (Blust and Trussel, 2016). Science historian Sheril Kirshenbaum reports that in Vedic texts dating to the 1500s BCE, 'no word exists for "kiss", but the same word is employed to mean both "sniff" and "smell"' (Danesi, 2013, 5). Classen *et al.* (1994, 114) further detail, 'Thus the Vedas speak of the satisfaction fathers take in smelling the heads of their children after returning from an absence. This act was as meaningful and affectionate as a kiss or hug would be in the West.'

On the shared function of kissing and smelling as an act of determining compatibility between prospective mates, anthropologist Bettina Beer (2004, 154), through her exploration of olfaction in the island of Bohol, establishes that, 'Social interactions and relations are one of the most important areas, where Boholanos constantly worry about odors and self-presentation. Not only ethnicity and gender but

also status, income, and class are marked by kinds of odors, intensity, absences, or presence of certain smells.' Accordingly, semiotics professor Marcel Danesi (2013, 21), citing the work of anthropologist Helen Fischer, relays that tasting and smelling each other may be genetic markers, 'especially since [the] testosterone in [men's] saliva might unconsciously trigger estrogen in women's.'

Medical anthropologist Gideon Lasco (2015), in writing about the Filipino sense of smell, resolves that, 'the way many Filipinos [...] traditionally kiss each other is called "sniff kiss" because it involves the lips touching the cheek, and sniffing. Perhaps this is why *halik* (kiss) is related to *halimuyak* (fragrance), which is in turn also associated with feminine sensuality. In the act of kissing—whether in a familial or romantic context—there is a dimension of the olfactory.' The sniff kiss described by Lasco can be seen performed in the 1959 film *Biyaya ng Lupa* (*Blessings of the Land*) (see Fig 5). Around the 08:30 mark, Jose (played by Tony Santos) sniff kisses his wife Maria (Rosa Rosal) proceeding a moment in which Jose reassures his love for her—'At asahan mo namang ang pagmamahal ko sayo'y tataglayin ko hanggang libing (And be assured that I will hold on to my love for you until my grave).' When the promise of love is conflated with the place of rest, the confirmation of a kiss presets the entwinement of life and death.

KISS AND TELL

In the documentary *Walang Rape sa Bontok* (*Bontok, Rapeless*), Carla Pulido Ocampo went to several mountain villages to corroborate the belief that rape had never taken place in Bontoc communities. When asked about kissing, an elder woman answered, 'We do not do that here.' Another man likewise responded, 'Nobody knows how to kiss over here. During our time, that was never a thing.' Ocampo (2016) supported their responses with the writings of the American-colonial anthropologist Albert Jenks, who in 1905 observed that, '[the] Igorot do not kiss or have other formal physical expression to show affection between friends or relatives. Mothers do not kiss their babes even.' Many of the older Bontoc believe that displays of affection among their youth are foreign and modeled on outside influence.

In like manner, the romantic notion of the kiss never became fashionable even in 20th century Philippine visual arts. While the popularization of the kiss was thwarted by Christian conservatism, romance arrived in literature as early as the American colonial period from 1898. Jurilla (2010, 18) reports that the most common words used in the titles of twentieth century Tagalog novels were *pag-ibig* (love), *buhay* (life), *puso* (heart) and *luha* (tear). In film, the first on-screen kiss in the Philippines was performed by characters played by Isabel Rosario Cooper and Luis Tuason in Jose Nepomuceno's 1926 romantic comedy *Ang Tatlong Hambog* (*The Three Braggarts*). Nepomuceno's choice of theme was encouraged by the success of the earlier 1926 silent picture *Miracles of Love* by Vicente Salumbides, who had spent years working in Hollywood. Nepomuceno, who was also cameraman for *Miracles of Love*, broke taboo by filming the kiss outside the 17th century

Guadalupe Church in Makati.

In the years following independence from the United States, the kiss in the visual arts was conventionally illustrated through religious allegories and archetypes, such as in Napoleon Abueva's adobe sculpture *Judas Kiss*, 1955. Using the notion of the romantic kiss was likely influenced by Paras-Perez's upbringing in Manila during the twilight of deep conservatism and his time in the United States as a master's scholar in Minneapolis, doctorate student in Cambridge, and lecturer in Boston (NCCA, 2019, 11). Benesa (1975, 15) upheld this view, writing, 'Paras-Perez's woodcuts, especially his early ones [...] are sophisticated products of a sensibility and mind honed on the traditions of the West.' Paras-Perez travelled around the United States, visited a chain of museums, and was able to view and access works of various collections. He was plainly conversant with notions of the kiss and its parentage.

Kiss (1962) reflects a convergent moment gleaned from a succession of kissing and telling by artists from various epochs and geographies. While Paolo and Francesca were rather popular subjects in 19th century European painting—the pair had been depicted among others by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres between 1814 and 1819, William Dyce in 1837, Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1855, and Alexander Cabanel in 1870—the romantic kiss motif was propelled to even greater popularity by late 19th to early 20th century artists like Rodin, Klimt, Munch, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Picasso (see Fig 6). Trailing this line of descent, a pronouncement made by Capistrano-Baker becomes telling—'[Paras-Perez knew] the genealogy of an image' (Cruz, 2014).

TRAJECTORIES OF DOCTRINE

Contemporary Philippine printing, bookmaking, and literary publishing identify the *Doctrina* as the original site of conversion. That is, from a non-Christian, non-printing, non-bookmaking, and non-publishing culture, the islands were hurriedly bequeathed with technology endowed by Spain. Clark (1998, 49) however affirms that, 'The art culture that receives does a great deal more than simply accept, for reception is governed by the propensity of a given art culture to receive.' Observing the 20th century woodcut histories of post-revolution propagandist Mexico (Williams 2006), leftist China, militant postcolonial Southeast Asia (Ng, 2012), and separatist Bangladesh (Igarashi 2018), the woodcut's revival in the Philippines, it seems, is not a peculiar case. Different woodcut exhibitions mounted by the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, 2018; the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, 2012; and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2006, have shown the medium's intervention in social movements as the woodcut's point of reclaim. 'The reprographic artist may well be involved with resistance to a status quo [...] and the reprographic workshop must also be seen as a potential site for transfer and mediation of radical social and political ideas, not just in art' (Clark, 1998, 52-53).

In particular, the history of Philippine woodcut can be compared to that of Mexico by looking at the first known book to have been

published in the Americas in 1539 (Maloney, 2018). Written by Mexico City's first bishop, the Franciscan Juan de Zumárraga, the *Breve y más compendiosa doctrina Christiana en lengua mexicana y castellana* (Brief and most compendious Christian doctrine in Nahuatl and Spanish) was printed under the orders of Zumárraga for the swift indoctrination of the Aztec people. No known surviving copies of the text exist and so the *Doctrina breve muy provechosa* (Highly useful brief doctrine), also by Zumárraga, printed in 1543 becomes the emblematic image of the Mexican woodcut's origin. In 1781, the first school on engraving in Nueva España—the viceroyalty which governed the Americas and the Philippines among others—was founded, and by 1831, lithography had been included in the curriculum of Mexico City's Academia de San Carlos. By the late 19th century, decades after Mexico's independence from Spain, printing had circled back to the relief method by way of the engraved illustrations of Manuel Manilla, the satirical woodcuts of Gabriel Vicente Gahona or Picheta, and the wood engravings of José Guadalupe Posada, the latter substantially published in local periodicals and broadsheets (Williams, 2006, 1–2; López Casillas, 2013, 21). These artists inspired the modern graphic arts and *muralismo* movements of the 1920s (see Fig 7).

In 1967, while still in Harvard under a travelling fellowship, Paras-Perez received an additional art history grant of \$1,000 from the JDR 3rd Fund for 'the purchase of camera equipment, the costs of film and processing, to cover the cost of air travel to Mexico City and return in connection with the research necessary to the completion of [his] doctoral thesis' (McCray, 1967). In a letter sent to the program, Paras-Perez (1969) reported that he had gone to Mexico's Archivo Nacional and accumulated 380 documents containing general background materials on the growth of Philippine art. How this juncture excited Paras-Perez's art practice and scholarship is evidenced in a 1971 essay in which he critiques the works of Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, subsequently announcing the agency of art to be revolutionary. He writes: 'If art is to be truly revolutionary—it should be *relevant* to revolution: it should not be an appendix to change but an instrument of change. Not a depiction of protest but an act of protest. Thus the first problem for the artist is the resolution of the dichotomy between protest as an act and art as an object.' It is through comparable material histories such as those of the Philippines and Mexico where we are able to see clearly the singular progression and direction of the Spanish crown's imperialism westward. What happened in Mexico followed suit in the Philippines later on. But while Mexico generated its modernist post-revolution in the graphic arts, in the Philippines, it might have taken an allegorical and mythical turn under Paras-Perez.

FLORANTE AND LAURA

Paras-Perez's technical and political innovation can be seen fully blossomed in his 1977 xylographs for the literary scholar E. San Juan Jr's English translation of *Florante at Laura* (*Florante and Laura*). *Florante*, written by Francisco Balagtas and published in Manila in 1838 by the Colegio de Santo Tomás, is an awit or chivalric romance comprising

399 monorhyming dodecasyllabic quatrains (Jurilla 2005, 131). Its popularity as a literary work continues today as required reading among Filipino high school students. In this book, Paras-Perez printed 27 original woodblock impressions, each using two colours, to illuminate the popular metrical romance. Of the 27 illustrations, ten were in double spread format while 17 were single pages. In his earlier 1969 formal study of the text, E. San Juan Jr (1969, 143) had debunked the opinion that *Florante* was a simple pastiche of traditional motifs derived from *komedyas* and *moro-moros* or local interpretations and dramatizations of stories about Euro-Christian medieval kingdoms and battles: 'Balagtas aimed to expose the Absurd: the "fetishism" of colonial tyranny and implicitly the alienation of the human spirit in Christian feudal society.' Jurilla (2005, 132) likewise affirms: 'Balagtas was thought to have employed elements far removed from nineteenth-century Philippine society to get his poem past the strict censorship of the government and the Church. Thus his fantastic characters and settings have been regarded as symbolic, and *Florante at Laura* has come to be read consequently as a stirring piece of patriotism—a depiction of the sufferings of the Filipino people under the oppressive Spanish colonial regime.' A form of theatre originating from Cataluña, introduced through the Manila-Acapulco galleons, and regulated by mestizo Mexican friars in the Philippines (Tiongson 2008, 62), Paras-Perez (1980a, 29) was circumspect, moreover self-reflexive, in providing artwork for this genre. Weighing up *Florante*, he wrote, 'Yet what was readily apparent was the erudition exuded. There were generous references to the ancient Greco-Roman gods and goddesses, ample allusions and metaphoric devices, and a grand and noble setting even when some of the characters in the awit were less than noble. It was a work similar in form to the Spanish ballad, although it inevitably contained, as well, intrinsic elements of Pilipino literature.' The kiss motif reappears in four of the 27 woodcuts, namely *Kiss*, *Quartet*, *Yin-Yang*, and *Icon*, depicting passionate scenes shared by the protagonist Florante, son of Duke Briseo, and Princess Laura of Albania. In *Quartet* (see Fig 8), Florante and Laura are set next to the Persian prince Aladin and his lover Florida described in stanza 373:

What's more, the dismal wilderness was transformed for these four persons into a garden of bliss, a paradise. How many times they forgot to breathe. Oblivious of their mortality.

Yin-Yang, the last illustration of the story, meanwhile describes the final stanza:

So they lived together in enviable harmony until they reached the serene dominion whence no one returns.

San Juan (1988, 146) summarizes his critical interpretation of *Florante* stating, '[It] is a sustained poetic interrogation about the nature of justice, truth, and the human commitment to social-political equity.' In *Yin-Yang*, Paras-Perez visibly constrains Florante and Laura inside the yin yang emblem, giving credence to the notion where balance and

sovereignty are restored only after the contact or transfer takes place.

ALLEGORIES OF PRINT

How can works of print break free from the binary of male and female—whose legacy in colonized countries such as the Philippines persists—particularly when its artists, such as Paras-Perez, lived just as the endowment was starting to dismantle? Kathryn Reeves (1999, 77), in discussing the sex of print as one that ‘is always reduced to a sort of biological determinism’, suggests that, ‘What must occur is not a recoding, but a challenge to existing notions and a reconsideration of gender.’ In the age of the coronavirus where the point of contact causes a healing-havoc, the recoding that Reeves searches for presents itself elusively.

Recalling Rodin’s configuration of sex, where woman is active agent of the transfer, in Paras-Perez’s the reverse is true. In *Kiss* (1962), the pressing of the man and woman’s lips reminds the viewer of the print process itself—the critical moment of transfer when the carrier and recipient’s surfaces touch. Moreover, the weight of the man on top of the helpless woman cues the pressure exerted by printmaker via a press on to paper so that the transfer registers immaculately. The blossomy plant forms are thrown into relief to spotlight a woman being devoured by man, prompting a kiss that is at once fatal and life-sustaining.

In ‘The Graphic Landscape: a critical perspective’, Paras-Perez (1980b, 1) set out his ideas about the effect of Spanish colonialism on the graphic medium’s history. To underline this context, he wrote, without mincing words:

During the century of Hispanic encounter, the conquistadores viewed the Indios or indigenes with proprietary interest. Likewise, the frayles-capitanes or friar-captains looked at the Indio’s soul as a ward awaiting their benevolent disposition: with the ecclesiastical Orders as sole keepers of God’s word. Teaching the Indios to accept the blessings of such an authority together with the basic tenets of Catholicism became the first concern of the friars.

Paras-Perez 1980

In the short essay of nine pages, Paras-Perez examined works of 18th century Filipino engravers who he believed ‘underscored the nature of the teaching: that [their prints were] inserted within the cultural frame of the *Indio*. What was taught [by the Spanish] was thus also changed in the process of transforming the indigenous traditions’ (Paras-Perez, 1980, 2). In *Kiss*, one might—depending on their political sympathies—mistake the bloom held by the male, as a torch-bearing light. Flores (2020, 31) details this as a ‘transposition or translation, or maybe even confusion, of urges that the full and recognizable material coalesces’. Flores then invokes Paras-Perez’s polemic: ‘The fundamental problem of course—especially in the visual arts—is how to convert an object

depicting the protest into a protesting object: a defiant object asking questions.' *Kiss* is a portrait of the resultant woodcut whose severance from its originative pedigree is emplaced by the brushing of lips of the emerging woodcut artist with the expiring colonial engraver.

IN CONCLUSION: KISS OF DEATH, KISS OF LIFE

Woodcut's second arrival should be placed in the context of Philippine print history, where a succession of methods and events are normally recounted to furnish a uniform timeline, starting from and exemplified by the *Doctrina*. From these conditions we are able to discern the medium's disquiet stemming from its self-consciousness (Flores, 2018) as a peripheral-marginal art form. It is against this backdrop that Paras-Perez galvanized the medium through sales, awards, and reviews. From its early recognition, *Kiss* stood out as both a technical and thematic innovation in the medium's development.

The subject of the kiss should also be reviewed in light of its significance to the dominant institutions, organizations, and writers of the time. From this environment, the notion of the kiss as a visual device was deeply formative for Paras-Perez. In addition, we were able to trace the influence of Rodin and other artists from whom Paras-Perez had inherited the kiss motif, and the footprint of his scholarship in augmenting his woodcut practice. Meditating on the essence of kissing through anthropological, linguistic, and religious viewpoints also expands the transference of concepts and themes. Paras-Perez's xylographic suite for *Florante at Laura*—a canonical and politically charged text—which heavily used the kiss motif is used to further illustrate these ideas.

Attendant to these reflections, *Kiss* can be seen as a metaphor in terms of the relief printing practice, where the point of contact between matrix and paper is allegorized through the brushing of lips. To be in contact, especially in this age, is to occupy a precarious ground between the remedial and the detrimental. The kiss was an essential act in printing, as well as an important agent in the return to the handmade, and, as a subject found in Paras-Perez's work, instrumental in having reformed the woodcut in the Philippines.

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IMAGE GALLERY



Figure 1. Title page of the *Doctrina Christiana en lengua española y tagala* (1593). Woodblock print on paper. Library of Congress, Washington, DC



Figure 2: *Kiss* (1962) by Rodolfo Paras-Perez. Woodcut print on paper, 520 x 800 mm. Ateneo Art Gallery, Quezon City



Figure 3. Copy of *The Kiss* (1929) by Auguste Rodin. Marble, 1815 × 1125 × 1170 mm. Rodin Museum, Philadelphia, PA



Figure 4. *Kiss* (1965) by Rodolfo Paras-Perez. Woodcut print on paper, 630 x 890 mm. Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA



Figure 5. Sniff kissing in *Biyaya ng Lupa* (1959), directed by Manuel Silos. LVN Pictures



Figure 6. *The Kiss IV* (1902) by Edvard Munch. Woodcut print on paper, 525 × 494 mm. Art Institute Chicago, IL



Figure 7. *Las antorchas* (1948) by Leopoldo Méndez. Linocut print on paper, 388 x 504 mm. RISD Museum, Providence, RI



Figure 8. *Florante at Laura: Quartet* (1977) by Rodolfo Paras-Perez. Woodcut print on paper, 268 x 427 mm. Cultural Center of the Philippines, Manila