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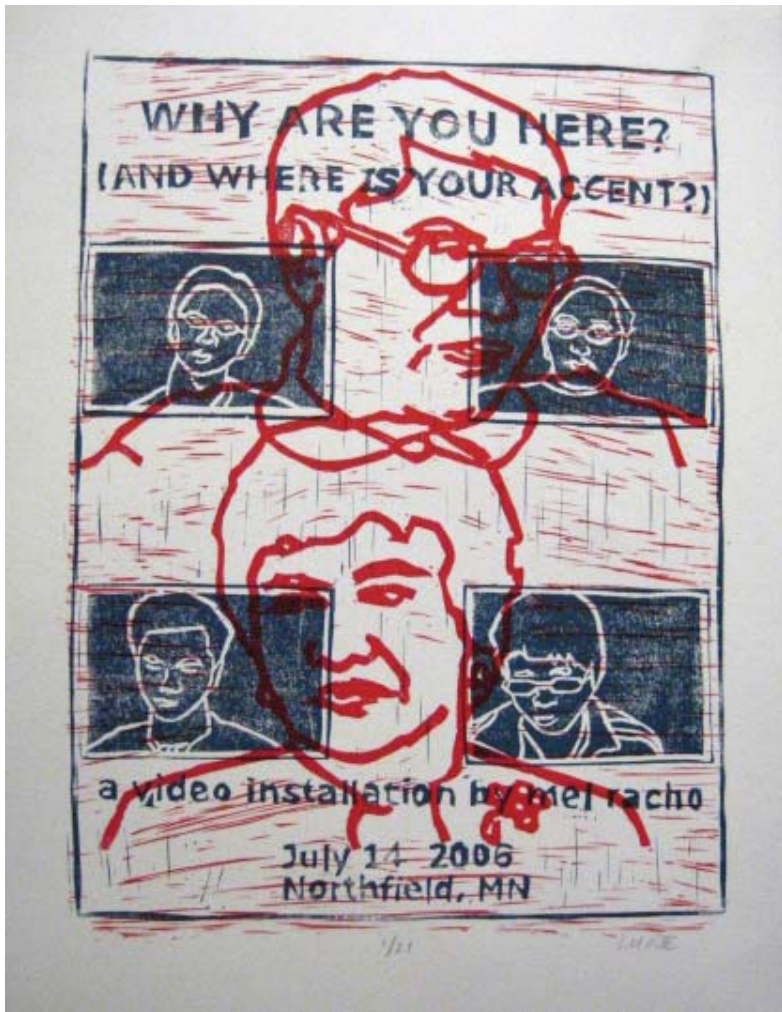
Melissa Racho Asks, "Why are you here?"



A JIS alumna from grade school to high school, Melissa Racho ('99) received her undergraduate degree in studio art and English from Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa. She is currently pursuing her master of fine arts degree in interdisciplinary arts and media at Columbia College in Chicago. Melissa held an exhibit of her video installation work: "Why are you here? (And where is your accent?): The Moderate Immigration Story," at Chicago's ArtOrg's Moving Walls Gallery where she was a recent Artist-in-Residence. In her exhibit Melissa shows how between the sensational accounts of illegal immigrants sneaking across the border and the relative ease with which people of wealth can enter the United States lies another story — the "moderate" immigration story.

Part 1960s television show 'The Brady Bunch' and part US Immigration and Naturalization Service interview, "Why are you here?" utilizes video and custom electronics to create a 'conversation' on six screens between Melissa, her parents, former JIS teachers Albert and Elena, and her brothers, Allen ('91), Aron ('94) and Alex ('96). The children respond to a video of their parents, who ask them questions about their experiences with the slow process of immigrating and living in America. It is neither rife with the hardship of illegality nor the relative ease of affluence, yet "Why are you here?" paints no less a relevant picture of what it means to immigrate to America today. There was no Ellis Island and no exceptional turn of wealth. For Melissa's family, coming to America could not even be called a calculated, life-long plan. Rather, it was a process that evolved gradually from a desire to create a permanent home. Because of its tempered nature, this story is one that is often overlooked in favor of either more extreme immigration narratives.

Albert and Elena Racho are still educators in Jakarta, a consultant and a principal, respectively. Melissa is the youngest child and is close to her brothers. Her family is



A limited edition linoleum print was pulled by the show's curator, Lisa Otte, based on Mel's artwork for the show poster.

important to her. "I'm unwaveringly loyal to everything Racho!" she exclaims. Although Melissa admits to having identity problems, she embraces them wholeheartedly rather than rejecting them. "I see my experiences in Indonesia as a source material for creative work. I know my upbringing is far from the average Indonesian, Filipino or American one. I was born in Manila, but left for Indonesia at age one with my family. I still regard Jakarta as 'home.' However, moving to the U. S. for my college education has changed my definition of home greatly."

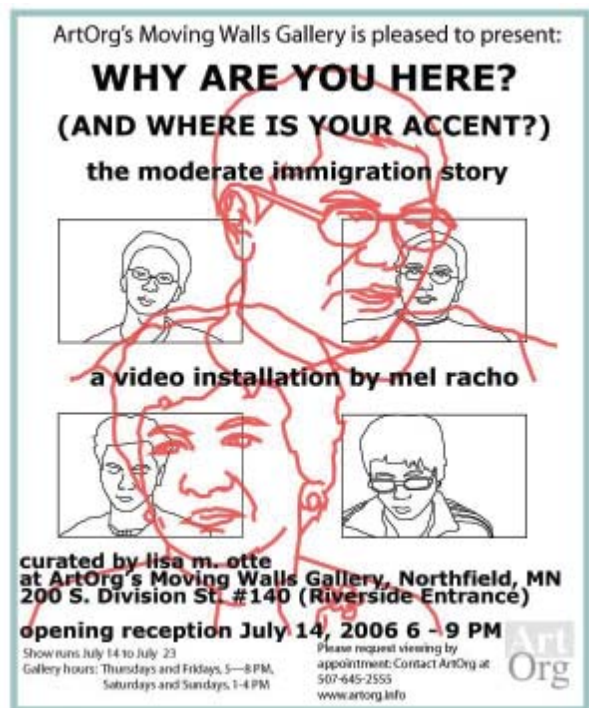
At Grinnell College, Racho somehow managed to meld sculpture and literature. "I discovered that I had an affinity," she remembers, "for three-dimensional art, namely wood and steel fabrication. I was drawn to the physicality of it, relating with the material through my hands. At the time, I was also studying classical British literature, and found that the hands-on nature of sculpture complemented the esoteric nature of some of the literary texts I was studying."

"Whether or not I'm sculpting traditionally or 'sculpting' video," Melissa explains, "I've found that the most valuable lessons I take from the experience is that you have

to work with and against your material that can be inflexible, like steel, or obtuse. Everything is raw material, whether it's lumber or footage collected on a beach—I've learned to be flexible, to allow my ideas to change just as much as I've learned to fight against the medium."

Melissa would like to always live a creative life. She dreams of owning and running a gallery part-time, while making her living as an art professor. "It's awfully sentimental," she says, "I realize, but there's no better way to describe what happens when I'm making art, when I'm on a 'roll'—it's similar to that completely irrational moment of falling in love. In a sense, I'm addicted to that moment—'aha!'—I'm always going to strive for that feeling."

Melissa has always found herself in cross-cultural currents, which are reflected in the displacement and reconstitution themes of the sculptures that she builds. A rarity in the masculine world of sculpture, her talent, passion, and art may someday make her a global Filipina icon.



Mel produced the artwork for her show poster, which features her parents and siblings.

Melissa's Website:
<http://www.melracho.com>

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