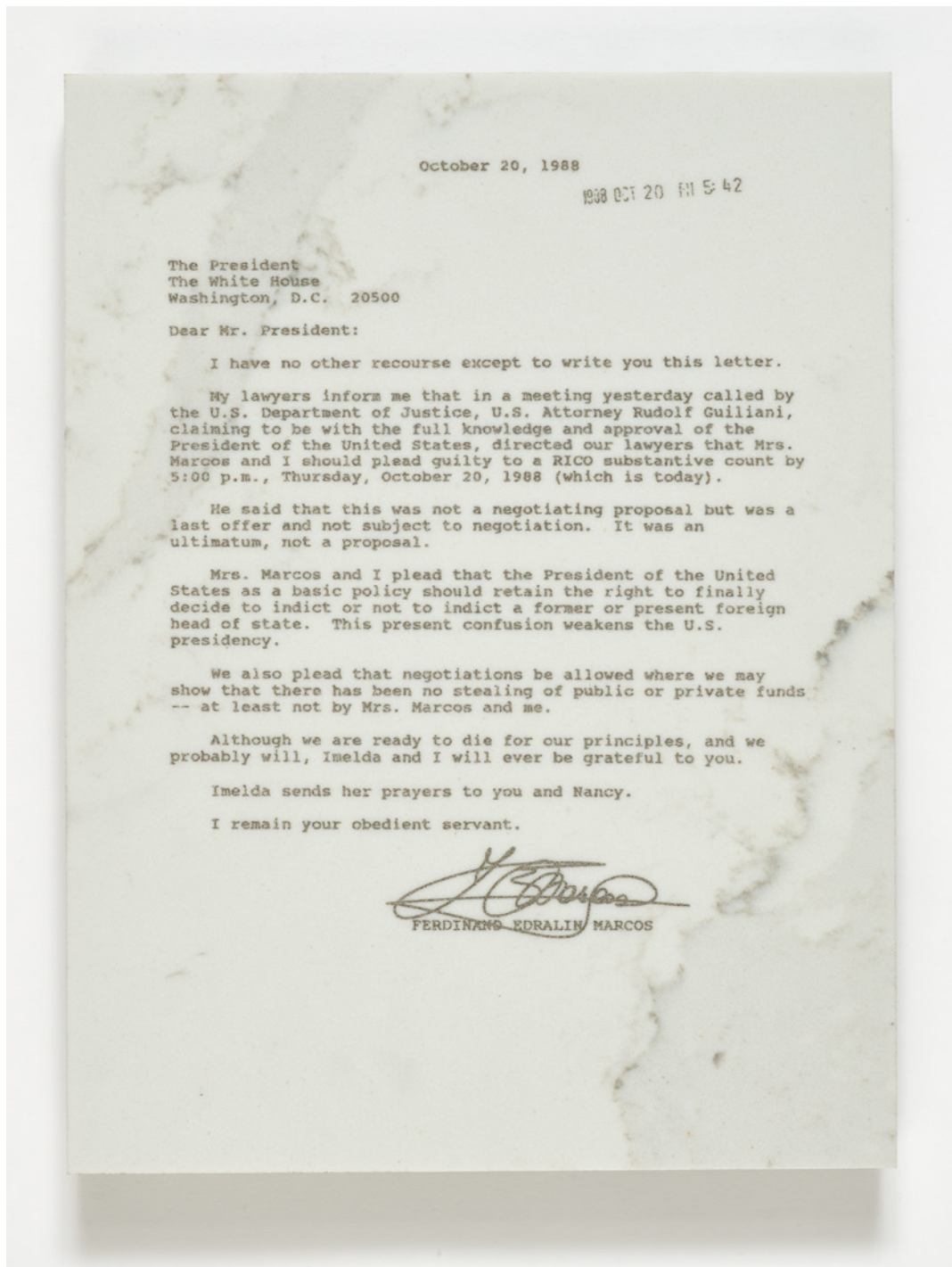


Gossip After



Pio Abad, *Thoughtful Gifts* (October 12, 1988), 2020, unique laser engraving on Carrara marble, 33 cm x 25.4 cm x 2 cm
PHOTO: ANDY KEATE; © COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Dictatorship

by Alex Quicho

Gossip is a grand tradition in Philippine politics and letters. Rumours syphoned from politicians' inner circles have ousted and reinstated rulers. Inventories of presidential excess, repeated in essays, novels, artworks, speeches, and chain messages, detail symbols of corruption as potent as if in a recurring dream. Scandalous images circulate until they reach critical mass—instigating the popular protest, impeachment, or coup d'état—making gossip the primary medium of our political life.

Take Jessica Hagedorn's classic *Dogeaters* (1990), for example, where the power of a fictional oligarch is described with the force of a hundred idle tongues:

Because he tells the President what to do. [...] Because he collects primitive art, renaissance art, and modern art. Because he owns silver madonnas, rotting statues of unknown saints, and jeweled altars lifted intact from the bowels of bombed-out churches. [...] Because he plays polo and breeds horses. [...] Because he owns everything we need, including a munitions factory. Because he dances well: the boogie, the fox-trot, the waltz, the cha-cha, the mambo, the hustle, the bump. [...] Because he owns *The Metro Manila Daily*, *Celebrity Pinoy Weekly*, Radiomanila, TruCola Soft Drinks, plus controlling interests in Mabuhay Movie Studios, Apollo Records, and the Monte Vista Golf and Country Club. [...] Because he was once nominated for president and declined to run. Because he plays poker and wins. Because he is short, and smells like expensive citrus. Because he has elegant silver hair, big ears, slanted Japanese eyes, and the aquiline nose of a Spanish mestizo. Because his skin is dark and leathery from too much sun. Because he is married to a stunning, selfish beauty with a caustic tongue.¹

In *The New York Review of Books*,² Deborah Eisenberg writes that the narrative of *Dogeaters* surfs a “richly informative current of gossip” filtered from “people who travel in various orbits around that center of power.” Gossip, however, isn't just synonymous with intelligence-gathering. A taste of power, shared by a momentary insider with a thrill, can easily become a taste for power—because who doesn't want to be on the inside, for life? As the politician or oligarch becomes as omnipresent as any celebrity facing tabloid time, idle speculation assembles an indecent template for living. Authoritarian play-acting is practiced by the provincial elite, who reproduce the spectacle of singular power in small-scale behaviour. Special treatment comes cheap. Anyone with a bit of money can style themselves as a little dictator, tinting the windows of their lifted SUVs diplomatic black, oiling their social lives generously with bribes. (Or so I hear.) When con-tortions of respect dictate relations at every level, it is

in the interest of the rich to be crass. The aspiration is to be careless enough for the favour to be called in, so that exceptional status—that is, being “above the law”—is broadcast loud and clear.

Today, the Filipino national consciousness is undergoing a violent convulsion as Ferdinand “Bong-bong” Romualdez Marcos Jr., son of the former dictator, assumes power after three decades of familial exile in sunny Hawai'i under protection of the United States. After years of behind-the-scenes reputation laundering, disseminated across Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, the Marcos regime's legacy appears as the most solid hallucination in the vaporous nightmare of the present. The country's perennial ills have been reattributed to democracy's biggest backers through equal parts fake news and real institutional failure. Anti-Marcos groups have been freshly defined as “liberal elites” by opponents wise to global tides of disfavour, while deft editing skips over cycles of local plunder and global extraction. By deferring responsibility and downplaying systemic factors, the Marcos campaign may well have trained individual anger on easily caricatured opponents, yet disinformation is not entirely to blame. In fact, the junior Marcos's rise to power follows a pattern common to fledgling democracies. A 2015 study by James Loxton published by *The Journal of Democracy* found that “in over one-half of new democracies, voters returned the [authoritarian successor] party to power in free and fair elections.”³ Dynastic ties in business, media, and politics lend “authoritarian successors” an air of competency seen in contrast with the leaders of democratic parties who have had the misfortune of tangling, in imperfect practice, with the bitter challenges of a post-authoritarian and neocolonial political landscape.

Since the reign of Marcos Sr., melodrama has formed the gleaming core of Filipino statecraft. The senior Marcoses unleashed melodrama to the soapy, gendered max, with the dictator and his wife styling themselves as *malakas* (“the powerful”) and *maganda* (“the beautiful”) of Philippine legend. Ostentatious architectural undertakings, thundering statesmanship, and ludicrous injections of capital into the arts disguised the couple's iron rule and sleights of hand as they emptied state coffers for personal use. *Their* plunder was artful: tales of a populated island cleared just for their exotic animals, the entire stock of Saks Fifth





Pio Abad and Frances Wadsworth Jones, *The Collection of Jane Ryan & William Saunders*, 2019, 3D printed plastic, brass and dry-transfer text
PHOTO: CHRIS ROHRER; ©, COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS





Pio Abad, *The Collection of Jane Ryan & William Saunders* (detail), 2022, ink on Heritage woodfree paper
PHOTO: ANDY KEATE; ©, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Avenue (or was it Barneys?) pillaged, in one swoop, for their coterie. Even their code- and pet-names—the first lady was known as the “Iron Butterfly”—contributed to an image of the regime as elegant and “civilized”: one that perfumed away the corpses of dissidents left in the streets and drowned out tortured cries with operatic arias.

In contrast, it was the naked display of bullet-ridden citizens that strengthened the public image of Rodrigo Duterte, who styled himself as a strongman so tough on narcotics that his “war on drugs” claimed the lives of 12,000 people.⁴ Duterte’s bolshy disruption of political decorum—he once described Pope Francis and Barack Obama using “a term that translates as ‘son of a whore’”⁵—cast him as a gritty outsider, though the Duterte family’s hold on politics has been anything but marginal. But where Duterte spat gobs in the face of the establishment—in turn revealing how he relies on it, as all self-styled “saviours” depend on their sworn enemies—the younger Marcos has pursued complete avoidance. He ghosted public broadcasts where he was to debate his by-the-book opponent, human rights lawyer and vice-president Leni Robredo. He refused to talk to the press about his tax evasion or faux Oxbridge degrees, becoming a living “no comment.” Rather than command the will and mythos of the people from centre stage, as his parents strove to do, Marcos Jr. focused on the digital fringes. He popped up on popular channels hosted by micro-celebrities to reach voters whose attention had long strayed from the political theatre.



I like to think of gossip as our earliest network infrastructure. In my parents’ day—that is, in the ’60s—households could cut their telephone bills by sharing a festively named “party line.” At any moment, social plans and sweet nothings could be interrupted by someone, somewhere in your neighbourhood, unwittingly picking up the receiver to start their own conversation. In a close-knit community, your business is de facto everyone else’s. Across a few group chats, I’ve seen a political meme depicting a group of older women in cotton house dresses with their hair up in Velcro rollers, gathered in a circle. Captions vary, the gist of the joke being that idle gossip exchanged by aunts can surpass insider information shared at 5G speeds.

As a Filipina of a certain demographic, most of my knowledge of the dictatorship comes from gossip. It’s second-hand. Stories of escape, collaboration, and revolt have been disputed and polished over at least one lifetime. The more lurid the details, the better they’re engraved in memory. These stories are fused to the original lifeline against authoritarianism through whisper networks and clandestine get-togethers. Family friends photocopied radical materials during their night shifts to distribute before dawn. Others played host to revolutionary meetings in the stock-rooms of stoner cafes, or the green rooms of black magic nightclubs. All of this was, I suppose, “gossip as resistance” in the way that is so valourized, yet so poorly practiced, in the present day. It’s true that whisper networks can form a protective bubble, helping individuals steer clear of predators and other dangers without necessarily changing the circumstances of that abuse. It’s also true that gossip can be collectively galvanizing. As Juaniyo Arcellana writes of *Ermita*, a radical magazine that dispersed political critique in the guise of far-out lifestyle pieces and psychedelic

illustration, “If you can’t say it direct, you have to say it sideways.”⁶ That strategy has even surpassed the time of dictatorship to work against modern-day corruption. Rumours of the cases of Château Pétrus, priced at over US\$2,000 a *bottle*, downed by ex-president Joseph Estrada at a time when minimum wage topped at US \$225 or 9,000 PHP a *month*, accelerated the mass People Power II movement in 2007, leading to Estrada’s impeachment and life imprisonment for plunder.⁷

But what use do we have for gossip now, when disinformation—with all its rapidly mutating rumours, revisions, and conspiracies—has replaced the authoritarian “party line” as the dominant mode of political communication? Today, tsismis is aided by modern technologies, shooting from phone to phone flanked by the cute stickers and Boomer copy-pastas of Viber and WhatsApp group chats. Divergence, context collapse, luridness, and gross exaggeration—once ways to disrupt the tightly managed façade of the dictatorship—have been harnessed by those looking to foment their existing political power. The tactic fails to unify: the Latin root for *tsismis*, shared with the Spanish *chisme*, means “to split or divide.”

Jonathan Corpus Ong, an associate professor of global digital media, attributed Marcos Jr.’s rise, in part, to “turbocharged folklore” shared through a sophisticated “architecture of disinformation” that implicates creative professionals, freelancing on contract, as much as it does pay-per-post trolls.⁸ Over-the-top tales of the dictatorship’s aesthetic prowess, infrastructural know-how, and political might are contrasted in hyper-quick montage with the diplomatic waffling of progressive leaders. The fact that these families have retained their power, in rumour and in practice, bolsters their allure to people who have seen little change to their circumstances in 34 years and counting of liberal democracy. The force of conservative narrative—with its penchant for legend, tradition, and selective nostalgia—lends itself well to snackable video, snapped up by larger-than-life personalities whose swift editing and caricatured delivery succeeds in the now-mature attention economy. Marcos Jr.’s communications team gambled, correctly, that effective political discourse was no longer taking place on traditional “neutral” ground. At any rate, careful policy makes for poor content.

“It’s everywhere: the insistence that history can be seen as *tsismis*,” says artist Pio Abad, whose multi-disciplinary works directly address the regime and its contested legacy. “The cultural sphere has a lot to answer for in maintaining that dissonance, particularly with regards to the rehabilitation of the Marcoses. It was through said cultural gap that they were able to ingratiate themselves.”⁹

Abad works diligently to retrieve facts from the murk of historical dissonance, like how a restorer patiently dissolves filth from canvas. He works to create immovable monuments of what is in the process of being buried by strategic content overload. He makes solid what risks vanishing into thin air. In *Thoughtful Gifts* (2021), Abad uses stark black ink to draw every item passed from the Marcoses to the Reagans in gratitude for America’s support of the regime. Simpering letters from Ferdinand to Ronald (in one, the Philippine president declares himself Reagan’s “humble servant”) are engraved in fat marble blocks. Elaborate tiaras, necklaces, brooches, and earrings are painstakingly reproduced in Abad’s *The Collection of Jane Ryan and William Saunders* (2014–ongoing). The collaboration with jewellery designer Frances

Wadsworth Jones, who is also Abad's partner, brings the jewellery collection—which was confiscated by US customs when the Marcoses arrived in Hawai'i and is currently hidden due to legal and political battles over its ownership—into public view. Each piece is printed in ivory resin so that it appears, as critic Izabella Scott writes in *Studio International*,¹⁰ as a collection of “spectral objects [...] which have been deprived of life.” Excess isn't absent here. Rather, Abad sands off seduction to lay power bare. These works are not unlike the meticulously researched reconstructions of the collective Forensic Architecture, whose artwork-investigations have gone on to inform humanitarian objectives around the world. But where Forensic Architecture uses testimony and reconstruction for instrumental ends, counteracting the legislative opacity of the aggressor state, Abad's reconstructions appeal to a more emotive register. The sombre, solid quality of historical occurrence is a neutralizer for shiny, bombastic power.

Abad is direct about a political system that has mastered the manipulative power of embellishment, what Ong and his co-writers call “emotive political narratives that chip away, if not totally replace, the foundational histories of [the Philippines].”¹¹ In Ong's telling, the playbook for Philippine politics is closer to that of world-building and fandoms—that is, fantasy—than serious partisan face-offs. Imaginative conjurings of alternative history are willed into reality by superfans through memes, tabloid stories, major memorial events like the reinstatement of Ferdinand Marcos's body in the Libingan ng mga Bayani (Hero's Cemetery), and splashy TV productions like *Maid in Malacañang* (2022). Yet Ong notes that “truth-denying tendencies” form part of each camp's political realities, regardless of partisan position; the flip side of such overactive political imaginations convince people that “all forms of knowledge can be politicized and dismissed as biased.”¹² Where does that leave us? When authoritarianism is so elaborately represented, and all its fantasies have magicked up a political afterlife, it may be left to the artist to state the cold, hard facts.

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ENDNOTES

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