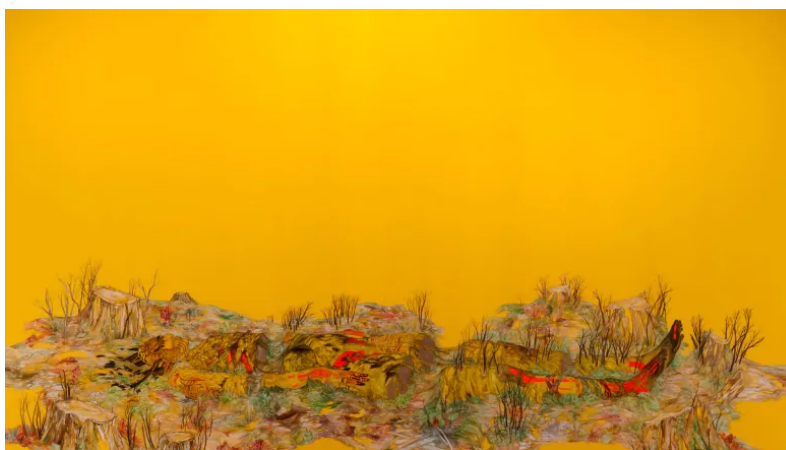


Arts · The world of

This Calgary artist is creating folk-tales about the new Canadian experience

Marigold Santos grew up hearing Filipino folk tales. Now, she's writing her own myths through her art.

[Leah Collins](#) · CBC Arts · Posted: Mar 24, 2016 3:46 PM ET | Last Updated: March 24, 2016



Marigold Santos. re-grounding, 2011. (www.marigoldsantos.com)

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When [Marigold Santos](#) moved from Calgary to Montreal in 2008, the artist found herself thinking about the things she was carrying with her. Not the stuff crammed into luggage and boxes, though she probably had plenty of that — Santos was starting grad studies at Concordia University at the time — but rather memories, experiences, favourite stories.

"I was really thinking about being uprooted," the artist tells CBC Arts, a familiar feeling for anyone who's ever left home, but one Santos had experienced even more keenly as a kid. "I was always going back to this specific moment in time: when my family immigrated."

When Santos arrived in Canada she was six years old. Her family came from the Philippines, eventually settling in Alberta where she grew up surrounded by relatives who would tell her old folktales full of monsters that captured her macabre imagination like the horror movies she'd devour on video.

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"That move," Santos remembers, "had to do with a loss of language. Like, I was born in the Philippines, but I don't speak Tagalog anymore."

When she found herself in Montreal, those feelings resurfaced. "I was thinking a lot about what I take with me and what I leave behind," she says.

She's still thinking about it, really.

Multiple identities, multiple shows

[Invisible Mother](#) and [Coven Ring](#), a sort of "two for one exhibition" of Santos's work, is on now at [Stride Gallery](#) in Calgary.

Although the two collections were created several years apart there's a huge amount of cross-pollination between them thematically. Whether she's creating paintings or sculptures, ink drawings or performance works, Santos makes art that explores how everyone's identity is evolving, influenced by the culture and landscape around us — elements which are, themselves, always changing.

"This idea of plurality, or multiplicity of self," she says, "is something to be embraced."



Marigold Santos. trust, 2012. (www.marigoldsantos.com)

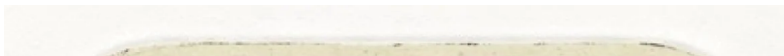
Transformation in itself is magical, and her images often suggest something eerily supernatural: witches and talismans and ghostly shrouds.

There's one fairy-tale creature, though, that's in nearly every piece in one form or another, a character from Santos's childhood that she didn't realize she'd packed with her until she arrived in Montreal.

The tale of the Asuang

When Santos's aunt would tell her folk tales from the Philippines, sometimes there'd be stories about a creature called the Asuang.

By day, she might be just an ordinary woman in the neighbourhood. "But she's ghoulish, and she's a monster," Santos explains, because when night falls she splits in two, hiding her legs while her disembodied torso hunts for flesh in the night.





Marigold Asuang. asuang (and lower halves), 2009. (www.marigoldsantos.com)

If her two halves aren't reunited by morning, though, the Asuang is destroyed. "Her survival depends on her separating and rejoining," says Santos — a concept that, she realized, related to her own experience (minus the ghoulish bits).

"When I came to Montreal I was thinking a lot about who I was," Santos recalls. "I was this young female kind of putzing around this city I didn't know."

She now splits her time between Montreal, where she teaches at Concordia, and Calgary. (In 2017, she'll participate in the [Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art](#).)

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"When I started thinking about her," she says of the Asuang, "I was thinking about 'What happens when you are fragmented as an individual and you are taking from your environment and you're piecing together your identity?'"

"I just gravitated toward that character — as evil and demonized as she is. I wanted to reconfigure that."

Writing her own myth

All the figures in Santos's art are Asuangs of a sort, she says. A mysterious woman might appear quartered, only to be stitched back together with rocks and prairie grasses, the literal landscape of Alberta. Or a figure might be cloaked in woven fabric, a web of sky or flowers or artifacts of where she's been.



Marigold Santos. re-grounding (detail), 2011. (www.marigoldsantos.com)

Folk tales change depending on who's telling them, and Santos's art is part of that. One of her favourite things, she says, is hearing how audiences translate her new myths.

"It's not meant to be just my story," she says of the art. "People can do with it what they will. That's what carries it on in the tradition of storytelling and folklore."

Invisible Mother. Marigold Santos. To May 6 at Stride Gallery, Calgary. www.stride.ab.ca

Gatherer. Marigold Santos. April 7 to May 1 at Galerie D'Este, Montreal. www.galeriedeste.com

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