

“Pre-Departure” by Julio Jose Austria

by Nicole Soriano

In the heady worlds of travel and migration, it is often the petty and routine activities that go unnoticed. What takes place in an airport—that dull structure humming with monotonous movement, sluggish lines, and endless security protocol—is but a blur compared to the thrill of the awaited destination. But it is in that in-between space where shared experiences exist beneath a sea of strange, vapid faces. Behind the x-rays and biometrics are human beings holding inevitable anxieties that come with leaving, entering, or returning.

New York-based Filipino artist Julio Jose Austria is no stranger to the built-up uncertainties pervading this transitory space. “Pre-Departure” reveals the artist closely looking at the structure—both at its concrete and invisible walls—that has silently become integral to his life since he left the Philippines. From the moment he first set foot in New York City in 2009 to his yearly visits back home, Austria has undergone the grueling procedures from tourist to immigrant, foreigner to resident. In this exhibit, fingerprints, barcodes, and surveillance technology embedded on layers of thick, expressionist strokes expose standards intended to secure, while questioning whom they continue to serve and restrict.

In magnifying this recurring experience, Austria presents two central works delving beyond the literal objects and machinery of the airport and onto the ambiguity that awaits a traveler. “Homie” paints a basic impression of a house floating on what appears to be a body of water, set against a similarly crude landscape. Hollow and open, its interior is washed with a paled orange tone suggesting the warmth one hopes to find in the romance of entering a new abode or the comforts of returning home. “Run Away” depicts an indefinite horizon manipulated with blinds of blue hues, set behind a blurred plane. Both scenes capture the unfamiliarity and haziness of a place as it remains in the imagination prior to landing, no matter how many times it has been revisited, reinhabited, or recollected.

One painting stands out amidst a series of recognizable images. “Floating Status” is the only non-objective work coated with smoky, dripping surfaces of paint. In its abstraction, a disquieting reality is translated: migrants not only unsure of the world they are to enter, but whether or not they will be permitted to depart. Having faced a similar dilemma when he vied for his US residency, Austria closely expresses the same tense feeling he experienced years ago. Its immediacy is both specific and universal—calling a sense of solidarity to the millions that continue to feel as if they are displaced and drifting: hoping one day, like Austria, to be grounded, confident in saying they belong to a place. Until it is time to depart again.