

MARTHA ATIENZA
THE COCONUT TREE METHODOLOGY

*WHEN I ASK MY FATHER ABOUT THE DISAPPEARING COASTLINE, HE DOESN'T TALK
ABOUT EROSION. HE TALKS ABOUT THE FAMILIES THAT DISAPPEARED.*



Malbago Coast, Barangay Malbago, Madridejos, Bantayan Group of Islands, The Philippines

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*THE COCONUT TREE METHODOLOGY IS
A WAY OF WORKING. ROOTED IN LONG-
TERM RELATIONSHIPS WITH PLACE,
IT USES ART TO GATHER MEMORY,
OBSERVATION, AND DIFFERENT FORMS
OF KNOWLEDGE, CREATING SPACES
WHERE PEOPLE CAN REFLECT, IMAGINE,
AND MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS ABOUT
THEIR SHARED FUTURE.*

THE COCONUT TREE

METHODOLOGY is both reflection and proposition: to sense the world and grasp the changes that are shaping it right now. For Martha Atienza, that world is anchored to the Bantayan Islands in Cebu, where the Dutch-Filipino artist was in part raised, bearing witness to coastlines being transformed by rising sea levels: a fact that Atienza has diligently documented as a central facet of her award-winning transdisciplinary practice. Highlighting that shift is footage the artist filmed in 2026 of a seawall built along the same stretch of coastline she shot in 2019, when fallen coconut trees peppered an open shore, their roots shaken loose by rising sea levels and consequent coastal erosion. As Atienza notes, those coconut trees were the first to register the transformations being wrought by climate change. First they fell. Then, they were cast adrift, carrying traces of past attachments while bearing the weight of uncertain futures into the sea. Some of these spectral sentinels found their way back to land with a warning, their forms transformed into embodied testimonies of their displacement: a politics without words.

In this shifting landscape, everything becomes a witness, from the concrete encasing waterlines like tombs to the fisherfolk struggling to retain their connection to the sea. Even those who enter the gallery, far from Bantayan, are drawn into a reality that the coconut trees amplify in their monumental silence. Atienza honours each wordless testimony by gathering these drifting forms into an assembly where they might speak, beyond language, in terms that all living things must share.

The focus of the exhibition, as in Atienza's practice, is the lived politics of land and sea. Because Bantayan is home, it has naturally become Atienza's studio and laboratory as much as her community and audience: a place to work through ideas at a practical level. The artist has filmed on the archipelago since 2010, producing such masterworks as the 2017 *Our Islands* 11°16'58.4" N 123°45'07.0"E. This moving-image paean to Bantayan's archipelagic history unfolds as an underwater staging of the annual Ati-Atihan festival held by the island's Madridejos village in honour of Santo Niño, though the ritual was originally connected to indigenous inhabitants preceding Austronesian migrations, and was transformed under Spanish colonialism. Back then, Atienza was sounding the alarm on the impact climate change was already having on Bantayan's communities, with local fishermen being forced into compression diving due to dwindling fish supplies amid rising and warming seas. In the video, divers from the community dressed as, among other things, Christ carrying a cross and a drug dealer under the guns of President Duterte's anti-drug squads, form a procession that crosses a barren sea floor.

At once 21st century history painting and landscape study, *Our Islands* is all-encompassing. The Coconut Tree Methodology is a similar kind of immersion: a landscape to walk into, that speaks plainly about material loss and transformation. Each coconut tree is evidence: shaped by environmental degradation as much as systemic failure and a tragic lack of political will. A fisherman crouched inside an aquarium by a sea that feels like a front line, gazes outwards so that their mask shines like a

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mirror. None of this is simply about representation, and it is about much more than reflection. As Atienza says: “The installation is not only about climate change. It’s about how climate change exposes the structure of society itself.”

With that in mind, this exhibition grows out of the artist’s longterm engagement with intervening in society’s structures: an impulse that led Atienza to co-found GOODLand, a Bantayan-based organisation formalised in 2020. The group works with communities, organisations and institutions to uncover, archive, and apply intergenerational knowledge to the real-world, real-time politics of climate change and its environmental, political, social, economic effects, including methods for sustainable living and forms of organisation. One initiative is Adlaw sa Mga Mananagat, or FisherFolks Day, established in 2022, for the inter-generational fishing communities of Bantayan, many of whom have been forcibly relocated from their coastal homes to public and private housing projects while tourism is heavily promoted as an alternative livelihood. In its report, GOODland describe government-endorsed actions increasingly subjecting the islands to private development,

including a 2019 bill removing Bantayan from the protected wilderness zone category. Acting as a counterweight, GOODLand has supported groups like the youths of the archipelago’s Mambacayao Daku islet, who advocated for an ordinance to designate an 8-hectare Marine Protected Area along their coastline, with official recognition granted in 2022.

This all feeds into the coconut tree methodology as Atienza’s artistic method. Everyone has a particular way of looking at driftwood, whether in a gallery or on a beach. To some, they are haunted: spectres infused with the spirits of the natural world, to be left alone. To others, they are material to be bent into some kind of form, in order to participate in the cycle of re-shaping life on earth. Perhaps they are a reminder of home: their shadows a portal into memories of here and elsewhere. Maybe in their silence, they are loud: alive as they are. Everyone has a connection to land and sea, after all, even if tangentially: which is why the politics around sustaining both involves everyone. Holding space for that connection is how the artist turns the question of what is to be done into an invitation to become part of the work.

Written by Stephanie Bailey

THE ARCHIVE IS NOT ABOUT PRESERVING THE PAST. IT IS ABOUT GATHERING KNOWLEDGE SO THAT COMMUNITIES CAN MAKE BETTER DECISIONS ABOUT THEIR FUTURE.

THE INSTALLATION

MALBAGO 11°17’18.2’’N 123°44’49.6’’E
2019/ 2026 7

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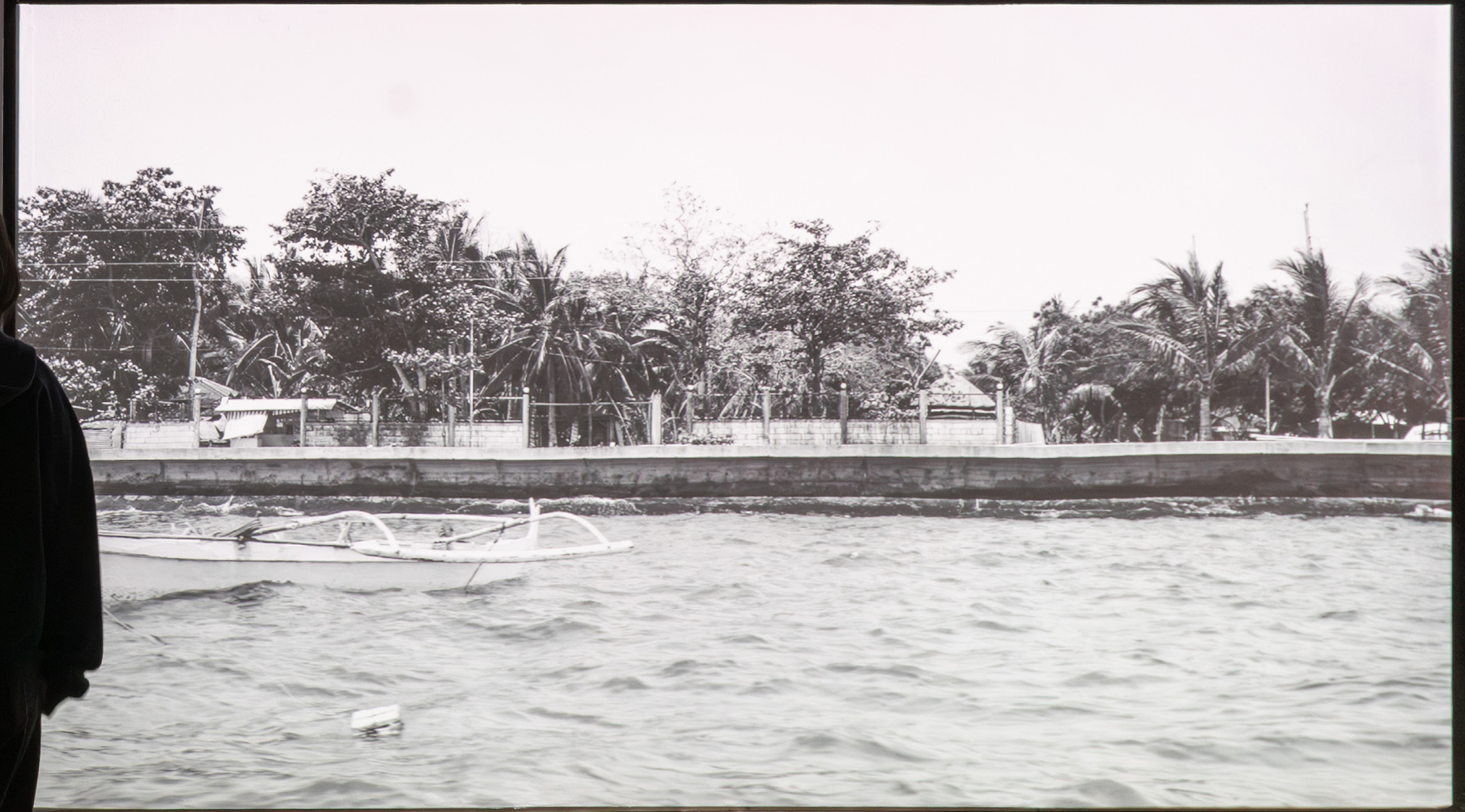
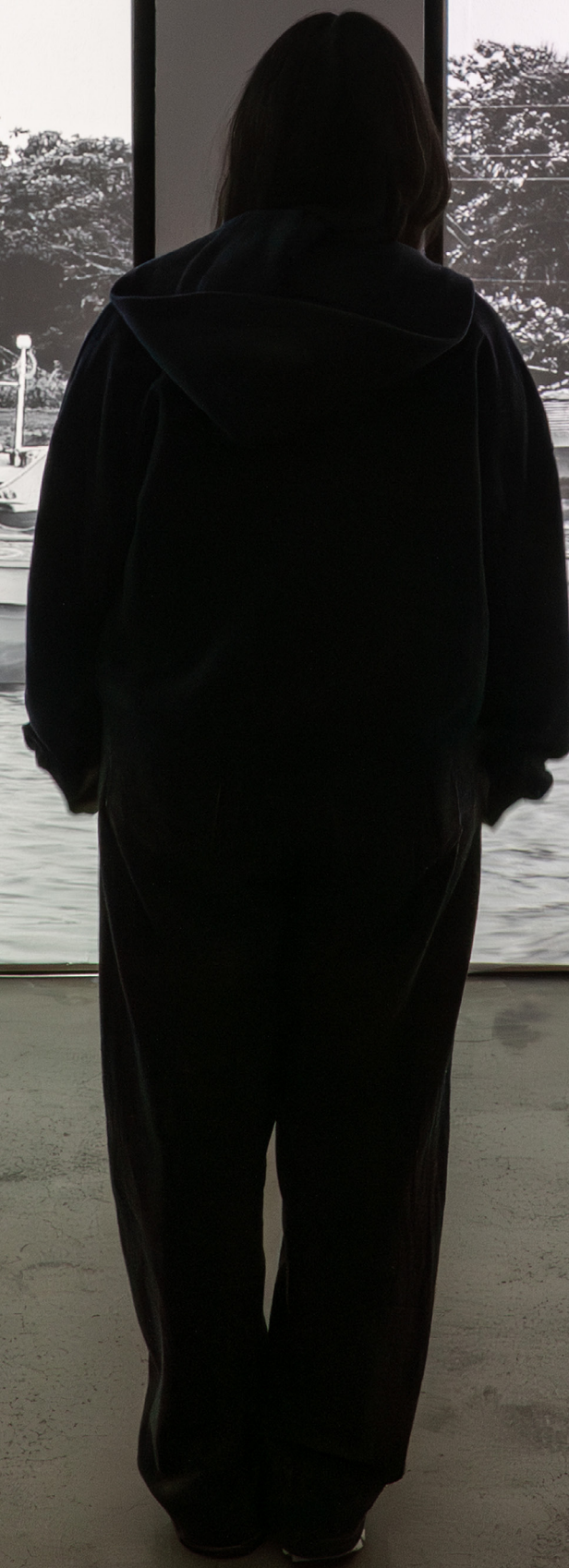
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MALBAGO 11°17'18.2 "N 123°44'49.6 "E
2019/ 2026
FROM THE BANTAYAN COASTAL SERIES

2 channel Video Hd
duration: 16min 52sec



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THE COCONUT TREE METHODOLOGY NO.2

*COCONUT ROOT, MACHINE (ARDUINO AND SENSOR) CEMENT WEIGHT, WOOD, ROPE,
MANILA PAPER*

A sensor embedded within the screen of the projected 2026 Malbago coastline detects every opening in the seawall—moments where access between land and sea remains. Each time an opening appears, the sculpture is activated, pulling the coconut root while the Manila paper moves in counterbalance.

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THE COCONUT TREE METHODOLOGY NO.1
39 coconuts, 29 Ti Plants, 6x Bamboo sound machines, slider light machine



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PYANAS

sound

motor, metal, bamboo, water, batad shells



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BATANG NO. 1

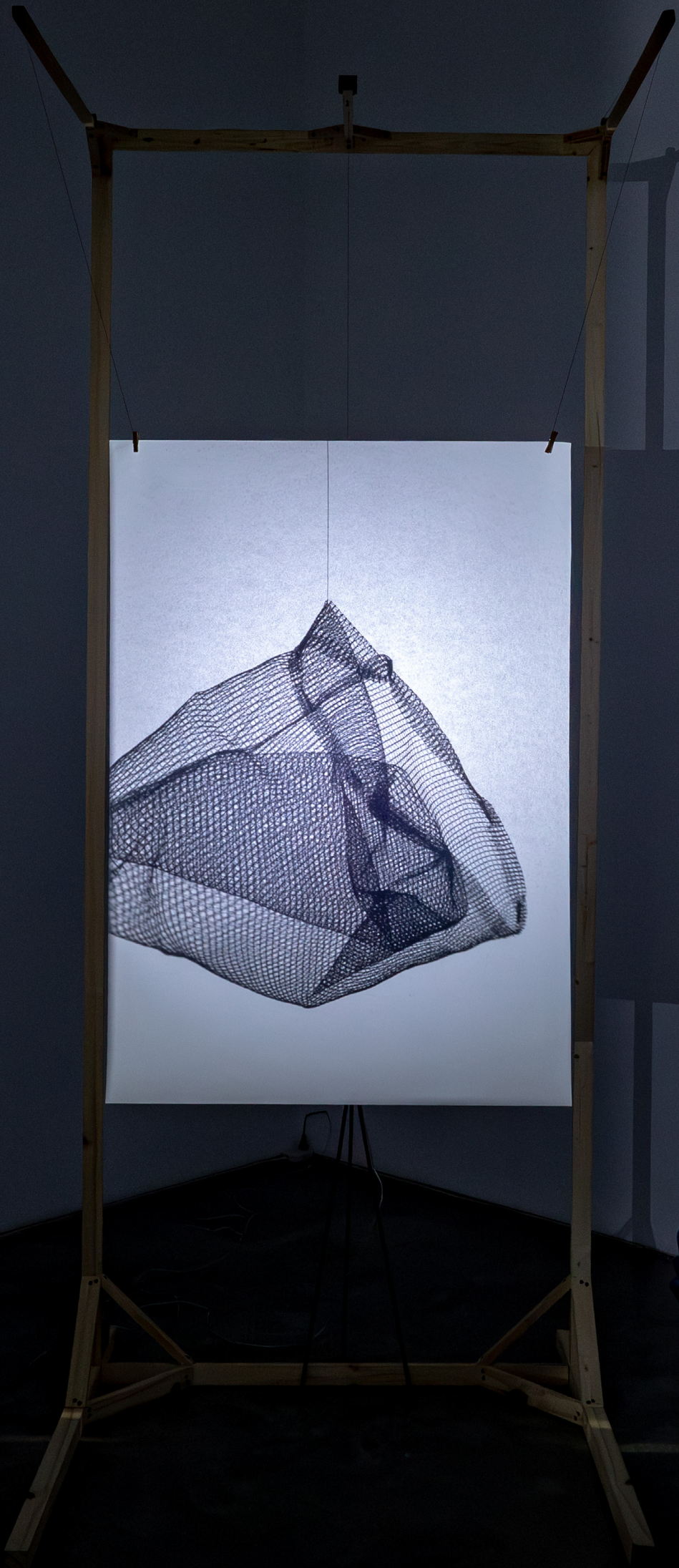
single channel video 4K video
duration: 53mins 22sec



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THE COCONUT TREE METHODOLOGY NO.3

net bag, wooden stand, motor, light, speed controller, thread, rubber



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REMEMBERING IS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE.

DAGHANG SALAMAT

Ramon Alontaga

Rick Atienza

Maria Atienza

Renante Batusbatusan

Roberth Fuentes

Ieusef Santillan

Jozef Heij

Martin Miranda

Allan Zamora

Rex De La Pena

Silverlens Gallery

Isa Lorenzo and Rachel Rillo