

Bhenji Ra
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 Western Front
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Canada

Biraddali Dancing on the Horizon

Western Front is pleased to present *Biraddali Dancing on the Horizon*, a new moving image commission and the first solo exhibition in Canada by Filipina-Australian artist Bhenji Ra.

Biraddali Dancing on the Horizon (2024) documents a process of intergenerational learning. Its starting point is a ritual journey taken by Ra with her teacher and collaborator Sitti Airia Sangkula Askalani-Obeso. A Tausug elder, Obeso is a cultural bearer of the pangalay, a pre-Islamic dance of the Tausug people of the Sulu Archipelago and the eastern coast Bajau of Saba in the Philippines.

Falling into a dreamlike ancestral plane, Obeso and Ra develop and trouble the roles of student and teacher, mother and daughter. Whilst relaying the history of the pangalay, Ra and Obeso explore the cultures and structures of movement practices in the Sulu Archipelago and their relationship to precolonial understandings of gender and identity, in particular the *bantot* or *bayot* relating to a trans feminine person. A fabulation unfolds in which a celestial being that resembles a woman with wings and supernatural beauty, known across the Sulu as the Biraddali, reveals itself through dialogue and dreaming.

Translated from Tausug or other Samal languages as “angel” or “skymaiden” the Biraddali are believed to live in the sky and possess the power to change their form. As the imaginal passage unfolds, the dance of pangalay and the figure of the Biraddali become symbolically interrelated, with Ra interpreting the Biraddali as a trans, non-human figure and the originator of the dance.

Initially appearing documentarian in style, *Biraddali Dancing on the Horizon* unravels into its own mythology as the bond of mentorship becomes an offering that weaves bantot and Tausug genealogies together. The film foregrounds a pedagogy of decolonial choreography. It develops languages of movement that connect vocabularies of gender with past and present colonial realities in the Asia-Pacific region. This continues Ra’s ongoing work exploring methods of performance that decentre hegemonic Western dance conventions, and which engage critically with expressions of gender and sexual difference.

Biraddali Dancing on the Horizon runs for 30 minutes. A new musical score composed by Tati au Miel accompanies the film.

✧ HOW TO HOLD A GLINT ✧

by Kiel Torres

In *Biraddali Dancing on the Horizon*, we first encounter Bhenji Ra as a silhouette wading in the Sulu Sea off the coast of Mindanao. The scene is glazed in a subdued purple hue, a colouring that situates the moment outside of solar time. Under this dimness, the film's grain foams, exposing the camera's strain. We're pulled closer as Bhenji sinks deeper. She extends her arms to her sides, floating her fingertips on the surface of the water. The angle of her arms doubles into a diamond-shaped spectral reflection, momentarily transforming her body into a four-pointed star. Above, tears in the clouds reveal slices of blue where light drops in soft lines. I think about glinting. Within optics, the phenomenon refers to the fleeting flash or sparkle that occurs when light bounces off a reflective surface at an angle. While this is most readily observed when rays from the sun or moon interact with water, a glint can also be carried in the body; say, a brief twinkle in the eye that expresses subtle allure, hinting at something below the surface. When used as a noun or verb, "glint" describes both light and feeling: a glimmer that is both optical and emotional.

Pangalay, the ancestral dance of the Tausug people that is at the heart of Bhenji's film, embodies the ebb and flow of currents. Moving to brass gongs, double headed drums, and bamboo percussion instruments, performers pair intricate footwork with fluid, wave-like arm motions; an effect emphasized by fingernail extensions called *janggay*. Despite regional variations of pangalay across the Sulu Archipelago, the essence that unites them is a pre-Islamic concept of celestial angels.¹ Bhenji began practicing pangalay in Manila, learning from non-Tausug teachers before discovering a familial connection to the dance. In 2018, a relative introduced her to Tausug elder and pangalay master Sitti Airia Sangkula Askalani-Obeso. Under Sitti's mentorship, Bhenji's studies were entwined with uncovering her own Tausug connection alongside a trans lineage within pangalay. For the 22nd Biennale of Sydney, Bhenji and Sitti collaborated on a video work titled *The Offering (Pang Alay)* (2020), in which Sitti shares her experience of performing alongside *bantot* dancers.² While pangalay is traditionally taught in gendered parts, Sitti blessed Bhenji with permission to embody whichever style resonated.

As a founding mother to the first ballroom house in Australia, House of Slé, Bhenji carries her teachings from Sitti alongside the maternal transmission of

ballroom culture. This spirited interweaving of pangalay and voguing is embodied in the film by Bhenji, as well as by her house daughters Alima Ra and Berta Juicy who perform in front of a visual of the moon and sea while wearing *janggay*. In a conversation with Jaya Jacobo presented by Auto Italia, Bhenji speaks to the slipperiness of pangalay—how the transmission of the dance extends into a way of being that evades choreography and academic capture. She describes pangalay as an energy field, a body of cultural knowledge that is sustained through "tissues and spirits."³ To perform pangalay is to channel a living archive that collapses ancestors and shores. It's a dance that reveals the edges of water.

Throughout *Biraddali*, layered exposures and animated apparitions evoke this liminal encounter between the present and afterlife. Playing with traditions of spirit photography that use the camera to reveal what the human eye can't perceive, shadows of dancers, musicians, and animals surface in brilliant flashes across silver night-vision stills and black-and-white film images. Similarly, Tati au Miel's original score vibrates and hums in a frequency akin to the electromagnetic sensors used to detect paranormal happenings.

The *Biraddali*, the mischievous all-gendered sky maiden that Bhenji credits as the creator of pangalay, is said to travel between the earth and spirit realms on rainbows. Near the end of the film, we return to the purple tinged shore of the Sulu Sea, although this time, the horizon—the portal to the *Biraddali*'s prismatic highway—fuses with the waves. Bhenji emerges from the water. She duets with the current, dancing pangalay as her body multiplies in layers of sheer exposures.⁴ For a brief moment, we witness Bhenji transform into a multi-limbed being, transcending a corporeal threshold as her movements shimmer in recognition of family and mythology.

Notes

1. Michael Camus, "Pangalay Traditional Dance," Sinaunang Panahon, last modified April 24, 2024, <https://sinaunangpanahon.com/pangalay-traditional-dance/>.
2. "Bantot" or "bayot" refers to a transfeminine person.
3. In Conversation: Bhenji Ra and Jaya Jacobo, Auto Italia, March 9, 2024, video interview, 1:06:10. <https://autoitaliasoutheast.org/events/in-conversation-bhenji-ra-and-jaya-jacobo/>
4. Ibid. As Bhenji notes, "In death, the dancer becomes the current, and the current is always doing pangalay."

Biographies

Bhenji Ra is a Filipina–Australian artist based on Gadigal land, Eora Nation. Ra’s projects combine choreography and video and are deeply rooted in social justice practices. Her practice combines dance, video, illustration, and community activation. Her work dissects cultural theory and identity, centralizing her own personal histories as a tool to reframe performance. She is the mother of Western Sydney based collective and ballroom house SLÉ.

Kiel Torres is Assistant Curator at Western Front. She joined Western Front in 2022 as the Content Writer & Editor and previously held positions at Britannia Community Services Centre, Hatch Art Gallery, and the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. Her work focuses on performance, poetry, criticism, and correspondence, and she hosts a seasonal reading series at Choklit Park.

List of Works

All works by Bhenji Ra, and courtesy of the artist.

1. *Biraddali Dancing on the Horizon (2024)*
16mm transferred to 4K video, 32:56 min
2. *Crocodile Ancestor (2024)*
Black and white photo printed on fabric
91.5 x 152.5 cm
Photo by Sasha Palomares
3. *Buffalo Ancestor (2024)*
Black and white photo printed on fabric
137 x 244 cm
Photo by Sasha Palomares
4. *Pangalay Twin Ancestor (2024)*
Black and white photo printed on fabric
137 x 244 cm
Photo by Sasha Palomares

Project Team

Curators: Susan Gibb & Kiel Torres
Graphic Design: Line–Gry Hørup
Technician: Ben Wilson

Co-commissioned by Auto Italia, London.

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