

## **Podcast Recording: Patrick Cruz**

### **Coco Zhou (2:05):**

For today's episode, we're talking to Patrick Cruz about his multifaceted practice in painting, installation and performance, as well as his negotiations of diasporic identity and explorations of divinatory practices.

Patrick Cruz creates installations that draw on aspects of diasporic experience, play and folk spirituality. He received the prestigious Thirteen Artist Award from the Cultural Center of the Philippines in 2021, was long-listed for the Sobey Art Award in 2019 and won the RBC Canadian Painting Competition in 2015. Cruz is co-founder of two curatorial collectives. The Kamias Collective along with Toronto based curators Su-Ying Lee and Karie Liao and most recently Ben Flores Fan Club Collective with Vancouver based artist Christian Vistan. Cruz is a cross appointed Assistant Professor in Studio Art at the Arts, Culture and Media department at the University of Toronto Scarborough and the Master of Visual Studies at Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design.

### **Diane Wong (3:18):**

Hi, Patrick, welcome to our podcast.

### **Coco Zhou (3:25):**

Hey, Patrick. Today we have a lunar eclipse, did you know?

### **Patrick Cruz (3:28):**

Oh, right, yeah, Taurus, full moon in Taurus. I do follow the full moon phase. I don't know what that means, though, do you know?

### **Coco Zhou (3:36):**

I think it means beginnings and endings and a time of great change.

### **Diane Wong (3:43):**

We have two Tauruses in the office.

### **Patrick Cruz (3:46):**

Oh, nice.

### **Diane Wong (3:52):**

Yeah, we're having a great time. We'll just get to the questions. First, we're kind of starting off with some introductory questions. You work across a lot of different mediums, from painting to sculptures to performance and installation. And you also weave together themes of globalization, diaspora and the occult. How would you describe your art practice in this current moment?

**Patrick Cruz (4:18):**

Oh, man. This moment, I think I'm just trying to find a way to speak differently, in a way that would help me to feel revitalized and stay engaged. I think as artists, we're always trying to find new ways. I'd like to think artists do that. So we're always trying to find new ways to speak and find new ways to make and think. And I think this sort of my move towards more thinking about spirituality, the occult and magic, these are sort of things that I find, I guess for me, it's also as much as it is familiar to me, it's also new territory.

And I'm finding ways to link it to how it may relate to my lens and also how I relate to the world is something that I'm kind of interested in. I've been working a lot with past life regression, and I've been making paintings and maybe sculpture based on past life regression downloads. Yeah, it's been interesting. I've been getting some weird stories out and particularly kind of thinking of how cultural appropriation might play within those contexts because obviously without that lens, it's going to be problematic. Without the lens of spirituality, it's going to be problematic. So just interested how to speak of identity in a different way.

**Diane Wong (5:49):**

Thank you so much for answering that question. I'm just wondering, I'm not as familiar. What is past life aggression?

**Patrick Cruz (5:58):**

Yeah, that's true. That's a good question. I don't think it's as common. I guess it stems from a Buddhist philosophy that there is reincarnation. There is this concept of a soul that gets reincarnated back from birth to death and rebirth to death over and over. So I guess with that belief in mind, there's a practice. Actually, it's also used in therapy a lot to deal with trauma. But there's a belief that you can go to a practitioner, an actual practitioner of past life regression, or you can also do it by yourself through meditation and hypnosis, which basically allows you to revisit a memory that's been suppressed. And it's this idea that you could have had many lives. You know that saying when you meet someone, they're like, oh, that's an old soul. So I think it's this idea that someone may have had many lives before. And it's kind of an explanation to, you know, sometimes you have weird interests or like, you're good at something, you know, you're good at gardening, you're good at cooking, but somehow you just intuitively know it without even studying it. And some people do trace that in a kind of past life pattern. So regression is just basically going back and retrieving those things, understanding where it's coming from.

**Coco Zhou (7:26):**

I just thought it was really interesting how you were talking about spirituality and as a way to think about what this technique does for identity, right? Because it's such a bodily and historically informed thing, the process of identification, but what does it mean to be able to, through all these different practices, reach back into these different versions of a self that has existed before, that you still have some kind of connection to? Yeah, maybe we can come back

to this later, but I would love to hear more about what that work has informed for you in terms of how you think about identity.

**Patrick Cruz (8:10):**

I guess just to quickly respond to that, I think it's because how identity politics is such a trend right now, I think it's even more amplified. I think that made me shy away to always speak about my Filipino-ness, and this sort of becomes this kind of performativity that I think a lot of BIPOC artists are very careful in how they represent themselves, that they don't instrumentalize themselves. So I think this was my strategy to sort of sidestep that. Talk about identity in a non-physical way, in a more psychic way, I guess.

**Diane Wong (8:48):**

Cool, I guess we can kind of jump into your time working with Centre A, that you had a solo exhibition. Could you tell us a little bit more about the show? What was it like working with Centre A at the time?

**Patrick Cruz (9:02):**

That feels like a past life. That was in 2016, I believe. That was an interesting moment, because I feel like I was in grad school when I got that invitation to do the show. And at the time, Makiko Hara was a guest curator, and it coincided with my project. And I was researching about the occult and magic, but as a subject matter, not as a practice. So that was very different. And I was very invested in identity politics at the time, issues about globalization, being an immigrant, all the shebang, all the things that are kind of expected from. And I think that's also, it came from maybe grad school. I was studying at University of Guelph at the time, and I think there was a lot of expectation from me. At least that's how I felt, to kind of perform my identity.

I felt very supported in that project. It was probably one of the biggest projects I did at the time. It was the first time I made a crate for art and shipped sculptures. I was like, you know, and then there was like a publication, there was even a fundraiser. There was just so many elements in the exhibition. It was so epic and exhausting. But overall, I really had a good time. And I also met Christian Vistan, who was interning at the time. And now we're actually co-curating a show at Grunt, which is an all Filipino exhibition. So, I think it created really nice connections, meeting people. I also met Lani Maestro, who came to the opening. And I'm a big fan of her work, so I was fanboying really hard when she came to the opening. Lani Maestro and Makiko Hara, were I think classmates back in Concordia. Yeah, there's just, I think that's the beauty of exhibition sometimes, is that it brings people that you don't expect. I don't know, sometimes as an artist, you feel like you only work with your resources that you have. So it's nice when the gallery can kind of push that, open it more, and allow some cracks to happen. Yeah, like even this podcast, like emerging out of Centre A, and having a connection with you guys from the past. Like it's nice that these sort of relationships still emanate.

**Coco Zhou (11:27):**

That's really beautiful. Thank you. I'm wondering, going back a little bit to the past life saying, we've been asking everyone how they find themselves in Vancouver, as a city that, you know,

as a space, as a place that informs so much of our identity and ways of being. Yeah, we're curious about how living in Vancouver has impacted your thinking and our making. And you mentioned this to me before in the previous conversation, I don't know if you remember, that Vancouver is like a very spiritual place compared to many other places that you've been. I'm curious to hear more about that also, and like how does it compare to Toronto?

**Patrick Cruz (12:13):**

Yeah, I feel like I can't say the same to Toronto, that it's a spiritual place. But I guess, obviously, I think spirituality is something internal. You can feel spiritual wherever you are, that depends on you. But I think Vancouver's sort of landscape, just I guess, seeing the mountains as a background is so crazy. And I feel like you kind of stop appreciating that when you live there. You see it so often, that it's like, well, it's just the mountains. But then you move to Toronto, it's like, there's nothing, it's just buildings and stuff. But I think a big part of the shift to within the two cities is that, I think the weather as well is so different. I think in Vancouver, people fetishize the sun a lot. They're like, oh my God, it's sunny. Like, they're just like, they have to like savour it, you know? They have to go out and like experience the sun. Whereas here in Toronto, I feel like it's always sunny. I don't feel the urge, like I could just stay at home and not feel like I need to go out. I feel like in Vancouver, because there's such a history and legacy of conceptual art, and then the peers that you kind of respond to, at least for me, I feel like I'm always responding to the people around me and the environment around me. And even if we're not in dialogue directly, I feel like it's a kind of a conversation in passing.

Maybe there's just a more awareness, I feel like, when I'm in Vancouver. I feel more heightened in how I'm speaking or articulating. Whereas in Toronto, I feel less conscious. I don't really see it as a negative thing, but maybe there's just, I don't know, I feel like you do something here and no one cares, because there's just so many people. Whereas I feel like in Vancouver, you do something and everyone knows, in a way. I was even thinking about this with cancel culture, like, I think I know more people who got canceled in Vancouver than in Toronto, because it's just a small art community in Vancouver, and you do something, it's like everyone knows, you know, you date someone, everyone knows who you're dating. Like in Toronto, like no one cares. It's just the bigger pool of artists, and it feels less cliquy, maybe. So, I don't know, I just feel like I'm more at home, maybe, in not performing here in Toronto. But not to say that the quality is less. Some people might argue that, you know, I know a lot of my friends who moved to Vancouver, they say Vancouver's more sophisticated when it comes to art. People are more critical or more well-versed.

**Coco Zhou (14:51):**

Diane is making a face for our audio listeners.

**Patrick Cruz (14:56):**

Yeah. You know, that's also maybe a generational thing, because I feel like a lot of the younger kids are now changing that as well, right? I'd like to think that that's the case.

**Diane Wong (15:06):**

I mean, I think it's like 50/50. I think there's still a lot of more pretentious people in the Vancouver art world, and then there's people who are a little bit more down to earth, which I think is the case of a lot of different cities too.

**Patrick Cruz (15:21):**

Maybe you see it more in Vancouver, because it's smaller.

**Diane Wong (15:27):**

It's smaller, and I think the people who can afford to work in arts in Vancouver, because of the living costs, you end up with a lot more rich kids in the city, I think, working in the arts. So I think that also play a part into it.

**Coco Zhou (15:42):**

So this project is funded by a heritage grant. And so for each of the speakers, we're trying to ask them how notions of heritage relate to their work or how they think about this concept. And so heritage is often associated with tradition, with authenticity. And I think your approach to art seems to complicate these ideas, thinking about kitchen codex as this collection of performances and recipes that are passed down, but also have adaptations woven in. And also your engagement with "new age" spiritual practices, which are also formed out of distinct different lineages, but also become their own thing. And at the same time, your work about past life regressions, it's deeply informed by cultural memory, migration history and generational knowledge. So yeah, I wonder how you navigate these tensions in your practice and what you think about that.

**Patrick Cruz (16:46):**

I mean, those are questions I constantly ask myself, especially when I'm faced with the question like, what motivates me? What are my intentions to continue this kind of work? What does it mean to be an artist in this time? And maybe it's also a way for me to give some kind of space and understanding momentarily, because I know that shifts. I think that answer shifts constantly. Maybe tomorrow I might have a different answer, or maybe some kind of event shifts that.

But I guess going back to the question of authenticity, I think now my understanding is that I'm kind of disenchanted with this concept of authenticity anymore. I don't subscribe to it anymore. Not that I did before, but just even thinking of Canada, what is Canada? It's a construct, you know, or like Canadian cuisine. What is Canadian cuisine? I think this sort of concept of purity and tradition, it holds a special place. But as artists who are working in this time and space that is now, we can't be sort of just be operating from that point. I feel like these conversations need to be moved forward and always critiqued. Maybe it's even more relevant as a diasporic person because what does that even mean?

For me, when I go back home, I'm not really Filipino anymore. Even if I grew up there, you kind of lose that so-called authenticity when you're uprooted and displaced. So I think for me, what's authentic is what you have right now, right? Doing this past life regression. For me, that's my kind of authentic self because that's what I'm invested in. That's what kind of makes sense for me right now in how I think about identity. Because now when I think about my identity before, it

becomes very kind of nostalgic. I mean, I still use that perspective to make work because it's still a part of my identity, but it's not the totality of it. I think it's just a fragment. And I think every time we sort of just move from one place to the next, even from Vancouver to Toronto, that's already such a shift culturally, politically. Even the social landscape is so different. And I think those aspects really affect the way I think about notions of home.

And yeah, ultimately, what is it to be a Canadian artist? But maybe I tried to begin to ask, well, what is not a Canadian artist? What is not an authentic Filipino or an authentic diasporic person? Sometimes I start to think of what's the opposite to understand where I am at. Because sometimes it's hard to see.

**Coco Zhou (19:43):**

I was showing Diane the work that you did for MOCA Toronto, called Crownland. I thought it was so good. So it's like a picture of yourself as a teenager, but then you're posing as this real estate agent. And yeah, I just find it so cheeky and hilarious. And also a very good critique of, yeah, the commodification of identity. And also puts into question the authenticity and realness that we were talking about.

**Patrick Cruz (20:17):**

The occupation of an artist navigating a city that's like, you know, unlivable. I think it speaks to that layer too, that a city or even a country that's like trying to support the arts, but there's actually no infrastructure to even do it. You know, it's kind of ironic.

**Coco Zhou (20:35):**

Yeah, for sure. So we've talked a little bit before about your complicated feelings about art school. You told me at the time that you felt like it was like a very overly intellectualized space that like, I think you felt restricted in that environment in a lot of ways. But now you are a professor in studio art at U of T, which is really great. And, you know, now that the student has become the teacher, I'm curious, like, what are your main pedagogical concerns now that you're in this position?

**Patrick Cruz (21:15):**

For me, I really try to be real with my students. I try to not gatekeep information, especially now I'm teaching this course called Essential Skills for Emerging Artists, which is basically this notion of how to professionalize as an artist and what that means. And also making it clear that it doesn't mean you're professional, you're a good artist. You know, you can be a professional and make really shit art, and you can be an amazing artist and be very bad professionally. And I think it's two different things that need to be balanced somehow, at least in this day and age or in the context we're working in within Canada, because of the bureaucracy that's part of applying grants, gallery proposals, or writing your artist's statements and bios and all that stuff.

So I think there's a lot of blind spots that I experience in art school that I would have only known through mistakes or through peers. And I was like, always confused, like, why didn't they teach us about taxes, or like writing invoices? And then you end up filing taxes to the wrong people,

and they screw up your taxes because they don't know how to deal with work in the cultural field. So yeah, I'm like trying to filter this kind of trauma, because being an artist is already so difficult. So to add this layer of mystery, I just want to demystify it for them, because they think it's glamorous, you know? They think being an artist is like, ooh, it's like, you're going to travel, you're going to be famous and stuff, but no, you're going to be living in a shithole and making minimum wage for a time. You know, it's like, it's not what you think it is. And I think it's good to kind of break that reality to them before they leave the institution. And the institution obviously plays a big role because there's a weird promise as well that, you know, having an art career or having a master's degree can lead to stability. It's just not true. In terms of being a good artist, that's really up to them. I'm just there to facilitate it. But it's also hard because I feel like to make good art, you need to have life experience. You need to feel pain, be destroyed, feel love.

And these guys, they lived in dorms or they haven't really moved out. I guess as a professor, as a teacher, I also tried to read between those lines because grading is also a fucked up method. It's such a colonial framework to assess art based on numbers and letters. Everyone's coming from a different point of knowledge, and you can't just say, oh, this is B+, this is A-, and everyone's talking about decolonizing the institution. So I think it's a work in progress, and being part of U of T has been very great because I feel like I'm able to voice out these things and with my colleagues who are also very supportive. I feel like I'm optimistic about the future of institutions now, but I think it's going to be baby steps and a long grind.

**Diane Wong (24:18):**

As someone who is currently still in my masters, I agree with everything you just said. The thing with academia is that they don't teach you practical knowledge skills to actually work in the arts and cultural field. And the amount of time I chase people for invoices is too many. It's too many times. I just want to pay you. Please send me your invoice. I mean, different schools, I think, have different amount of professional development courses. There are some schools that are theory-heavy, academic. So it's nice to see that you feel that there are changes coming.

I always tell people this. A good artist is both equally like your work is important, but your ability to do administrative work is also so important as well. It's a very fine balance between the two. Some of the best artists that I have seen are really good at their admin work. As a curator, I love a good artist, like good, like responsive, you know, like administrative. Like, yes, please respond to email. Like I'm easygoing, but like, you know, I don't want to wait two weeks for an email.

**Patrick Cruz (25:28):**

No, it's difficult too, because I feel like, yeah, it's just, I feel like underappreciated this sort of notion of having structure, having schedule, being punctual. Maybe because we also associate it with capitalism, this sort of notion of efficiency that we're kind of like, oh, we have to be against this form or this, you know, but it's what pays the bills. So shut up.

**Diane Wong (25:52):**

I mean, love the whole grant system too, right? Like I also see that there's no experience working with grant system in like post-secondary university. So like emerging artists are not

even aware of how to access the grants, how to use languages that grant officers like. It's hard. It's like a process that once you get into it, it's like relatively easy to do. But like you need to be able to get into it first. At least that's what I would like to see in post-secondary institutions. Teach your students how to write grants. That's one of the biggest things like regardless of sector, it's like whatever you do, realistically is you're going to be writing grants to support those.

**Patrick Cruz (26:29):**

Survival skills, you know.

**Coco Zhou (26:31):**

I know you're probably really busy teaching, but what are you working on these days?

**Patrick Cruz (26:37):**

Yeah, I'm working on a lot of curatorial projects right now and also working on a solo project this fall, presenting a work at Susan Hobbs on November 30th. It's a solo show. The title is Canada, very relevant to what we're talking about. And I'm curating a group show upstairs at the same time. So it's two exhibitions happening simultaneously. And that group show is kind of tackling ideas about ephemerality, transience. So I guess it's still kind of related to my interests, but expressed very differently. And then I'm working with a curatorial project with Christian Vistan at Grunt this June. We're bringing together nine Filipino artists. We started a collective called Ben Flores Fan Club Collective, which is named after the first Filipino who moved to Canada in Bowen Island, named Ben Flores. And a month after that, I'll be co-curating the 4th Kamias Triennial here in Toronto. Next year, I also have a project at SFU Burnaby in March, working with their collection in their vault. I don't know, I'm surviving, and I'd rather be doing this than anything else. So I'm very, very grateful that there's even opportunities coming in my way.