



Marikit Santiago

Heaven and earth



Name: Marikit Santiago.

Lives: Darug land,
Parramatta.

Listening to: Kendrick
Lamar, Dobby and L-FRESH
The LION.

Enjoying: Running
Parramatta's river foreshore
track with her daughter.

Known for: Realistic
portraiture, reflections on
the migration experience,
naturalistic backgrounds and
gilded details.

I pull up on Marikit Santiago's street and walk to the last townhouse along a lane edged with cypress trees. I ring the doorbell and Santiago welcomes me into her home. I notice some of her exquisite paintings on the walls. They portray her children when they were babies surrounded by foliage and glinting gold leaf. In her lounge room, a large rug features a stylised snake that reminds me of the serpents that adorn her paintings. I start to wonder where her studio could be.

Santiago leads me to the back deck where I spot a cheerful blue studio in the courtyard. Directly opposite is a space where her son likes to shoot hoops. 'We moved to the townhouse around a year and a half ago,' she tells me. 'My dad and uncle put the studio up in about two weeks!'

Santiago opens the sliding door to the space which houses her easel, her painting box, a couch, plants and framed photos. It's also where her husband Shawn works during the day. He greets me and is immediately recognisable from her paintings. The space is disarmingly little and I instantly feel admiration for the couple – their ability to work together, yet on entirely separate pursuits. Evidently, they have found their routine and rhythm: 'Shawn listens to a lot of podcasts, and I play music,' Santiago tells me.

Most of the paintings for Santiago's upcoming solo exhibition at Campbelltown Art Centre, *Marikit Santiago: Proclaim Your Death!*, have just left her studio for framing. However, a significant

artwork remains, entitled *Bread, power and worldly recognition* (pictured page 58), responding to Elisabetta Sirani's *The Temptation of Christ* c1655–65 in the Art Gallery's collection. Within the show, Santiago is adapting several works from the Art Gallery's European collection, with the support of international art curator Anne Gérard-Austin.

Santiago was drawn to Sirani's ink drawing (pictured page 12) for several reasons. For one, it is the earliest-dated artwork by a woman to enter the European collection. Also, it appears to be a quick sketch that never progressed into a finalised painting. Santiago was interested in the idea of realising the artwork from her own perspective.

Mirroring the original composition, Shawn is depicted to the right of the picture in place of Christ and Santiago to the left, in place of Satan, 'because this is the way women are always presented throughout history: as sinners and temptresses'. Standing tall on a rocky outcrop in the far left are their children, representing the three temptations.

While elements of the original work are echoed, Santiago finds personal ways to inject imagination. The rocks that dominate the background are modelled on a formation she found at Lake Parramatta, and the church positioned to the right of the canvas is San Agustin in Manila. 'It's not logical, but it doesn't have to be,' she remarks. 'Also, Shawn and I aren't wearing robes like in the original painting. Here we are wrapped in blankets, which is a lot more realistic,' she laughs.

In Sirani's original, Christ determinedly avoids Satan's gaze, while in Santiago's version, her eyes lock with Shawn's as he reaches out to her. Through this gesture of intimacy, the dynamic between the cast of characters is transformed into one of warmth.

While the painting is relatively small, Santiago has taken its framing to remarkable heights. With the help of her father and uncle, the painting now sits inside a freestanding wooden tabernacle. 'We've made it so that visitors will be able to walk around the work itself,' Santiago explains, showing me the back of this sculptural frame, which has been carved out in the shape of a square. She has coated the concave niche with gold leaf and is contemplating what she will place inside.

Santiago also shows me a selection of miniature clay sculptures coated in gold leaf. 'There's a strawberry, a dragon fruit, an apple, a pineapple, blueberries,' she says, placing them on top of the tabernacle. They were made by her children, sister and father, reminding me of offerings found at places of worship. 'They are, oh ... what are they called again?' We try to recall the architectural term. 'Finials,' Shawn confirms from his desk.

Sitting atop Santiago's easel is a cardboard surface which has been fashioned into three panels; its outer 'wings' designed to fold inwards like a book. 'This is going to be the exhibition's altarpiece,' she says.

Santiago's practice of working with cardboard has a practical implication in that 'it's light, portable, foldable and free'. However, it also has symbolic resonance. Santiago explains that it is common for migrants from the Philippines to send cardboard Balikbayan boxes to family members filled with aid and supplies. 'Migration is imbued in the material itself as well as the Philippine ethos of making do, and of resilience. It's strange to think that once the artworks are in a collection they are handled with white gloves.'

Santiago and I settle in the main house over a cup of coffee and some Tim Tams. I ask whether painting from life is ever intimidating, 'Well, not for me, because it's my family,' she says. Santiago knows her sitters better than most. She had her first child while studying her master's and has grown as an artist alongside her children ever since – 'and they've grown up in my paintings'.

Through this process, she has noticed how the children's faces are slowly losing their roundness. Sarita is now six, Santi is eight and Maella is ten and while they do sit for her, Santiago knows their nuances by heart. Appearing regularly in her paintings, the children are depicted adoringly, often surrounded by halos of gold leaf.

Recently, Santiago invited her children to participate in the making process, at least, while they're still interested in joining her. 'They bring a freedom to the paintings, and a looseness,' she



explains. ‘They often help with decorative details or large areas of background, like leaves ... actually, Santi is great at snakes!’

While this relinquishing of control might be frightening to some, it makes a powerful statement. In allowing the creative relationship to evolve from muse to collaborator, Santiago asserts that, yes, you can be a mother and an artist and, no, these roles don’t have to be mutually exclusive.

In 2024, Santiago won the La Prairie Art Award presented by the Art Gallery and the luxury Swiss skincare house. For this award, the winning artist is offered an overseas residency, which can be complicated for an artist/parent. Fortunately, the La Prairie Art Award allows artists to use the funds as best suits their life and work. So, Santiago travelled to Europe with Shawn and the children to conduct research supporting her show at Campbelltown Arts Centre, and her practice broadly.

They visited Art Basel and the Venice Biennale and enjoyed the best that contemporary art has to offer, but she couldn’t resist returning to her original inspiration. Visiting the Uffizi in Florence was like a homecoming, allowing Santiago to rediscover her love for Sandro Botticelli. I start to see the parallels: the symbolism-laden works, the prevalence of nature, the dominance of figuration and narrative.

Santiago also found inspiration inside the Duomo di Firenze when gazing at the dome’s mural, *The Last Judgement* 1572–79 by Giorgio Vasari. She cracks open a book on her table to show me its detail. The mural includes seven circular bands running in layers from the cupola, from heaven at the top to hell below. In heaven, there are saints, angels and apostles; but in hell we find demons with pig tails, creatures with tusks and people getting their genitals torched by devils. ‘There’s a lot going on in hell and, as a painter, it actually offers a lot of movement and dynamism compared with the more static levels of heaven.’

The lowest level of Vasari’s mural is a vibrant red while above is pale blue: hues that Santiago draws on for her upcoming works in *Marikit Santiago: Proclaim Your Death!* While representing the duality of good and evil, these are also the colours on the national flag of the Philippines, which has a blue band at top and a red one below. ‘When the flag is flipped,’ she explains, ‘it means the country is at war.’ Hell reigning over heaven.

We talk about the upcoming Campbelltown Arts Centre show. One room, titled *Alter Altar*, offers a workshop space for visitors. Meanwhile in Gallery one, Santiago showcases what she describes as a ‘deconstructed church’, the focal point being a sculptural adaptation of Manila’s San Agustin Church constructed by her father.



For the show, Santiago has painted her parents’ likenesses on the church doors. Surrounding the church will be her altarpiece in oil, and a series of watercolours – a medium she is exhibiting for the first time.

We finish our coffees and I tell Santiago how much I’m looking forward to seeing the works. ‘So am I!’ she jokes, about to tackle the altarpiece. I find it hard to believe an artist with such divine technical skills could feel nervous.

Saying goodbye, I glance at the clock. The school run is mere hours away and the heavenly blue studio beckons.

—

Emma McLean, deputy editor, *Look*

Marikit Santiago: Proclaim Your Death!, Campbelltown Arts Centre
4 January – 16 March, free

Drawing from ...

In late 2023, Marikit Santiago and I met to discuss her solo exhibition at Campbelltown Arts Centre and her desire to delve into the Art Gallery’s collection of European masterworks exploring biblical and mythological themes. I gave her a tour of the Grand Courts and the Prints and Drawings Room, before showing her lesser-known works I thought might pique her curiosity. From these fruitful visits, several paintings became the inspiration for her works in the show. Here you will find three paintings that inspired her:

Jacques Blanchard
Mars and the vestal virgin c1637–38

The vestal virgin Rhea Silvia wandered into the woods to collect water in a grove sacred to Mars, the god of war. The legend tells that she lay down to rest, opened her clothing to catch the breeze and fell asleep. It was in this state that Mars discovered and raped her. The consequence was the birth of her twins Romulus and Remus, founders of Rome. **Santiago:** ‘The painting seemingly depicts a tender moment of romance but actually omits the sexual violence that is about to occur. My version offers a counterpoint with a woman [myself] as the central figure. She has authority in this encounter.’

Niccolò Cecconi
Pompeian baths c1890

This picturesque reconstruction of a women’s bath in ancient Pompeii reveals the artist’s knowledge of Roman bathing customs, gained from archaeological excavations. The subject provides Cecconi with an excuse to portray a group of scantily clad women at a sufficient distance from contemporary life to titillate the spectator without causing offence. **Santiago:** ‘I’ve omitted the slave in the background and portrayed the women wearing *dasters* (house dresses). My work is about feminism, but I wanted my son Santi’s marks on the painting to suggest that feminism isn’t just a conversation we have with our girls. We need the boys to participate too.’

Francesco Solimena
Noli me tangere c1718–20

Noli me tangere, meaning ‘touch me not’, were the words spoken by Christ to Mary Magdalene according to the gospel of John. After she found Christ’s tomb empty, Mary encountered a man. When he spoke, she recognised him as the risen Christ and tried to touch him. Christ’s denial of touch in this moment is thought to ask Christians to rely on faith, rather than the tangible. **Santiago:** ‘This is also the title of the revolutionary novel by José Rizal, credited for uniting people against the Spanish clergy in the Philippines. In my painting [pictured page 54], my husband plays the main character Crisostomo Ibarra, bent on violent revolution, and I play Maria Clara, the idealised Filipina woman: modest, demure and loyal.’

Anne Gérard-Austin, curator, international art



Jacques Blanchard
Mars and the vestal virgin c1637–38, oil on canvas, 130 x 110.4 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales, purchased with funds resulting from a gift by James Fairfax AC and with the support of the Art Gallery Society of New South Wales 2007

Niccolò Cecconi
Pompeian bath c1890, oil on canvas, 104 x 154.5 x 0.5 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales, purchased 1891

Francesco Solimena *Noli me tangere* 1718–20, oil on canvas, 67.8 x 50.6 cm, on loan to the Art Gallery of New South Wales from the Kenneth Reed collection