

Tears, Blood, Sweat

Ryan Frigillana

Silver Eye

Education Guide
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I. Introduction

How do memory, images, and systems of belief shape lived experience and a sense of belonging?

These questions unfold throughout *Tears, Blood, Sweat*, in which Ryan Frigillana reconsiders the American Dream through intertwined histories of land, labor, and citizenship. Drawing on his experience as a first-generation Filipino American, he traces connections between his family's past and present.

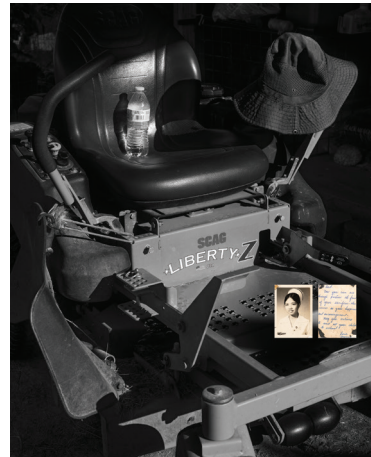
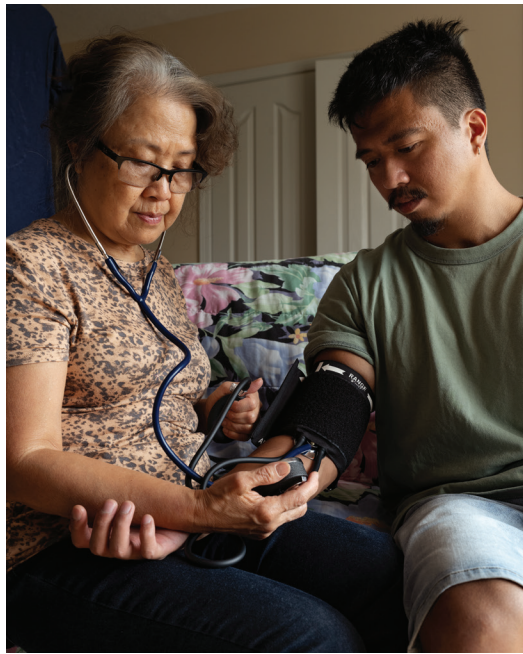
Frigillana works across multiple visual strategies in the exhibition. These include contemporary photographs that incorporate still-life compositions and collages, reworked biblical illustrations, appropriated news imagery, and intimate observations of family and place.

Together, these approaches challenge fixed narratives of migration, showing how histories, memories, and evolving ideas of faith and country shape belonging amid changing political realities.

About the Artist

Ryan Frigillana (b. Iligan City, Philippines) is a lens-based artist working between Long Island, New York, and Southaven, Mississippi. Drawing from an upbringing shaped by migration and Adventism, he combines photographs with reworked materials—including print media, family and public archives, and biblical illustrations from his childhood—to address the tensions and continuities of diaspora and faith. Through books and installations, he approaches photography as a form of evidence, allegory, and prayer: as record, symbol, and confession.

Frigillana has exhibited at Light Work, Houston Center for Photography, Blue Sky Oregon Center for the Photographic Arts, and Candela Photographic Arts. He is a recipient of the NYSCA/ NYFA Artist Fellowship in Photography ('25), the JGS Fellowship for Photography ('25, '21), the Aperture & Google Creator Labs Photo Fund ('23), and the En Foco Photography Fellowship ('23), and has completed residencies through the Penumbra Workspace Program ('24) and the Penumbra Foundation Risograph Print & Publication Residency ('21). His work has been published by *Aperture*, Atlanta Center for Photography, Humble Arts Foundation, *Booooooom*, PhMuseum, *Der Greif*, *Musée* magazine, and *The New Yorker* among others. He holds a BFA in Photography and Related Media (2020) from the Fashion Institute of Technology.



II. Strategies of Self-Representation

Frigillana's projects are grounded in reflection. His work considers the experiences and values that shape his sense of self, and how he has changed and grown in relation to them. *Tears, Blood, Sweat* brings together work from three different projects.

Across these bodies of work, he employs diverse approaches to photography to explore family relationships and the power of images to shape belief. His practice considers how image-making can reorganize, critique, and celebrate both personal and collective histories.

Questions for Looking:

→ *Two Kinds of Care*, 2023, is a pair of similarly composed images where the artist poses with his mother, a nurse by profession. In one image, his mother reads her son's blood pressure. In the other, he squeezes the bulb of an air-pressured remote camera shutter release. The images connect the different professions that mother and son have pursued while making their relationship central to the work.

What does the collaboration between the artist and his mother open up for the viewer? What can a collaborative self-portrait make possible that other forms of portraiture might not?

→ Several works in the exhibition, including *Vessels*, 2023, juxtapose archival family photos with new photographs, connecting the past and the present. How does foregrounding the past shape the way that we look at photographs made in the present? Does thinking about the past shape the kinds of images we make in the present?



III. The Power of Images

Frigillana works across multiple visual strategies. These include contemporary photographs that incorporate still-life compositions and collages, reworked biblical illustrations, **appropriated** news imagery, and intimate observations of family and place. As he moves between different modes, he creates a flow of images that invites us to consider not only what each image might mean, but how its meaning is shaped through its relationship with surrounding images.

Questions for Looking

- How do the different strategies that Frigillana uses to present visual information feel? Do you “read” the images differently depending on how they are constructed? Do some images feel more “real” than others? Why? Are images offered as evidence or interpretation? Who gets to decide?
- How is the feeling of the exhibition as a whole shaped by these different strategies?
- In *Save*, 2024, Frigillana recontextualizes an image from an illustrated bible in a large installation that examines the aesthetics of both contemporary news and biblical imagery. By asking us to pay attention to the visual qualities of these powerful narratives, how does Frigillana invite us to consider the stories these images tell? What might Frigillana want us to think about these images by separating them from their original contexts?

IV. Belonging, Migration, and the American Dream



Frigillana shows immigration as an ongoing process of negotiation experienced both intimately and politically. He draws attention to the norms that have shaped our shared and individual beliefs about what it means to be American, and to histories of alienation and belonging in relation to labor and personal investment in the American Dream. Frigillana builds on and critiques **visual culture**, creating personal responses that ask us to reconsider the dominant images and narratives that have shaped how we understand these histories.

Questions for Looking

→ Who is included in these national myths, and who is left out? In *A Family Tree*, 2022, Frigillana collages his family pictures, including a graduation photograph, over a text describing **Norman Rockwell's** painting *Family Tree*, 1959. An image of Rockwell's painting *Boy Graduate*, 1959, can be seen through the reverse of the page. The description of *Family Tree* celebrates diversity while positioning that diversity as “other” in relation to a social norm of whiteness. How does it feel to see Frigillana's graduation photograph juxtaposed with Rockwell's powerful yet non-specific descriptions of social norms?

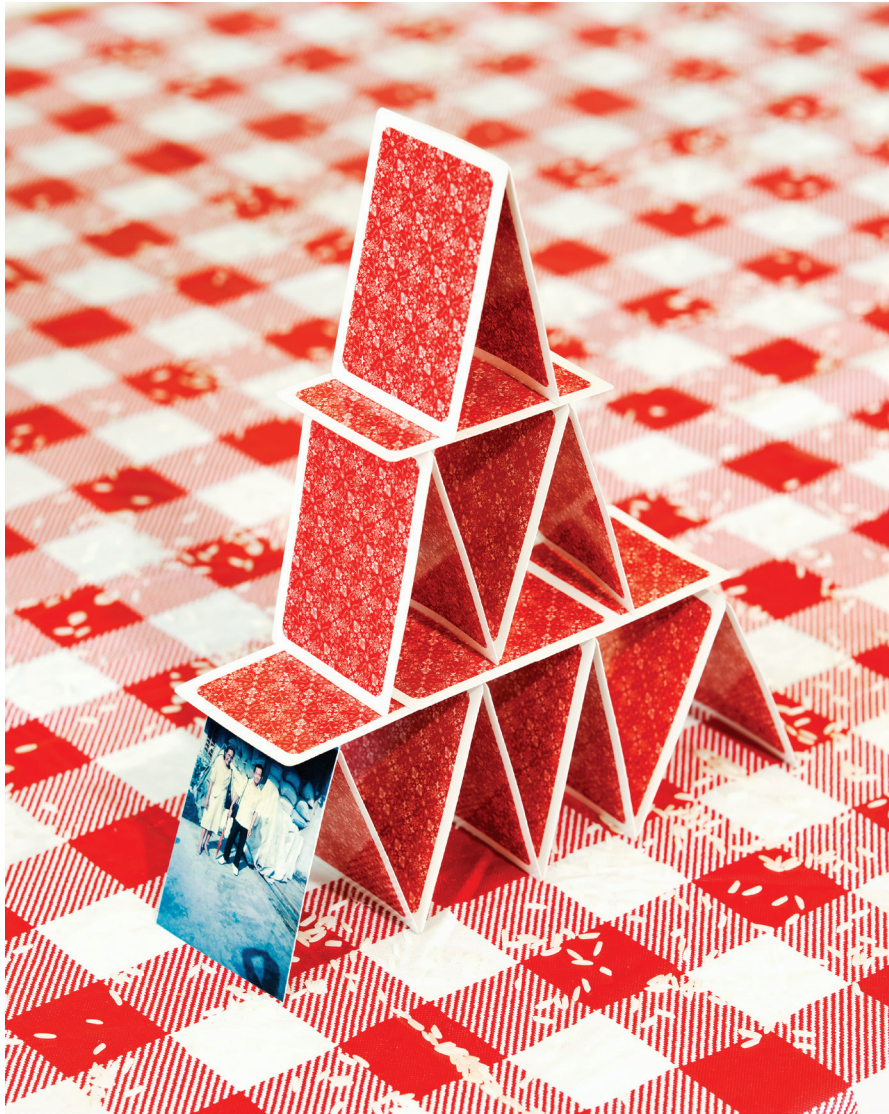
→ Consider *Exchange (My American Flag)*, *After Dorothea Lange's "Filipinos cutting lettuce, Salinas, California, 1935."* In this image, Frigillana appropriates a photograph made by Dorothea Lange for the **Resettlement Administration**. Lange's photographs often described labor and its toll on human bodies. Frigillana is interested in seeing how Filipino Americans were visualized by Lange and other twentieth-century photographers.

How does Lange depict the Filipino American farm workers? How does Frigillana ask us to think about this picture? He juxtaposes Lange's photograph with a series of three images depicting a dollar bill being slipped out from beneath an inverted bottle, bringing the historical and contemporary images together to form a U.S. flag through the superimposition of stripes. What is the overall effect of this collage for you?



V. Community Perspectives

Community Perspectives is an ongoing series where people from diverse disciplines and backgrounds respond freely to images in our exhibitions.



Halle Stockton reflects on *The House They Built*, 2022

“Then I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down.”

It’s a cliché, and there’s a literary rule against leaning on clichés. But I’m reading those words every night to my toddler, so give me a break.

Besides, they feel meaningful here. We’re all feeling the gusts — the sense that one strong blow could take away what we’ve built.

Shelter sits on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs for a reason. Stability matters, yet so many people are living one whoosh away from losing it: amid global conflict, climate change, and the rising cost of food and housing.

We built this house — a house of power, consumption and expectation. A house that assumes a certain quality of life. Even when it appears sturdy, a little doomscrolling can leave us feeling perched on a card’s edge, uncertain about the future we imagined for ourselves and our families.

And yet we keep building. It’s the most human thing. Is that resilience, denial, some sheep-like optimism?

Perhaps the strongest foundation is the one card that is not a card at all: family. Memory. Nostalgia. Love.

How fragile a house can be. And how strong.

Halle Stockton is editor-in-chief and co-executive director of Pittsburgh’s Public Source, where she has helped guide the nonprofit newsroom’s growth since 2012. An Erie native and Penn State graduate, she lives in Pittsburgh with her husband and two daughters. She believes local news and storytelling help us understand what our neighbors are carrying and stay connected to one another. Follow Public Source at publicsource.org and @publicsource on Instagram.

Veronica G.N. Corpuz reflects on *Mother's Faith*, 2022

Manang

three white buttons
on her dress remind
me of the shells we
use to play sungka

sigay
cowrie

her dress is ochre
wet mud / earth red

pula o marron
her sleeves
are layered
like petals

embroidered
white circles

green flowers
white flowers

sampaguita
or kalachuchi

a new day dawns
behind the home
beyond the trees

light that lands
on the throat
like a tide pool's
shimmer or glint
of capiz shell



light seems
to bubble
from her lips

bendisyon,
anak

she lifts her head
towards the heavens,
she listens to the trees—

eyes closed, spirit wide open

it is her face i love
so full of grace
 of peace

a peace born out
of faith and hope

a peace born out
of stillness and breath

the peace of trees
the peace of wind and water
the peace of the gods
who speak in all dialects
 all languages

gods who know no borders
but travel on the wind

a peace that makes
the sun rise out
of her mind

she is a holy woman
conjuring the sun

a bright golden orb
of imagination

an energy that radiates
from a mind connected
clearly to the heart

the peace of all ancestors

bendisyon, anak
benediction, child:

*may the light
within you
carry you home*

Veronica Corpuz is a first-generation Filipina-American poet and artist exploring themes of identity, assimilation, loss, and grief. A workshop facilitator in the Madwomen in the Attic program at Carlow University, she also co-curates with Sarah Williams-Devereux Mad Bookends, an online journal of creative writing featuring women writers of color. As a member of the #notwhite collective, she is currently producing work at Artist Image Resource which will be on exhibit this fall. Her book of poetry, The Widow's Calendar, is forthcoming this January.

Glossary

Appropriation

Appropriation is a technique in which an existing image is incorporated into an artistic work. By placing the image in a new context, the artist can create new meanings and associations that expand upon those established by its earlier contexts.

Resettlement Administration

The Resettlement Administration (1935-1937) and Farm Security Administration (1937-1942) were New Deal government programs that sought to resettle farmers and workers forced to migrate west by economic insecurity and drought. These programs produced photographic surveys documenting the struggles experienced by many Americans. Columbia University economist Roy Stryker instructed a team of photographers to “Introduce Americans to America.” While the photographs served the interests of the US government by supporting its programs, they were recognized as landmark projects in documentary photography.

Dorothea Lange

Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) was an American documentary photographer best known for her work for the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration, New Deal projects that addressed American economic and social upheaval in the 1930s. Lange photographed tenant farmers, migrant workers, and people displaced by economic hardship. Her most famous image is *Migrant Mother*, 1936, a portrait of Florence Thompson.

Norman Rockwell

Norman Rockwell (1894-1978) was an American illustrator known for his paintings that regularly appeared on the covers of *The Saturday Evening Post* and depicted everyday American life. While much of Rockwell’s work reinforced a sentimental, idealized image of small-town America, he also created important work around civil rights including *For Freedoms* (1943) and *The Problem We All Live With* (1964), which depicted Ruby Bridges and addressed school desegregation.

Visual Culture

Visual culture is the study of the role of images in society, including how they are produced, circulated, and understood. It considers how images influence and are shaped by larger social and cultural ideas about meaning, power, and value.

Reading List

Selected readings shared by Ryan Frigillana offer insights into his practice.

Literature

Carlos Bulosan, *America is in the Heart: A Personal History*, University of Washington Press, 2014.

Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History*, Duke University Press, 2003.

Dawn Bohulano Mabalon, *Little Manila is in the Heart: The Making of the Filipina/o American Community in Stockton, California*, Duke University Press, 2013.

Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, *Spectacular Opacities*, essay from *Dark Mirrors*, Mack, 2021.

Eva Respini, *Deana Lawson’s Family Album*, essay from *Deana Lawson*, Mack, 2021.

Michelle Dizon & Việt Lê, *White Gaze*, Candor Arts, 2019.

Artistic Influences

Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin, *Holy Bible*, Mack, 2013.

Dawn Kim, *New York Testament*, Printed Matter, 2015.

Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, 2016

LaToya Ruby Frazier, *The Notion of Family*, Aperture, 2016.

Larry Sultan, *Pictures From Home*, Mack, 2017.

Sam Contis, *Deep Springs*, Mack, 2017.

Penelope Umbrico, *Penelope Umbrico: Photographs*, Aperture, 2011.

Ron Jude, *Dark Matter*, Monogram, 2022.

**Silver Eye Center for Photography
Aaronel deRoy Gruber & Irving Gruber Gallery
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