

HYPERALLERGIC

Fabrics Stained with Colonial Blues

by Philip A Hartigan on July 27, 2015

CHICAGO — The color indigo has been used for thousands of years to dye fabric with an inimitable, lustrous blue, the blue of a warm night sky or a shimmering ocean. Manufacturing the color has also been bound up with forced human labor or slavery, whether in Asia, where the source plant originated, or the Americas, where it was imported and where indigo production in the late 1700s was as economically valuable as sugar and cotton. (The blue areas of the first American flags were dyed with indigo, almost certainly produced by the hands of slaves in the southern US states.) It is this duality — the color's beauty and its intimate connection with human degradation — that artist Jovencio de la Paz explores in his current exhibition of batik works, *Endless Flight*.

De la Paz lived in Jakarta, Indonesia, for a time when he was a child, a place with a history of colonial exploitation of the populace in order to extract and export indigo. What concerns the artist is what's often missing from histories of those times: the individuals who worked in the fields to produce the dyes, the many thousands whose lives ended earlier than they should have because of that process. De la Paz chose batik — a technique that has a long history in Indonesia — to explore this subject matter. Batik is itself a laborious process that involves successive steps of blocking out areas of fabric with wax and dyeing the fabric. The artist draws on these different material and cultural associations to depict large-scale figures on indigo backgrounds, their bodies created out of the empty, undyed areas of the fabric — present as negative space, devoid of features and “missing” from the artwork just as those indigo-workers are absent from history. In some of the pieces, the figures appear to be walking, or throwing their heads back and crying, or stumbling. Other shapes surround them: abstract jagged marks, raindrops or tears, starbursts, fragments of hands, water and waves.

It isn't always clear what these combinations of shapes are supposed to mean, except for an implied narrative of movement or flight. At times it seems as if de la Paz succumbed to the beauty of the medium, allowing his preoccupations with oppression to be obscured by decoration. But what decorations they are: huge, wall-sized creations, saturated in that compelling, unearthly color of indigo. “Questions and answers are a bitterness,” writes the Indonesian poet Toeti Heraty in “The Moon Is High.” Maybe it's enough that de la Paz raises the questions, and leaves the viewer to figure out the bitter answers to how we deal with our colonial pasts.

Jovencio de la Paz: *Endless Flight* continues at Threewalls (119 North Peoria St, #2C, Chicago) through August 1.