

BENNIE FLORES ANSELL

I 2K-IMELDA 2000



W O M E N & T H E I R W O R K

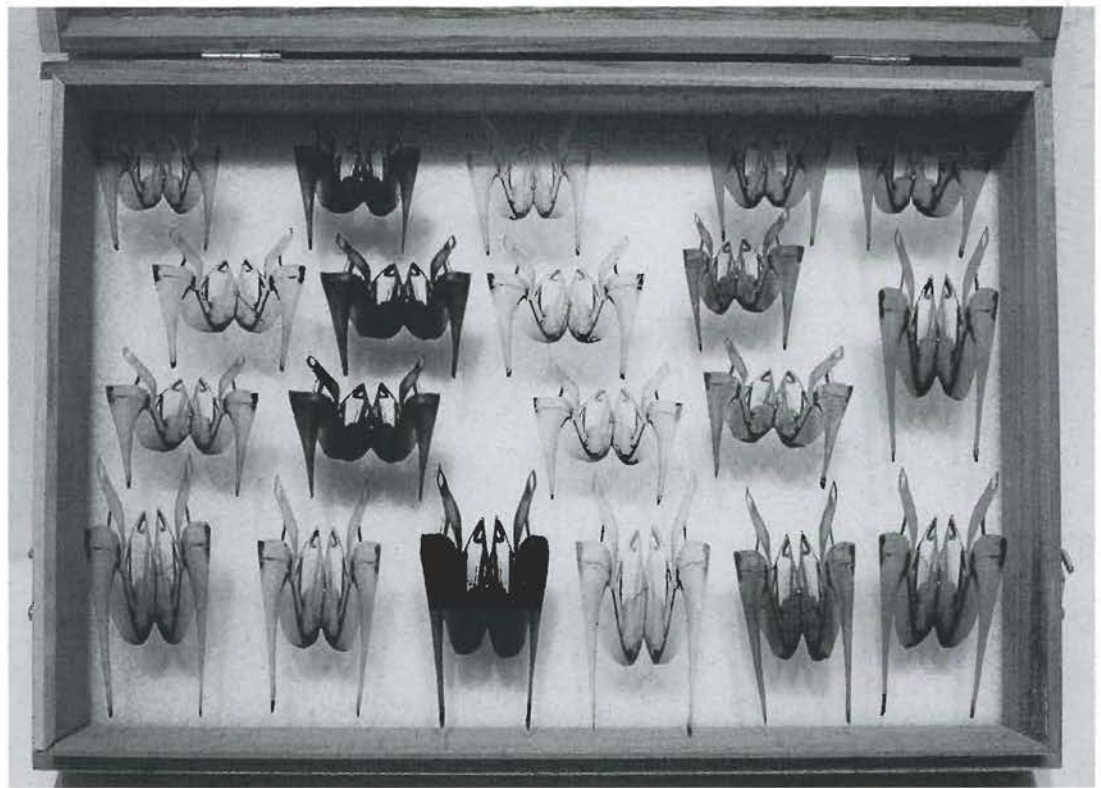
JUNE 22 - JULY 29, 2000

AUSTIN, TEXAS

Taxonomic Conundrums

In this new work, Benedikte (“Bennie”) Flores Ansell continues to pursue a complex and interrelated set of themes: First are reflections on her hybridized identity as a Filipino-American, someone caught between the standard racial dichotomies of black and white, who as a young girl admired Imelda Marcos, the beauty queen and glamorous cultural icon, but who now knows (what we all do) about how that secret closetful of 2000 shoes represented the theft of billions from an impoverished people. Second, Ansell explores her American home’s commodification of female beauty—its pervasive objectification of women’s bodies and degrading association of females with an exploitable nature. And third, we find allusions to broad issues about the nature of photography as an objective medium still caught between craft, art, and science, with its identity now more in question than ever in the digital era of the 21st century.

But to speak in this way of how the artist tackles such weighty issues implies that her work will be ponderous, turgid, humorless and dull. In fact, it is light and beautiful, witty and playful, delicate and gossamer as a butterfly’s wing. Butterflies have become Ansell’s signature symbol here, shown in authoritative wooden collectors’ boxes (with even the proper round-headed pins), in orderly rows of the zoological text, or in the sweeping artificial swarms and collecting jars of the biologist’s lab and the natural history museum. But these are no ordinary butterflies. Looked at more closely, they are revealed as pairs of shoes, and no ordinary shoes. Ansell has photographed the most outrageous, colorful, exotic, and torturous sets of high-heeled shoes that she can find. More precisely, the shoes



Collection Box, 2000. Collection box detail, pins and inkjet transparency film, 8" w. x 12" h. x 3" d.

are the product of “reprography,” as they have been placed directly on a scanner for maximum, if flattened, realistic rendering on transparent plastic. This process continues as the resulting pairs of shoes are painstakingly cut out into butterfly images and then bent so that they appear to possess wings, now helplessly pinned down by the merciless observer-collector.

As image and metaphor the butterfly is endlessly fascinating, the one insect we all love and admire (think of the contrast with horror-movie wasps, maggots, cockroaches, or killer bees). Butterfly beauty seems to resonate with images of the East and “Oriental” women, with their stereotyped aura of colorful garb, exotic movement, and delicate beauty. Think of “Madam Butterfly,” that Eastern figment of Western imagination, the beautiful Japanese mistress who kills

herself (ceremoniously) in despair over betrayal by her brutish American lover. Ansell’s work also alludes to the exotic restrictions of the Chinese woman’s bound feet, stunted in silken splendor, as the artist offers us varied and repeated references to new kinds of gorgeous slippers that foster pleasure in cruel ways: they can cripple a woman’s feet while affirming her desirable appearance for the male gaze. These elegantly angled shoes, devoid of legs and feet, seem to poke fun at Helmut Newton’s fetishized S&M spike-heel fashion photos. Some of the butterflies begin to take on a sinister appearance, even, as we start to see the shoes’ straps and buckles as stingers or bulging compound insect eyes. These shoes even seem to gaze back at us in eerie ways, especially the ones shown on a lighted tracing table. Each butterfly with its own individual loupe looms large and threatening as we get closer to scrutinize its details.

Probably the most arresting work in the gallery is "I 2K-Imelda 2000," a huge swarm of 2000 of these shoe-butterflies. Here the sheer excess is breathtaking and conveys in the most literal, yet fanciful, way possible the decadent horrors of the Philippine First Lady's abuse of her own people. This thought of Imelda's rich, overripe world of sensuous possessions has become embedded in our cultural image of the Philippines, perhaps because it seems to resonate with every Western stereotype of the luxurious East—from Shakespeare's description of a voluptuous Cleopatra to European male travelers' repeated litanies of harems and geisha-houses.

And yet it is not possible to offer just a simple condemnation and dismissal of Imelda and her shoes as a case of "Oriental" pomp and splendor. The Philippine disaster was the product of Western colonialism, first by Spain and then by the U.S., a process that began so early (in the 16th century) that the country is sometimes described as the only Asian nation never to have achieved its own distinctive civilization. Ansell's work is not simply about her Filipino-American identity but also about the "problem" of the Philippines' identity as a nation, a country that is sometimes sneered at by other Asian cultures as inferior and lacking a distinguished history with a proud ancient tradition in art like that of China or Japan. It was the United States that propped up the Marcos regime; so absorbed were we by his support of our military bases and resistance to Communism that we ourselves, in the era of Reagan, looked the other way until the abuses could no longer be ignored when a revolution occurred. Then, astonishingly, with Ferdinand weak and dying, it was Imelda with all those shoes who had to take the blame.

The label "Steel Butterfly" might begin to convey then that despite Imelda's guilt (she was found innocent of racketeering by a U.S. court but guilty back in her own country), the Filipino woman does have resources to draw upon. The butterfly after all is also the symbol of transformation and emergence, moving from its distinct stages as caterpillar to chrysalis into the miracle of wings and flight. Its seeming fragility belies its real strength and power (imagine how the Monarchs make their majestic migration). Besides, when the passionate collector becomes devoted to the creation of a complete taxonomical project, who is in charge: the collector or the collected? Here Ansell's display methods emphasize this obsessive repetition in the varieties of the natural history text or museum, as the butterflies seem to acquire strength in numbers. The metaphor of metamorphosis also can refer to the woman artist's own emergence into a newer, more potent identity.

But now the question arises, what is this identity to be—that is, how does a photographic artist choose to create work in the 21st century? Ansell alludes to this challenge with her title, "Which Would Anna Atkins?", raising questions about the photographer's choice of methods and medium. Atkins was a distinguished early naturalist who used the cyanotype process to document beautiful, orderly, and informative botanical prints. Ansell pays her homage with her own cyanotypes—only here, of course, the "natural" is put into question as we find our old friends back again with their ominous platform heels. From its earliest days, when Fox Talbot made photograms of pressed flowers and leaves, photography has had many uses as a scientific medium with the power to provide marvelously detailed and "objective" renderings of the real world.

Ansell's use of scanning technology might similarly seem to refute established dogmas about art in photography which stress the touch of the artist's hand through the craft of the fine print with its expensive metals of silver and platinum. Her plasticized images trace instead the mark of the machine, of the scanner plus computer keyboard and mouse, and the products are not too precious to be attacked with scissors and pinned down by harsh stabbing needles. Instead of exhibiting images in unobtrusive mattes framed in rows on the walls, Ansell exhibits her photos every which way in horizontal boxes, wall installations, pinned on fabric, and afloat in capture jars.

Taxonomy is a funny project when you ponder it, an artful and satisfying way of making scientific sense of the dizzying array of real-world phenomena. There is an effort at completeness to the project that can almost never be realized, as nature's complexity and richness elude us. In her multifarious artwork, Ansell examines this same sort of collecting passion as she both pursues and parodies it. She taxonomizes the natural world along with the worlds of artifice and art, and the world of ethnic and racial variations, creating artistic order in patterns and rows, and yet, at the same time, throwing it all up into a swarm that blows about to alight where it may, like a carefree butterfly.

Cynthia Freeland
University of Houston
Houston, Texas, 2000

BENNIE FLORES ANSELL

Born Manila, Philippines, 1967

Resides in Houston, Texas

EDUCATION

- 1989 B.A. in Photography, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida
M.F.A. in Photography, University of Houston, Houston, TX

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 *I 2K-Imelda 2000, Women & Their Work*, Austin, TX
Heels and Hangers, Houston Center for Photography, Houston, TX
- 1998 *Bennie Flores Ansell*, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 *The Reductive Eye: Photographs by Bennie Flores Ansell, Claudete Champbrun Goux and Nancy Orr*, Flatbed Press, Austin, TX
- Perennial*, 1/4 Hora Project Space, Elgin, TX
- Click Chicks*, Arlington Museum of Art, Arlington, TX
- Houston Fotofest*, Public Arts Project in Foley's Downtown, Houston, TX
- The Really Big Shoe Show*, City Museum, St. Louis, MO
- 1999 *Transcending Limits*, Texas Fine Arts Association, juried by Michael Ray Charles and Don Bacigalupi, traveling exhibition thru 2001, Austin, Beaumont Museum of Art, Blue Star Art Space, San Antonio, TX
- 1999 *Photo Austin*, Flatbed Press Galleries, Austin, TX
- New Texas Talent*, Craighead-Green Gallery, Dallas, TX
- American Photography Institute Fellowship Show*, New York University Tisch School of Art, New York
- Half and Half*, Purse Building Gallery, Houston, TX
- MFA Thesis Exhibit*, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX
- 1998 *Blurred Boundaries*, Winter Street Gallery, Houston Fotofest sponsored group exhibit, Houston, TX



Suspended in Jars, 2000. Capture jars (4oz.) and inkjet transparency film, 2" w. x 4" h. x 1" d.

- How's My Driving*, mobile art space, Fotofest, Houston, TX
- Fellowship Exhibition*, Houston Center for Photography, Houston, TX
- 1997 *The Big Show*, Lawndale Art Center, juried by Don Bacigalupi, Houston, TX
- ABC Show*, Artist Board Chooses, Diverse Works, Houston, TX
- 1996 *Picturing Asia America*, Arlington Museum of Art, Arlington, TX
- Opening Moves*, John Cleary Gallery, Houston, TX
- Houston Area Exhibition*, Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston, juried group show by Dana Friis Hansen, Mary Miss and Luis Jimenez, Houston, TX

AWARDS

- 1999 Honorable Mention, *Transcending Limits*, exhibition, Texas Fine Arts Association, Austin, TX
- 1999 American Photography Institute Graduate Seminar Fellowship, New York University
- 1998 HCP Photography Fellowship, Houston Center for Photography, Houston, TX

BIBLIOGRAPHY

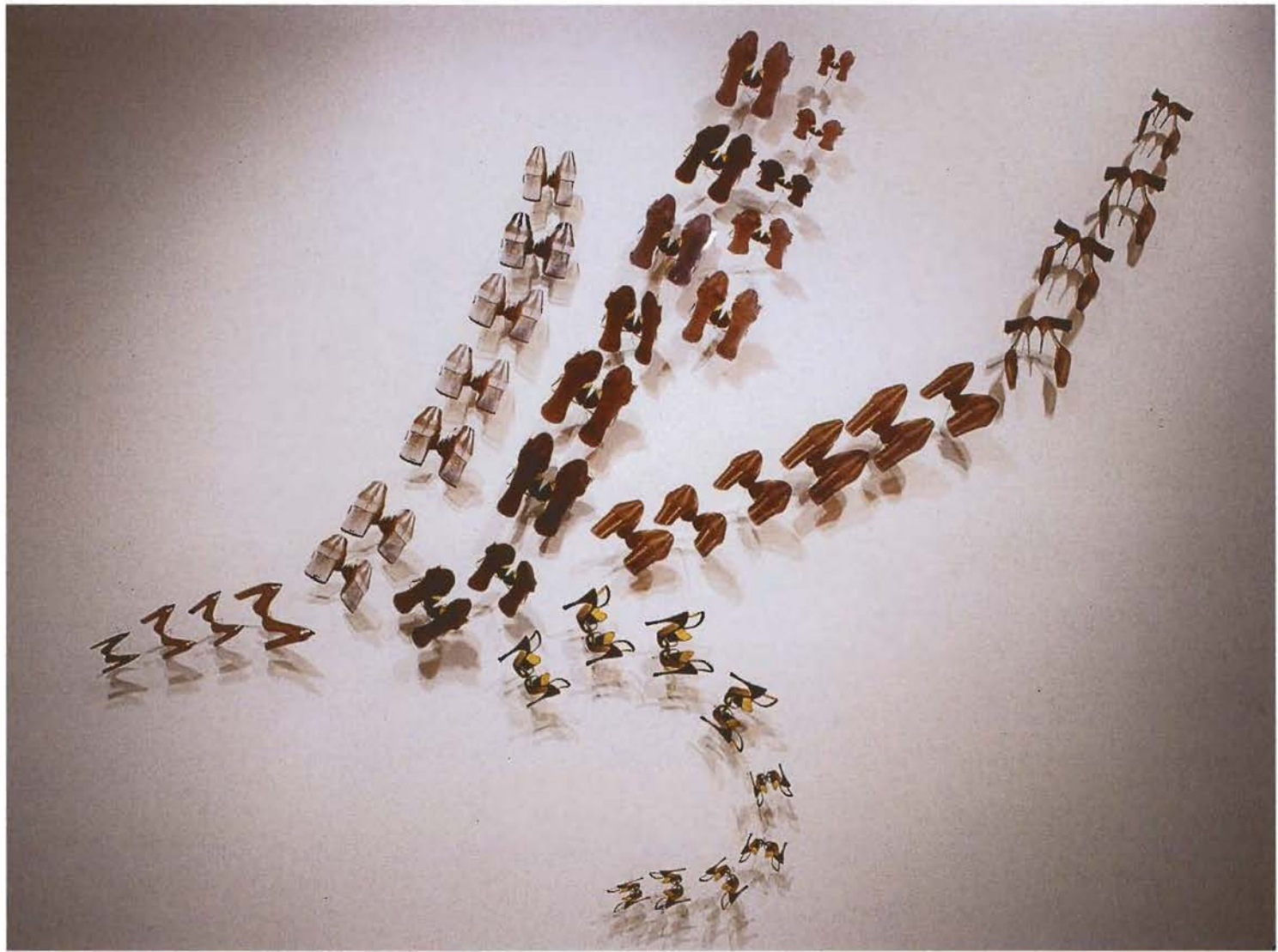
- 2000 *Austin American Statesmen*, April 15. "1/4 Hora Gets Into the Spring of Things," by Jeanne Claire van Ryzin.
The Dallas Morning News, March 31, "Hi Jinx," by Mike Daniel.
- 1999 *Paper City*, November, "The Medium of Modern Photography: What to Collect Now," by Catherine Anspion.
- 1998 *CD Rom* by Ohio University Art Department on U. S. Graduate Student Printmaking, April.
Public News, March 25, "Art to go-How's My Driving?" by Catherine Anspion.
Houston Chronicle, February 22, "A Wider Aperture," by Patricia C. Johnson.
- 1996 Fort Worth Star Telegram, June 21, "Picturing Asia-America: Communities, Culture, Difference," by Janet Tyson.

PUBLICATIONS

- 1997 *SPOT*, Houston Center for Photography "The View from the Head of the Table," Review of Carrie Mae Weems, Kitchen Table Series at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Spring Issue.



This Panel: *Morpho Leopard Boot*, 2000. Collection box with pins and inkjet transparency film, 12" w. x 18" h. x 3" d.
Cover Panel: *Imelda*, 2000. Installation detail with pins and inkjet transparency film, 16' w. x 8'9" h.
Back Panel: *Flutter in Black and Grey*, 2000. Installation with pins and inkjet transparency film, 5' w. x 4' h.



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