

Tabi-Tabi Po

2 October — 8 November 2025
114 Commonwealth Street, Sydney

WHERE RESPECT DWELLS IN TRANSCIENCE

Between Land and Life

In the lush forests and along the pristine shorelines, in the shadows of the tallest mountain peaks and in the depths of the oceans, human survival is bound to the land. Across diverse ethnolinguistic groups, communities gather and hunt for sustenance, draw healing from plants and trees, listen to the rhythms of birds and beasts, and raise their homes from the momentary growths of the earth. The wind carries prayers across valleys, rivers bear stories as they rush to the sea, and ancient trees above caves stand as guardians, witnessing each generation's rise and fall.

From this enduring communion with earth, water, and sky springs a natural impulse to protect. This ancestral legacy, quiet yet unyielding, humble yet powerful, forms an inheritance of wisdom and responsibility continually carried forward.

Out of this bond with the environment emerges a sacred language. The phrase *tabi-tabi po* arises as an expression of respect. While it translates simply as "excuse me, please let me pass," it carries within it a deeper worldview of interconnectedness and an acknowledgment of the limitations of human existence. The phrase embodies the belief that beyond the visible world lies another realm, unseen and incomprehensible to thought. From this wellspring of inspiration and remembrance, Elmer Borlongan draws his solo exhibition with cadence and sensitivity, anchoring it in folk traditions and customs that continue to live and breathe today.

The Sacred Gesture of Tabi-Tabi Po

The ethos of humility is evident in Borlongan's subdued colours, which do not confront the eye with proclamation but extend a quiet invitation to merely witness. Like the careful *tabi-tabi po*, this restraint articulates a visual attitude that privileges presence over spectacle. The hues of his ochre underpainting open into layers of earthy sensations, while his controlled tones sustain a delicate balance between the contemplative and the dramatic. His style, long recognised for its masterful rendering of charged encounters and distinct characters, is enriched by the composite storytelling that emerges in his images.

Transparent in his practice, he allows the process of making to remain visible as the work takes shape and arrives at form. This openness functions not merely as technique but as an aesthetic position that refuses to conceal the labour of creation. The honesty of his surfaces reveals sketches and brushstrokes, traces of movement that illuminate what is often hidden, incorporating them into the vitality of the image itself. For this exhibition, the artist reverses his usual procedure, beginning with the background before bringing the figures into being. These choices reflect the moral attunement from which the exhibition's theme is drawn. Alongside this, Borlongan explores the expressive potential of elongation and distortion. These deliberate departures from natural proportion intensify gesture and emotion, often focusing on the eyes, producing figures that do not simply represent but embody feeling. In this way, his practice negotiates between visibility and invention, and the truth of process in relation to the transformation of form.

EXHIBITION TEXT

AMES YAVUZ

Informed by the landscapes of his second hometown in Zambales, Borlongan's works allude to the mountains of Pundaquit and Maubanban and to the western shorelines of San Antonio. These places appear in *Stargazing* and *Wrestling by the Bay*, where powerful personal encounters on the beach acquire layered meaning. In the romance of *Stargazing*, for example, an expanded negative space allows the eyes to breathe, resembling the sensation of being on the beach where nothing intrudes except the sound of waves and the wind moving through rustling leaves. The mountainscapes also surface in *Sabangan*, a work named after the place where the river meets the sea, and extend into *Lublob*, which carries the same mountain backdrop. The presence of concrete in *Sabangan* finds an echo in *Shelter from the Storm*, which hints at unease and suggests a looming construction nearby. In both paintings, the interplay of the rural and the urban creates tensions in context.

Borlongan's imagery, however, extends beyond geography, because places for the artist cradle memory as much as terrain. In *Haven of the Fireflies*, Borlongan recalls an experience with his wife, fellow artist Plet Bolipata, when the couple unexpectedly encountered a tree illuminated by swarms of fireflies while rowing a boat. Stories of land stewardship passed down by ancestors surface in *A Fool on the Hill*, where Borlongan pays tribute to Bolipata's grandfather, who planted hundreds of mango trees in a quiet, remote part of their land.

Guardians of the Trees and *Crossing the Fields* recall the artist's childhood experiences in Bulacan, when he and his cousin spent hours atop a tree, and when night walks across the fields unfolded in near-total darkness, the horizon melted as the line between sky and land disappeared. Birds also play a crucial role in this body of work, as in the owl of *Crossing the Fields*, symbolising vision in the dark. The artist's fascination with birds is evident in *Birdwatcher*, a work inspired by catching glimpses of the roaming birds that frequent the Zambales region. This motif resonates with *Brahminy Kite*, where a man's face floats on water directly beneath a soaring brahminy kite, a migratory sea-eagle that originates in Australia and travels to the coasts and inland wetlands of the Philippines. The work exudes a feeling of freedom, as the body dissolves in water and the tensions of life's struggles release into open space.

In *Tabi-Tabi Po*, Borlongan captures the quiet meditations drawn from the patterns of everyday life. This direction is not merely a personal archive but a deliberate affirmation and a conscious turn to celebrate and value the simplicity and richness of life in the countryside. Romantic in its nostalgia yet grounded in present choices, Borlongan's vision rises in sharp contrast to the aggressive development and restless urbanisation reshaping rural and coastal communities across the archipelago. By bringing the local and the intimate to the fore, his work offers a counter-narrative to the homogenising thrust of modern expansion, where memory, land, and the everyday stand as enduring sites of resistance and meaning.

Across Waters and Lands

The islands, in their quiet correspondence with continents across the seas, bear witness to the enduring truth that life and land are bound by law and spirit. Amid the entangled and wounding legacies of colonisation and globalisation, communities endure and resist erasure. To live within a culture where life remains inseparable from nature is to enact a perpetual *tabi-tabi po*. More than a sign of respect or a remnant of ancient cosmology, it functions as a salutation to transience and a recognition of ephemerality. The call to step with awareness and reverence affirms that although all things pass, impermanence does not release the human responsibility toward the earth but deepens the obligation to tread with care.

It is within this horizon that Borlongan's exhibition gathers force. His distinct sensibility shows that the bond between land and life is neither past nor peripheral but alive and ensouled, extending affinities across waters and lands.

Written by Janine Go Dimaranan