

Matelot, Matelot

Sept 11 – Oct 17, 2026

'Matelot' was a song written and released by Noël Coward, ten days after the end of war in 1945. It is a bittersweet ode to a sailor, the vocalist mourning his departure and calling him over the sea. From a contemporary point of view, it is impossible not to feel the song is filled with queer longing for the male figure travelling "the wide world over/ Lips that he kissed Could not resist/ This loving, roving rover."

David Medalla was born three years prior to the release of the song in the Philippines. Lauded as a boy genius, he was lecturing at university aged 12. He experimented with multimedia painting and even participatory land art as a teenager. He was inspired deeply by the openly gay Arthur Rimbaud, later noting "All of us are his children. His life became an allegory of freedom." In 1954, Medalla was invited to a summer camp for gifted boys in upstate New York, quickly escaping to Greenwich Village and meeting everyone from James Dean to Jackson Pollock. Here he developed the painting practice that underpinned his work. Over the coming decades, Medalla moved across Europe, establishing himself as a unique artist that resisted the confinement of media. Medalla worked with painting, collage, action, sculpture, text, publishing and textiles.

Medalla was deeply engaged with the conceptual and material possibilities of art. He notably exhibited as part of iconic curator Harald Szeemann's exhibitions, 'When Attitudes Become Form' and documenta 5 – two shows that established much of the canon of conceptual late 20th century art. Medalla became best known for his engagement with kinetic art, such as his bubble machines such as 'Cloud Canyons'. Here, foam was created to grow upwards in columns and spill out towards the viewer. The artist later noted the inspiration was his mother's rice dessert as a child in the Philippines and his memories of watching a dying soldier foaming at the mouth during the Second World War. 'Mud Machine' (1964–67) fused science and sculpture, with automated sponges dipping into a pool of oil and mud and slowly smearing it on a glass plate. There was something cosmic and almost spiritual in the way he pushed beyond the limits of modernism.

These pieces were created while he simultaneously co-founded Signals gallery and produced its affiliated magazine 'Signals Newsbulletin' in London, between 1964 and 1966. The gallery focused on avant garde artists of the era, many from Asia and Latin America including Lygia Clark, Gustav Metzger, Soto, Mira Schendel, Hélio Oiticica and Takis – whose work inspired the name of the space. Like Medalla, these were artists driven by unconventional materials, science, poetry, technology and new paradigms.

Ephemerality and chance were something built into Medalla's work. At documenta 5, he exhibited the pioneering, participatory work 'A Stitch in Time – inviting viewers to embroider and add whatever they

wished with needle and thread. In the 1970s he moved into political and counter-cultural performance work. He created actions with the psychedelic commune, the Exploding Gallery and later in the Artists' Liberation Front and Artists' for Democracy. Works around Tibetan and African liberation, resisted international dictatorships and in many ways was deeply embedded in the action-led artist activism that resounds today.

Yet looking at Medalla's practice in a wider sense, there was nothing didactic here. He was innately charming company, even later in life while living in Berlin, inspired by the poetry and possibility of creativity. He crossed paths and often became friends with people including Marcel Duchamp, William Burroughs, Jean Genet, Man Ray, Yve-Alain Bois, Raymond Duncan, Louis Aragon and many more.

For many years the queerness in Medalla's work was evident but unspoken. His lovers often became artistic collaborators. Overflowing phallic forms are a recurring motif. His bubbles were erect, overflowing and exploding. His 'Body Motion Pendulum' piece, for example, used an egg, rubber band and suction cup to create a kinetic, penis-like sculpture driven by the movement of the body. His personal sketchbooks were filled with figurative drawings and photographs of naked men. Desire was as clear a driver in his artistic impulse, as politics, participation and the poetic.

The print blocks, discovered recently by the late artist's partner and collaborator Adam Nankervis, were never used. Created early in Medalla's career, most likely in the late 1950s, they depict pensive male figures looking longingly at the viewer or poetically downward. Sometimes these young men hold branches like gentle masks or display their muscular bodies or alongside animals. The refusal of these printmaking objects to fulfil their purpose – to make prints – is a fitting metaphor for hidden sexuality.

This is the only time these works will be seen in this largely unused form before belatedly being activated to produce print works. This exhibition aims to echo Medalla sense of transitory performance – a moment of time that cannot be repeated. The unread negatives of these images will soon to be transformed into something solid.

These works represent an illusory, dream-like love for a male sexual ideal. Reversed compositionally, they are mirror images of an internal desire. Like Noël Coward's song, they are erotic fantasies – dreamy, intimate and loving.

Text by Francesca Gavin

Sculpting the Light
New York, 1992

Crossing the road on the corner of 23rd Street and Broadway, on the way to David's apartment at the George Washington Hotel on Lexington Avenue, David brought out from one of his innumerable plastic bags a disposable camera (the same Kodak throw-away cameras with which we were to document nearly two decades of our actions around the world). He asked me to photograph him in front of the Flatiron Building in New York on the triangular concrete traffic island on the northern side of the street.

Through the micro-vision of the bubbled, blurred and anamorphic lens, the skyline of lower Broadway was framed, reframed, fractured, and extenuated back to crystalline form. On this perfect blue sky morning, the slow balletic movement of David's hands and arms cast and recast shadows, Light appeared and was blocked, the form of the iconic building in its magnificent diagonal was undefiant and had at once become a spot through the spy hole of David's fingers, a latitude through the parting of two open palms, a cubistic fracture through crossed and parted fingers.

Having lived in the Australian desert for a year before arriving in Manhattan, this reading had become instinctual. The fall of light from the body and an extended arm was a testimony to time in a place where time had become almost formless. I had been my own walking sun map, my shadow the dial, my body the diviner of time, and seeing David moving from forms of mantras to the imitation of the movement of clock arms slicing the air, appearing to the passers-by like a tai chi exercise. David was performing an impromptu, in this instance, a considered but spontaneous action of redefining and reshaping the solidity of the cityscape of Manhattan and the skies above it. Through these simple but considered motions he was re-sculpting and kneading the permanence of its concrete testimony; through these movements, he was redefining form in sculpting the light.

A Postcard
Berlin/ London, May 2012

This morning in Berlin, a postcard arrived: an image of Piero della Francesca's *The Baptism of Christ*, painted in the fifteenth century. It was from David. Last Monday we crossed Trafalgar Square where the fountains had become frozen stalactites and water still gushed from the upper to the lower basin, foaming, flowing, cutting the air and creating this beautiful haze of frost where we walked in thin clouds of blurred stings toward the National Gallery in London. David wanted to take me to see this painting before the opening of the Tate Britain exhibition, *Migrations*, where his *Cloud Canyons* was being shown. This painting has inspired David in many manifestations: painting, participatory performance, poems, and sculpture.

He first saw it as a reproduction in his grandfather's library as a boy and this work had also inspired the naming of his café in 1950s Ermita in Manila, La Cave D'Angely (the Cave of Angels). The painting hovers luminescent

in a golden frame in a brightly lit, powder blue alcove: a luminosity in setting framing the muscularity of pale skins; the pearlescent drops from John's cup anointing the figure of Christ; angels, heavy-winged and united in their grasp, at left; the fine fold of looped drapery of the disrobing boy reflected on the stream's still edge; and three noblemen who stand enigmatically apart, framed by a receding escalation of two rounded hills. A dove, the messenger levitating over the head of Christ, the vanishing point at mid-frame, spread-winged, the birdsoars above and toward, trapped in the image like a gilded bird breaking forth, echoing the flat saucers of clouds that halo the landscape and the apparitions that inhabit it.

Here where nature lay divine, harnessed and yet untamed, communal and isolated, is earth's composition in man-made form and in abstraction. It is unity in its temporality. Seeing David's kinetic work *Cloud Canyons* that night, bubbling through towers, forming, falling from form, expanding, flowing, ever creating and vaporizing, this building of form only for its own demise and re-creation, I thought of the painting of Piero and the beauty of his having taken me that day to see it. The sculpture in the exhibition, forever re-creating itself, stood framed with the optic vibrations of a Naum Gabo and the pulsating form of a Piet Mondrian. These three works together in space worked not as a (tenuous) reflection of nature, but as a second nature, one uniquely found in the universal act of an artist's creation.

Text by Adam Nankervis

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The two texts assembled here were written at different moments of a long artistic and personal companionship with David Medalla. *Sculpting the Light* recalls an improvised action in New York in 1992, while *A Postcard*, from 2012, describes a shared viewing of Piero della Francesca's *The Baptism of Christ* in London.

Within the context of *Curated By*, Adam Nankervis's deliberate selection of these historical writings constitutes the curatorial act itself. Rather than composing a detached, retrospective analysis, he activates the archive through the act of bringing these texts into the present. The curation takes the form of an act of sharing: the audience is granted access to writings that emerged from the heart of a shared life and artistic collaboration. They capture precisely those gestures, encounters, and fleeting moments through which Medalla's ideas first took shape.

This gesture reflects a fundamental leitmotif of the exhibition, that love can be a way of seeing the world and an openness to the moment, in which the boundaries between art, life, and curation dissolve. Through their fragmentary nature, these writings reflect something fundamental to David Medalla's work: its resistance to fixed categories and its capacity to continuously generate new forms through encounters with people, places, and images.

Summary by Markus Summerer