



The Insistent Eye/I: On the Work of Michelle Dizon  
By Annie Buckley

(An essay on Michelle Dizon's solo exhibition curated by Mary Kelly  
on view March 23<sup>rd</sup> – May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010)

It was Spring 1992 and I was six months into my new job as a third grade teacher. The school where I was assigned was a mere ten-minute drive from the ranch house where I grew up, but in Los Angeles, proximity does not equal similarity. While I had been raised in relative privilege, my students were living in poverty; my parents had come to California from the East Coast, and my students were the children of immigrants from Mexico and Central America. One morning that April, as our class met, the city outside learned that the four white Los Angeles police officers who had been caught on tape beating a black man, Rodney King, would be acquitted of any wrongdoing. Within the walls of the school, the students recited the date, “Hoy es miercoles, el veintinueve de abril, mil novecientos noventa y dos,” unaware of the news, and the morning passed calmly enough. But walking to class after recess, the sky was dark. “Huele humo,” the students said, “It smells like smoke.” We peered over the balcony to see smoke blossoming in dark clouds from buildings around the perimeter of the school.

Across town, Michelle Dizon was a student at Culver City High School. We didn't know each other, and what seems like only a few short years between us now spelled a world of difference to our experiences then. I was twenty-three; she was fifteen. I was a teacher, she a student. I taught children to speak English; she had learned English

alongside Filipino as a child. Eighteen years later, I remember children's voices, the smell of smoke, scenes of destruction; Michelle remembers the video image.

Dizon's hauntingly beautiful and subtly probing video, *Civil Disturbance*, 2008, explores her curiosity about why it is that she remembers so little of such a tumultuous time. The 38-minute video is comprised of Dizon's own footage of France and Los Angeles, archival newsreels from the 1965 Watts riots, recent interviews, and segments of the now infamous video of the Rodney King beating. (Dizon also used that video in her three-channel work, *Echographies*, 2007.)

*Civil Disturbance* opens with grainy black-and-white stills of burned-down buildings, images that look eerily similar to the ones I took in the days that followed April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1992, when the city erupted in a three-day siege of fire, looting, and random violence. Our school was closed the next day, and the next, as people in the surrounding area and in South Los Angeles expressed rage at the verdicts--and at decades of injustice. I walked the chaotic streets, my shocked eyes watching through the unfazed lens of my camera as National Guard troops patrolled our city's streets.

Thirteen years later, another city across the ocean would similarly implode. The deaths of two young French-Algerian boys running from the police in a low-income suburb of France incited riots in Paris and surrounding areas in 2005. News of these riots caused Dizon, now an artist and filmmaker, to reflect on her hometown. Wondering at her lack of memory of the 1992 events, she began work on what would become *Civil Disturbance*, a quietly provocative exploration of ideas that have run through her work--ideas she has questioned with increasing subtlety and rigor over the past decade.

Dizon tends to draw from her personal history. In *My Child Anak*, 2001, an early work, she utilizes a recording of her cheeky but dutiful two-year-old self responding to parental prompts about being American, Chinese, and Filipino. Since then, Dizon has carefully expanded into the arena of, as she says, "History with a capital H," the official,

public version of history, as opposed to what we experience and remember. Her interest in the tension between porous experience and finite language, changeable personhood and predetermined identities, is buoyed by her study of philosophy, film theory, and art history (she is currently a PhD candidate at U.C. Berkeley).

Dizon is skilled in the use of traditional filmic montage, integrating her own footage as well as stills and archival film. The resulting videos reflect her interests in revolutionary cinema and structuralist filmmaking as well as her identity as the child of immigrants and, increasingly, her voice as a writer at once poetic and theoretical. The refrain, “I saw nothing,” recurs throughout the script for *Civil Disturbance*, which Dizon wrote after composing the video. The text is lyrical and rhythmic, but also pointed: “The vision of ruins arises for me just as televisions announce / The fires that cover the outskirts of Paris / I was young but I wasn’t that young / Did I see nothing because I wanted to see nothing / Or did I see nothing because I was taught to see nothing / To see would mean to put something at great risk / But what was it? / No answer comes easily.”

The words add clarity and context to what appear, at times, to be incongruously beautiful images of the work’s two inciting incidents. As she reads the script, Dizon’s voice is mellow and hypnotic; it is paired with sensuous imagery—orange skies, the Arc de Triomphe, birds’-eye views of snaking freeways. Such visual beauty would seem at odds with the sophisticated work’s grave topics, but Dizon uses it honestly and deftly to draw us into the heart of the questions that haunt her, and that she cajoles us to consider: What comprises the space between you and me? How does a nation maintain its borders? And, though less directly, Will the violence cease, and how are we culpable?

Dizon employs subjectivity similarly to the way it was used by early feminist artists, among them Mary Kelly, a former teacher of Dizon’s and the curator of this exhibition. Because the “I” of the artist can never be eliminated, the persistence of that “I”, and the artist’s own pushing up against it, become both the subject and a metaphor

pointing to the simultaneously malleable and fixed nature of subjectivity itself. Dizon the artist is also Michelle the two-year-old girl learning English and Filipino; Michelle the teenager, closing the shades of her calm Westside home as others looted stores across town; Michelle the student of Mary Kelly; and Michelle, the soft-spoken and articulate artist I visited at her home in the lush and overgrown hills of Lincoln Heights near downtown L.A. Because her history—and by extension each of our histories—will always exist side by side with the History written by nations (and, it must be said again, by those in power), her personal narrative becomes the foil by which we consider the at once restrictive and fluid nature of subjectivity—individual, communal, and national.

Throughout *Civil Disturbance*, Dizon wonders how it is possible that she has no memory of the riots, save the video of King being beaten, the insistent “eye” of the camera her only entry into the event. She weaves images of France and America, past and present, destruction and reconstruction, working not with a dialectical split screen or the singular vision of one camera, but in a three-channel installation format that often presents the same image at a slightly altered time. But time, the work persuades us, is more malleable than our shifting allegiances and roles; time offers the potential for choice: one can elect to remember and alter the trajectory or to forget and repeat the cycle. “I will forget,” the narrator—the artist—tells us near the end of this powerful work. Again, image belies truth, as *Civil Disturbance* has made it certain that she, as well the attentive viewer, will remember deeply.

The writer, **Annie Buckley**, is an artist and writer based in Los Angeles. Annie is a graduate of University of California Berkeley and earned an MFA from Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles, CA. Her writing about contemporary art has appeared in publications including *Artforum*, *Art in America*, and *Make Magazine*. Her artwork is represented in Los Angeles by Jancar Gallery. She is the author of a book of short stories, *Navigating Ghosts*, and of several nonfiction books for children including, most recently,

a book about racism written for teenagers.

The mentor, **Michael Duncan**, is an independent curator and a corresponding editor of *Art in America*. He is co-curator of the forthcoming exhibition, *An Opening of the Field: Jess, Robert Duncan, and Their Circle*, and has organized exhibitions of works by Pavel Tchelitchew, Kim Macconnel, Richard Pettibone, Sister Corita Kent, Eugene Berman, and Wallace Berman.

The essay was written as part of the Young Art Critics Mentoring Program, A partnership between AICA USA (US section of International Association of Art Critics) and CUE Art Foundation, which pairs emerging writers with AICA mentors to produce original essays on a specific exhibiting artist. Please visit [www.aica.org](http://www.aica.org) for further information on AICA USA, or [www.cueartfoundation.org](http://www.cueartfoundation.org) to learn how to participate in this program. All quotes are from interviews with the author unless otherwise specified. No part of this essay may be reproduced with prior written consent from the author. Elizabeth Baker is AICA's coordinator for this program for the second season.