

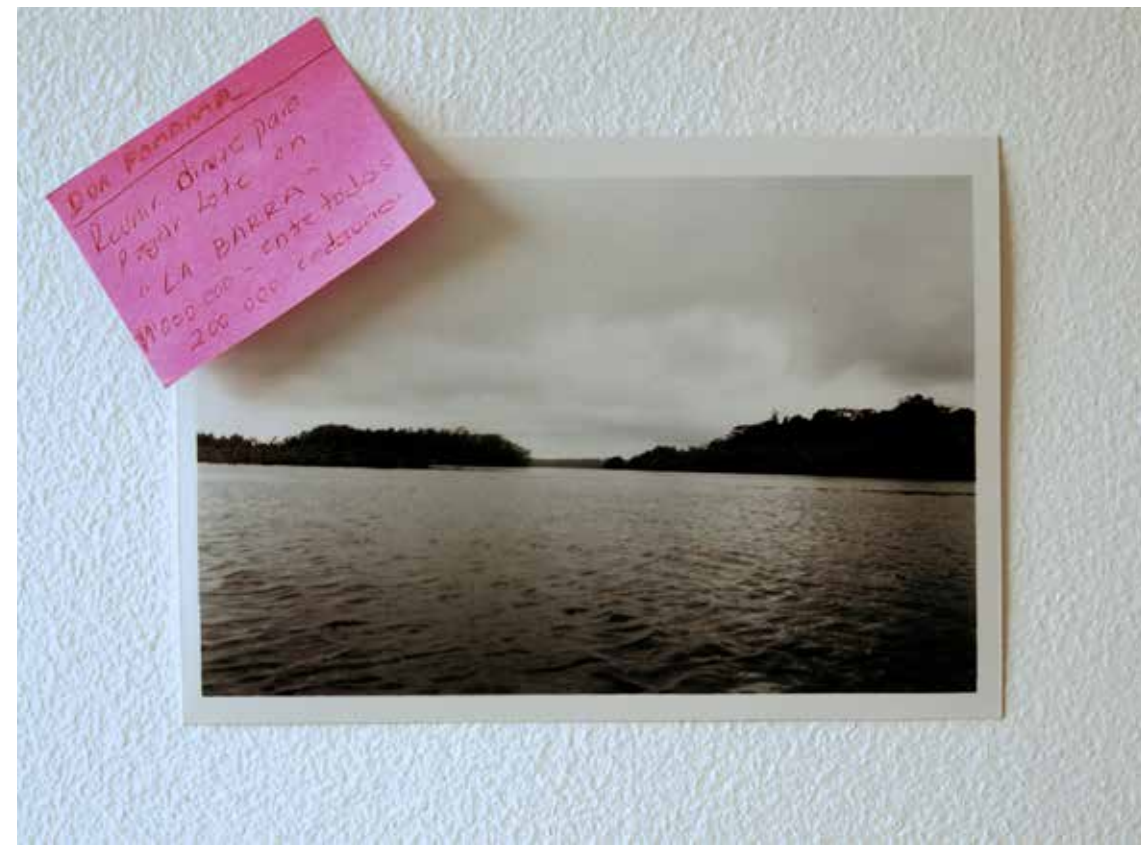


Driftless

On Waterscapes and Radical Seafaring

By Felipe Castelbanco

2019



Atlantic Ocean, 2018

Pacific Ocean, Colombia. 2008



Las Bocas del San Juan. Colombia 2007

1. When Water Dissolves All Boundaries:

A Story of Folly, Mirages, and Great Terrible Ideas:

Deep in the mangroves that extend across the Colombian Pacific coast, if lucky, one might stumble upon various towns that embody a continuous confrontation between the river and the ocean, soil and the soul, dream and fact, the sweet and salty.

Between 2000 and 2008 I lived in Bogotá, but I also constantly traveled to the regions of the Colombian Pacific coast. I returned year after year, always searching for a spot where I could set up camp, make sculptures and spaces using the driftwood gifted to me by the tides. I also wanted to dance Currulao and coexist with other living forms that existed as in-between definitions, just as I myself had always done. Here, or indeed there, a number of fugitives from the violent social machine that we call West meet:

Afro-Colombians dreaming quietly of post-slavery, free nations; native indigenous communities, mostly Emberas, guarding the last unexplored stretch of the Darien Gap; magical fish waiting to be caught, just so they can pull on the line, dragging into the deeps the fishermen in order to swallow them; insects, snakes, and all kinds of tiny animals waiting for sweet and naïve blood (all the better if it comes from ill-prepared European researchers working for Pharma companies, sent to borrow—without permission and without returning—the secrets of sacred plants from the depths of the jungle).

If there is a place where time becomes a walking being, moving sometimes backwards, sideways and then in circles, then this place is called Las Bocas del San Juan. Here, the river dresses, acts and sounds like a sea, and eventually becomes the ocean. One even feels that life itself settled here to take it easy and watch others pass by. This point marks a confluence of time and space, beginning and end, the seen and unseen, done and undone. In the early 2000s guerrilla and paramilitary groups controlled this region, and not carrying a spare pair of thick and dry socks was a major risk. Indeed, socks were the most precious currency among the zombie-like rebel armies (ELN, FARC, EP, AUC, PPC, etc.) that walked up and down the dense, wet and vast Darien Gap.

For me, this area never felt synchronized with any familiar form of living: time, for example, was sometimes dominated by a loss of time as a result of confrontations between the armed groups. People planned their lives around periods of downtime in the conflict. In other instances, any sense of the passing of time was absent, as the towns prepared for the unexpected and unforgivable state of “nothing happens”. Alternative paths, like a map of secret routes, shaped the territory of this part of the continent and served the locals to evade one another. There, the ocean mixes secretly with the many rivers that end in that region, creating an intricate system of channels that change direction from day to night. One can't ever tell where the country ends or begins. Many times, I witnessed how the waves of the Pacific Ocean granted the towns with new land, massive lands, as the water changed its path; a few minutes later the ocean had taken away the main square or the only named street in the town, as if it were a fair price to pay. The people living in such locations were constantly on the move, constructing and deconstructing their own spatial referents. Entire towns became islands in a day and the people swapped houses every once in a while, motivated by the orientation they preferred to live in or that which might cure some mystical disease.

It was there, near Las Bocas del San Juan that I had the brilliant and terrible idea of buying a piece of land. Year after year I traveled with a little pile of easy money that I had made in the

city and slowly but surely convinced the only greedy man I could find to sell me a piece of his true no man's land.

After touring the site and being awed by the thickness of its green and the smell of its soil, I was committed to buying a piece of land from him. This man, Mr. Panama, took a yearly mortgage payment and, for a little extra, kept an eye on my little dreamland. Things moved smoothly for the first few years and the plans grew bigger and bigger, so I arranged a surprise trip to bring the rest of the money and finally build something. After the usual difficulties of reaching the region (floods, storms and a queasy stomach), I managed to reach Mr. Panama's doorstep. He was somewhat hard to find at first, and I also realized that I was a stranger in a strange territory. His house was a bit further southwest, a bit higher and a bit narrower than I remembered. Also, the originally flat ground now felt like a rolling hill. After a few beers and many stories about his constant battle with the Pacific Ocean, Mr. Panama finally took me to see my site. We walked and walked, getting closer to the beach until the waves washed our feet. With an apologetic but serene voice, Mr. Panama asked me to stare at the ocean.

Suddenly we saw the waves retreat and, for a split second, they revealed hundreds of meters of beach covered in shiny black sand. The tropical light reflected so strongly on the sand that it was hard to see where the sky and the ocean met.

With every wave, we walked further and further while he kept pointing towards the horizon. He finally confessed that after the 'new big waves' he had surrendered to the Pacific Ocean. When we finally couldn't walk anymore, this former fisherman turned landlord pulled a wet piece of paper out of his pocket and lay it flat on the water. I stared at the paper floating between us and I could see the note he had written for me. This was a simple contract between two men, but all of the sudden it had become a contract between us and this immensity: this little note described how Mr. Panama had once sold me a piece of the Pacific Ocean.

Darien Gap, Colombia. 2013





Colombia, Pacific Coast. 2013



Quebec City, Canada 2018



Sydney, Australia. 2015



Lofoten, Norway. 2015



Lofoten, Norway. 2015

2. Beyond the Boundaries:

Fluid Spaces and Radical Seafaring

In 2012 I attempted to circumvent the world in the smallest boat, one that could hold only one person's weight. As a result, I devised a way to navigate through large bodies of water using a precarious, hand-made raft and embarked on a six year-long journey.

Dirftless explores notions of nationhood as a form of contemporary confinement, while embracing the ocean as a public site for artistic interventions. This performative journey creates a visual narrative, which echoes human and non-human migratory paths, while taking the viewer on a journey through unbound territories and a unique type of planetary landscape.

The journey started in lake Wesserunsett in Maine (North East of the USA) in 2012 and continued through places like the Pacific Coast of Colombia, Mexico, the UK, Norway, Italy, Sweden, Australia, the Philippines and several cities in the USA. The final location for the performance was Quebec City in the Summer of 2018.

In its final form, *Driftless* becomes a video installation and photographic series, informed by stories of border crossing, makeshift vessels and radical seafaring.



Lekness, Norway. 2017



Arctic Ocean, Norway. 2017

For more than six years, I performed “in” and “with” large bodies of water. In many ways, these rivers, oceans and lakes are an all-encompassing form of unbound (and perhaps cosmopolitical) space: a continuum that spreads or contracts, emerges or evaporates without losing its qualities of container, carrier, enabler and territory. In other words, water in all its forms, either as a tear or as an ocean, is the most radical form of SPACE. However, this vast and shared space is rarely understood, or cared for, in the same terms as the public spaces that we are so enchanted with in today’s urbanized cultures.



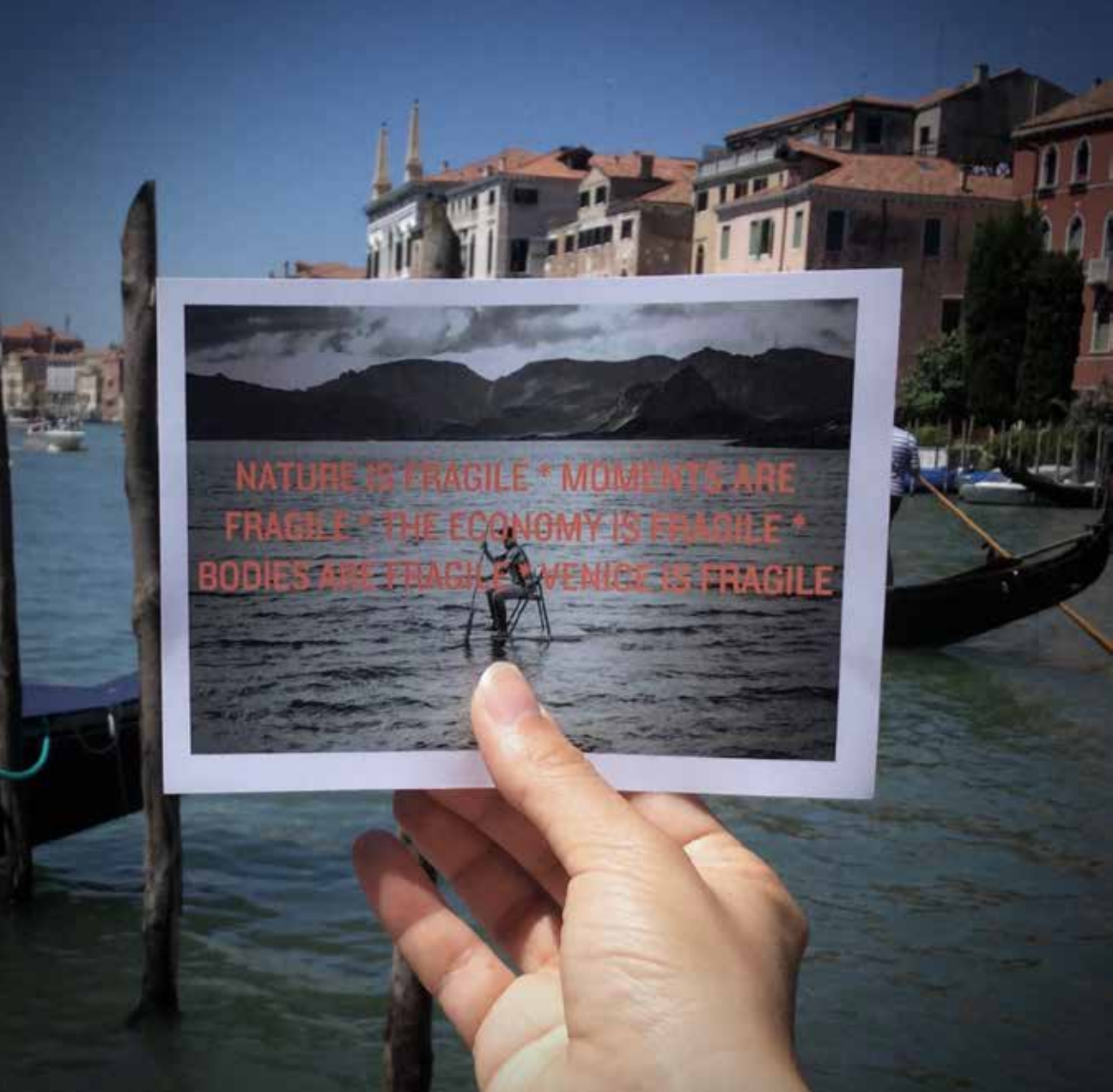
Montmorency Falls, Canada. 2018

Stockholm. Sweden. 2014



Throughout human history, thinking of water-as-space has been a contested idea. Unless water offers some kind of strategic advantage, it is regarded as transparent, negative, void, lawless, unbound, “Terra Nullius” or simply as a space in-between nations and beyond human accountability. However, seeing water-as-space presents a new aesthetic framework that encompasses all sorts of human actions, the failures and developments of today: from commerce to migration, trafficking to profit and even the use of the oceans as an international wasteland.

The same oceans, rivers and lakes I have performed “with” are the backdrop –or better, the backbone– of human progress, as well as poetic spaces for action, imagination and paradox.



Venice, Italy. 2016



QUÉBEC

BEAUPORT

BOISCHATEL

DE L'ILE D'ORLEANS

STE-
PÉTRONILLE

RAND McNALLY

VILLE DE QUÉBEC CITY

Driftless 2012 - 2019

Three Channel Video Installation

HD Video, 12 Minutes



La Bande Vidéo Gallery, Quebec Biennial 2019. Photo: Ricard Savard











La Bande Vidéo Gallery, Quebec Biennial 2019. Photo: Ricard Savard



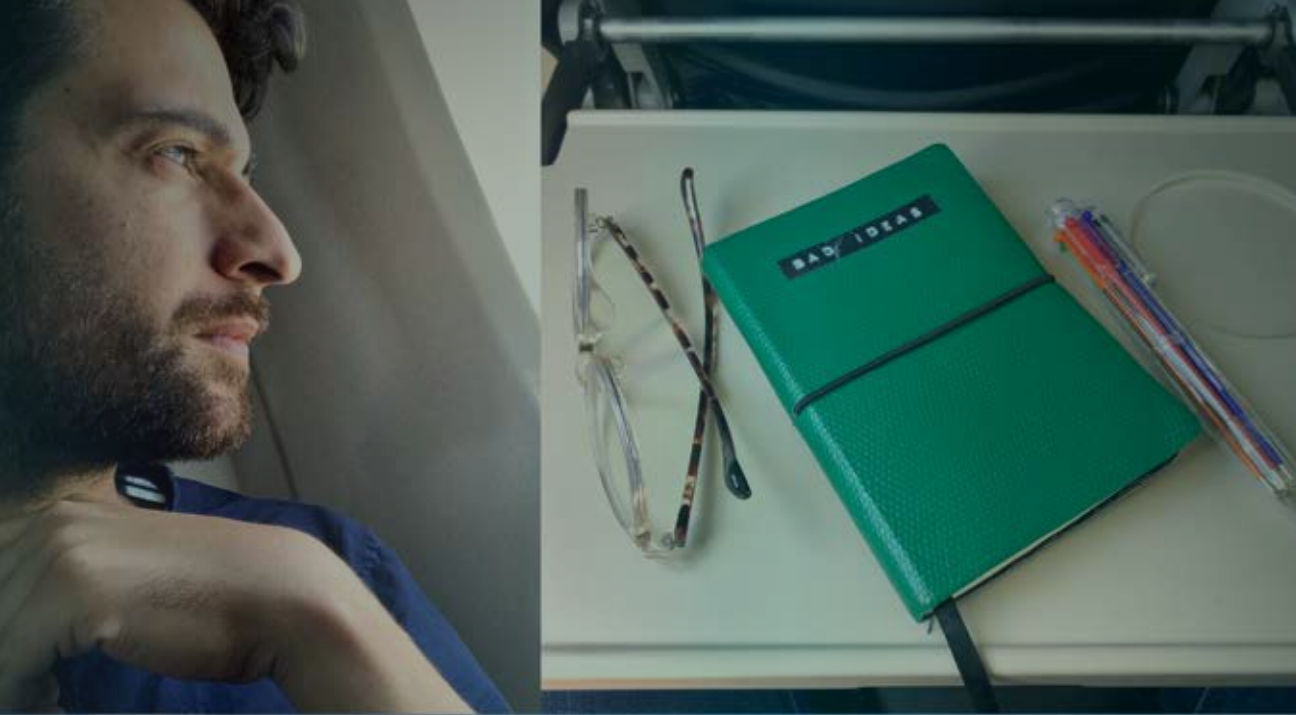
La Bande Vidéo Gallery, Quebec Biennial 2019. Photo: Ricard Savard



Photo: Ricard Savard



Photo: Matt Eich



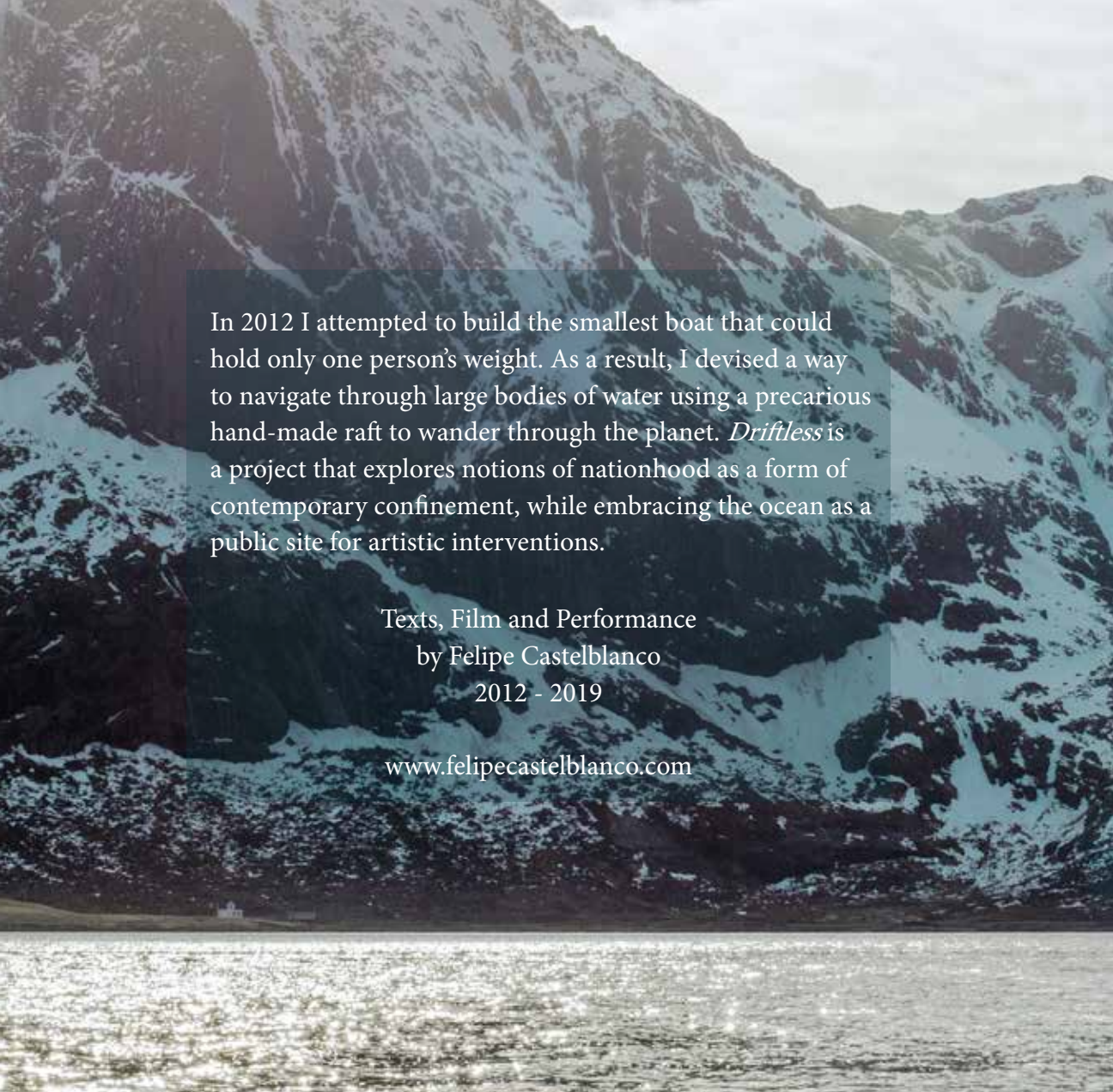
Felipe Castelblanco (1985, Bogotá) is a multidisciplinary artist working at the intersection of socially engaged, film and Media Art. His work explores participation, institutional forms and new frontiers of public space, which enable coexistent encounters between unlikely audiences.

Felipe has exhibited at museums and galleries in Europe, Asia, North and South America. Awards include the Starr Fellowship at the Royal Academy Schools in London (UK, 2015) the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Residency (USA, 2019) and in 2015 he served as a Cultural Emissary for the USA State Department to the Philippines.

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2012 - 2019



In 2012 I attempted to build the smallest boat that could hold only one person's weight. As a result, I devised a way to navigate through large bodies of water using a precarious hand-made raft to wander through the planet. *Driftless* is a project that explores notions of nationhood as a form of contemporary confinement, while embracing the ocean as a public site for artistic interventions.

Texts, Film and Performance
by Felipe Castelblanco
2012 - 2019

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