Backstory

MANUEL OCAMPO
Never Give Up Before It's Too Late

By Susan Gibb

MANUEL OCAMPO in his studio, Manila, 2012.
Photo by MM Yu. Courtesy the artist.

Manuel Ocampo is a painter. The rest of what one can say about him is up for negotiation, or of shifting importance. For more than two decades, Ocampo has pursued an approach to art-making that lives out the late French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's claim that the apocalypse has already occurred, and that this has happened at the level of the linguistic sign. In his canvases, Ocampo deploys a vast arsenal of art-historical and literary references, religious and popular iconography—including crucifixes, teeth, emoticons, sausages, swastikas, feces and flowers—which collide in caustic relationships, creating pictures that refer to their own making.

Confined within the picture's frame, these symbols draw attention to the formal properties that render them—color, line, form and proportion—all of which Ocampo handles with deft assurance, seamlessly moving from a style of oil painting reminiscent of old masters, to a crude, gestural immediacy and visual flatness, rendered in acrylic. In *Artist Examining Life Closely* (1998), Ocampo quotes conceptualist John Baldessari, placing the Californian artist's words, "Everything is purged from this painting but art, no ideas have entered this work," over an image of an upturned toilet, spilling intestines and feet. In *The Failure to Express Is Its Expression* (2002), the title appears as text floating above an image of a demonic-looking painter, easel in hands with his pants pulled down. More recently, the painting *What Do You Mean* (2012), asks precisely that, juxtaposing various comic figures, colorful blobs and a donkey wearing a sash showing the words "Just Married."

Leveling the hierarchy between the sacrosanct and the banal, the painting's content and surface, Ocampo's works offer the viewer multiple points of entry and dead-ends all at once. When asked about the practice of painting, he remarks, "There are a lot of ghosts in paintings," an acknowledgment of the rich history and tradition that any painter works in. Furthermore, he adds that, unlike many popular contemporary mediums, "paintings are not spectacular, they are not experience driven, they require a slow read."

Like his paintings, Ocampo defies easy categorization. A "perpetual expat" by his own description, the artist's personal history is an embodiment of the fractured cultural hybridization that typifies the Philippines, whose culture is a heady blend of indigenous, Spanish and American influences. Born in Quezon City in 1965, at age 20 Ocampo moved to the United States, where he briefly studied at the California State University, Bakersfield, before dropping out the following year to work at McDonald's and paint at night. It was in Los Angeles that Ocampo first achieved recognition with a string of successful solo gallery shows and his inclusion in seminal exhibitions such as "Helter Skelter: LA Art in the 1990s," at the city's Museum of Contemporary Art in 1992.

Within an artistic milieu enamored with postcolonial theory, he was quickly adopted as a poster child for identity politics and multiculturalism, which were dominating political and social agendas of the time. And yet, ironically, these were positions that recast the very representational modes that Ocampo was questioning in his work. In 1992, this problem became most apparent when Ocampo achieved notoriety at Documenta 9, in Kassel, where some of his paintings incorporating swastikas—a symbol of varied significance in Asian and Western societies—caused a media furor and were censored, due to how they would be interpreted in Germany.

In the late 1990s, after showing extensively in international exhibitions and biennials throughout the decade, Ocampo settled in Seville, Spain. During this period, and as documented in the film *Manuel Ocampo: God Is My Copilot* (1999), his paintings shifted from the heavy use of iconoclastic motifs to less loaded symbolism, as he eschewed direct comments on religion, politics and race.

Since he returned to Manila in 2003 for family reasons, Ocampo has made an undeniable mark on the local art scene. Alongside regular exhibitions of his work—the most recent being "Cryptic Slaughter Crossover Catholic Remix and Breakdown Trash," at the hangar-sized Finale Art File gallery in March—Ocampo has added gallery owner and curator to his list of activities. When I caught up with him in April, Ocampo was at the Department of Avant-Garde Clichés (DAGC), a gallery dedicated to prints, that he co-founded in 2011, and which also houses his studio. Located along Pasong Tamo Extension, Manila's burgeoning commercial gallery strip, DAGC seeks to provide an alternative to the commercial model that dominates the Filipino art scene and which exists in lieu of significant government support for the arts.

Speaking about DAGC, Ocampo remarks, "Having shown outside of the Philippines, and having had my work read with more critical rather than market-driven responses, I wanted to expand the playing field of what Filipino art might be." He describes the impetus behind DAGC "as a way of trying to foster a new type of collector," one that is priced out of the big-ticket, one-off painting market, but who can afford to support artists they like through the low- to mid-range editions market.

Also through the gallery, Ocampo has facilitated exhibitions of local and international artists, as well as workshops and publications. Its latest initiative is the Bureau of Artistic Rehab (BAR), functioning as an artist-run counterpart to formal university art-school instruction.

A similar sentiment lies behind Ocampo's role as curator for the group exhibition "Bastards of Misrepresentation: Doing Time on Filipino Time," which was presented at the Freies Museum Berlin, in 2010. Including a notable list of artists working in Manila and internationally, with ties to the place, "Bastards of Misrepresentation" aimed to capture a snapshot of what was happening in the Philippines at that moment. Importantly, though, as stressed by Ocampo in the introduction of the accompanying catalog, the exhibition did not aim to be a definitive show about contemporary art in the Philippines, with the title playfully "embodying the complexity of [the Philippines'] heritage and [its] colonial history while its political identity reflects the pervasive 'misrepresentation' of its people." The success of this exhibition has seen the "Bastards" moniker adopted for three more exhibitions, at H Gallery, Bangkok, in May this year, and soon at the Queens Museum Project Space, Topaz Arts and Crossing Arts in New York in October. The forthcoming shows will feature a changing roster of artists and will address different conceptual concerns at play in the Philippines.

In his own recent exhibition at Finale Art File, the work *The 4 Horseponies of the Apocalypse* (2012) acts as a clear warning for the future of the Manila art scene. Comprising four canvases dominated by the crazed head of a My Little Pony toy and the names of current Filipino auction starlets such as Geraldine Javier, the painting provides a telling manifesto of Ocampo's continued skepticism about the art market. Painted in response to the speculation in full bloom across the Southeast Asian auction scene, Ocampo chastizes this development for how it "makes the artist expendable." There may be a lot of ghosts in painting, but in Ocampo's art, and in his curatorial activities, there is no sign of painting's death, or the death of the artist. Rather, his canvas is a statement of each one's continuing vitality and relevance. In the words of one of his favorite artists, Martin Kippenberger, whom Ocampo often likes to quote, "Never give up before it's too late."

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