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INTERVIEW

Interview with Manuel Ocampo

AAA's Ringo Bunoan speaks with Filipino artist Manuel Ocampo about how his practice has changed since he started painting, his return to Manila, and the gallery and art school he has started there

Ringo Bunoan (AAA): Much has been written about your early work in the 1990s, when you first started to gain attention in the Los Angeles art scene. Your work then, which combined religious imagery with overtly political, sexual, and punk undertones, was discussed mostly in the context of multiculturalism and identity politics, all of which you claim to be 'bored with' today. In retrospect, do you think it would have been possible to have a different reading of your work?

Manuel Ocampo (MO): What you're asking about is the issue of context, and whether a work of art could be read at all without it. I would like to think that a work of art has the possibility of standing on its own without any such prosthesis, but that might sound quaintly modern and immediately negate the strides made by multiculturalism in opening the gates for the barbarians to finally arrive, so to speak. What multiculturalism did was make the public aware that history can have a different voice other than what was dominant. And there was indeed a lot of rewriting made back then, which we remember now as the time culture was made politically correct — with the ensuing backlash of course. So, with all these differing voices, who knows if what was said was true. Meanwhile, the work is left standing on its own. It continues while history remains stuck.

AAA: Your controversial work in the 1991 Documenta IX exhibition was censored for bearing images of swastikas, and Filipino critic Alice Guillermo once called your work 'blasphemous.' How do you personally define blasphemy in art? Do you think art can still be truly blasphemous or even shocking today?

MO: One person's blasphemy could be another person's form of spiritual expression. Blasphemy comes close to the idea of a protest. If a work offends someone else's taste and values then perhaps the work has already succeeded in staking a claim of its meaning in the world, as a statement of existence. That type of work therefore has ceded from being a mere representation of life, and has broached reality as an event. Perhaps blasphemy is the cry of the real, when stripped bare of its many illusions. Nothing is more shocking than the real.

AAA: The strength of your earlier work was its ability to critique power structures in society. In your more recent works, I sense that the disturbances are more internal; there is something going on in the painting itself. Can you describe your more recent work? How has it changed from your previous works?

MO: If I were to follow the differences that you have found in my overall work that circle around dialectical counterparts between social critique and autonomy, public vs. private, psychological vs. real, culture vs. nature, art and politics, so on and so forth, then I would be forced to create a moral fable about life in general, as if going to church. I'm



Pilipinas (O'Bathala), 1990, acrylic on canvas. Photo courtesy Artsenecal



Dolor de Muelas, 1991, oil on canvas. Photo courtesy Track16 Gallery



Untitled (Burnt Out Europe), 1992, oil and decal on canvas. Photo courtesy Artsenecal



Die Kruzigung Christi, 1993, acrylic and collaged color Xerox on canvas. Photo courtesy Artsenecal

just having fun with the current works. The earlier works concern themselves with the struggle of using painting as medium of expression and the entire hullabaloo related to its practice. Now I feel comfortable. Didn't we see a lot of pictures of Picasso walking around in his underwear? Or the elderly De Kooning going topless? Or Schnabel attending openings in his pajamas? Well, I'm not there yet in terms of exposing myself in public; but in terms of painting you do get a sense of what can be done with it after all the time spent figuring it out. And so you hang loose, with the works eventually becoming introspective, or so it seems. The strength of the earlier work is its ability to critique power structures in society, as you say. While the strength of the current work shows that critique has no effect on it.

AAA: Certain images often re-appear in your work. Apart from the swastikas, there are crows, rats, roaches, liquor bottles, crucifixes, sausages, hooded figures, penises, other blob-like forms. As an artist who is part of the 'image scavenging' generation, would you say that you are scavenging your own work?

MO: No, those are painter's forms, part of a visual vocabulary that recurs in character when used as language.

AAA: One writer has pointed out Jorg Heiser's essay on 'super-hybridity' as a backdrop for the works by artists of your generation. Given the amount of images that we have to contend with today, how can painting compete with all these other forms of visual information? Do you think painting still holds a privileged position in art?

MO: I consider painting to be the gold standard in art. Like when the economy is down, a lot of people put their money in gold rather than in stocks, which definitely lure a potential investor of many happy returns through vigorous trading, but, as we have seen, stocks can also lead to one's financial pitfall because they are based on make-believe or rumor, and are not substantial like gold. For example, Asian stocks fell because of fears about the European debt crisis. It's the same story with new media, or these other forms of visual information that you were talking about, which are definitely sexy with the scent of the new, but who knows how long they will last before another form of newer media comes along. But I wouldn't say painting is privileged, because that connotes another hierarchic condition that is no longer credible in the arts today, and which leads to continued exaggerated rumors of its demise. On the other hand, I would say painting is definitely reliable when expressing the human who is 'us' of course and not calculators, and we have centuries of having proven this.

AAA: Another familiar image, the wooden door with the sign 'Department of Avant-Garde Clichés' is now the logo and name of your new gallery. Why did you decide to open a gallery, especially one that focuses on prints? How do you position DAGC among the other big galleries along Pasong Tamo?

MO: The gallery is my personal take on bringing art to a larger audience without diminishing any of the quality and pleasure that we get from so-called 'fine art.' This 'fine art' is where the idea of the cliché originates from — art that is cloistered and preserved within institutions because they are stuck with the conventions of a masterpiece. But then as the story goes, the modernist avant-garde came along to discombobulate all these conventions to produce something 'new', which, ironically, in our postmodern moment would be cynical of anything that is considered new, having given form to another set of clichés. If we only have clichés to work with, then necessarily we would need a department to dispense and resolve disputes about what art could be today, as arbiter and purveyor of taste, which may or may not be a bunch of clichés depending on how positively or negatively you look at things. So this is facilitated through a medium that is reproducible and unique while remaining 'fine art' as well as accessible. A print for me serves as the junction between technology and craft, between new and traditional medias. It looks like painting and drawing but it is mechanically (re)produced. And since it removes the immediate trace of the hand, a print exhibits conceptual coolness based on its methodical process and multiple design formats. It could be sculptural too depending on how you use the paper or position the print. DAGC as a gallery is thus everywhere within the circumference of its interests and nowhere in terms of the limits of its definition.

AAA: Since your return to Manila in 2003, you have been active in engaging the local art community by independently organising exhibitions, collaborating with other artists,



From a Children's Book, 1995, oil on canvas. Photo courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art



El Demonyo Vive En Mi Culo Cagando De Cristo II (The Devil Lives in My Asshole Crapping Christs), 1998, oil on linen. Collection courtesy the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco



The Contemporary Motif in the Libidinal Economy of a Painter's Conscience, 2001, oil on canvas. Photo courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art



A Defeatist Movement to the Grand Narratives in the Theatrical Arena of Modernist Object Makers, 2006, oil on canvas. Photo courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art



Manuel Ocampo in his studio, Marikina

inviting foreign artists and curators, and now running your gallery. How do you feel about artists taking on multiple roles?

MO: That it's too much work. Joking aside, I don't see it as taking on multiple roles. Rather, I see everything as art. And if I were to be medium specific, then it would be painting by other means.

AAA: Could you tell us about the new school you are planning with fellow artist Gerardo Tan? How do you think we can teach art to young people today?

MO: The school will be one-of-a-kind in Manila. It is very unique and I'm excited about it. So having Gerry and me involved in it will mean that the school is artist-directed and designed, a school by artists for other artists. Usually when we say art all sorts of notions about creative freedom arise. But when we say school, all our hopes of such die. So the term art school could be oxymoronic or irrational. But that also underlines the meaning of art as a paradox. It is said that art can never be taught, and there is truth in that. But we, the artists behind the school, have the experience, the knowledge, and the professional savvy within the field to pass this on to the next generation of artists. So the school becomes a true community of artists, and not some dusty bureaucratic and dogmatic trap that we know academia can be. Our programme is studio-oriented with hands-on learning objectives, functioning as an experimental lab or think tank for the critical practitioner, and geared towards career development and progress. We don't churn diplomas. We produce Artists.

City, Philippines, 2007. Photo by Ringo Bunoan



Department of Avant-Garde Cliches, 2007, on canvas. Photo by Ringo Bunoan



Detail of collaborative painting with Argie Bandy, 2008. Photo by Ringo Bunoan



Monuments to the Institutional Critique of Myself, 2009, installation. Photo by Ringo Bunoan



Manuel Ocampo during the opening of his exhibition 'Macho Forever', 2009, Finale Art File. Photo by Ringo Bunoan



Design for a Crucifixion (Cross with Water Closet and Shower), 2010, acrylic on canvas. Photo courtesy Tyler



Opening night of 'Painting with a Hammer to Nail the Crotch of Civilization' curated by Manuel Ocampo, 2010, Manila Contemporary. Photo by Ringo Bunoan



Opening night of 'Painting with a Hammer to Nail the Crotch of Civilization' curated by Manuel Ocampo, 2010, Manila Contemporary. Photo by Ringo Bunoan



Sign to Department of Avant-Garde Cliches (DAGC), 2011. Photo by Ringo Bunoan




Installation view, 'Beasts Along a Chain of Ineffable Deferments', inaugural exhibition of DAGC, 2011. Photo by Ringo Bunoan




Installation view, 'Misprint Messiahs', by Carlo Ricafort and Louie Cordero, DAGC, 2011. Photo by Ringo Bunoan



Installation view, 'Misprint Messiahs', by Carlo Ricafort and Louie Cordero, DAGC, 2011. Photo by Ringo Bunoan

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