

Cultural Clashes And Visceral Shocks

The Filipino artist Manuel Ocampo has made a name for himself in the United States and Europe as an artist whose work takes on every taboo head on. By turns his art is dark, ambiguous, and angry, mocking and profoundly humorous, blasphemous and emotional, even sentimental. His paintings and drawings are a visual stream-of-consciousness that has scatology as their heart.

By Alice G. Guillermo

Blazing into the art world in the early 1970s, the works of Manuel Ocampo made art connoisseurs sit up at the bold and disquieting images that were born of two cultures, Filipino and Western. As a boy, his earliest experience in art was touching up santos or carved religious icons to give them an antique look. This puerile occupation gave him access to the rich variety of religious iconography and sharpened his awareness of religious and cultural symbols. Subsequently, he took up fine arts at the University of the Philippines, followed by an early stint with the popular group *Saling-pusa* (Young Apprentices) consisting of young muralists based in Antipolo. Hanging around the artists' group, then in the midst of creating a new aesthetic, must have given him the necessary impetus to make it on his own. Still in his teens, he decided to move to the United States and resume studies in paintings at the California State College at Bakersfield.

In the mid-1980s, he came out strongly with a striking iconography which, on one hand, included holy personages, saints, monks, and angels, as well as symbols such as the Bible, the Cross of various religious

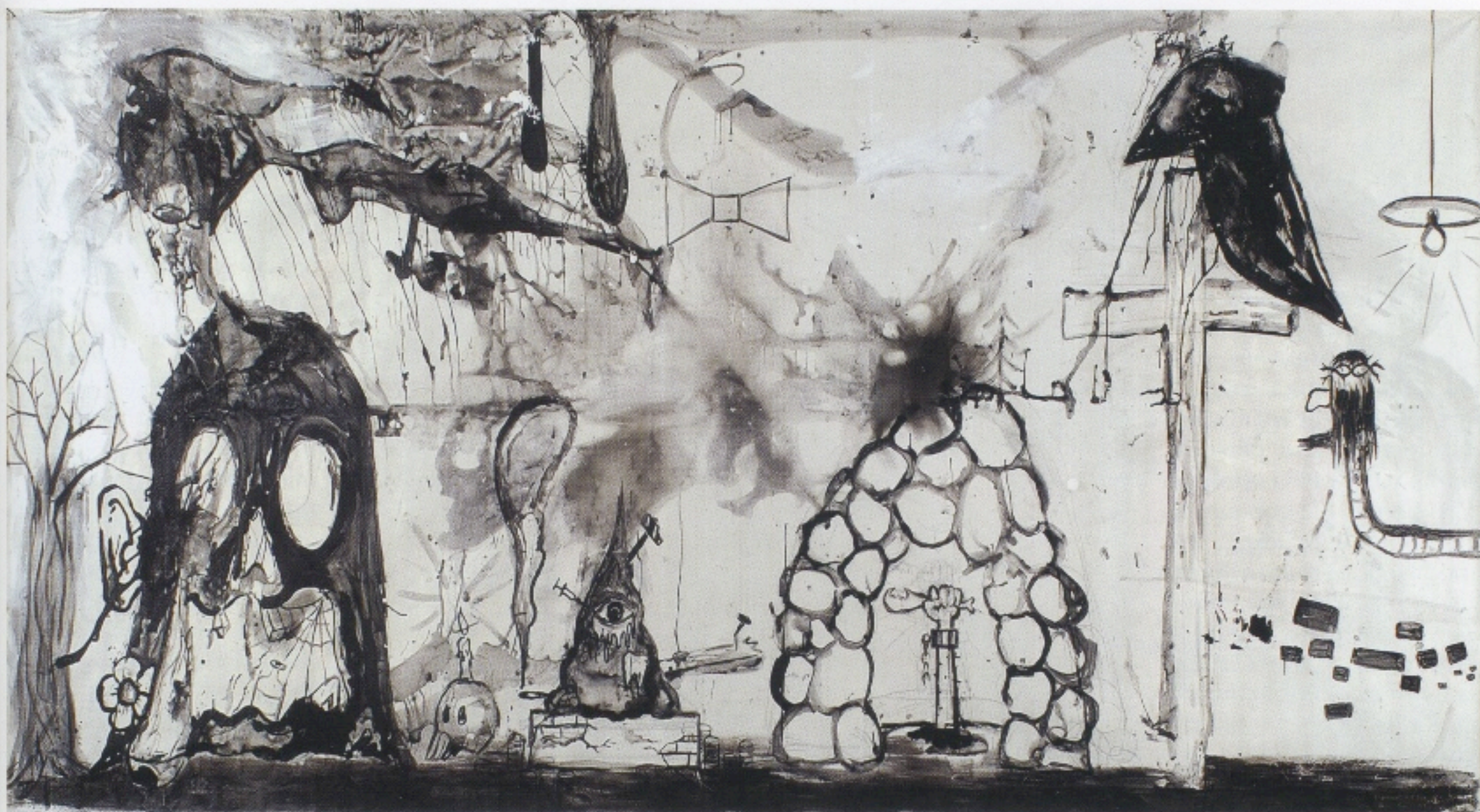
denominations, the rosary, all icons deeply engraved in the Filipino psyche from almost 500 years of Spanish colonial rule. Then, on the other hand, as from some perverse influence, he would boldly juxtapose these with the swastika, often in multiples or as

a many-sided figure with a life of its own, strung with a bunch of rosy peaches concealing a slithering snake. Another symbol was the Ku Klux Klansman, clothed in the inquisitional white robe and pointed hat and carrying a crucifix.

By 1993, he had harnessed his now immense cultural glossary to do large works such as *Die Kreuzigung Christi* that carved him a niche in contemporary art. A fusion of Gothic, for its stern moralistic tone, and Baroque, for its flamboyant imagery, it became a key painting of the 1990s. Executed in acrylic and collaged with elements of color xerox on canvas, its somber blue tones and its detailed style of figuration show the influence of the Old Spanish Masters who fascinated the artist who had been based for some time in Seville, Spain. It is an ominous, dramatic painting that warns of the end of the world, as was often the theme of the past millennia. Into a landscape barren but highly charged with competing energies toppling the structures along the sides, a huge dark horse springs forward, its horseman clothed in a red auto-da-fe inquisitional costume with pointed hat, also like a Ku Klux Klan figure, thus suggesting the



Manuel Ocampo, Varmint Hunting, 1982, oil on canvas, 98 x 72". All photographs: Courtesy of the Artist and Finale Art File, Manila.



Manuel Ocampo, *Heridas de la Lengua*, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 120".

re-emergent force of the repressive Spanish inquisition and its institutional agents in our midst. Now this rider thrusts a spear at the Holy Bible in the middle of a cross emanating golden rays. The severity of the tone is offset by a strange one-eyed Christ figure, an element of surrealist fantasy continued by floating images of meticulously rendered alcohol bottles garnished with skull and crossbones. At the upper left, another contending figure is the head of a cherub, eyes intensely closed and seeming to implode, while surrounded by the words *Das Leben* (Love) and *Das Tod* (Death), light rays radiating from his face. The artist thus brings together, in a single image, the contending energies of our day.

These and similar works done in the 1990s deal with clashes of culture in colonial and multicultural contexts, especially between the dominant West and indigenous colonized cultures, and the human suffering that ensued from the encounters. They also imply the 20th-century's bloody holocausts, and the dictatorships that swept the globe, as well as hardbound prejudices

of race and gender. This turmoil was conveyed with the use of recurrent symbols, such as the Latin and the Greek crosses, along with the swastika its facile allusion to Nazi Germany (although a deeper and

earlier meaning comes from the Buddhist swastika, an ancient symbol of the sun). Along with the cross is the rosary, a prominent religious/cultural symbol in the Philippines. These symbols have been used

to create a charged field or theater of conflict. Ocampo has likewise peopled his canvases with holy personages, hermits, and saints, while displacing them from their original sacred contexts into a profane pop culture with accessories such as socks (mocking the discalced orders) or a pet black cat, symbol of carnality.

While these symbols are, as Arnold Hauser would say, ideologically saturated, dealing with different concepts of good and evil, sin and redemption that, when brought together, spark an atmosphere of ideological conflict, the artist seems to be more concerned with showing how these cultural symbols interact, as intense forces and energies in a field. He keeps a certain psychological distance by not aligning them into facile binaries of good and evil, thus avoiding a simplistic didacticism. One perceives this negative strategy in the use of a postmodern distancing device, that of stimulating peeled areas on the canvas surface as a result of time and neglect,



Manuel Ocampo, *Capitalism (Capitsapatalim)*, 1991, inkjet print, 60 x 48".

thereby creating temporal displacement conveying the sense that the narrative took place in another time in order to deflect a more contemporary engagement with the work.

Although Ocampo's ideological orientation is often ambiguous, the swastika and all that it tells us of repression, dictatorship, and persecution, is used with a semantic consistency. But contrary to the common reading, the apocalyptic horseman thrusting his spear on the sacred Christian symbols, the Bible and the Cross, is not necessarily an evil force to the artist, for he views the Church as a powerful ideological apparatus of oppression. The Virgin of Guadalupe herself takes the form of a large realistic cockroach surrounded by the familiar radiating halo in *Virgin Destroyer*. The confessional sado-masochism that lurks in the heart of Christianity is expressed in the headless, seated man wielding a knife beside a religious icon. While refusing all religious edification, Ocampo, upholds liberty, political, intellectual, and artistic, as the highest good for himself as artist and for every human being. In the painting *Capitalism*, a man with a globe for head lies dead on the ground. Floating above is the word "Free," a satire on "free market," and below is the Tagalog word KAMATAYAN (death) written in reverse. However, the body of Ocampo's oeuvre unequivocally rejects any radical reading. In at least one work, for instance, he subjects the iconic figure of Karl Marx to scatological ridicule. In another work, he teases out the irony between the conjoint figures of Marx and Lenin, counted among the "dead white males" of poststructuralist theory confronted by



Manuel Ocampo, *The Compensatory Motif in the Libidinal Economy of a Painter's Bad Inconscience*, 2001, oil on canvas, 84 x 60".



Manuel Ocampo, *Deus Ex Machina (Abstract Painting)*, 1996, oil on canvas, 48 x 48".

a voluptuous black nude in a seductive pose.

His most compelling denunciation of class society, however, is *Abstract Painting (Deus ex Machina, 1996)*. To title the work *Abstract Painting* is again a strategy of distancing, for one may instinctively recoil from the gruesome subject on hand. The subtitle *Deus ex Machina* hardly relates to the painting at all, except in the sense of invoking divine intervention, hands thrown up in despair. It is a scene at once grisly and violent. Here, Ocampo brings out one of his favorite motifs, the still life on a table derived from the proud vanitas of European tradition. But in his hands, it undergoes a sinister transformation. Instead of the elegant bourgeois settings of the 17th century *petits-mâtres*, the table holds a pig's head, its blood draining into a dish, a white grinning skull, and a string of bolotus sausages. Beside it, a man in coat and tie violently regurgitates the contents of his gustatory indulgence which splatters all over the walls and floor as blood and vomit, while on the floor crawl two black skeletal figures that lap up the excess.

Such explosive political and social imagery is, however, leveled off as he vents his ferocity equally on various other things: ethnic identity ("Identity is your own worst enemy!"), the concept of the Third World, the discourse of art theory, and unsparingly, his own art. In the Philippines' context, he believes that his uncompromising position might serve as the necessary but bitter pill to put to shame effectively the mindless, sweet, and pretty commercial productions, the lollipops of the leisurely class. And yet, although liberty and freedom are



Manuel Ocampo, **Kitsch Recovery Effort: Frontal Depiction of Taste Inanities in the Figurative Bait of Meaning Reduced to an Analog for a Sign of Reality**, 2000, oil on canvas, 4 x 8 ft.

the catchwords that Ocampo will always go by, he tends towards a general anarchistic violence lacking an anchor or a firm and human, albeit secular, value system to see one through.

After having reached such heights of intensity, Ocampo, who was born in 1965 in Quezon City, the Philippines, shifted gears to what seems to be a transitional period in his career, though it was already present to some degree in the early key work entitled *Die Kreuzigung Christi*. This involved a vigorous textuality where words or multilingual texts in dynamic cultural encounters, aside from the semantic value of their contents and messages, were themselves visual forms in their different types and other physical properties. This valorization of the text led to works in which handwritten words, with their fonts, colors, and embellishments, constituted the visuality of the paintings. This development covered a number of shows, including *Free Aesthetic Pleasure Now!*, exhibited in Babilonia 1808 in Berkeley.

Some texts were simply epigrammatic: "A work completes itself." Many obviously parodied critical language as though to

expose its hollowness: "Objective criticality in paintings only merits in indifference from a culture that craves instant gratifications."

Some were titles of lithographs in which the artist appropriated and altered images from his paintings with ephemera from pop culture, as in *The Compensatory Motif in the Libidinal Economy of a Painter's Bad Inconscience* (2001), obviously derived from a French creative philosopher. In this image, above a procession of children, a recurrent motif is the crowned and dazzling Cockroach Lady. Ocampo summed up his work in 1999: "I find the perversity of Christian imagery rather fascinating. Sexuality, violence, and corruption are simultaneously taboo and common themes that are explored through my paintings. Through the images I paint, I unconsciously draw upon the black humor and cultural contradictions inherent in the Philippine culture." The focus of a New York exhibition at the Gray Kapernekas Gallery, in 2006, was a large work, *A Defeatist Monument to the Grand Narratives in the Theatrical Arena in the Modernist Object-Making*



Manuel Ocampo, **Down with Reality**, 2005, oil on canvas, 4 x 3 ft.



Manuel Ocampo, *A Defeatist Monument to the Grand Narratives in the Theatrical Arena of Modernist Object-making*, 2006, oil on canvas, 96 x 132".

(2006), which relentlessly struck out at the art establishment itself. The two parts of the image consisted of the Critic and the Collector as a row of anthropomorphic tree stumps on the left, and on the right a large conical pile of excreta surrounded with coins as the Work of Art.

This event marks a turning point of Ocampo's art where he overhauls his entire iconography and style, as also in his 2005 show *Mumu Territorium* sponsored by the Finale Art File at the Art Center of SM Megamall, Manila. The virtuosic title continues as Jabar logic in times of mCarthyian transgressions multiplying on the borders of the concatenated post-Duchampian theater swastikating between love and hate. (Jabar referring to a popular basketball player.) And still yet a subtitle: The paroxysmal triumph of painting failures in the burnik arena of meaning emptied of signs. Now Ocampo has abandoned the grand theater and stylistic connoisseurship of his earlier works influenced by Old Spanish Masters, as exemplified by *Las Heridas de la Lengua* and *Die Kreuzigung Christi* to a low-key, childlike but perversely precocious style. The elements seem to be articulated in a distant falsetto by a master ventriloquist. Only a few traces remain of his earlier iconography, mainly the Latin and the

Greek crosses that serve as focal points of the largely monochromatic works. But to these, the artist of a distinct coprophilic passion, although of satiric impulse, has given primacy of place to the toilet bowl and the death's head that are the salient features of his vanitas as well as a tome, cobwebs for the background, a mass of coiled viscera, conical piles of shit surrounded by coins. There is likewise a hearth or an open structure made of pebbles with a lit candle within, the entire scene often festooned by



Manuel Ocampo at his studio.

linked sausages made from the innards of some animal. The *dramatis personae* that inhabit this underworld territorium consist of the *mumu*, formless ghosts with round eyes and diverse antennae, and their humanoid factotums, with a lone unrepentant duck the only animal around (could it be unconsciously a McCarthyist duck, survivor of the witch hunts?) The large painting in color shows three frontal presentations which are but vaguely reminiscent of the human form and is entitled *Kitsch Recovery Effort: Frontal Depiction of Taste Inanities in the Figurative Bait of Meaning Reduced to an Analogue for a Sign of Reality* (2000).

Has Manuel Ocampo exited reality, as the work *Down with Reality!* suggests?

In his most recent show, the critical relationship between image and text is as yet static and not locked in confrontation. And the *mumu*, if they are the pale phantoms of past wars, falls under the weight of the logorrheic burden that is foisted on them. One would look to a coequal engagement between image and text that would send all the sparks flying and that would indeed constitute a more than instant gratification. Δ

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