

Manuel Ocampo

By OLIVIA SAND

Even though Manuel Ocampo is only forty-eight years old, he has been a steady contributor to the contemporary art scene for almost three decades. Born in the Philippines, where he also grew up, Manuel Ocampo took the art world by storm, following his move to the United States, where he was quickly considered one of the rising stars of his generation. His direct visual vocabulary combined with his fabulous talent led him to be an artist much sought after and featured in the key landmark exhibitions of the 1990s and the early 2000s.

Although his handwriting is clearly still the same, Manuel Ocampo has taken on the daring move to keep experimenting with his painting, making it even more complex and unpredictable. Now firmly anchored back in the Philippines, he continues to challenge the medium of painting – as he always has – starting a new phase in his career. He discusses this undertaking with the Asian Art Newspaper.



Manuel Ocampo

ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER:

Although there is a growing interest in artists from Asia, you are not always considered, or thought of, as being part of this group.

MANUEL OCAMPO: When people look at my work, they usually do not associate it with Asia.

Personally, I do not consider myself particularly Asian. It is very strange. I think people do not know what to make of the Philippines. It is Catholic, the culture is very Latin, but it is in Asia. When people see what is happening, they are somehow uneasy, trying to figure out what culture and what country they are in.

AAN: You were living in Manila and then went to Los Angeles. How did you get to Los Angeles? MO: The first time I lived in the United States was in 1991, in New York. My sister was studying in New York, but was living in Jersey City. When I was fifteen, I attended an all boys Catholic school in New Jersey. At that time, my father was working for an American company. We all stayed in New Jersey for a year, but then my parents had to go back to Manila. I wanted to finish my studies in New Jersey, because the system is quite different in the Philippines and the States. My parents went back, but my sister (twenty at the time) and I (fifteen) were eager to stay. As we had relatives in Seattle, we moved

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there in order to be closer to them. After two years together in Seattle, we split and went our separate ways. I was seventeen and decided it was time to live on my own, making paintings.

AAN: Why did you choose Los Angeles over New York?

MO: It happened by chance. I travelled along the coast, and I felt that Los Angeles was a good compromise between the US and Manila. I felt it looked familiar, it had a car culture, and unlike the East coast, the weather was kinder. Also, at the time, there was a lot going on and graffiti art – with Haring or Basquiat – was very strong. I was young and I still needed to go to college to study art. As I turned twenty, I returned to the Philippines for a year pursuing my art studies, and then went back to the States. I dropped out of school and became a full time painter, while working odd jobs as a waiter, or as a painter making window decorations.

AAN: Why did you decide to drop out?

MO: I think back then, I did not know what I wanted. I wanted to be an artist, but I thought I should do something besides going to school, because just going to school seemed like a waste of money. I was twenty and I decided to experience life first. Retrospectively, I do not even know if those were decisions that I made, or if things just ended up happening the way they did.

AAN: Were your technical skills already above average?

MO: I did not know what I was doing, but looking back, I kept a certain discipline, painting every day, looking at art books and teaching myself about contemporary art. I was reading a lot of art magazines, art books, and I was teaching myself by copying the styles of painters that interested me. That was the case for many of the graffiti artists like Basquiat, for example, but also for artists like Julian Schnabel, the German artists, George Condo or Milan Kunc. I was taking in all that was happening.

AAN: Do you still like these artists today?

MO: Yes, and I can still relate to these artists – in some ways. I guess that was part of my development of being an artist.



The Holocaust Spackle in the Murals of the Quixotic Inseminators II (2010), 80 x 75 in



Deux Ex Machina (1996), oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in

AAN: Back in Los Angeles, did your work already bear some connection to what you did later on?

MO: I guess that back then it was more towards graffiti. Crosses would come up – and cockroaches. I think it was my immediate surrounding that influenced me, like being Catholic and living in a Mexican community.

AAN: You were already very successful when you were very young. To what do you owe that early success?

MO: I think it is just about my being at the right place, at the right time. In the 1990s, the market was opening up to different perspectives from immigrants, or ethnic minorities, and it was expanding. I fit within that trend. I was probably the only one at the time painting swastikas, but it was generally done in a punk attitude. As a teenager growing up in the 1980s, I was listening to a lot of music, and punk music clearly inspired me and influenced a certain attitude. I put that sort of confrontational, dirty, and provocative attitude into my art.

AAN: At the time, did you consider yourself a very rebellious young artist?

MO: I do not know. Sometimes my life, especially my early years, seems just like a blur. I do not think I was rebellious. I lived on my own early on.

When I was seventeen and I reached the age to rebel, as my parents were not there, I did not have anyone to rebel against. I transferred that attitude into my art. In some ways, I always thought I was born an old man, because I did not have that phase where I had to rebel, or be a simple kid. Maybe, I am just recalling things that are not really clear. Perhaps, I am just inventing things from what I can remember now and perhaps I was just a spoiled brat. I cannot really get a grasp of myself thinking about me when I was a boy. Perhaps it is something that I want to forget?

AAN: Do you see yourself as a spontaneous painter, or as one who meticulously plans everything?

MO: Earlier in my career, it was more planned and the symbols meant something. Over the years, the planning and the meaning of symbols seem to have diminished. It is less about what the work is about, but more about what the work looks like. In my opinion, using certain symbols, the more you use them, the less meaning they have for you other than a subject matter to paint. Now, my paintings are more spontaneous. It is more about the process of painting. It is more about the language, and how I can twist it, and how I can play around with it. That could also mean something and be a statement in itself.

AAN: Looking at the pieces in your latest show in New York in the fall of 2012, they have indeed become much looser and more spontaneous.

MO: I think when you have been painting for 30 years, you do not want to stay with the same formula, you want to play around. I am almost fifty, and if I can make an analogy, it is not conceivable to me to eat potato salad every day. I have to try out a steak, a hamburger ... You want to try out something else. Some people are just comfortable doing the same thing all the time. In a way, I envy them.

AAN: As a child, did you draw a lot? MO: Yes. I did three comic books when I was young. My mother was teaching journalism and my father is a writer. She used to teach in a college and had the connections with newspapers, reporters, and all kinds of different types of writers. Sometimes, she would use my drawings in the editorial sections of the papers.

AAN: In some of your work of the late 1990s, you feature faces of characters from comic books. How

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did they make their way into your paintings?

MO: I was inspired by my immediate surroundings. Also, I used to collect a lot of comic books. The things that interest you visually always have an influence in your life. Looking back, I believe that I did not become an artist through school, as I tend to think that school inhibits creativity.

AAN: Do you consider yourself a very religious person?

MO: Art is my religion! In terms of being Catholic, no. Or maybe I am religious, but I am not really aware of it.

AAN: Some writers have said that the early pieces were very honest whereas now you are just using symbols without any meaning. Did those early pieces actually make a statement?

MO: That is honest? I always like things to be a little bit vague. Maybe back then I was not vague, but still trying to learn. Now, it is more interesting to me to play around with things and blur people's expectations. There is undeniably a lot of play in my work. Then, everything in my work was obvious, and it was an easier read. Now, my work is a lot more complex and perhaps that is why people find it harder to enter the work. Also, I do not stick to any one



Virgin Destroyer (1995), acrylic and collage on canvas, 60 x 40 in

style, or statement. Sometimes I contradict myself. First, I would like the work to be interesting to me, and maybe that is why people find it difficult to catch up with me. I change my mind a lot and therefore it is hard for people to follow what I am doing. My work may seem contradictory and people may not understand why I am saying this when last year I was saying something else.

AAN: One of your pieces was included in Documenta IX (1992) and was subsequently removed from the exhibition. Why? What was so shocking about the piece?

MO: I would imagine it was the swastikas, however I did not pick this specific piece to be shown there. The

organisers headed by Jan Hoet selected that piece. Why they picked that piece, I do not know.

AAN: Today that exact piece would not be an issue

MO: Yes, you are right. The responsibility really falls to the organisers. Documenta is a big exhibition and I was just one of the artists. I was not in control and I do not know what really transpired. Also, today times have changed. It is no longer just black and white. There are a lot of 'in-between meanings' and the image of the swastika comes up again and again, especially now with the young German artists like Jonathan Meese, or Andreas Hofer.

AAN: You were a pioneer in that sense. Today the issues are not the same, but 20 years ago, painting a swastika was quite daring.

MO: Yes, because back then, things were still black and white. 'The Wall' had just come down, and the memory of history was still much stronger than now. It was dangerous to play with symbols. From my point of view, it was coming from a punk attitude of provocation with a double meaning and floating signifiers. Back then it was a form of rebellion against beautiful things. Now, it has become very acceptable.

AAN: After 9/11, you moved back to the Philippines. Did you feel out of place in the States?

MO: It is a complicated story. After 9/11, the atmosphere became different. People were paranoid and one thing that was very present in their consciousness was fear. I just did not like the atmosphere. At the same time, my ex-wife's father died in the Philippines. It was a good opportunity for us to go back and distance ourselves from that whole atmosphere of post 9/11, when the Americans were going to attack Iraq. It just did not feel right. Maybe, we took it as a sign to go and see what was happening in Manila. Until 20 I was going back and forth between California and Manila before settling in the Philippines that same year.

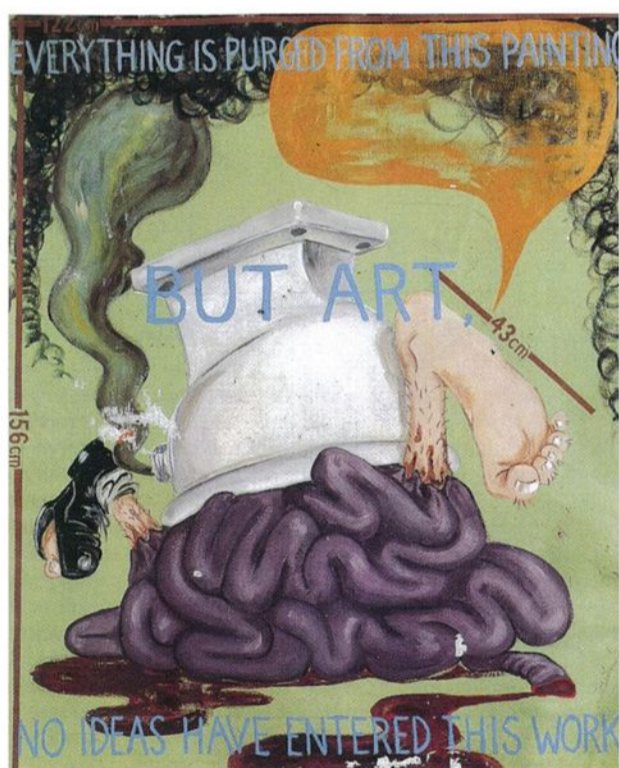
Then last year, I opened a gallery and started working on the Manila based artists' show *Bastards of Misrepresentation*. Currently, it seems that the focus is on Southeast Asia and several prominent galleries have gone to Manila. Representatives of Zwirner, Gagosian, Marianne Boesman, Perrotin came to visit a gallery, but also to get a first impression of what was going on in Manila. It seems that there is definitely something happening at that there is something growing there

AAN: Is it that momentum which prompts you to consolidate your activities as a dealer in Manila?

MO: Yes. The gallery I have set up, DAC (Department of Avant-Garde Clichés), only focused on prints by international artists, a medium underrepresented in the Philippines. I will be closing this gallery and merge with an Austria gallery. The new gallery is actually comprised of two galleries – one called Zinc (Zimmerman Incorporated) and the other one E (Bureau of Artistic Rehab) with a bar in the gallery. Maybe, I can revive the printing studio at some point, it is difficult to run a print shop while at the same time continuing your own work.

The gallery will be showing experimental art, dealing also with traditional art, from painting to sculpture, and blur the boundaries what a painting is and what a

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Everything is Purged From This Painting, oil on canvas, 156 x 122 cm

sculpture is. It is more about ideas than media. It is more about collaborating with artists. The model is not a gallery showing artists, but a gallery collaborating with artists. For example, I am thinking about collaborating with an artist who does clothes as art and in the bar have the waiters wear these clothes. The idea is simple: you have an idea and I have an idea, so let us merge and do it together, rather than a gallery asking an artist to show there. It is more trying to get to know the work and applying it to the gallery. Most artists I am working with are in their

thirties, but many of them are in their mid-twenties. I am looking forward to that project because so far the Philippines does not have much exposure – at an international level. With the crisis in Europe and in the States, people are always looking for other ways to make money.

AAN: Through your own and other initiatives, there is beginning to be a local market in the Philippines?

MO: Yes. The market is developing also because of the economic growth of the country – about 4% growth. Recently, we lent money to Spain. In some ways, it is like the son giving the mother money. There is still a lot to improve in the Philippines, but in comparison to 20 years ago, it is doing a lot better.

AAN: You mentioned earlier that through your gallery, you would like to support experimental art. Do you consider yourself an experimental artist and would you be tempted to venture into something different from painting?

MO: I already see the gallery and the curatorial shows as an extension of my art. I am experimenting with it, seeing where it takes me. So yes, I would consider myself an experimental artist.

AAN: It has been written many times that you have felt a kind of distrust towards the art world. Why is that? MO: That was an earlier sentiment maybe because the art world deals with money. Of course, when there is money involved, there is some speculation. It is also a system that is big, powerful, and for some artists, it is difficult to understand, as artists only do their work. Being also



Absolute Postcolonial, 2012, oil on canvas with artist's frame, 18x14 in

Philippines is so unregulated, some old artists die because they do not have anyone to take care of them and a few years later once they passed away, the dealers manage to make money out of their work. I would like to change that.

AAN: As a painter/curator/dealer, what else would you like to achieve?

MO: As a painter, I want to continue with what I am doing. I hope I will still be enjoying what I am doing. As a painter that is really what is important. As a dealer, I would like to further hone my skills, because I do

not have any skills at all in that field. I hope I can sharpen my teeth more. As a curator, I would like to continue promoting abroad artists that are active in Manila and that I am able to expand, or open people's awareness about what is happening in Manila. For example, the show I am curating is about artists based in Manila, but they are not necessarily from the Philippines. Most of them are Filipinos, but it is not ethnocentric. I am not promoting a nationality. I am promoting the local art scene.

AAN: How many exhibitions have you curated abroad so far?

MO: I have curated four shows. In

2010, I curated a show of Manila artists in Berlin, which subsequently travelled to Hamburg. I did another show in Bangkok of Manila artists and then one in New York. The other projects I curated in Manila featured international artists: Albert Oehlen, Claus Carstensen, and Dr Lakra.

AAN: As a curator, do you exhibit art you personally like?

MO: That is where it gets complicated. In the beginning, I curated only artists that I liked and collected, because as a collector and curator, you legitimately try to push the artists you collect. As you go along and you meet people, it becomes political. You tend to choose an artist that maybe you do not particularly like, but who is acceptable enough, and you start thinking about the audience. You consider the sponsor behind the show, the people who are going to give you money to do the show. Maybe in order for me to reach my goal, I need to compromise along the way. You have to look at it all in the long run.

AAN: For these projects, do you need to rely on sponsors?

MO: It depends. The first Bastards of Misrepresentation show was a group effort with the artists and me trying to raise the required money (around 23,000 euros). We raised money via auctions, raffles, lottery, producing merchandise that we sold, going to corporations to get endorsements. It was more grassroots- and artist-initiated. Now, as people become aware of my intentions, the ones interested, like galleries, will support me. So overall, it is getting more and more corporate. The trouble with galleries is that by supporting my project, they would try to have one of their artists in the show. Then it gets complicated.

AAN: How did the title Bastards of Misrepresentation come about?

MO: That is the group of Filipino artists that I am curating. The Philippines is a hybrid country – bastardised. As for misrepresentation, it is already a double negative and nobody knows who Filipinos are. In my opinion, we do not fit into any category, so there is the misrepresentation.

AAN: As a collector, what do you collect? MO: Filipino artists, or modest

pieces by international artists like Albert Oehlen, Julian Schnabel, or Jonathan Meese. I have a few photographs. The bulk of my collection comprises small pieces and works on paper.

AAN: Do you still draw?

MO: Yes, but I rarely exhibit my drawings. That mainly has to do with my attitude towards drawing. When I draw, it is in a restaurant on a napkin. They are just like doodles and I do not take them seriously, so it is my fault because of my attitude. Lately, however, I have been thinking about

exhibiting works on paper.

AAN: The gallery you started specialised in prints. Is that a medium you appreciate personally?

MO: Yes. I like doing prints because it is new to me. What comes out is also something that I could not get in painting, or in drawing, because I like the fact that there is a certain distance with the actual work. With an etching for example, you print on the copper, you give it to a printer, they produce it using a machine and the creation comes out. There is that distance. It is different with drawing: it is there and is very immediate. It is the same with painting. It is very laborious, but it is you who is making it. I like that distance for a print to come out the way it does. Also, print-making is a collaborative media. The print-maker will suggest using certain tools to create different effects: it is a collaboration, because I do not print my own work. Somebody does it for me and they can recommend ideas to you. I like that.

AAN: How would you say that your work has evolved over the years?

MO: I think that earlier on it was about statements, about communicating, about direct messages. Now, it has become more about painting. I think that today it is calmer and more playful than before. I think it is less serious – or I would like to think of it that way. When I was young, I was more political, now I do not care, because sometime there is nothing you can do. Having gallery and curating from the periphery or fringes, is already a political statement in itself. I can only affect something politically in a smaller scale, not ideologically, but within my immediate surroundings. I guess that over the years I have become more pragmatic.



Untitled: Henry Taylor's Version of Bohemian Rhapsody (2012), oil and collage on canvas, 74 x 78 in