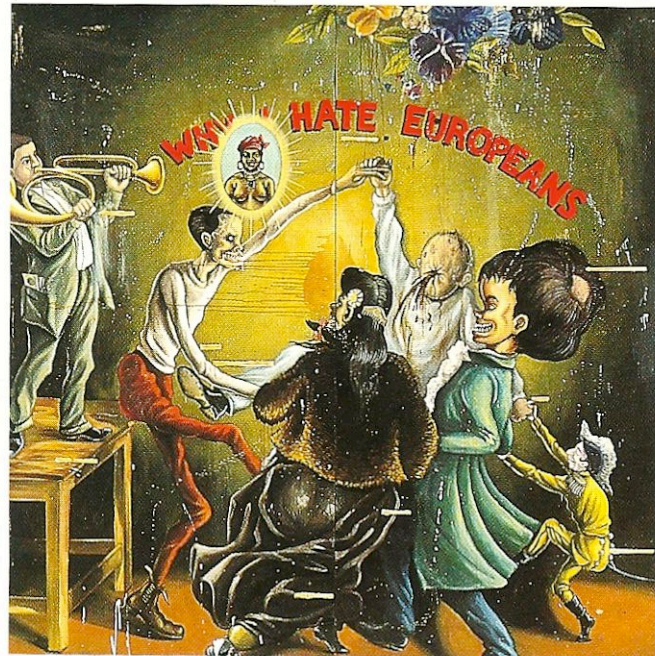


WIEDER EINMAL IN DER WELT VORAN, 1993. OIL ON LINEN, 96 X 96".



WHY I HATE EUROPEANS, 1992. OIL ON LINEN, 106 X 106".

MANUEL OCAMPO

ONE-MAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT

JAMES SCARBOROUGH

James Scarborough: *In Europe I've seen fragments of altarpieces — by the likes of Brueghel, Bosch, Van Eyck — and each have similar versions of hell: fire and brimstone, cannibalism, a generally unsavory tone, that sort of thing. In one sense, your work represents such a vision. But, while the European hells were generally accompanied by a heaven, yours aren't. Why?*

Manuel Ocampo: I see hell on earth. Social manipulation is rampant in most countries. It has been repeatedly revealed to be maneuvered by the very models of humanitarian culture. Moralistic problems are dwarfed by complex international political schemes which generate massive human suffering. World banking is organized to perpetuate the status of the perpetrators. In the Philippines, for example, fundamentalists are heavily converting Filipinos into the capitalist system while the Catholic strategy of liberation theology urges members to resist the system. The first group reportedly has CIA training behind them while the second is so political that priests and nuns are literally killing their enemies. Combine this with the military which is bent on eradicating

the Muslims and you have a religious war erupting like a volcano. An ancient strategy — internal war for control supported by external aggravation. You know how there used to be so many kinds of vegetables, fruits, and animals? Now it's all being systematically simplified to enable nature to be controlled for marketing. The Western world wants control through simplification of political philosophy. In a personal sense, I see not having a culture to base myself on as being my own version of hell. It may sound ideological but, without a pure culture, all present cultures are composed of appropriated and exchangeable bits and pieces. They are just an exercise in domination and submission.

JS: *Are you, then, a religious artist or an iconoclast?*

MO: My work is both religious and iconoclastic. It's all about image. I believe I'm an atheist who's looking for, who wants to believe in, an image.

JS: *Pretend that contemporary culture is a forest with trees and swamps and alligators of conceptualism, deconstructionism, and*

postmodernism. If you had to hack your way through, would you consider your art to be a rapier or a machete?

MO: I would consider myself a lawnmower. I'm not cutting down trees; I'm just buzzing between them. In L.A. I feel very much like an outsider. Being a machete would just be part of that forest. So would a rapier.

JS: *An undeniable trait of our work is violence, either literal or implied. Similarly, does your work advocate any kind of literal or implied struggle for those who are oppressed?*

MO: I see my paintings as signs that unmask cultural paranoia and cultural schizophrenia. I see my work as a billboard. Violence is just a brutal necessity of life. I paint where I come from. Nothing can take away my being Filipino, nothing changes the fact that I am now American. It comes out on the canvas, whether it is a sense of humor or in the color or in the perverse interpretation. My paintings are not meant to be didactic. I think in that sense they become performance art, like a Passion Play.

JS: *The work you showed at Salander-*

O'Reilly/Fred Hoffman, especially Cooks in the Kitchen, reminds me, in its overall effect, of Dali. You have said on numerous occasions that your work is a critique of the Westernization of the Philippines; I'm wondering whether, like Dali, your work also expresses your own deep-rooted psychoses.

MO: In *Cooks in the Kitchen* I wanted to paint something more universal and identifiable. My inspiration for *Cooks in the Kitchen* is a little known fact about minstrel shows. I see the minstrel show as an act of subversion. The performers exaggerate their stereotypes and the white audience laughs at the minstrels who in turn laugh at the audience. They themselves are laughing at the performers. It's a sort of double reflection.

JS: What does multiculturalism mean to you? Do you feel part of a larger socio-cultural group in Los Angeles, a grouping which includes Chicanos, Asians, Afro-Americans?

MO: Multiculturalism is just a label, a marketing label. It's a trend, a capitalist tool. It's like someone said, "Western culture is a little tired right now, so let's introduce this exoticism."

JS: Are you a "bad boy," or is all that P.R.?

MO: (laughing), I'm not a bad boy. It's not a strategy. I don't want to have a certain persona as a bad boy. I'd like to be the Devil, but a bad boy, no, he just gets spanked! The Devil is God in exile.

JS: Is all this critical and commercial attention on your work a hindrance or an aid?

MO: No, it's not a hindrance; I put it to good use. Sometimes when a critic trashes

my work I'll say, "Maybe he's right." But I'll do the same thing anyway because it's what I want to do. It's hard to view the work objectively. I guess it makes my work more critical while maintaining the same cutting edge. It helps me.

JS: What next? You mentioned somewhere you wanted to open an art school both here and in the Philippines.

MO: I'd like to open a school in which the students would make little *retablos* of my paintings. Like a little factory. It would be a tourist industry based in the Philippines.

JS: Among both living and dead artists, whom do you admire?

MO: I like Robert Colescott. I like the collective Yugoslav group, IRWIN. Among the dead, Julian Schnabel (laughs), Dali, Bosch, Picabia, and all of those anonymous colonial folk painters. I'm an image scavenger. Any image I can use I will use — not just art but design elements, mass media, films — whether Western or non-Western.

JS: Do you ever feel that you have sold out? Third World artist selling to the Western tourists, that sort of thing.

MO: Hey, that's exchange, like what I used to do in the Philippines. I seriously wanted to become a painter. I used to copy all these antiquated colonial paintings to sell to European dealers who knew they were fake, and they would sell them to the public as authentic antiques from the Philippines. I'd even put them in the oven, with egg tempera, to make them look old.

JS: You have said you wanted to put the Philippines on the international art scene and art market. How does it feel to be a one-man national movement?

MO: There is nobody to model myself after or on with whom I can gauge myself. I really think there is a School of Ocampo, selling these *retablos* of my work to European antique dealers. I think using my past is a subversive act, like the minstrel shows. I think I have raised the conscious of artistic activity in the Philippines. I've seen a lot of recent painting in the Philippines and, surprisingly enough, it's like these kind of surrealist scenes; I even saw one with a swastika in it. A lot of abstraction too. Filipino artists always have to question their identity, they always have to paint about that. They just can't relax and be competitive. It's always about questioning themselves. This holds them back.

JS: Do you read deconstructionist theory? I ask because it has been written that your work — with its swastikas, Ku Klux Klansmen — demonstrates the impurity of cultural production. Or is that an imposed reading?

MO: All cultural production is impure. I paint the swastika — and not the Nazi symbol — and the hooded figures — not the Klansmen — because to me they are ancient images of empowerment. I've seen *Birth of a Nation*, I've been impressed by its aspects of truth. I want to do my own *Birth of a Nation* because it is a presentation of a time without censorship.

JS: You draw on and uniquely synthesize many sources. Is there an overall effect you consciously strive for?

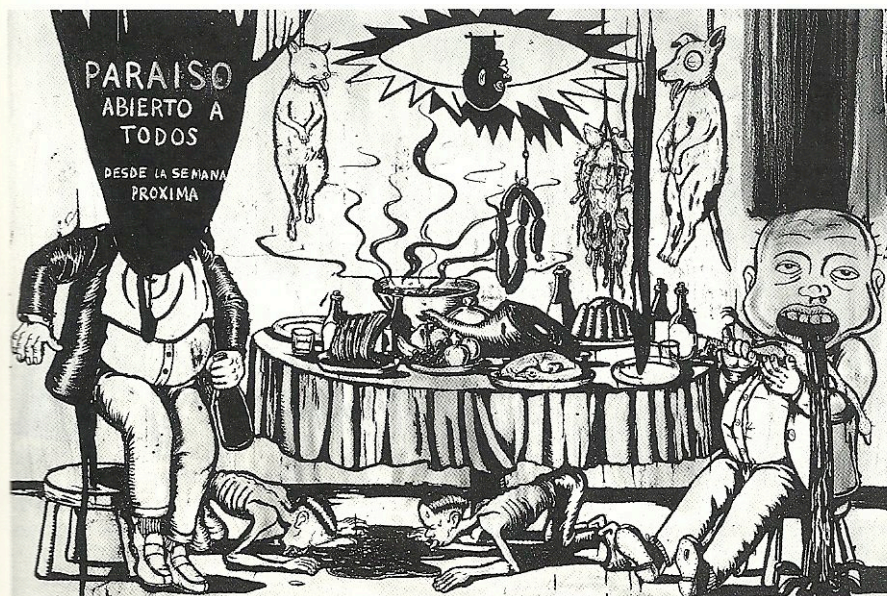
MO: No. It's something I want to do that I'm good at. It's something I want to express that I enjoy. If you want to express something, you want to express it perfectly. It's not a conscious effect; it's not a strategy.

James Scarborough is a critic based in Los Angeles.

Manuel Ocampo was born in Quezon City (Philippines) in 1965. He lives and works in Los Angeles.

Selected solo shows: 1988: La Luz de Jesus Gallery, Los Angeles; 1989: The Onyx Gallery, Hollywood; 1990: Christopher John, Santa Monica; 1991: Fred Hoffman, Santa Monica; 1992: University Art Museum/Pacific Film Archives, Berkeley, CA; 1993: Salander-O'Reilly/Fred Hoffman, Beverly Hills.

Selected group shows: 1985: Vargas Museum, Quezon City, (Philippines); 1986: City Gallery, Manila; 1987: "I Just Stopped off for a Beer," Kulay Diwa, Manila; "Salon des Independants," Richard Bennett, Los Angeles; "The I Love Jesus Show," La Luz de Jesus Gallery, Los Angeles; 1988: "New Art-New Artists," Francine Elman, Los Angeles; 1989: "The Scream Show," A.T.A. Gallery, San Francisco; 1990: "Art Café," Municipal Art Gallery, Hollywood; "Enigmatic Messages," John Thomas, Santa Monica; "4 Fanaticists," Action Gallery, Los Angeles; "Asian-American Art," L.A. Arts Festival, Korean Cultural Service, Los Angeles; "Oppression-Four Voices," John Thomas, Santa Monica; 1991: "Mike Bidlo, Manuel Ocampo, Andres Serrano," Saatchi Collection, London; "Individual Realities in the California Art Scene," Sezon Museum of Art, Tokyo; 1992: "Helter Skelter," MoCA, Los Angeles; Documenta IX, Kassel; 1993: "Drawing in Southern California," California State University, Fullerton, California.



PARAISO ABIERTO A TODOS, 1993. OIL ON CANVAS, 72 X 108".