

Art from the Philippines showcases global influences anchored in Manila

Manila Vice exhibition in Sète explores work of 23 Filipino artists while Manuel Ocampo takes centre stage in Montpellier

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Phantasmagoric ... Manuel Ocampo with his works on view at the Carré Sainte-Anne museum in Montpellier, France.
Photograph: Carré Sainte-Anne

In the catalogue to his show, Romeo Lee, born in 1956, describes himself as "the first Filipino punk". The blurb states that "he persists in defining himself as 'underground'", even though he is well known in his country and the Pacific region in general.

He has yet to make a name in France, but the Manila Vice exhibition currently in Sète in southern France, will certainly help. Here Lee occupies an entire wall of the vast international museum of lowbrow art (Musée International des Arts Modestes, or

MIAM) established in 2000 by Hervé Di Rosa and Pascal Saumade. The wall is black and Lee has covered it with white drooling dragons, giant snails, laughing vampires and owls on dead trees. The drawings are highly skilled yet simplistic, doubtless a reference to some of the sources of this nightmare bestiary: cartoons, horror film posters, graffiti and tattoos.

Above this vast mural, Lee has hung a dozen or so paintings that date between 2005 and 2012. They are so high up that you have to twist your neck to see them or climb a metal staircase in this strange museum to get a better view. There it becomes clear that Lee does not have one specific painting style but varies effects and techniques, alternating between powerful representational and expressionistic extremes. Most of these paintings are remarkable, and one or two are quite outstanding. Some would not be out of place next to a Basquiat; others would stand up easily in the company of a Kirchner or a Dix.

The first Filipino punk is the most visible revelation in the Manila Vice exhibition, but not the only one. This is the first time we have had an opportunity to explore Filipino art in France, and of the 23 Filipino artists whose works are on display, Lee is the oldest while the youngest were born in the 80s. They have studied in the Philippines but some also in the US: for instance, Armando Flores and Gerardo Tan. They have held exhibitions in Manila as well as in Hong Kong, Singapore, Bangkok, Taipei and San Francisco. In other words, these artists are familiar with the international contemporary art scene, but rather than work in New York or Berlin, most of these artists prefer to stay in and around their hometown of Manila. The life of that megalopolis – its cultures and iconographic traditions, the blend of religions, and the social and economic situation, where ostentatious wealth is juxtaposed with extreme poverty – is omnipresent in these works.

The way the works are hung triggers many allusions to pre- and post-colonial Philippines, with display cases of figurines of Christ and Christian saints, toys inspired by Hollywood movies and their spinoffs, and primitive statuettes of rice deities. In addition to utilitarian objects made using the same aesthetic principles, here are also lifesize statues, realistic down to the details of the clothing. They resemble those by Maurizio Cattelan but are created by artisans from the Baguio region, who carve them with chainsaws before sculpting the details, painting them in a range of bright colours and varnishing them.

There is no transition between the various works. Scenes with a Christian inspiration are placed side-by-side with paintings of monsters and zombies, and the Lamentation of Christ may be reinterpreted in the style of a rather less Catholic Night of the Living

Dead. That is how things are in the Philippines, a country of hybrid culture, which has assimilated its indigenous roots, the Spanish, and later the American colonists, in addition to the influence of its relations with Asia. The unity of the exhibition lies in the artists' total lack of hierarchy or prohibitions concerning their country's stock of references. Dina Gadia and Katwo Puertollano have made use of low-grade and Disney films, while Maria Jeona Zoleta consumes vast quantities of TV series and tabloids. Jayson Oliveria's smoking-and-pissing King Kong is fairly explicit, and Pow Martinez does not go in for nuance in his bloody neo-primitive genre.



Manuel Ocampo ...

'His paintings fill the entire vast exhibition space, each one swarming with monsters and demons'

The works echo each other from one wall to the next, clashing and finally mutually explaining each other since they all lead to the same pictorial chaos of names and myths. Most of the invited artists are painters and flow effortlessly, and perhaps mockingly, between references to the history of art and art markets. Jayson Oliveria happily shifts from his pissing King Kong to a richly coloured Richer-type abstract, demonstrating that he is quite as much at ease with one style as the other.

The predominance of paintings may be due to the show's curator, Manuel Ocampo, who is a painter himself, born in the Philippines in 1965. He trained in Los Angeles and now lives in Seville. Ocampo's reputation has been established for more than a decade, spanning the Venice Biennale, the Lyon Contemporary Art Biennale and Documenta IX in Kassel, Germany. A number of scandals certainly contributed to his fame, but he has kept in the background for the Manila Vice exhibition, with only a mural drawing at the entrance (but a fairly shocking one), and a small painting of a narcissistic fish.

However, in an exhibition of his works in Montpellier's Carré Sainte-Anne, a former

church, Ocampo is far less restrained. Baroque might best describe it. His paintings fill the entire vast exhibition space, each one swarming with monsters and demons, religious or cabalistic signs, symbols and historic quotations. His still-lives abound with axes, empty bottles and branches. He often writes on his canvases (in French or English) and assembles such a large variety of pictorial pastiches that it is impossible to keep track of them.

One might tire of this verbosity and overabundance if Ocampo's principal aim were to demonstrate that he is a virtuoso of such hybrid forms. But there is far more to his works than that. They convey a deep, genuine anguish and a rage against religion and globalisation. The two exhibitions, in Sète and in Montpellier, are inseparable because Ocampo has played a key role in the formation and recognition of Filipino art through his own work and, as in these exhibitions, by his actions.

Manila Vice, is at the Musée International des Arts Modestes, Sète, until 22 September

Manuel Ocampo is at the Carré Sainte-Anne, Montpellier, until 15 September

• *This article was published in Guardian Weekly, which incorporates material from Le Monde*