

The Seattle Times

Friday, February 18, 1994

Manuel Ocampo Rides The Arts Roller Coaster

By Ferdinand M. De Leon

Manuel Ocampo has no illusions about the fickle nature of the art business.

At the moment, the 28-year-old artist is a rising star: critics praise his complex, symbolic paintings, serious art buyers and celebrities collect them, and important galleries exhibit them.

But he knows all that can change at a moment's notice.

"The art world and the art media can really exploit you and when they've made their money and they think there's no more money to be made out of you, then they say you're finished," Ocampo said. "You really have to be skeptical and wary of fame."

Ocampo, who is in town for the opening of the Henry Art Gallery's exhibit of his work, is speaking obliquely about the artist whose work makes up the other half of the show: Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Like Ocampo, Basquiat was discovered when he was very young. Championed by Andy Warhol, he quickly became a cause celebre, and his graffiti-influenced works were at the center of an art-buying frenzy in the 1980s. But others dismissed Basquiat as a media creation, and in 1988, when he died at 27 from a heroin overdose, his artistic reputation quickly declined.

But a Basquiat retrospective last year at the Whitney Museum of American Art (the source of the paintings in the Henry exhibit) revived interest in his work.

The pairing of the Philippine-born Ocampo and Basquiat was the brainchild of Chris Bruce, the senior curator for the Henry Art Gallery.

Bruce first became aware of Ocampo's work at a 1991 exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

"It was a big, very splashy show," Bruce said. "It was the art event in L.A. for that year, and there were about a dozen artists in the show. His work seemed like the most aggressively historical painting I had seen in a while. It was very intense and it stood out."

Ocampo's work impressed him enough that Bruce contacted Ocampo and began laying the groundwork for this exhibit. He decided to pair him with Basquiat after the Whitney show.

"They're both large-scale, and both ambitious," Bruce said. "The physical impact of their best work has an intensity level that not a lot of artists can compete with. They're both in your face but in a different way."

But despite his admiration for Basquiat's work (Ocampo refers to him as a genius), Ocampo also emphasizes the differences, especially in the way they've responded to their early successes.

"Thinking about Basquiat and what happened to him, I feel like you really have to be aware of what's happening and go about it real slow so you don't put out so much that you burn out. You have to be elusive and just keep growing and not take it too seriously."

Learning the business

Ocampo actually had a very early introduction to the business side of the art world. When he was 14, he received some of his earliest artistic training doing replicas of religious artwork and icons that were then passed off as religious icons. One of the partners in the scam was a priest, he said.

After moving to Los Angeles when he was 20, Ocampo began to use that training to produce angry works that depicted the cruel impact he says the Catholic Church and Western imperialism had on his native Philippines.

"In the Philippines, I never questioned those things, but after moving here I started to question my beliefs," Ocampo said.

His violent works often include hooded Spanish friars surrounded by carnage and severed limbs. Filipino-Americans in Los Angeles, where Ocampo lives, have criticized the anti-Catholicism in the paintings.

Ocampo also was accused of being a racist and a sexist, when some of his paintings depicted swastikas and stereotypical images of African Americans. Ocampo, who withdrew the paintings from a planned exhibit, said he was simply trying to use stereotypical images and, in doing so, hoping to render them impotent.

But after eight years, Ocampo said he's starting to mellow.

"I think I'm coming to terms with my Catholicism. Once a Catholic, always a Catholic. In my earlier work, I was really angry, renouncing Catholicism. But I now accept the fact that I'm a Catholic. I just don't go to church anymore."

Recent work

In his most recent work, there are no swastikas or severed limbs. There is a group of rats gathered around a tin can. A spent condom sits on top of the can. The leader rat has a syringe in his paws.

But it's not entirely without religious reference. The head rat also has a halo, and the other rats, not too coincidentally, look to him in the same intent way that the Apostles look to Jesus in paintings of The Last Supper, and the German words above the scene read "Peace on Earth."

Ocampo's star shows no sign of waning.

"In the contemporary art world people are looking all the time," Bruce said. "Anytime there's a new talent that's that dynamic and interesting, people pay attention to it."

Exhibit at Henry

The Jean-Michel Basquiat and Manuel Ocampo exhibit opens today at the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington and will be on view through April 28. Ocampo discusses his work at 7:30 p.m. today.