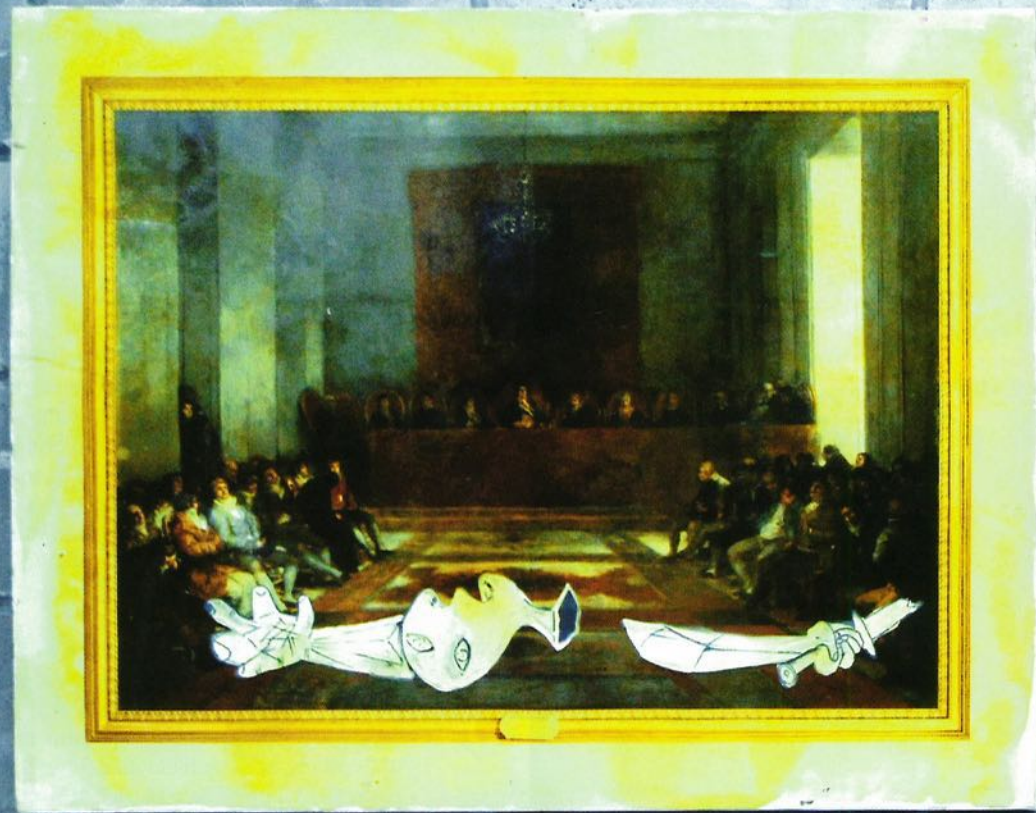


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THE DEVIL YOU KNOW



Manuel
Ocampo

NIS
NENOS

BY DOMINIC
ZINAMPAN

On the evening of August 22 last year, artists, professors, students and collectors flocked to Ateneo Art Gallery in Quezon City, Philippines, for the opening of “Los Desastres de la Democracia (The Disasters of Democracy),” an exhibition of paintings, photographs and sculptures by Manuel Ocampo in collaboration with Jigger Cruz. I felt compelled to go, intrigued by Ocampo’s notoriety and stature within the local art scene. I was already aware that his explicit and often gory works were not for the fainthearted. Given the artist’s reputation, I assumed him to be either a brooding and ill-tempered misanthrope or a reckless and self-destructive motormouth. However, during the introductory speech, he was surprisingly polite, even soft-spoken. Yet he concluded his remarks with a provocative declaration, “Let’s have an orgy!”—which drew good-humored chuckles from the audience. Throughout the night Ocampo exuded a warm and jovial charm as he conversed with critics, patrons, curators and fellow artists—an image at odds with his depictions of grotesque bodies, extreme violence, brutal sodomy, bloodthirsty demons, right-wing insignia and Spanish expletives scarring the exhibition space.

Skulls, guts, teeth, fetuses, crosses, swastikas, God, Satan, the occult, cartoons and feces: these are all features of the Ocampo lexicon. The artist idolizes the irreverent expressions of figures such as Martin Kippenberger, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp. He wages war against all things sacred in art, armed with an array of kitsch and an extensive knowledge of art history, polluting his canvases with cryptic and usually vulgar phrases in an array of languages including Spanish, German, English and Filipino. Splatters, drips, scribbles and other methods of disruption and distortion are commonly integrated. These components create puzzles that alternate between seducing viewers to decipher the works and chasing them away by yelling obscenities. Racist, blasphemous and anti-Semitic themes make appearances in his violently gestural and mind-meltingly nightmarish paintings. His works are frequently intertextual, imbuing familiar motifs with new meanings and regularly recycling disparate symbols with histories stretching across different periods. Ocampo even treats the crucifix and other sacred motifs as pop icons, just as Warhol did with the Campbell soup cans. Along the way, many boundaries are transgressed.

The artist’s gentle demeanor, which I witnessed that night at Ateneo Art Gallery, is perplexing considering his public reputation as an outspoken critic whose vitriolic opinions spare no one. He has railed virulently against numerous art world targets—fairs, collectors, curators, other artists and auction houses—as well as larger phenomena such as Spanish colonialism, Roman Catholicism, United States imperialism, capitalism and neoliberalism. However, as well as embodying the role of a belligerent critic, Ocampo is also cerebral, insightful and humorous, a balance that hints at an elaborate prank being played on those who dare to write off his work as simply offensive. His 30-year-long career is astonishing—few if any artists can boast of similar “accolades” or milestones, such as having four paintings yanked from Documenta IX in 1992

for containing swastikas, to creating a “mockumentary” with fellow artist Romeo Lee as the subject in 2003. The artist has also established unofficial organizations, such as the Bastards of Misrepresentation, the Department of Avant-Garde Clichés and the Bureau of Artistic Rehab.

To those who know a little about the Manila contemporary art scene, Ocampo might have seemed like a controversial choice as one of the artists representing the Philippines at the 57th Venice Biennale in May, along with Filipino-Canadian artist Lani Maestro, in the exhibition “The Spectre of Comparison,” curated by Joselina Cruz, the director and curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design in Manila. However, the topic of the show, inspired by José Rizal’s 1887 novel *Noli Me Tángere* (“Touch Me Not”), is close to the heart of Ocampo’s work. The artists will look at central themes from the novel, including religion, corruption, politics and human-rights abuses, referencing the memory-based perspective on the world that Rizal called “el demonio de las comparaciones,” later translated into English by anthropologist Benedict Anderson as “the spectre of comparisons.” This particular perspective revealed how Filipinos tend to negotiate their gaze between Asia and Europe and the US. Ocampo has long displayed self-reflexivity regarding the issue, having once commented that artists often oversimplify the concept of globalization and its relation to identity—something he realized early on during his formative years in Los Angeles. He believes that globalization renders the East-West dichotomy absurd, slowly diminishing the substance that national identity once had. Behind every one of Ocampo’s paintings are expressions of this commentary, and yet he retains a deep affinity with, and has strong reactions to, the ever-shifting circumstances arising from within his native country. To shock or hurt is not his intention, nor is he being nihilistic. Instead, Ocampo’s message is that we must arm ourselves with humor in order to transcend the traumas of history.

Ocampo’s own life story is one of negotiating societal ruptures. He was born in 1965, just months before the presidency and subsequent dictatorship under martial law of Ferdinand Marcos. Growing up in a middle-class family, the artist was an obedient son, as described by his mother in *Manuel Ocampo: God Is My Copilot*, a 1999 documentary by Phillip Rodriguez. Spending his early years in Quezon City, Ocampo and his family eventually moved to New Jersey, in the early 1980s. He later returned to his home country to spend a year studying fine arts at the University of the Philippines before moving to LA in 1985.

While in LA, he studied briefly at California State University before dropping out and juggling odd jobs at McDonald’s, Fotomat and a paint factory. He worked during the day and painted at night. Eventually his works garnered enough attention that he could earn more from selling a single painting than from his monthly paycheck. At the time, many curators and critics saw Ocampo as a poster boy for issues of postcolonialism, identity politics and multiculturalism, themes that were gaining traction within the LA art scene. Yet he had trouble identifying as Filipino, and, living in “the Disneyland of the World,” as he called it, felt alienated and displaced from his

(Previous spread)

(Left) **QUITATE LA ROPA Y CALLATE**, 2015, acrylic on digital print, 74 x 94 cm; (right) **DAME TU DINERO**, 2015, acrylic on digital print, 74 x 94 cm. Installation view for Manuel Ocampo’s exhibition “Los Desastres de la Democracia” at Ateneo Art Gallery, Quezon City, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Ateneo Art Gallery.

(Opposite page)

YOU BETTER WATCH OUT WHAT YOU ARE SAYING IN THIS SOCIETY PEOPLE ARE QUICK TO CRUCIFY YOU, 1985, oil on canvas, plastic, denim, paper on wood and latex paint, 127.6 x 210.8 cm. Courtesy Archivo 1984, Makati City.



homeland. In the documentary, he recalled the first time he was called a “chink” while waiting tables. Although the art community had come to associate him with multiculturalism and identity politics, Ocampo soon lost interest in investigating such issues.

In 1992, Ocampo officially entered the international art scene when his paintings were featured in the critically acclaimed exhibition “Helter Skelter: LA Art in the 1990s” at LA Museum of Contemporary Art, alongside renowned artists such as Chris Burden, Charles Ray, Mike Kelley and Raymond Pettibon. These artists similarly wrestled with the unruly, sprawling landscape of the city, in works that carried strong themes of sexuality and violence. Then came the infamous Documenta IX incident. German authorities prohibited four of Ocampo’s five paintings from being displayed because they contained swastika-like symbols that, although used to reference Asian and Native American iconography, were still considered taboo in Germany. The single remaining painting was placed in an obstructed basement room, a compromise between the Documenta IX team and Ocampo, who wanted to avoid withdrawing from the show entirely.

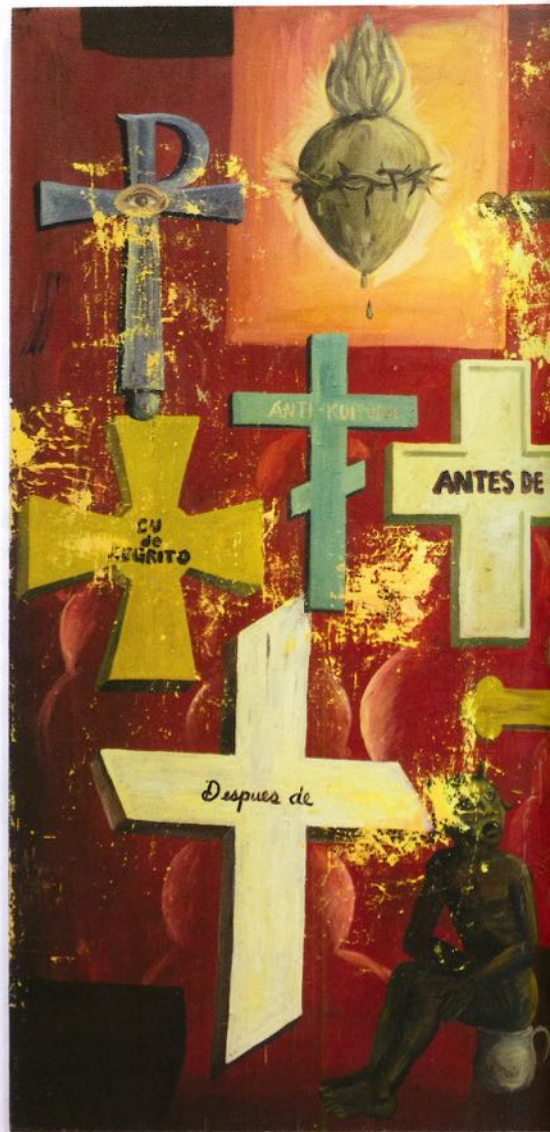
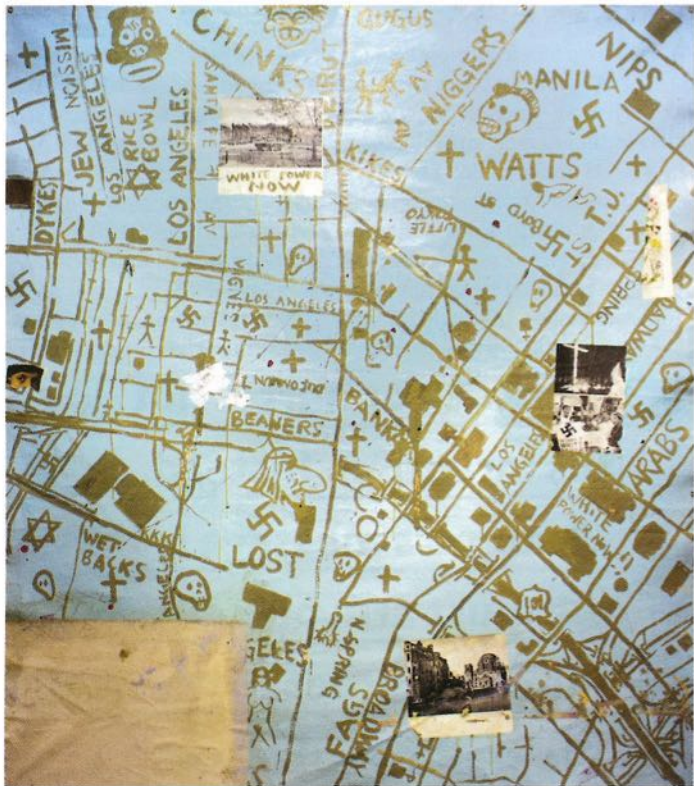
These earliest works, created during Ocampo’s LA years, exude a baroque, narrative-based sensibility. In February of this year, a rare show of the artist’s earliest works opened at Archivo 1984, a gallery in Makati City, providing visitors with the opportunity to contrast his recent works with this initial period of creation when his paintings possessed a more vicious energy. For example, a 1985 assemblage titled *You Better Watch Out What You Are Saying in This Society People Are Quick to Crucify You* comprises picture-frames

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of different sizes nailed together in a style reminiscent of American painter Robert Rauschenberg's "combines" of collaged found objects. In Ocampo's work, a jar, a denim jacket and a rag form the "canvas," on the surface of which is a decapitated man, several buildings, a church and a silhouette. Although anomalous in the artist's oeuvre, *You Better Watch Out* illustrated his early propensity for experimentation and rebellion.

Foreshadowing his later gestural and text-based works is *Untitled (Ethnic Map of LA)* (1987). In the painting, the serenely pale-blue ground is demarcated by a scat-brown grid describing different streets and neighborhoods, annotated with racially charged slurs and symbols to identify its inhabitants. Although less graphic, the diptych *Dolor de Muelas* (1991) is also characteristic of Ocampo's developing esoteric style. The left panel depicts seven different crosses, a sacred-heart motif and a devil sitting on a pot, while the right panel features a desolate landscape occupied by the figure of a devil about to be struck by a Ku Klux Klansman wielding a weapon and riding atop a black horse whose front legs are gesturing toward the sky. In the same allegorical vein, *Cooks in the Kitchen* (1993/1997), sees three Caucasian-looking men being mutilated by four cooks with charcoal black skin. A victim on the left side of the canvas hangs upside down, his ankles impaled by curved blades. His torso is sliced vertically down the middle, and guts and foreign objects such as bottles and credit cards are falling out of the wound. Another victim at the center of the painting has had his crown cleanly sliced off to reveal a pink fleshy brain while bills and coins are funneled into his rectum. In the background, the third victim is being spit roasted. Narrating this horrific scene is a bitterly ironic phrase inscribed at the upper portion of the canvas: "The development of abstract art immigrant version."

Ocampo's shift away from this earlier figurative period was documented in *God Is My Copilot*, which captured the years he spent in Seville, Spain, in the late 1990s. During that time, he began to introduce cartoon imagery and a more monochromatic palette to his works, to the dismay of some of his loyal collectors. His style would continue to evolve drastically, which resulted in Ocampo losing longtime fans while gaining new ones. His frequently shifting



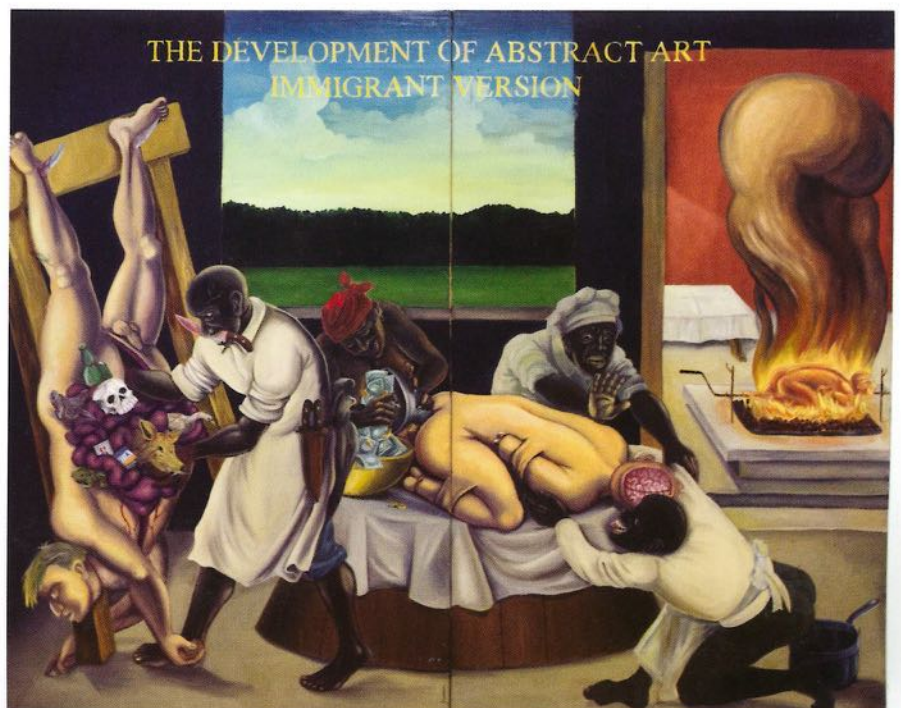
**“I always seem to pervert
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approach to painting is indicative of his inclination toward practice over product. It is this philosophy that, aside from revealing Ocampo's recent dismissals of hyperrealism as an unoriginal style, forces him to persistently challenge himself by imposing limitations on form or initiating collaborations and grappling with sociopolitical ideas and subject matter. Ocampo actively seeks external stimuli that spur him to paint, seeing himself as a conduit rather than a fountain. In part due to this restless search for community and experimentation, Ocampo moved back to Manila in 2005 after having lived abroad for 18 years.

During the 2000s in the Philippines, artists were freely experimenting, largely unconcerned and unconstrained by commercial interests. Coupled with the increasing number of pop-up art spaces, galleries and artist-groups, there was a sense of emergent possibility that was worlds away from the established art scenes of LA and Europe. This led to a period of fearless creativity that ultimately ended in the late 2000s after the global economic recession, which—ironically—led to the expansion of the art market across Asia, including in the Philippines. Today, there is still a steady current of countercultural art being produced in Manila, although Ocampo laments the corrosion of this bygone era after “neoliberalist vultures” set their sights on Southeast Asia.

To counteract the increasing commercialization of the art scene in Manila, Ocampo curated several shows around the world with a group of like-minded artists who called themselves the Bastards of Misrepresentation. The group included daring and anarchic painters such as Romeo Lee, Pow Martinez and Maria-Jeona Zoleta, along with more conceptual artists like Poklong Anading, Lena Cobangbang and Gerry Tan. They exhibited first in Berlin at the Freies Museum in 2010; then in New York at Topaz Arts, the Queens Museum of Art and Crossing Art Gallery in 2012; and finally in Sète, France, at the Musée International des Arts Modestes in 2013. All travel expenses, including the shipping of the works, were drawn from funds raised by the group. “I wanted to show art made in the Philippines abroad but didn’t want to wait for things to happen, so we decided to take things into our own hands,” Ocampo wrote to me in an email. He mentioned he also made a foray into pedagogy with the Bureau of Artistic Rehab (BAR), an artist-led educational program that served as an alternative to the traditional university and art-school formats back in 2012. The vision behind BAR was to cultivate healthy interaction between the new generation of artists



(Opposite page)
UNTITLED (ETHNIC MAP OF LA), 1987,
acrylic and collage on canvas, 168.9 x 149.8 cm.
Courtesy Archivo 1984, Makati City.

(This page, top)
DOLOR DE MUELAS, 1991, oil on canvas, 243.8
x 304.8 cm. Courtesy Archivo 1984, Makati City.

(This page, bottom right)
COOKS IN THE KITCHEN, 1993/1997,
oil on linen, 242.2 x 304.8 cm. Courtesy
Archivo 1984, Makati City.

(Opposite page, top)

TREMORS, 2016, oil on canvas, 208 x 188 cm.
Courtesy the Drawing Room, Makati City.

(Opposite page, bottom left)

PHANTOM INSPIRATION (LA LEALTAD),
2016, acrylic on vellum, 126 x 89 cm. Courtesy
the artist and Ateneo Art Gallery, Quezon City.

(Opposite, bottom right)

ENTRAR Y CALLAR, PART 2, 2016, acrylic
on cartolina, 201 x 150 cm. Courtesy the artist
and Ateneo Art Gallery, Quezon City.

and veterans without the typically bureaucratic and dogmatic rules found in academia.

In 2011, Ocampo went a step further by founding the Department of Avant-Garde Clichés (DAGC), a commercial art gallery. Located along the gallery-lined street of Pasong Tamo in Makati City, Ocampo sought to present art to a wider audience. Instead of peddling expensive paintings to keep the gallery afloat, DAGC sold print editions at low- and mid-range prices. In his three-pronged role of artist, curator and gallerist, Ocampo has consistently displayed a penchant for radical experimentation, all the while remaining realistic about his status as an artist. As he explained: “I always seem to pervert my function as an artist, thereby sabotaging my own work. The result can be a mess, but I guess this is the way I can challenge my own notion of what a painting is and keep it from being boring.”

Ocampo has made it clear in interviews over the years that he did not decide to be an artist; rather, the profession was a calling. He is a misfit whose ideals and interests are incompatible with mainstream society. In his mind, being an artist is the closest one can get to being free. As he put it, to be an artist, “all one needs are ideas and [the desire] to express oneself.” When considering his medium of choice early in his career, he simply chose paint for its accessibility as well as its malleability. In the last couple of years, Ocampo has turned his focus back solely to his painting and art practice. In 2016, he mounted works at three important exhibitions in Manila: “Brown Dada,” a group show at Vinyl on Vinyl Gallery, “Paintings to Take Drugs to” at the Drawing Room, and “Los Desastres de la Democracia” at Ateneo Art Gallery. Each exhibition featured Ocampo’s most recent studies and themes in vastly different bodies of work. The Vinyl on Vinyl show was partly inspired by Thomas Zipp’s 2008 exhibition “White Dada” at London’s Alison Jacques Gallery, which viewed Dada’s radicalism as a bygone trend in society. Ocampo and others drew parallels between the milieu that gave birth to Dada and the carnage of the present, ridiculing the seminal movement as if to perpetuate its radical irreverence. The show was expectedly anarchic, not only in terms of the brushwork and subjects of Ocampo’s paintings but even in its unorthodox manner of display. Some of the artists’ works were suspended in the air, while others were touching the floor. In contrast, “Paintings to Take Drugs to” responded directly to President Rodrigo Duterte’s war on drugs—which had claimed thousands of lives in the Philippines within six months of his election victory—featuring black-and-white paintings depicting ghostly figures and a host of references to drugs. Here, Ocampo’s visual language remained enigmatic, though open to political or allegorical readings. In *Tremors* (2016), a devil, surrounded by skulls on the floor, plays a grand piano while a candelabra and a dead swan-like figure rests on top of it. In *Heroin Flashbacks* (2016), a man with a giant nose drags from a pipe and is surrounded by flowers, African ornaments and a detached foot; the word “heroin,” is painted prominently in the left portion of the canvas.

Ocampo is fond of bombarding viewers with information, without adhering to a linear sequence, and believes that painting can best communicate this kind of anarchy. He refuses to settle on singular meanings or scenarios, instead choosing to juxtapose signs, allowing them to clash and occupy different contexts. He likens himself to a vulture eating from the carcass of history, only to “shit out art,” as he said during the artist talk for “Los Desastres de la Democracia.” In that exhibition at Ateneo, created with Jigger Cruz, Ocampo referenced Francisco Goya’s aquatint and etching print series “Los Disparates” (1815–23), depicting strange and dark scenes as well as Goya’s canvas *Junta de la Real Compañía de Filipinas* (1815), which commemorated the annual meeting of the Royal Company. Ocampo and Cruz treated Goya’s works as the backbone for their acerbic commentary on the current condition of the Philippines. In the artists’ view, the follies that Goya critiqued two centuries ago are still relevant today. They transformed the entire space to create an immersive environment, meant to evoke the feeling of walking inside a painting, filling the walls with canvases, the interstices with cryptic doodles and Spanish profanities, and the open spaces with installations. Though deeply provocative, their works were received favorably. Ocampo transformed Goya’s *Junta* by superimposing a tribesman, a mushroom cloud and details from Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937) on the respective surfaces of the paintings *Dame Tu Dinero I* (2016), *Dame Tu Dinero II* (2016) and *Quitate La Ropa y Callate* (2016). Visitors saw a devil sodomizing the figure of death in *El Demonio Violando la Muerte* (2016), a Templar cross with a skull in the center in *Phantom Inspiration (La Lealtad)* (2016) and various crosses, Stars of David and an Indian swastika in *Entrary Callar, Part 2* (2016). Ocampo has always pushed boundaries, never shying from the themes that have caused his works to be censored, but instead has expanded on them. However, when asked how he would prefer viewers to approach his works, Ocampo said that he hopes for openness, an appreciation for irony and an active imagination, which would pair well with the images on the canvases.

These days Ocampo leaves it to his artworks to tear up the art scene in Manila. Many of his other projects have fallen off the radar or become inactive. The Bastards haven’t exhibited together in years, the Department of Avant-Garde Clichés is on an indefinite hiatus and the Bureau of Artistic Rehab is no longer cutting-edge, as more and more independent avenues for arts education spring up in Asia. However, Ocampo was never interested in immortality. In a similar sense, the artist hardly cares if his works will live on after he’s gone. Although he has never offered any concrete reason as to why he paints or why he started painting, his stubborn refusal to compromise his vision is admirable. This attitude has opened up multiple channels of artistic expression and continues to serve as a beacon for other artists. In that sense, Manuel Ocampo has kicked a dent in the art world deep enough to ensure his legacy as one of the most influential characters in the Philippine art scene. 