

Spectre of Comparison Responds to Viva Arte Viva's Call

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The setting up of the works of Lani Maestro and Manuel Ocampo for the 2017 Philippine Pavilion at the 57th International Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia. Photos courtesy of the office of Sen. Loren Legarda

The 57th International Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia titled VIVA ARTE VIVA curated by Christine Macel focuses on art and artists and the Philippine Pavilion responds to this call, said Senator Loren Legarda.

Legarda, the visionary and principal advocate of the Philippines' participation in the Venice Biennale, said that the 2017 Philippine Pavilion, *The Spectre of Comparison*, curated by Joselina Cruz is in sync with Macel's concept for the Biennale exhibition.

Macel describes VIVA ARTE VIVA as "a Biennale designed with artists, by artists and for artists, about the forms they propose, the questions they ask, the practices they develop and the ways of life they choose... Today, in a world full of conflicts and shocks, art bears witness to the most precious part of what makes us human. Art is the ultimate ground for reflection, individual expression, freedom, and for fundamental questions."

Legarda said that the Philippine Pavilion responds to this through Lani Maestro and Manuel Ocampo whose works show that the artists' experiences have shaped their practice.

“The Spectre of Comparison aims to present the works of Maestro and Ocampo in such a way that the spectator would see more about the artists. The take off point is Jose Rizal’s protagonist in Noli Me Tangere, Crisostomo Ibarra, who experienced a double vision when he gazed out at the botanical gardens of Manila. The exhibition looks at how the two artists see the events of the Philippines and their adopted countries through an inverted telescope,” said Legarda.



Lani Maestro pictured inside the 2017 Philippine Pavilion

Both Maestro and Ocampo have lived and practiced outside of the Philippines, but have maintained active engagement with the country throughout their careers. Their practice and subject matters are deeply involved with their experiences as immigrants or citizens of a new diaspora that also reflect the complexity of a contemporary Philippine identity.

Cruz describes the Pavilion as one that puts more focus on the artists’ practices. “I do not want the phrase, ‘the spectre of comparisons,’ to overburden the works of Lani and Manuel, because the works are not about that. The phrase is about their work, not the other way around. It is embodied in their process, in their practice.”

Maestro’s practice moves fluidly through various forms of artistic engagements and installation incorporating a variety of media such as sound, film, text and photographs. Prompted by concerns that simultaneously call attention to and displace her materials and subject matter, her practice produces a shifting ground that makes it difficult to place Maestro as simply politically inclined.



Manuel Ocampo working on his piece for the 57th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia.

Ocampo's practice on the other hand, developed and matured in the United States in the early 80s. A painter by trade, he has been decidedly critical of systems across contemporary culture. Most glaring are his figurative works which in no uncertain terms critique power structures that exist in the Philippines, and across other contemporary systems.

Rizal's experience and understanding of Europe and the connections he continually made as he flipped back and forth between the contexts of home and the foreign crystallized the double-consciousness of a colonial émigré of the 19th century.

The Spectre of Comparison accords this global gaze to Ocampo and Maestro, not just as the simple in-between location or a knowledge of two (or several) worlds, but as a more complex imagining of the local and global as each artist re-define political resistance within their experience of shifting localities throughout their artistic careers. Woven within this twinning of practices is the space of the spectre of comparison that haunts the imagery and making of nationalisms fraught with colonial and imperialist pasts.

The Philippine Pavilion, a joint project of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA), the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) and the Office of Senator Loren Legarda, will hold its vernissage on May 11 and will be open to the public from May 13 to November 26, 2017.