



What does it mean to represent the ‘Filipino’ in the 2017 Venice Art Biennale?

By Don Jaucian

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The Philippines returns to the biggest event of the art world, the Venice Biennale, after the country’s comeback in 2015. Spearheaded by Sen. Loren Legarda, the project has taken on the contemplation of national identity through “The Spectre of Comparison” curated by Joselina Cruz and featuring the works of Lani Maestro and Manuel Ocampo. In photo: "No Pain Like This Body" by Lani Maestro. Photo by DON JAUCIAN

Venice, Italy (CNN Philippines Life) — The idea of a “national identity” isn’t flat, as some people might have you think. It is a vast, complex landscape, with boundaries leaking from one to the other. Perceived differences form a major part of what one’s national identity is supposed to be, but it is an idea sifted through many filters, such as exclusion, inclusion, straightforward definition, or deconstruction. Borders are drawn to demarcate the various elements that make up what, for example, being a Filipino is. But what if one is thrown into the spotlight to represent the country on a stage where national identity is at its core? Does simply being a Filipino qualify? What does it take to consider one work as Filipino other than being from the country of origin? Even more so, in this age where the notion of identity expands further than before?

The phrase "el demonio de las comparacione" appears in Jose Rizal’s “Noli Me Tangere,” uttered by the protagonist, Crisostomo Ibarra, who experiences this double vision of seeing his

beloved Philippines with the “spectre” of Europe (and vice versa), where he has been stripped off of his political innocence, seeing the possibilities — and limits — offered by Europe, and viewing Manila as a “sickly girl wrapped in the garments of her grandmother’s better days.”

It is this “spectre” that serves as the jump-off point of the Philippine Pavilion in this year’s Venice Art Biennale. Curated by Museum of Contemporary Art and Design’s Joselina Cruz, the exhibit features works of artists Lani Maestro and Manuel Ocampo, who have used their practice to confront their very own demonios, looking at the Philippines — and what it means to be a Filipino — when you’re no longer in a place you once called home.

In her curatorial statement, Cruz writes, “Their practice and their subject matters are deeply involved with their experiences as immigrants or citizens of a new diaspora that reflect a globalized subjectivity that characterizes our times.”



The Philippine Pavilion at the Venice Biennale takes its cue from the "spectre" as experienced by the protagonist Crisostomo Ibarra in Jose Rizal's "Noli Me Tangere," who, stripped of his political innocence, experiences a double vision of seeing his beloved Philippines with the “spectre” of Europe (and vice versa). PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PHILIPPINE ART VENICE BIENNALE

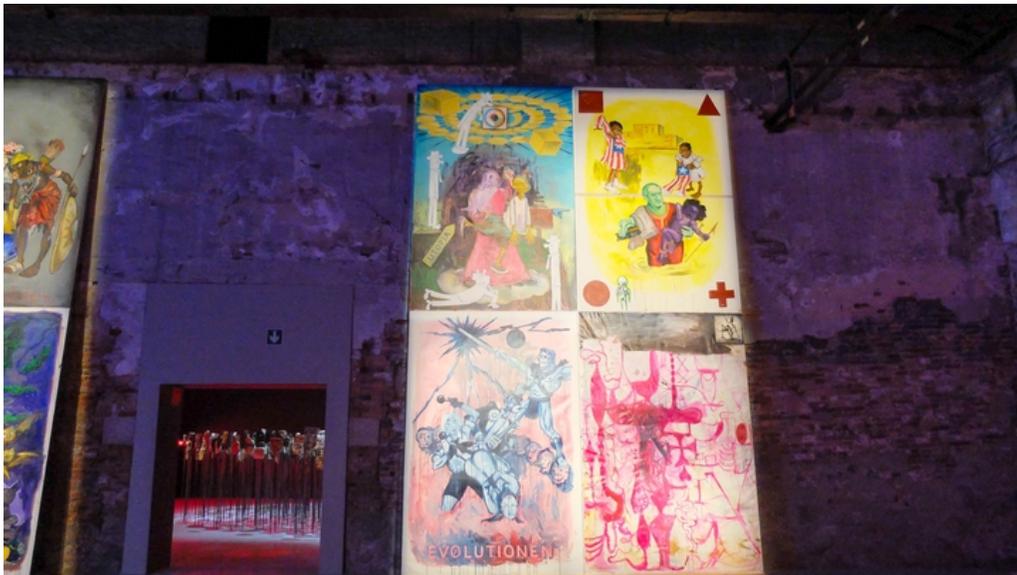
Looking at the Philippines’ representation in the Biennale — the second time since it returned in 2015 after a 51-year absence — the works resonate in quiet ways, responding to the political and social narratives that beleaguer the country.

Cruz confesses she has been critical about the idea of building pavilions around the concept of a “nation” and this is what “The Spectre of Comparison” shows by way of Maestro and Ocampo’s artistic practice. Yet, Cruz is quick to note that the title of the pavilion isn’t the center of the works of the artists but rather the other way around. “It is embodied in their process, in their practice.”

A major drawback produced a rather interesting result for the pavilion. The space given to the Philippines at the Artiglierie of the Arsenale, a historic building that dates back to the 1560, cannot be tampered wholly: no holes can be made, no major changes to the integrity of the structure.

“But I think that challenge was also wonderful,” says Maestro. “It was more of our interest how to preserve the aura of this space, the feeling of the space. I feel there is already a sense of community in this place, it has a trace of things from the past, so I feel it’s just a way of respecting what was there before and so for us to be here.”

She adds, “It was a proposition I decided as a way to link my work with Manuel’s within the space but also how to acknowledge a certain kind of movement in the space, the fluidity, that will allow to the people to be with our works more but also to move to the other spaces with a connection. And it's bangkó, it’s very Filipino.”



"Torta Imperiales," comprised of two towering works by Manuel Ocampo, is a response to the vastness of the pavilion space. Photo by DON JAUCIAN

Ocampo has spent years in the U.S. and in Spain, and returned to the Philippines recently, but is now back in Spain. His works are charged with irreverence, skewering the conventions of the art world and of society itself, and at the same time, contemplating on our own history of colonization by the Spaniards (deploying Baroque imagery to set off critique), the ramifications of the Filipino-American war, along with other iconographies from various cultures and works. This is but one of many of the layers of Ocampo’s art, which from the surface, wouldn’t seem to pair well with Maestro’s (which is influenced by American minimalism), as some have said.

“People say, ‘How can you work with Manuel? He’s too odd! Pwede ba ‘yun?’” says Maestro. “So for me it was kind of challenging. I didn’t think that, [I just thought] ‘Why not, I’ll just see what’ll happen.’ And in fact, the process of working with Manuel, I realized we have so much in common ... punk attitude?”

Maestro left the Philippines during the Martial Law years and has been “claimed” by various contexts, working in Canada for a long time — where she was conferred one of the highest visual arts awards of Canada, the Hnatyshyn Prize in 2012 — but is currently in France. Her work for the Biennale, two neon texts that hang from temporary and built structures, engage with the idea of the body and space. At the center of the pavilion is her new work, “meronmeron”: wooden benches — bangkó — that ask audiences to sit in order to contemplate the relationship of the viewer to the artwork around them.

The benches link the constant conversation between Maestro and Ocampo’s works. Ocampo’s are vast canvases that speak of numerous references, from Francisco Goya’s “Los Caprichos,” to the balikbayan box. For the exhibit, he produced two towering works, as a response, partly, to the vastness of the space, called “Torta Imperiales,” (6 x 4 meters) which Cruz suggests in her catalogue essay is “the (imperial) slap by the artist to everything he has ever critiqued, likely to include the Biennale itself as well as the governing arm that supports the exhibition.”

The participation of the country in the “Olympics of the art world” has been through the efforts of Senator Loren Legarda, working with the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, headed by the chairman, National Artist Virgilio Almario, who attended the vernissage of the pavilion recently. Legarda, due to an emergency surgical procedure, participated in the opening through Skype, taking questions from the members of the Philippine press who were flown to Venice to cover the unveiling.

This year’s Philippine participation marks a new milestone as the pavilion moves into the heart of the Biennale, at the Arsenale, from the Palazzo Mora — far from the main grounds of the Biennale in the Arsenale and the Giardini — where the 2015 Philippine Pavilion was displayed. Legarda was able to realize her dream of securing a place in the Arsenale, placing the works of Cruz, Maestro, and Ocampo, beside the pavilions of countries such as Argentina, Mexico, the U.A.E., Chile, and Singapore, as well as the main exhibit of the Biennale itself.



Lani Maestro, Manuel Ocampo, and Joselina Cruz. Photo by DON JAUCIAN

Aside from Maestro and Ocampo, Filipino artists David Medalla, and Katherine Nuñez and Issay Rodriguez have been selected by this year's Art Biennale curator, Christine Macel, to participate in the official "Viva Arte Viva" exhibition.

"The past years the floodgates of creativity have really burst open," says Legarda. "The fact that Issay and Kathy are in the main exhibition is a testament to the greatness of Filipino artists, the fact that two artists who [practice] overseas, Lani and Manuel, are selected artists in our exhibit, attests to the growth of our contemporary art scene."

She underscores the importance of the Philippine participation in the international art scene, as a way for Philippine culture to interact with other people and cultures — a bridge towards international understanding. "We tell the countries of our 'now,' as we mirror our political and cultural realities," Legarda says.

During the press conference of the Philippine Pavilion, days before the Biennale was opened to the public, CNN Philippines Life talked to Cruz, Maestro, and Ocampo about the notions of national identity, being in a state of exile, and how the work exists in the context of the entire Biennale.

The jump-off point of "The Spectre of Comparison" is a line from Jose Rizal's "Noli Me Tangere" and Benedict Anderson's contextualization of it. How does the idea of exile seep into the works that you guys brought here? Since Lani and Manuel work abroad, did you ever feel exiled?

Lani Maestro: For a long time yeah, it wasn't a preoccupation but I thought about it a lot. It's a big word because I wasn't really pushed out ...

Manuel Ocampo: It's a self-imposed [exile].

Lani Maestro: It was a choice but at the same time, I left during Martial Law but I didn't leave for political reasons. It was a preoccupation because there's always the question [of] how one defines identity when one is not within one's country. But I think this is so far back, because now I feel if there is such a thing, I belong to the country of making art. [Laughs] And that's where I feel free. And so to be a Canadian and to be a Filipino and to be something else, for me, it doesn't matter anymore, perhaps I feel like a citizen of the world.

At one point, I think it's interesting this whole notion of exile because it talks about belonging. For a long time I thought it's two separate things, "to be" and "to long." Being and longing. I think the idea of belonging is a perpetual longing for the mother, which is also the Other, that's how I define it for myself. It's an important state of mind, to be longing for this place that we don't have because in the world ... we are born alone, we die alone.

"The notion of identity is always moving. It's always in flux." - Manuel Ocampo

Manuel Ocampo: It's something that can never [be] realized. It's sort of an ideal.

Lani Maestro: Philosophically, I would like to think that exile is the best condition in life. To feel alone, even if I am in my own country, is the best way to go back to one's self, to not be attached to anything because it's the best way to find who one's self really is.

Joselina Cruz: It's very zen.

Manuel Ocampo: I guess I feel like I'm always not belonging, since I'm always moving around. I guess that also feeds into my work, the chaos of images and the multiplicity of references. I think I'm still, like what Lani said, it's a perpetual search and for me it sort of ... the idea of belonging [is] also the idea of having a homeland. I already referred to that in [one of the paintings in "Torta Imperiales"] ... it roughly translates: 'To masturbate is to make your homeland.' [Laughs]

Joselina Cruz: And you know what sort of seeds. [Laughs]

Manuel Ocampo: It refers to Hugo Chavez promoting football ... to support sports is to make your homeland proud. So in my paintings, it deals with a lot of those kinds of things, the notion of homeland, identity, and also makes fun of it.

It's not always so self-serious.

Manuel Ocampo: Yeah, this idea is like, "what?"

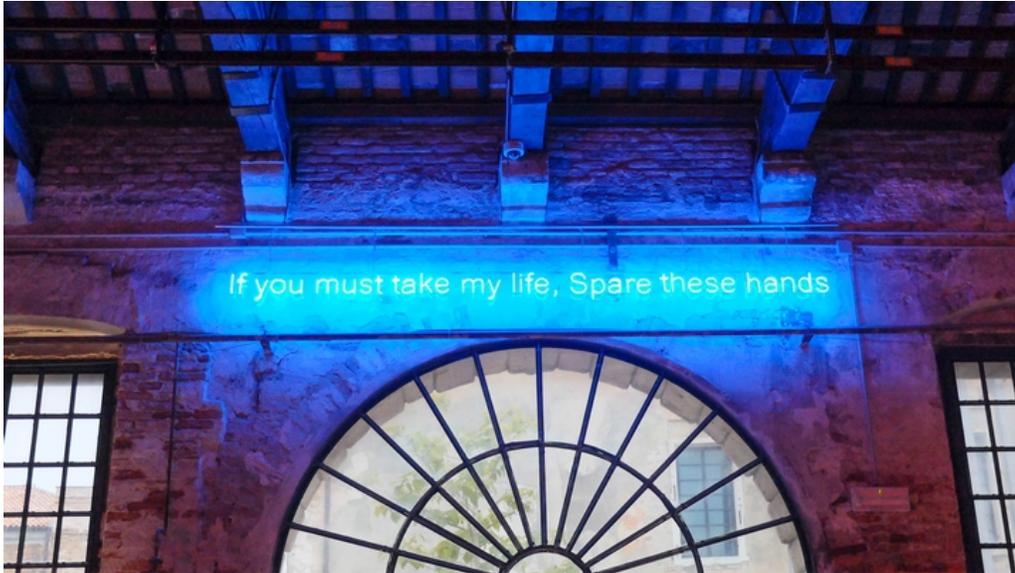
Lani Maestro: And it's a complex thing. It's never just one thing.

Manuel Ocampo: It's very layered. The notion of identity is always moving. It's always in flux. Like for example, every time I get legalized in a country, I move away. I lived in the States for 10 years, I was illegal for nine years and on the tenth year I got my papers. I went to Spain, I was illegal, and then I moved to the Philippines. I finally got my double nationality, I fled and moved back to Spain, and my status is uncertain. [Laughs] I'm not standing on fixed ground all the time.

Joselina Cruz: It's an interesting development, the movement from site to site.

Lani Maestro: I kept my Filipino passport for 25 years. I'm a masochist because it's always difficult to move with all the exhibitions. Finally I got my Canadian citizenship, and I was depressed because I had to give up my status and then I moved to France. I became Canadian to be in France. [Laughs] I think it's really important to be an outsider. We talk about the Other and I always felt, for the longest time when I lived in Canada, [that] it was an issue. When I went back to the Philippines after the dictatorship, suddenly I was back but I didn't belong there. I went back to Canada, I didn't belong there either.

Manuel Ocampo: We're in limbo, sort of.



"These Hands," by Lani Maestro. Photo by DON JAUCIAN

Lani Maestro: In a way, I think it became clear to me that the feeling of Otherness is really important, it's an interesting condition, or the feeling of homelessness.

Joselina Cruz: I think what's interesting there is the recognition of that.

Lani Maestro: Yeah, I think once I accepted that, I became free. I could feel free and grounded in terms of my identity because I've accepted that I could be outside or other everywhere else, even in myself.

Manuel Ocampo: Being in the peripheries is actually where the action is. [Laughs]

But now that you're actually representing the Philippines for the Biennale, what do you think this says about you and your practice?

Lani Maestro: For us, we're proud to be here but at the same time, because we've moved around and became part of other context[s] that claimed us, it's nice to be claimed by many people, it's like sitting in these benches, lahat kasali. In the end, countries, nations, they're categories.

Manuel Ocampo: They're social constructs.

Lani Maestro: The important thing is how we feel within ourselves. I think that's where freedom is found, not externally.

People are going to be looking at your work after they've gone from one country's pavilion to another. Does that affect how you guys have thought about your work?

Lani Maestro: Yeah, that's why we configured it this way.

Joselina Cruz: What you see when you enter from that point and that point. These are very curatorial discussions. The curator could have it [another way] but the way I work is with the two of them, and we'd make proposals and many times they'd disagree with me. [Laughs] Sometimes they do, but at the end of the day, it's the artist, and we will have this conversation and sometimes I'd go "My god, why are they doing this to me?" But it's productive.

Manuel Ocampo: We just decide as we go along. What we wanted is to have the integrity of the space intact, and so there were a lot of problems, it's really a difficult space but we decided to put false walls and we went from there. We're not mounting experts.

"Philosophically, I would like to think that exile is the best condition in life. To feel alone, even if I am in my own country, is the best way to go back to one's self, to not be attached to anything because it's the best way to find who one's self really is." - Lani Maestro

Joselina Cruz: It's also contributed a lot [to the conversation]. For example, Lani's works with the wall, has actually given another layer to the work, developed the work in a totally different realm and made it respond to the idea of walls. A lot of people have commented on this, it's so strong to actually produce a wall and put this sort of text on it, if we are to think about the walls at the moment, walls have a very strong political statement ... the push and pull of the works between Lani and Manuel are very strong. When they first asked me, "How are you gonna put Manuel and Lani's work together? They're so different!"

Manuel Ocampo: They didn't have the vision. [Laughs]

Joselina Cruz: I told them that I trusted them, that I trusted the work, I trusted the practice, I trusted the artist.

This I'll never forget when Manuel told me, "Lani's work is so powerful when you're there, but it's got this quality the moment you move out, sometimes, it disappears." I thought it was one of the most poetic depictions of Lani's work or of any artwork, to actually say that when you're in the presence of the work, it actually leaves this imprint, but the moment you move away, it releases this hold on you. I think this is what Lani's work [is], being present, the idea of how strong it hits you and your awareness of the work at that moment.

"The Spectre of Comparison" can be viewed at the Artiglierie exhibition space of the Arsenale complex in Venice, Italy. The 2017 Venice Art Biennale runs until November 26, 2017. The Philippine Pavilion is made through the efforts of Senator Loren Legarda, the National Commission for Culture and the Arts and the Department for of Foreign Affairs — which make up the Philippine Art Venice Biennale — and in cooperation with the Department of Tourism.