

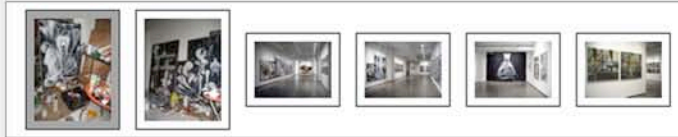


2 DEGREES / REENA KALLAT

Expand All | Collapse All

- Home
- Editorial
- Cover Story
- Articles

ARTICLES



Installation View at Tyler Rollins Fine Art (3 of 6)

- Up Against Interpretation: Manuel Ocampo
- 'Kachra Seth'
- Performance by WALAS
- Rivers of Blood
- 'Blacheborne Largo'
- Reviews
- News Stories
- Interviews
- Spring Board
- My Work
- Offbeat
- Book Review
- Open Text
- Listings
- About Us
- Contact Us
- Archives
- Readers Column

Up Against Interpretation: Manuel Ocampo

Art writer Brian Curtin draws up a profile of **Manuel Ocampo**, the Filipino artist based in Manila.



Directing a thoughtless racist remark at someone you are meeting for the first time is even more inappropriate when you've kept that person waiting for over an hour. I traveled to Manila from my home in Bangkok during September to meet Manuel Ocampo in advance of his solo exhibition at Tyler Rollins Fine Art in New York, his first in that city for 4 years. Traffic in Bangkok has nothing on the tortured pace of moving from one part of Metro Manila to another and when I finally arrived at our meeting place in Quezon I was stuck by how young Ocampo appears, given the length of his established international career as an artist. I also told him I expected someone, erm, burlier because of portrait photographs I have seen. The polite manner of his response didn't dissipate my embarrassment: he told me that people often assume he is Mexican (or "Mexican") because the paintings that initially made his reputation drew on devotional imagery that is routinely associated with Latin America. Is that the misguided connection I had imbibed? Oh, Christ.

Yes, Ocampo did emerge internationally as an artist in the early 90s with works that reproduced the emotionally-heightened rhetoric of colonial Catholic images. He is Filipino. His paintings then also reproduced an antique look with scarred surfaces and heavy-handed sepia varnish. As a student at the University of the Philippines, Ocampo worked for an industry that produced fake religious antiquities for a North American market kick-started by the likes of Madonna. He decided to bring this training to this practice as an artist.

I first saw Ocampo's paintings in the Saatchi Collection in London during 1991, when he was 26. He exhibited alongside Mike Bidlo and Andres Serrano. Further, Ocampo is written into the history of contemporary art in LA, where he lived for a time, by his inclusion in the epoch-making 'Helter Skelter: LA Art in the 1990s,' a show curated by Paul Schimmel at the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles in 1992. Ocampo can also be linked to the amorphous group of artists who emerged under the mantle of 'image scavengers,' after a decade of minimal and conceptual art, to engage with the forms and ideologies of popular cultures. However, Ocampo's art was and remains so much more than critical and commercial frameworks allow for. For a start, his paintings have never held the sense of coldness and cynicism that image appropriation often engendered; or indulged the portentousness of, say, Julian Schnabel. Moreover, Ocampo manages to engage the essential ambiguities and ambivalences of popular visual imagery without reproducing its seductive and hypnotic effects, an approach mined by contemporary artists such as Collier Schorr and Paul Pfeiffer, a fellow scion of Manila.

Ocampo works in a tiny studio in Quezon. I asked him about the general background to his work and he explained that he is interested in the differences between "fake" and "real" art and the ways that Filipino art has traded, and been traded, on the back of its cultural identity. Filipino culture, however, is hybrid. That is, ostensibly in-authentic. "Is this what your work is addressing?" I asked. "I don't know," he responded, and instead used a metaphor of choosing clothes as a way of explaining that he draws on all available images, like a bank. After graduating in the Philippines, Ocampo studied in California where he was influenced by, among others, Chris Burden and Lari Pittman, sharing a studio with the latter. He also cites Albert Oehlen and George Baselitz as important. Ocampo told me that the LA art scene was then dominated by macho heroes such as Ed Ruscha and Robert Irwin; and he also reacted against the slick image of that region produced by artists such as David Hockney.

His current paintings are black and white and use and re-use particular motifs: teeth, fetuses, stylised eagles and chicken drumsticks (!). These paintings are exceptionally uninhibited: spontaneous, aggressive, over-worked and in-your-face. Imagine Robert Crumb filtered through the methods of Terry Winters. Ocampo explains that artists such as Andy Warhol and Philip Guston focused on certain motifs and that he is following a comparable line. He is also interested in the trans-national significance of his imagery: the eagle, for example, has differential meanings for America and Germany and both countries claim to be the major sources of modern art. The motifs he uses are essentially malleable, available to endless re-inscription and variable significances.

A recent article in 'Frieze' magazine by Jorg Heiser expertly traced the contemporary legacy of theories of hybridity that emerged in the 80s, and formed the background to the emergence of artists such as Ocampo. Heiser uses the term 'super-hybridity' to characterise a current trend. He writes that globalisation, digital technology and the Internet, amidst other factors, has accelerated the pace by which artists absorb differential cultural contexts and references; and this is to the extent that differences are amalgamated and transformed to emerge as a method rather than a style.

Style, we can now concede, was the death of many artists of the 'image scavenger' generation. But Ocampo, then as now, guides us critically and creatively to an understanding of what an image is and does. That is, without telling us what to think.

Manuel Ocampo's exhibition 'An Arcane Recipe Involving Ingredients Cannibalized from the Reliquaries of Some Profane Illumination' ran from September 16th – October 30th 2010 at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York City. <http://www.trfineart.com/>

All Images Courtesy of Tyler Rollins

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