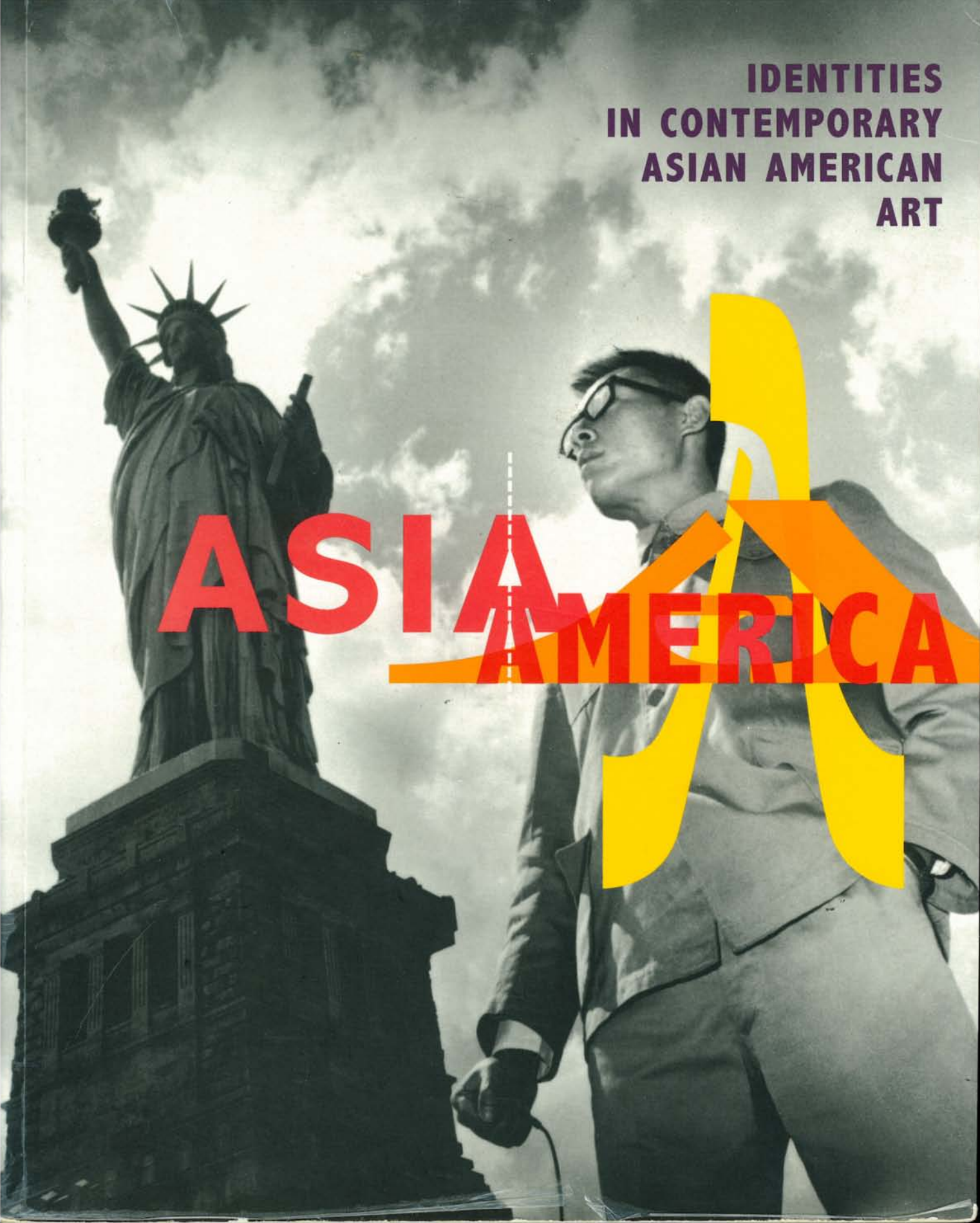


IDENTITIES
IN CONTEMPORARY
ASIAN AMERICAN
ART

ASIA
AMERICA





Manuel Ocampo

Heridas de la Lengua

1991

Oil on canvas with chewing gum and
wooden frame

71 x 61 in (180.3 x 154.9 cm)

Courtesy of Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York

*The story of global connections
is also the story of
disconnec-
tions . . .*

MARTHA ROSLER,
1989

A number of immigrant artists have come to see themselves as contemporary protagonists in a long history of East/West interaction that has all too often been characterized by unequal power relationships and

mutual misunderstanding. Given the complex range of Asian experiences with the West as colonies, battlegrounds, trading partners, and markets for each other's goods and ideas, such work, especially when informed by firsthand experience, can be acrimonious, even overtly oppositional.

Because the numerous island cultures of the Philippines were consolidated into a single entity under Western powers who imposed their languages and customs, Manuel Ocampo (like many of his countrymen), has long struggled with the notion that Filipinos do not yet have a "valid or concrete identity" that they can truly call their own. According to Ocampo, "you don't know where your real culture is. You're lost and there's nothing to lean on, being Westernized and also not being a Westerner." Yet in America, Ocampo, who first arrived as a teenager, found a necessary psychological space from the problems of the land of his birth, and ultimately a highly visible platform from which to address a sense of identity that had remained dependent on the influence of his homeland's heterogeneous culture. As he states, it is not only that "you can't change much when you're just concentrating on the day to day struggle [in the Philippines]" but "Filipinos can hear me more [in America] because I'm being published in widely read magazines and having shows."



Addressing East/West Interaction

Manuel Ocampo

Pilipinas Anti-Kultura

1993

Mixed media on canvas

50 x 46 in (127.0 x 116.8 cm)

Collection of Reynolds Tenazas-Norman and Raoul Norman-Tenazas, New York

Marlon Fuentes

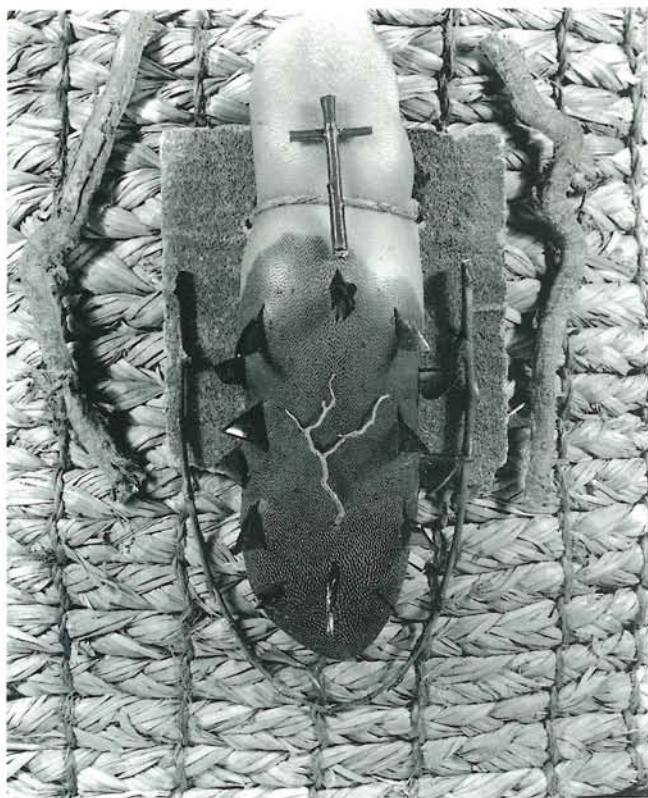
Tongue, from Circle of Fear series

1981

Gelatin silver print

8 x 10 in (20.3 x 25.4 cm)

Collection of Ms. Bobbie Lee



In *Pilipinas Anti-Kultura*, 1993, the artist played on the liturgical iconography typical of his homeland's imported Roman Catholic culture to create a pithy metaphor for the modern Filipino condition. In this droll, pseudoreligious scenario, Ocampo depicts a figure—practically naked but for a minuscule loincloth, with a globe in place of his head signifying the many nations that have contributed to the Filipino psyche—on a secular pilgrimage for a "grail" that is a picture of a Greco-Roman statue, a paean to European masculinity. As he said, "the image is me, the Filipino. He has an Asian body. His head is the globe, turning in its confusion and following this Western ideal." While the artist proudly presents himself with an Asian physique whose "color and proportions are not the Greek ideal," in also depicting himself "following an image which is just collaged on, which is different from his reality," he proclaims his resistance (emphasized by the phrase *Pilipinas Anti-Kultura* [anticulture]) to the tendency he perceives among many Filipinos to consider almost anything identified with the West as inherently superior.

Fellow Filipino Marlon Fuentes also found it far easier to speak about his homeland after migrating. In his words, "because life back home was extremely hard, when you go to another place you see the confusion and pain more acutely since you're not surrounded by it every day." However, after a decade in America, he felt compelled to renew his ties to his heritage. Drawn by vivid recollections of a syncretic folk culture that blended indigenous and Western elements, the artist decided that the most natural way to summon that hybrid world was to become "my own personal shaman and use photography like a ritual to relive those memories." In the extensive Circle of Fear series, Fuentes, seeking to recapture the spirit of that complex environment, began to construct and photograph dramatic tableaux combining inanimate objects and disarticulated animal parts. *Tongue*, 1981, with its rotting cow's tongue overlaid with a crucifix and punctured by shards of glass, sardonically mimics a European coat of arms. This pseudo-heraldic configuration suggests a new kind of national emblem for his homeland that embodies both centuries of foreign domination and suppression under the Marcos regime. Because the artist maintains that the capacity of Filipinos to speak with their original voices has figuratively been ripped from their throats, he devised this painful image as a symbol for a people whose authentic culture he believes has "been amputated."

Hanh Thi Pham, like many Vietnamese who grew up during the decades between the expulsion of the French and the triumph of the Communists, remains haunted by the corrosive legacy of those times. As she said, "I did not know the extent of the damage until I got out, and, at night, I would think about all those things and want revenge." Seeking to express outrage not only over her sense of loss but also at the impact of outside forces on Vietnam's culture, Pham cre-