

Manuel Ocampo

On the Threshold of the Senses

Brian Curtin



Courtesy of Tyler Rollins Fine Art

International contemporary art criticism may have passed through the postcolonial moment but has the postcolonial moment passed through international contemporary art? Looking over Filipino artist Manuel Ocampo's oeuvre one might be inclined to answer "no". Currently based in Manila, Ocampo built an international profile while living in the U.S. during the 1980s and 90s and his paintings continue to point to predominant practices and concerns from the time: namely, image appropriation and identity politics. They provide a glut of references that include swastikas, crucifixes, amputees, hooded figures, toilets, disembodied eyeballs and turds. The works that initially made his reputation were influenced by an early training producing fake religious antiquities in the manner of colonial Catholic painting and fitted well with post-modern preoccupations with the nature of visual representation and notions of postcolonial hybridity as elaborated by intellectuals such as Homi Bhabha. Further, the legendary exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre (Magicians of the Earth)* at the Pompidou Center in Paris during 1989 prepared the art world in Western Europe and North America for critical dialogs with art from hitherto marginalized countries.

But that was then and this is now. What can we make of Ocampo's paintings for the contemporary moment? His method of disparate referencing has become commonplace in contemporary visual

◀ *The Holocaustic Spackle in the Murals of the Quixotic Inseminators II*, 2010
Oil on canvas
80 x 75 inches

▶ *Boycotter of Beauty*, 2011
Oil on canvas
163 x 122 cm

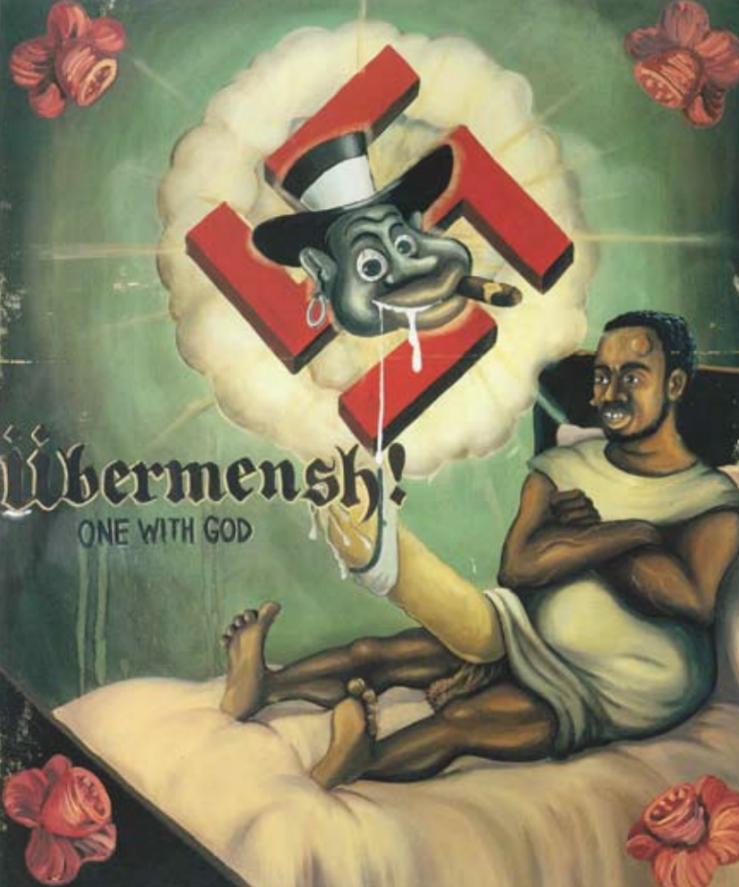


Photo by MM Yu



The Painters Equipment installation shot
Valentine Willie Fine Art Singapore

Courtesy of Valentine Willie Fine Art



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art and the radicalism of its initial emergence—after a decade of minimal and conceptual art—has disappeared. Also, thanks to globalization, we are now more familiar than ever with art from all over the world. Currently, Antarctica is the only continent without a major biennale! However, one response to this question is to slightly revise the narrative sketched above and therefore render Ocampo's historical significance as less than smooth. In the first instance, Ocampo can be distinguished from many of the precedents and his contemporaries of the so-called image scavenger generations—from Sherrie Levine to Julian Schnabel to Paul Pfeiffer—by his unadulterated visceral engagement with the imagery he employs. Unlike these artists, Ocampo's works have never been a cool deconstruction of simulacra or a portentous engagement with rich visual histories, and he does not reproduce the seductive and hypnotic qualities of ideologically-loaded symbols. Instead, he seeks a certain destruction of the power of visual imagery by overloading it to the point that viewers experience a sensational engagement with its affects. Ocampo's paintings are flagrantly in-your-face and he consistently damages his surfaces to disrupt any 'easy' consumption. A major shift in his practice has been to emphatically embrace the vulgarity promised by his early retablo-style approach. Ocampo's first exhibition in Manila at the Art Center Megamall during 2005 included paintings of spot-lit subterranean worlds populated by freakish cartoon characters and anthropomorphic blobs engaged in various forms of ritual and self-presentation. His recent solo exhibition at Tyler Rollins Fine Art in New York employed recurring images of chicken drumsticks and extracted teeth rendered to abject affect. And the painting used to advertise Ocampo's 2011 show at Valentine Willie in Singapore shows a graffiti-strewn cock'n'ass motif with a lit cigar poking out from it's behind.

Ocampo's ambition to explode a cerebral engagement with his imagery, however contentious, is typically underlined by his use of supporting text. Titles of his exhibitions include *Mumu Territorium: Jabar Logic in Times of Mcarthurian Transgressions Multiplying on the Borders of the Concatenated Post-Duchampian Theatre Swastikating Between Love and Hate*, and he has an ongoing curatorial project titled *Bastards of Misrepresentation*, which includes his own work alongside other Filipino artists and was shown most recently at the Freies Museum in Berlin during 2010. Titles of his paintings include *The Holocaustic Spackle in the Murals of the Quixotic Inseminators* and personal artistic statements typically bring us to the limits of language. For example, Ocampo has written, "The theme that comes up again and again are figures that connect to a sort of myth induced stereotype rendered iconic but are bludgeoned into a farcical conceptual iconoclasm rendered absurd by its exaggerated impotence as carriers of meaning or the esthetics of politics" and "...everything loses meaning and the cliché of motif is vexed to the point of abstraction. That's why there is

Courtesy of Valentine Willie Fine Art



▲
Übermensch, 1992
Oil on linen
72 x 60 inches

▼
From a Children's Picture Book, 1995
Oil on linen
60 x 48 inches

no storyline, but something is always happening at the same time". Both these statements are taken from the catalogue of an exhibition with Hermann Nitsch published by Galerie Zimmermann Kratochwill in Vienna during 2010.

Bracing taboo and attacking orthodoxy is the *raison d'être* of Ocampo's paintings. While this radicalism has an extended valence in the contexts of Asia, it does not define the significance of his practice. Instead, we might consider Ocampo's on-going engagement with the legacy of the appropriation artists—that is, a central concern with image-making and referentiality—in a new light. The writer Jorg Heiser used the term 'super-hybridity' in a recent article in *Frieze* magazine to characterize the contemporary proliferation of appropriation and referencing in visual art. He essentially asked: how might contemporary art distinguish itself in view of its seeming immersion in the methods, procedures, materials, aesthetics and rhetoric of visual and material culture generally?

Indeed, how might contemporary visual art distinguish itself? There are many subtle distinctions to be explored in Ocampo's

▼
Meatballs with Wings, 2010
Oil on canvas
84 x 60 inches



Courtesy of Tyler Rollins Fine Art



▲
Counterwish of the Exotic, 2010
Acrylic on canvas
48 x 36 inches

Courtesy of Valentine Willie Fine Art

practice, but his paintings can broadly be figured in terms of critical complicity with what Heiser described as the dynamics of globalization, digital technology, and the Internet, among other factors: that is, the conditions for an accelerated engagement with different cultural contexts. Ocampo understands that, in the era we are living through, images are always already divorced from their origin and questions of definitive contexts are all but meaningless. However, this is not to say that his works are cynical or nihilistic (even uber-critic Robert Hughes described Ocampo as sincere); instead he compels us to try and understand issues of engagement and interpretation, comprehension and subjectivity, historicity and the contemporary and the provocative and our limitless capacity to domesticate. Such concerns frame Ocampo's on-going importance as an artist, beyond the postcolonial. 🇵🇭

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