

Manuel Ocampo

West Gallery, Quezon City, Metro Manila,
Philippines

Billed as a solo show, Manuel Ocampo's exhibition featured five of his large canvases and smaller works, a haphazard installation of graffiti on cardboard, as well as works by 11 other artists, neatly divided between West Gallery's three spaces. At a glance, the installation appeared to summarize the themes of Ocampo's long-standing practice; at least, for those of us who have followed his career with interest. It consisted of a glut of grand guignol imagery – crucifixes, skulls and humanoid grotesqueries – while the title of the exhibition, 'Boycotter of Beauty and the Theoretical Steroid Defiled Modernist Chicken', supported a sense of overload, implosion or pure spectacle.



Ocampo, who was born in the Philippines, established an international reputation in the early 1990s while living in California. At the time, his paintings were derived from religious and devotional imagery. For the past five years, he has been living in Manila, and while his work continues in a comparable vein, drawing on a range of sensational references, it is now more bombastic, with little of the intrigue of his earlier concern with manipulating surfaces. The paintings here are mostly monochromatic, appear rapidly produced, and many of the motifs (testicles, teeth, beads, bones, et al) merely hang against a blank background. The titles are patently ludicrous, or just piss-taking: for example, a painting of what looks like a vagina filled with floating teeth is entitled *A Failed Attempt to Summon up L'Origin du monde after Courbet' from a Contrary Perspective Post-War Abstract Expressionist Style by Simone de Beauvoir circa 1943* (2011).

About this review

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Manuel Ocampo, *A Failed Attempt to Conjure Up Der Ursprung der Welt by Martin Heidegger* (2011)

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However, to dismiss the works on these grounds would be to misunderstand Ocampo's output. His early reputation was facilitated by the interest in so-called non-western art generated by the rise of identity politics and exhibitions such as 'Magicians de la Terre' in 1989. In spite of the fact that critic Robert Hughes described Ocampo's paintings at that time as sincere, his current works are merely another version of his central interest: the more-or-less cynical manipulation of signs. That is, Ocampo has never sustained an exploration of the deeper resonances of the imagery and references he uses. Again, they merely hang in space.



While much could be made of this insight in terms of how an Asian artist negotiates his professional place in the world, ultimately, we could just look at the paintings themselves; and here the accompanying installation serves not to dissipate but highlight the quality of Ocampo's works. He handles his medium deftly and his drawing is assured and comparatively exemplary. Further, the large works thematize rather than indulge aimless referencing. He paints apertures (a mouth, vagina, beads) that open onto objects of seemingly little significance (beer bottles, teeth, a closed door). The most striking painting is *Door to UP Fine Arts Glee Club*, circa 1985–2000 (2011); the acronym refers to the University of the Philippines and its famous fine art department; in the work, a closed door floats above peaked mountains. Of course, we could read ideas of exclusion or a sense of distance into the fact that ultimately nothing is revealed in paintings such as these. But if, for Ocampo, painting remains an ostensibly mute activity, thankfully he has yet to successfully render it entirely insignificant.

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