

THE HOLOCAUSTIC SPACKLE IN THE MURALS OF THE QUIXOTIC INSEMINATORS II

BY ARVIN FLORES

Manuel Ocampo emerged out of nowhere when the heyday of 1980's postmodernist art was coming to a close, giving way to an urgent voice that sought to level the cultural field through the representation of the *other*. During this time, Ocampo migrated from the Philippines, right after the country's People's Power Revolution that toppled Ferdinand Marcos. He was born and lived under this dictator's grip, through the period of martial law, while attending Catholic school for his primary education. Within such conditions he wrestled with the trinity of the spiritual (Spain), the material (U.S.), and the self (Philippines). He was trained by local priests to make copies of devotional retablo paintings, which considerably composed his only formal art training. Ocampo to this day is primarily a self-taught artist. However, his nascent genius caught the eye of Robert Hughes, then *Time* magazine art critic, who upon seeing the 1992 exhibition, *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990's*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, disparaged the whole show but singled out Ocampo's paintings as "frantic, heavy-handed but indubitably sincere." Since his modest beginnings, Ocampo has participated in groundbreaking shows, such as *Documenta IX* and various international biennials in Berlin, Venice, Seville, Lyon, and Kwangju. His work has been featured in critical publications on contemporary art, such as *Vitamin P: New Perspectives in Painting* from Phaidon Press, and *Art Now: 137 Artists at the Rise of the New Millennium* from Taschen. He exhibits from Manila to Berlin, Frankfurt, Brussels, Paris, Mexico City, Los Angeles, and New York, bringing with him a unique world view that blends history, politics, religion, society, identity, and aesthetics in a personal language that remains as critical as it is autonomous.

These paintings at Tyler Rollins Fine Art present a new exploration for Ocampo regarding his signature aesthetic of negation. His familiar iconography includes crucifixes, swastikas, Stars of David, excrement, genitalia, sausages, chicken drumsticks, toilets, teeth, fetuses, sperm, egg yolks, rats, roaches, hooded Klansmen, crowns of thorns, liquor bottles, drugs, money, etc., which are already symbolically powerful on their own as images of authority and its opposite, the abject, but in his hands all together produce an apocalyptic tone that touches the nerve of the times. Ocampo's works appear to us as terrifyingly undeniable yet at the same time incomprehensible and complicated, since their meaning is always shifting and contradictory, in tandem with the artist's penchant for switching his mode of production from one aesthetic to another. Though the particular iconography he uses allows them to be construed as expressions of postcolonialism (and thereby postmodernist), the distinct character which makes Ocampo's work stand out from any sort of category is essentially tied to the work's idiosyncratic negation of such labels. What makes the current work so unique, as per Ocampo's drive to kill all predictability in reading his work, is the elimination of the comfort of illusion, in the conscious abandonment of unnecessary extravagance demanded of craft, and the absence of a representational backdrop that constitutes the explanatory context or reason common to all paintings – which renders this work abstract in the manner that can only be his.

In Ocampo's paintings, the vacuum pervading in the flat, neutral background is occasionally disturbed by painterly gestures and figuration that are all quite present in the foreground. This gives the viewer a sense of bearing witness within the absolute moment, as a participant making a narrative in collaboration with the painter (as in a ritual), and

of being part of the painting space, in order to experience painting itself. Light or dark becomes the only choice of contexts here, with shades of gray providing ambiguity or abstraction. In other words, these works are tragic-comic melodramas about the universal themes of creation and destruction, life and death, ambivalence and certainty, suffering and joy, emptiness and fulfillment, being and nothingness, all happening in eternal recurrence, which is facilitated by Ocampo's painterly language, stripped of the illusion of progress in the form of taste, and choosing instead an expression that is abject, raw, brutal, bare, and primitive, but can only be true to the state of being *other* – as negative aesthetic.

One encounters the show as if being inside a primal cave with all comforts of culture, its signs of progress in technological power and cultural investments, removed from the world of modernity. Darkness is the pervasive force in the pictures, thick and heavy to the point of suffocation, pushing away any life of color that normally would establish cheerful conditions in leading one to believe the illusion is real. Dense brushwork, billowing and opaque as fumes, perambulates throughout the pictures, harkening back to unworldly beginnings, to the moment of creation. The brushwork prods and searches in every direction, creating a dynamic vortex that becomes shape, willing itself to coalesce into a thing, at the cusp of embodiment but remaining unknown.

These paintings flitter between modes of abstraction and representation, with each mode interchanging roles: representation as an image of uncertainty; abstraction in the obscure meaning of the sign. Smoke and soot fill the air, while *sfumato*, the loose application of grayscale values to produce hazy forms, embodies Ocampo's expression of the inexpressible. It's almost as if these works were cooked with hellfire, in the devil's furnace, with Ocampo painting with a blowtorch. Hence, the picture field is figured with a conflagration of bodies, a holocaust of unrecognizable deformity. From the void of his paintings emerge ectoplasmic essences, ghosts, and other unformed beings (embryos, sperm, tadpoles) that figure an event. The event is not necessarily spectacular, as these beings stand, lie down, float, or wait for things to happen rather than take action. But then the spectacular event that we have been expecting is actually imperceptible, in the way ghosts hang around reenacting moments of previous life, forgetful of their passing but perpetually awaiting a conclusion that never comes.

The body in Ocampo's paintings appears mutated, hybridized, monstrous, consisting of organs (brain stems, stomach sacs, intestines, scrotums, eyes, etc.) and other appendages and excretions (teeth, feet, fetuses, spermatozoa, excrement, etc.), as well as animal bits (chicken drumsticks, egg yolks, eagle heads) – all manifested as evolutionary markers in the life of Ocampo's painting. What remains is just the body, at least a reminder of it, which experiences sensations of pain and pleasure in the brutal experience of being. The paintings are broken surfaces, fractured with loss and renewal, creation and destruction, as each painted image congeals into scabs. Ocampo seems to be telling us, without the comfort of painterly convention, that painting is one big bag of sensation. While we do look at painting for information as an historical depiction of events, for pleasure in the artistic manipulation of material form, and for enlightenment in the expression of ideas, what essentially connects us with painting is the myriad life of feeling that it gives. Therefore, as Ocampo proves, painting continues to this day as an esoteric ritual that bridges the real with the unknown.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH MANUEL OCAMPO

Arvin Flores: To begin with, you live and work all over the place – New York, California, Spain, Italy, Luxembourg, Germany, etc. – and currently you're based in the country you were born, the Philippines. How does place come into the picture with your practice?

Manuel Ocampo: I am really a nomadic soul; I fit everywhere and belong nowhere. There is a sense of uprootedness in me that comes into fore with my work. Take, for example, the symbol of the tooth (and of socks, for that matter). With regards to the tooth, as we all know when we lose a tooth it is always quite painful. There is always drama involved. And as kids, we were bribed into thinking that when we lose a tooth there's this fairy that comes at night to exchange the tooth with money or some other reward. Somehow this sounds fishy already, and so as adults we laugh at this because this is not real and actually part of this conspiracy which adults do to children to condition them to follow the rules of culture. Same way with Santa Claus and Christmas. Anyway, I'm interested in all that, the way we look at a thing to construct a narrative around it, whether true or false, as long as we could continue the status quo. If Joseph Campbell were still around he would say it's what we call Mythology. And if Marx was alive and kicking also, he would say it is Mystification. Now returning to the socks, well socks do get old and grow holes on them. They also become stinky being worn out, and so we replace them. So this process of expenditure, if we ask Campbell or even Bataille, would be a process of sacrifice within mythology, as in God sacrificing his son, and etc. But let's not forget what Marx would say also, and that this condition would be called an Estrangement or Alienation, because the socks are stinky and would need to be replaced. He would call this process as Demystification. So there you go. Now thinking about this whole drama of suffering through the process of being uprooted goes back to your question about place which I think is more about *placing* than *placement*, and is really all about feeling born again. Doesn't that sound suspiciously religious?

AF: I agree that there are some religious motifs in what you had said, especially in the death and resurrection aspect of it. So in some sense you never really veered away from your original practice even though these paintings look brand new.

MO: I don't know what you meant by my "original practice," since I'm one who practices irony in my comic critique on originality. The way I see it, there are two types of artists. One who begins work with an idea or a narrative beforehand that guides him through the process. And as he goes along he produces forms or characters that he fits into his story. So this guy has a strict agenda which involves lotsa casualties and collateral damage during the

process. The second type of artist just goes about his way starting work with no *a priori* idea or narrative going. But through the process, he encounters forms or characters that tell their own story. Each one of them fellas is trying to outdo the other in an effort to have his story presented. You know it's like going down a sidewalk, and you have all these vendors shouting at you selling stuff which they say is just the perfect thing for you. Or another example. Going to the same bar each night, where everyone knows your name, and everyone tells you the same story again and again. But it is the storytelling which makes it always "brand new" as you say. Isn't that what painting is?

AF: Where do you think these paintings are in the context of contemporary painting? And I mean contemporary in the sense that our culture is immersed in technological media, which overloads us with information and other forms of entertainment that courses through global networks of power and market distribution, which eventually renders individual struggles nigh obsolete within this so called "society of the spectacle," according to Guy Debord.

MO: I live and work in an Asian region where typhoons and other natural calamities abound frequently. So I have seen how much power technological culture has within this much larger context. During one typhoon last year, "Ondoy" as we called it, there was a great deluge, but not lasting the biblical 40 days and nights but more like four days instead. Nonetheless, it was proportionally apocalyptic. I mean hell raising, body moving, angst ridden, hunger driven, panic stricken, fear and trembling, freakazoid experience that you'll ever have in this modern culture of ours. Right then all your hopes on modernity, including its technology and other luxury options, falls apart as you cling to your last shred of humanity. What you do then is put your fate into your own hands. That for me is why we still have painting around. Because painting speaks more than words could ever say. Or convey thoughts without rationalizing them. It is still very much around because it is tied to the human, pathetic and all. When we go and turn into robots, then painting will go as well. Don't you think it's happening around already when what you see are prefabricated goods that we then call art? These paintings of mine cut through all that crap from the lame and tired excuses we get from contemporary culture. With these works, I'm reducing painting into its minimal state of primordial ooze - as paint with no apparent dressing on it. So you can say I ain't gonna carry any cross from the west. This series of paintings revolves around my fascination with primeval forms and also my ambivalent feelings with modern art and its history. So I'm not acting like "the bored guy" as you mentioned who always complains while he plays chess and eats cheese with his baguette.

AF: What makes your work timely and important is its critical manner, but the symbols depicted as well as their combination sometimes become contradictory and abstract to the point that the viewer becomes ambivalent of its potency. What do the symbols mean in the best possible way to explain them?

MO: So as we're clear and no confusion comes about, since were dealing with the language of painting and of art in general, then I would say that when you make art that tries to look as art then it fails to become art at all, because art is unpredictable and indefinable. The same with symbols, also. For me, symbols are a system of signs that are unstable, pointing to a meaning yet to be formed since they rely on an actor - the painter himself - to align the symbols into a relational pattern for it to recur or be composed - as painting - so it can be read by any viewer at all. Sometimes this sianifvina practice - painting - is like a coniuuring act. a process of incantation to release the spirit of

the form from its casing we call the painted body that has long been denied since the emergence of the polished idol we know as a urinal readymade for the weak and indulgent gallery=museum=church followers of the bored kind. For anything magical to occur in this ritual of symbolic action, a pitch black condition of the womb with its "cave like expanse" only to be disturbed by "shafts of light" coming from the penitent's "passionate fire" has to be induced with the multi-tasking painter slash shamanic priest spreading sacrificial blood all over the place along with abject dirt, soot, shit, semen, and other excreta to make a cabalistic diagram that brings to life the golem who applies the holocaustic spackle in the murals of the quixotic inseminators. In the best explainable possibility of mojo in the sign of the text, I thereby reveal but warn that it can only be understood by a few initiates the Ocampo code (drum roll please):

Boca (as in mouth or "ibuka" or "bukang bunganga" (in Filipino) = open mouth = teeth = vagina dentata = bukake = drip = sperm = eggs = ghosts = fetus = trace = painting = chicken drumstick) my Boca-bulary right now: eagles, chicken drumstick, fetuses, fried eggs, molars, spermatozoid shapes turning into either ghosts becoming molars dripping fetuses forming into chicken drumsticks into legs feet and feet to eagles and then tadpoles. These are also debased forms except for the eagle symbolizing noble things (Germany? America? = modern art world war 2 = rupture of modern art? fascism + capitalism) black and white, grey, brown, yellow ochre, "peyne's" grey???? "kalabit peynge" (in Filipino means to touch and ask, as in begging) but in my paintings they turn into chicken drumstick and then goes back to fried eggs, fetuses, feet, tadpoles (not in that order). Thinking of rupture = modern art - 2nd world war →← fascism (is it modern or postmodern??? = Germany + modernism = America (Capitalism, Individualism) - {eagles as symbols.} - eggs, fried eggs, chicken drumstick - which came first the chicken or the egg....sperm = fetus = babies - no teeth = teeth, yay! - teeth + feet = ouch!!! broken tooth + jack boot - swastika % star of david\$ = Cross + addiction = dead = man = ghost = fetus = "balut" (a Filipino delicacy of fertilized duck or chicken egg with its embryo inside ready for snack)= egg = sperm = drip = painting = brushstroke = trace = ghost = fetus = egg = chicken = eagle = jackboot = foot = fingernail = tooth = bone = drumstick = legs = feet =) ^o_o^ , ←o}-:)