

Manuel Ocampo and Lani Maestro channel Rizal

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- — IGAN D'BAYAN



“No Pain Like This Body” by Lani Maestro

It’s not the job of a lawmaker or the Senate Committee on Finance to do this,” says Senator Loren Legarda, meaning her spearheading of the Philippines’ participation in the prestigious Venice Biennale for the third time. “It is just my hobby.”



Senator Loren Legarda says, “Our successful return to the Venice Biennale even after a long absence is proof that we always had our place in the world, we never lost it; we only have to be brave enough to seize it.” Photo by MIGUEL DE GUZMAN

The National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) — together with the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) and the Office of Senator Loren Legarda — has officially presented the country’s official participation in the 57th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia: The Philippine Pavilion – “The Spectre of Comparison.”

“The Spectre of Comparison” was chosen among 12 curatorial proposals submitted to the Philippine Arts in Venice Biennale (PAVB) Coordinating Committee by the panel of jurors.

Joselina Cruz, the curator, brings together two artists, Lani Maestro and Manuel Ocampo, for the 2017 Philippine Pavilion, which will be mounted in the Artiglieri of the Arsenale in Venice, Italy. The Arsenale is one of the two main exhibition spaces of the Venice Biennale.



Curator Joselina Cruz



Lani Maestro

The Philippine Pavilion will hold its vernissage on May 11. The commissioner for the Philippine Pavilion is NCCA chairman Virgilio Almario.

Drawn from Jose Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* is the phrase "el demonio de las comparaciones" (also translated to "the specter of comparisons") — the impulse for the exhibition and the framework for the practices of Maestro and Ocampo.

"The phrase encapsulates the experience of Rizal's protagonist, Crisostomo Ibarra, when he gazes out at the botanical gardens of Manila and simultaneously sees the gardens of Europe. This point of realization suggests the loss of Ibarra's (and Rizal's) political innocence, this double-vision of experiencing events up close and from afar: no longer able to see the Philippines without seeing Europe nor gaze at Europe without seeing the Philippines," Cruz explains.

With this as spectral pivot, Maestro's and Ocampo's practices, aesthetically worlds apart from each other and produced through a multiplicity of contexts, are brought together in Venice.



Manuel Ocampo

Both artists have lived and practiced outside of the Philippines, but have maintained active engagement with the country throughout their careers. Their practice and their subject matters are deeply involved with their experiences as immigrants or citizens of a new diaspora that also reflect the complexity of a contemporary Philippine identity.

“The exhibition looks at their practices as emblematic of the experience of Rizal’s spectre of comparisons, the juxtaposition of their works, the manifestation of political and social commentary from afar, as they saw the events of the Philippines

Senator Loren Legarda says, ‘In “The Spectre of Comparison” at the Philippine Pavilion in the Venice Biennale, we are brought back to the past through Jose Rizal. The exhibition looks at two artists as emblematic of the experience of Rizal’s specter of comparisons.’ and their adopted countries — through an inverted telescope,” says Cruz.

She further explains, “Rizal’s experience and understanding of Europe and the connections he continually made as he flipped back and forth between the contexts of home and the foreign crystallized the double-consciousness of a colonial emigre of the 19th century.

“The Spectre of Comparison,” the exhibition, accords this global gaze to Ocampo and Maestro, not just as the simple inbetween location or a knowledge of two (or several) worlds, but as a more complex imagining of the local and global as each artist redefine political resistance within their experience of shifting localities throughout their artistic careers.



“Immigrant’s Daughter” by Manuel Ocampo

Cruz shares, “Woven within this twinning of practices is the space of the specter of comparison that haunts the imagery and making of nationalisms fraught with colonial and imperialist pasts.”

Legarda concludes, “Through this exhibition, we hope to respond to the call of Christine Macel, the curator of the 57th International Art Exhibition, titled ‘Viva Arte Viva,’ which she said is “an exclamation, a passionate outcry for art and the state of the artist. The role, the voice and the responsibility of the artist are more crucial than ever before within the framework of contemporary debates.”

The 2017 Venice Art Biennale opens on May 13 and runs up to Nov. 26.