

*La Liberté*, 1990



Hypocrisy, oppression, and retribution are the overriding themes of Manuel Ocampo's art. In his overwhelmingly dismal vision of history, many of our cherished distinctions between good and evil are overturned. Ocampo depicts swastika wielding priests and Ku Klux Klan-like hooded figures bearing crosses. While much of his work derides the oppressive regimes of the colonial powers in his native Philippines, Ocampo's cynicism extends to his countrymen who, in one picture, are depicted brutally dismembering a white colonist. Ocampo's paintings should not be mistaken, however, for direct comments on the historical record nor for simply anti-Catholic, antifascist, or anticolonial propaganda. Rather, the artist utilizes historical imagery to express symbolically emotions and states of mind which are highly personal while being, he believes, not at all unfamiliar to anyone who has been at the receiving end of Western cultural expansion.

The case of the Philippines is unusual in Asia insofar as the indigenous people of this archipelago had no unified material culture at the time of their initial colonization and remain divided into several hundred different language groups. After over four hundred years of foreign rule and forced acculturation—first by Spain and then by the United States—the question of cultural identity has become especially problematic. Ocampo himself learned to paint from a Catholic priest who hired him to make images of saints for his church. With scant surviving indigenous traditions to fall back on, Ocampo embraced this devotional, or *retablo*, painting style as a vehicle for the expression of his own highly critical views. By

appropriating the style of his perceived oppressor, Ocampo endows his art with a profoundly ironic twist.

Apart from the instruction he received from the Church, Ocampo's main stylistic influences derive from his work as a visual propagandist for the opposition forces during the regime of Ferdinand Marcos, and from his broad knowledge of Western art history. While still living in Manila, Ocampo produced political cartoons for underground publications and protest banners. Since moving to America, he has distanced himself from both the Catholic dogma with which he was raised and the dogma of the Left, in favor of a more personal aesthetic response.

Striving as he does for a kind of figuration that is simultaneously emotionally expressive and socially engaged, it is not surprising that Ocampo should feel a close affinity to the work of the late-Gothic artist Hieronymus Bosch. Like Bosch, Ocampo applies a free-wheeling imagination to invent physical forms expressive of the netherworld of the human spirit. Bosch's seemingly surrealistic works were actually highly structured according to the canons of late-Medieval Christianity, and represented conditions of the afterlife that were generally held to be realistic in their own terms. The emotional content of Ocampo's extraordinarily imaginative images is similarly fortified in that the images function simultaneously as allegorical depictions of colonial history.

There is a horrible potency to the fact that few of the evils described in Ocampo's fantastically bizarre paintings are beyond the actual

atrocities of the colonial period. The American campaign to subjugate the Philippines, for example, cost hundreds of thousands of Filipino lives and was fueled by the atmosphere of intense racism which prevailed in America at the time of the Spanish-American War and its aftermath. Ocampo's inclusion of a Klan-like hooded figure in many of his paintings signifies the link between racism and colonialism. In his book, *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn quotes one volunteer soldier, "Our fighting blood was up, and we all wanted to kill 'niggers'....This shooting human beings beats rabbit hunting to pieces."<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to statements such as these, President McKinley, speaking of his decision to go to war against the Philippines, said, "There was nothing left for us to do but to take them all and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them...."<sup>2</sup> It is precisely this kind of official hypocrisy that Ocampo points to in his frequent depictions of apparent collusion between sanctimonious and diabolical figures.

In some cases, Ocampo's use of symbols is intended not so much to make specific connections—for example, between Christianity and Nazism when he juxtaposes a cross and a swastika—as it is to undermine the absolute authority of any such symbol and the institution or ideology it signifies. In the case of the swastika, the artist introduces another level of complexity by suggesting a connection to the swastika-like formation of the centuries-old Filipino symbol for *Nuno*, an indigenous deity tacked on to the Catholic trinity after the Spanish conquest and once revered

among Filipinos as the "grandfather" of Christ.

While Ocampo's paintings may elicit a strong immediate reaction, their real value lies in their capacity to sustain prolonged reflection. Shocking us from our complacency, Ocampo leads us to the dark place within ourselves where anger and despair struggle for supremacy. Although some may criticize Ocampo's art for being altogether too negative, it is not the artist's responsibility to provide solutions to the painful problems of history and the human spirit, only to provoke us to do so ourselves.

Manuel Ocampo was born in Quezon City, Philippines, in 1965. He currently lives and works in Los Angeles.

Lawrence Rinder  
Curator

<sup>1</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 307.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 305-306.

Works in MATRIX (all works are lent by the artist unless otherwise indicated):

*Anak*, 1990, acrylic and oil on wood with collage, 102 x 54". Lent by Evan Tawil.

*La Liberté*, 1990, oil on wood, 48 1/2 x 48". Lent by Councilman Joel Wachs, Los Angeles.

*Sto. Niño*, 1990, oil on canvas, 61 1/2 x 56 3/4". Lent by Linda Ocampo.

Untitled, 1990, acrylic and collage on canvas, 45 x 36". Lent by Dorothy Halic and Timothy Anderson.

*No Me Falta Nada*, 1991, oil on linen with collage, 72 x 96". Lent by Jaime and Patricia Riestra.

*Duro es el Paso*, 1992, oil on canvas, 96 x 120".

*Gracias*, 1992, oil on canvas, 120 x 96".

*Porco Dio*, 1992, oil on canvas, 108 x 140".

*Sironzo*, 1992, oil, acrylic, and collage on canvas, 108 x 140".

#### Selected one-person exhibitions:

La Luz de Jesus Gallery, Los Angeles, CA '88; The Onyx Gallery, Hollywood, CA '89; Christopher John Gallery, Santa Monica, CA '90; Guggenheim Gallery, Chapman College, Santa Monica, CA '90; Fred Hoffman Gallery, Santa Monica, CA '91.

#### Selected group exhibitions:

Cultural Center of the Philippines, Manila, *UNICEF Art Show* '85; Galeria de Antipolo, Antipolo Rizal, Philippines, *Lengua Ni Utak* '86; A.T.A. Gallery, San Francisco, CA, *The Scream Show* '89; John Thomas Gallery, Santa Monica, CA, *Enigmatic Messages* '90; Saatchi Collection, London, U.K. '91 (catalog); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA, *Helter Skelter* '92 (catalog).

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogs under exhibitions):

Curtis, Cathy. "Strong Works by Young Artist...," *The Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 9 '90.

Jose, Joshua. "Filipino Artist Making It in the U.S.," *The California Examiner*, Dec. 13-19 '89, p. 7.

Laurence, Michael. "Manuel Ocampo at Christopher John," *Art in America*, Jan. '91, p. 143.

Picot, Pierre. "Manuel Ocampo [at] Fred Hoffman Gallery," *New Art Examiner*, June/Summer '91, p. 50.

Weissman, Benjamin. "Manuel Ocampo [at] Fred Hoffman Gallery," *Artforum*, May '91, p. 153.

Selwyn, Marc. "Manuel Ocampo [at] Fred Hoffman," *Flash Art*, May/June '91, p. 142.

MATRIX is supported in part by grants from the Paul L. and Phyllis Wattis Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the California Arts Council, the T. B. Walker Foundation, the Fleishacker Foundation, and Alexandra Bowes and Jack Hanley.