FROM SOCIAL REALISM TO THE SPECTER OF ABSTRACTION: CONCEPTUALIZING THE VISUAL PRACTICES OF H. R. OCAMPO

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Abstract
This study of National Artist H. R. Ocampo argues for the critical necessity of producing a theoretical language adequate to modernist abstract painting in the Philippines. It situates Ocampo’s stylistic shift from Social Realism to what is called “Neorealism” in the context of a post-war exhaustion of the narrative possibilities of nationalism. Both as a result of foreign domination and in order to get at a “pre-ideological” reality, the visual is first sheared off from a matrix of linguistic signification unavoidably overdetermined by questions of the nation. Later, with the Marcos appropriations of Philippine modernism, the momentarily autonomous visual indexed by abstract art is itself shown to be caught up in the ongoing argument over authentic nationalism. Beginning with Ocampo’s Social Realist short story “Rice and Bullets,” the essay explores the logic of abstraction and figuration in Ocampo’s work. The essay argues that his process of abstraction is intimately connected to people’s struggles, the sense that politics was somehow deeper than available language, and a world-historical shift in the nature of signification. The essay then turns to the fate of international abstract art and proposes some readings of the later abstract paintings of Ocampo. Finally it draws on Vicente Rafael’s reading of writer Jose “Pete” Lacaba’s politicization during the First Quarter Storm, to indicate some of the ways in which abstract images dissociated from “reality” might be utilized in the struggle for social justice.

Keywords
Philippine abstract art, Philippine modernism, neorealism, social realism

About the Author

In his relatively under-appreciated books on cinema, Gilles Deleuze explains that cinema is a new array of practices for which philosophy must find the concepts, writing that “the great directors of the cinema may be compared … not merely with the great painters, architects and musicians, but also with thinkers” (xiv). Understanding the challenge that cinema poses to thought thus, that is, as a new type of rift between the old antagonists practice and theory, one might transpose Deleuze’s challenge of finding concepts for visual, aesthetic practices to other situations of uneven development or inadequation. Just as Deleuze launches “a taxonomy, an attempt at the classification of images and signs” that are being produced in a relatively new medium which, by its
very function, changes the nature of the philosophical endeavor (for one of the lessons of the cinema books is that the cinematic medium disrupts the very fabric of philosophic thought), we might imagine new readings for Philippine modernism. This endeavor would be tantamount to seeing Philippine modernist painting as itself a medium, albeit a marginalized one, capable of disrupting the habitual patterns of thought – i.e., the thought of the dominant.

This possibility implies that there may be a distinctive lag-time between the operations of various forms of mediation and the emergence of their politico-aesthetic theory. Philippine Neo-realist painting, which followed a first moment of Social Realism in the Philippines, was practiced by H. R. Ocampo and others from the early 1950s until the late 1970s, and has been appreciated principally for its formal and affective innovations. Ocampo’s Neo-realist work has been seen as innovative, brash, even garish, and quintessentially if ineffably “Filipino.” Although it is usually conceded at the outset that Ocampo’s work was difficult at the time of its creation and remains so to this day, it is first the garish colors of his canvases (they are said to glare) and then their busy interlocking fullness (a horror vacui dubbed the “Pinoy Baroque”), which secures the stature of Ocampo’s work as “exhibit A” of Philippine Modernism. But just what is it about these works that gives them their supposed Filipino-ness?

Despite the fact that early modernism in the Philippines began with Edades’ intellectual dismissal of the formalist idealism and romanticism of the Amorsolo school, modernism itself has often been dismissed as a bourgeois art practice intent upon deleting the social content from art in order to satisfy fetishistic collector-patrons. While some of this criticism is certainly true in various ways, it is possible to offer a more nuanced and complex reading of Neo-realism.

In many respects the major developments out of Philippine Neo-realism, specifically Socialist Realism (Pablo Baenz Santos, Papo de Asis, Orlando Castrillo, Renato Habulan, Al Manrique, Edgar Fernandez, Antipas Delotavo, Jose Tence Ruiz and others) in its second moment of the late 1960s to the mid 1980s and what I sometimes call the Syncretic Realism that follows this second SR moment (in the 90s: Emmanuel Garibay, Elmer Borlongan, the later works of Imelda Cajipe-Endaya, Julie Lluch and many others) endeavor to return the concept to art practice – that is, the images strive to transmit conceptual thinking about the world and politics via the artwork. This (re) politicization of the artwork is at once a response to the perceived shearing off of social reference in abstract art and to the fact that after abstraction, images are unavoidably abstract (because, historically speaking, the visual itself has become a technology of abstraction). Abstraction marks the emergence of a
shift in the character of the visual, and later movements in Philippine painting endeavor to directly politicize that transformation.

This process of the transformation of the visual is not generally understood anywhere, less so in impoverished societies where there exists a dearth of material support for the creative production of the meta-practices of theory and philosophy. Thus there is a pressing need for the adequation of social practices of all types with concepts. The discourse about the role and function of artwork needs creative support—it is a philosophical and moreover a political necessity.

While the schism between language and the imaginary may be posited as the condition of language in general, the incommensurability of linguistic concepts with visual and even social practices is particularly problematic for politicized intellectual endeavors intent upon specifying the terms of oppression and counteracting these conditions. How to think about the political role and potential of Philippine painting—what does it achieve, what might it be good for? We might draw inspiration from Regis Debray’s noteworthy endeavor to inaugurate the field of mediology in *Media Manifestos* because Debray takes the emphasis off of the sign and its interpretation and places it on the technical apparatuses that deploy signs and the activity signs enable (Debray [n.p.]). Debray’s work on mediation would imply that it is important to look back at historical artworks as practices—as activities enmeshed in and enabling other activities. This view would allow the technological and historical situation of the work to become part of its significance. There is a very real danger that when antiquated ideas serve as templates with which to understand new works of art and new social formations, as they quite often do (and not only in the Philippines), the radical character of certain artworks falls away from the very discourse that might amplify their liberatory tendencies. Ocampo’s paintings are saying something not only about visual transformation but also about linguistic transformation; they would speak about a transformed situation of the human being in the Philippines. In many respects, Ocampo’s paintings are paintings because they cannot be words or, for that matter, political activity (in the traditional sense). To look ahead for a moment, we might say that a better understanding of the transmission of forces undertaken by an H. R. Ocampo painting might potentially lead to a consolidation of a variety of new forms of struggle which work through a politics of affect, and this strategy might be developed even now. However, what is more often heard instead with respect to Ocampo and to modernism in general is a rehearsal of sacred shibboleths (the supremacy of Realism, for example, or in some cases the essential character of nationalism).

If truly radical struggles and events are articulations taking place somehow beyond
the threshold of consolidated thought, one might seek an account of why this situation dominates. In what ways are language and reason, as we know them, inadequate to revolution, cultural or otherwise?

In countries not in the so-called center of both the so-called world-system and the so-called Western philosophical-theoretical tradition (of which it may be said of many of them that for centuries their greatest export has been the concrete abstraction of themselves—precisely in the form of capital), one might imagine that some forms of abstract thought have been stolen away (just like the frozen, alienated subjectivity that capital indeed is). Perhaps theory is, like most things, produced in the periphery, and consolidated and consumed in the center. At the very least, one can say that the condition of possibility for the West is what is now known as the Third World, and that this is no less true for Western theory. Abstraction, which in its development follows the development of capitalism, may be thought of as peeling an image of a concrete practice from its location of production—as concept, as map, as (exchange-)value, and also as photographic image—and placing this separated form in a new pathway of circulation that functions in accord with a new set of laws. These laws imbue the abstracted image with new properties. Therefore, to employ that specialized technology of abstraction called “theory,” which, like that other equally discerning language known as science tends to accumulate in zones of capital concentration, might be construed here in the Philippines as an act of expropriating the expropriators. Of course, the cultural worker engaged in such creative re-appropriations must proceed with a sense of caution and some risk, endeavoring to be vigilant against doing the work of imperialism and to avoid becoming an expropriator himself.

What I propose here, both as a way of testing the above claim regarding the potential merits of building theoretical concepts for and with third world practices and as a way of extrapolating the liberatory potential of twentieth-century Philippine painting is to extend my preliminary study of National Artist H.R. Ocampo entitled “Nationalism’s Molten Prayers: The Early Writings of Filipino National Artist H. R. Ocampo,” which first appeared in Philippine Studies. As I attempted to make clear there, Ocampo is perhaps particularly suited here for what I have in mind in terms of the visual transformations characteristic of Philippine modernity, not only because of his innovation, but also because of his prolific activity outside of painting (as short story writer, as editor, as screenwriter). Furthermore, the developmental trajectory of his work, from social realism to abstraction and from writer to painter, is highly significant.

In the earlier essay, I discussed Ocampo’s little known serial novel, Scenes and Spaces, in order to show that at the expiration of narrative possibility just before World War II, an
autonomous visual emerges. *Scenes and Spaces* took as its project the writing into being of a protagonist who might be an adequate (masculine) national subject in the context of US imperialism. However, unable to realize this project narratively because of real, historical limitations—Ocampo could not invent a realistic way for a Filipino masculine subject to exercise self-determination in a society dominated by a foreign (US) presence—Ocampo has his main characters veer off into hallucinatory visual experiences. These hallucinations are indeed peeled off of the narrative events even though they have nowhere to go in the narrative. A fervent portrait of the national artist as a young writer almost becomes a portrait of the artist as a visual dreamer—as if abstract visions in the Philippines were spilt nationalist struggle.

This temporal-historical movement from narrativity to visuality, and from social realism to abstraction, informs the movement of Ocampo’s paintings of the thirties and forties (which have a clear pro-proletarian agenda), to his post-war abstractions. It is in this movement that Ocampo literally re-invents the visual and its possibilities. What is peeled off from daily life has a new autonomy and a new potentiality. Although to many critics, including some of the revolutionary socialist realists of the Marcos era, the neo-realist abstractions may appear as exercises in formalism, it is the wager of the present essay that the conceptualization of Ocampo’s strategies of creation may be of service—not only to Ocampo’s work, but more generally to those of us who would learn from the historical record of struggles against forms of fascism.5

**POLITICS AND METAMORPHIC FORM**

H. R. Ocampo, one of the first *non-objective* painters in the Philippines and the principle practitioner of what came to be called Neorealism wrote that he was “less interested in capturing a photographic semblance of nature” and “more preoccupied with the creation of new realities in terms of stress and strain”6 (58). In other words, the “non-objective” character of Neo-realism was an effort to figure those “new realities,” a new objective situation, constituted through conflict—*the struggle over the significance of things?* Noting that Ocampo understood his painting in contradistinction to photographic practice supports one of the principle claims of my work here: H. R. Ocampo’s abstractions were not mere copying of Western art forms in a Filipino key, as has sometimes been racistically and imperialistically asserted. On the contrary, his paintings were hard-won records of the new character of sociality implied by radical changes in the social fabric after World War II. Modernism in the Philippines did not just arrive on a boat with Victorio Edades’s return
to Manila in 1928, as is often repeated in the art-historiographical lore of the Philippines. Rather, like communism in the Philippines, modernism in the Philippines has strong indigenous roots. The creative power of Filipino people laboring under the leveraged constraints of US imperialism and the full penetration of the money economy into the provinces must be credited with the occasion for both the political and aesthetic revolutions that confronted forced modernization, namely, modernism and communism. While it is true that the “father” of Philippine modernism Victorio Edades did return to Manila in 1928 from the University of Washington and the Armory show with a new set of tools and concepts (many of them borrowed from Kandinsky), the origins of modernism are much deeper or more “local” than such a foundation myth would indicate. It has been said in the Philippines that “Edades opened the door to modern art and H. R. Ocampo walked right in.” However, it is probably more appropriate, if less pithy, to say of Philippine modernism that a US colonial modernity was installed with the help of “free trade,” an English language mass educational system, a Euro-US capital dependent agricultural cash crop export industry that fostered an indigenous (mestizo) oligarchy and reorganized rural waged labor, US CIA propaganda campaigns, a print-journalism culture, and an emergent mass entertainment industry. Albeit fraught with compromises, Filipinos waged a modern revolution against the exploitation of Filipinos on various fronts, and cultural modernism was one of this revolution’s fruits.

Modernism, as already indicated, is said to have had its beginnings with the December 1928 one-man show of Victorio Edades in the Philippine Columbian Club in Ermita, Manila. In 1940, Edades assembled a list of 13 modern painters which included himself, Galo. B. Ocampo, Carlos (Botong) Francisco, H. R. Ocampo, Vicente Manasala, Cesar Legaspi, Diosdado M. Lorenzo, Demetrio Diego, Jose Pardo, Bonifacio Cristobal, Arsenio Capili, Ricarte Purugunan, Anita Magsaysay-Ho. Later, the Neo-Realist Group was composed of H. R. Ocampo, Cesar Lagaspi, Vicente Manansala, Romeo V. Tabuena, Victor Oteyza, Ramon Estella, Carlos (Botong) Francisco, and Victorio C. Edades and Nena Saguil.

During the Japanese occupation, H. R. Ocampo went from being Associate Editor of the commercially successful Herald Midweek Magazine, to being an officer in Hodobu, the propaganda section of the Japanese imperial army, for intelligence purposes. What might his switch from socialist realism to abstraction have to do with his first-hand experience of the imbrication of media and politics? In a discussion of Ocampo’s career, Angel de Jesus, Ocampo’s friend, colleague, fellow-Veronican and quasi-biographer, takes pains to suggest that, although Ocampo may have been a collaborator when it came to working with the
Japanese, he was not a capitulator. De Jesus writes:

In 1943, the Japanese management of the Liwayway magazine created a committee to pick the best Tagalog short stories of 1943. The result was the publication of Ang 25 Pinakamabuting Maikling Kathang Pilipino ng 1943 (The 25 Best Filipino Short Stories of 1943). Among the authors, all young, undaunted and nationalistic, unintimidated by the Japanese Fascists was Hernando R. Ocampo. (30)

De Jesus’ assertion that Ocampo was undaunted by Japanese Fascists should not be read as merely an admirer’s effort to redeem what might be seen, in a Philippines organized around US victory in the Pacific, as a compromising past. Caught between the US and Japan, there are no easy or clear-cut positions here. De Jesus continues his discussion of Ocampo’s vitae by telling us that during the war, Ocampo was detained overnight in Fort Santiago and cross-examined by “a Japanese Harvard Graduate” on suspicion of ties with the agrarian socialist movement Hukbalahap. One of Ocampo’s associates, Manuel V. Arguilla, “was arrested when the Japanese discovered guerilla propaganda material in his locked drawer in the propaganda office, which they forced open. He was subsequently executed” (30). De Jesus’s concluding remarks on Ocampo’s involvement with the Japanese propaganda machine are as follows:

The projection of Tagalog in the minds of the Filipinos as the language they should adopt and develop was one of the few favorable aspects of the Japanese Occupation. Gradually since then, Tagalog has increasingly become the language of the people, supplanting both Spanish and English. This too was the time when Nanding [Ocampo’s nickname] began to intuitively sense the forces at play during the war. He began to understand with his friends that the Philippines was merely a pawn in a fight between giants. It was a subject often discussed by them in meetings far from the prying eyes of The Japanese and their spies. (32)

De Jesus sees Ocampo and his coterie of writers and painters as harboring an authentic Philippine nationalism. Ocampo is able to roll with the changes and to cut a path through exigencies imposed by two enemies: The Japanese and the Americans. For de Jesus, there are compromises involved, but beyond the gaze of the prying eyes of “the Japanese and their spies” stays authenticity. The character of this authenticity, which De Jesus sees Ocampo to embody, will produce what he calls, “The Artist as Filipino.”
H. R. Ocampo was also a founding member of the literary group the Veronicans, whose other members were Francisco Arcellana, Lazaro M. Espinosa, Cornelio S. Reyes, Ernesto C. Basa, Bienvenido T. Potenciano, Delfin Fresnosa, Estrella Alfon, N. V. M. Gonzales, Manuel A. Viray, Benjamin P. Alcantara, Angel de Jesus, and Narciso G. Reyes. As de Jesus tells us in *H. R. Ocampo: The Artist as Filipino*, “These thirteen young writers were the avant-garde of the short story writers during the early 1930s. Their writing was characterized by a break with tradition, an absence of bourgeois-moralistic taboos, and a realistic approach to life.” (De Jesus [n.p.])

Before turning to Ocampo’s paintings, I would like to look at a brief example of H. R. Ocampo’s writing—a 1937 short story called “Rice and Bullets.”10 In this social realist tale, the protagonist, Tura, joins his fellow peasants in a protest against rice hoarders. The story emphasizes the hunger experienced by the main character and those around him (his family, the other peasants) as well as the creation of a sense of community and of power. In the final clash of the peasants with the police, Tura is shot and killed.

What I want to remark on here are Ocampo’s tropological practices. The manner in which he creates figures in prose is not too distant from the modality of figuration in the painted works. As Tura answers his wife Marta’s question about the stones he is carrying in his rice sack to a protest, one can almost see Ocampo’s brush at work: “Mr. Remulla said we must have three big stones in our sack. He said the stones would represent the three biggest islands in our country” (61). The economy of means in this passage is noteworthy. Tura has only stones in a sack that once contained rice. These stones, which have replaced food and, as such, have become images of starvation (the land without its fruits), compress several levels of meaning. In the literary sense of representation, they represent the Philippines, both for Tura and, in a way that seems to exceed this character’s understanding, for the general situation of agrarian workers under semi-feudal, capitalized agriculture. But Ocampo’s powers of condensation also allow another reading of the term “represent” here inasmuch as the stones, which have replaced food, can also be used as weapons. Thus we also have here “representation” in the political sense (as in the phrase “democratic representation”). That this representation is necessarily violent, given the circumstances of peasants and workers, and that this violence against an oligarchy can be mediated by an aesthetic work, suggests the possibility of a symbolic violence capable of taking up the trajectory of a thrown stone.

Another important aspect of Ocampo’s work here is his figuration of thought as event:
Hedged in far behind in the crowd, Tura heard nothing of the man’s talk except such stray words as “we must eat,” “we want rice,” “give us rice,” we are hungry;” yet, without fully knowing why, Tura shouted with the rest when the man in the bandstand made one of his dramatic pauses. And as the moments passed, Tura became more enthusiastic, more excited, and as his excitement and enthusiasm rose, he began to forget the rumbling and vinegar-like gnawing in his stomach. Tura was now perspiring and feeling hot and good and strong. He felt he could do anything—anything. (64-5, emphasis mine)

Whether Ocampo is correct in his assessment of politicization in the above passage, that is, that it takes place at a level that is distinct from consciousness and rationality (“without fully knowing why”), is not essential to establish here. What I want to draw attention to is the belief that the translation of the immanent social forces of protest and rebellion, which realize themselves as both bodily event and activity, take place for Ocampo at a level that one might want to call deeper than consciousness. In other words, rationality and knowledge are not, for Ocampo (at least here) the primary media of political action. That said, however, it is important to remember that Ocampo’s painting would later develop a numeric color system that rivaled the abstract rationality of Mondrian or conceptuality of composer Jose Maceda. The rational production of irrational affect becomes not just an artistic strategy on the part of Ocampo but also, as we shall see, the political modus operandi of imperalist logic whereby the sensual displaces the rational in the phenomenological organization of daily life.

Ocampo’s skepticism regarding the adequacy of thought to politics, which to a certain extent explains his lifelong engagement with the dynamics of the visual, extends to what is at this juncture not quite an account of, but rather an indication of, the failure of words. Facing the guards before the warehouse:

Tura wanted to shout something back at these men of the law who had sided with the rich Chinese; he wanted to shout something about insistent rumblings and vinegar-like gnawings inside the stomach. But these words struck, uncomfortably solid in his throat. He swallowed a big lump to relieve himself. (66)

The point at which words fail signals the possibility of a different level of activity. In the scene above, Tura is forced to swallow the inarticulate lump of his anger. This lump, which one might imagine on a canvas of Ocampo as taking its form from one of the three
stones in Tura’s rice sack, is the only thing eaten in this entire story of hunger. However, what is swallowed here into the empty sack of his stomach will dramatically re-emerge in the chaos of the story’s climax.

After the peasants break into the warehouse, they furiously begin to fill their rice sacks. When the police come, the trapped men try to escape:

Tura was once more confronted by another policeman. He was no longer in a position to dodge his opponent, so he clutched his sack tighter, then swung it against the khaki-clad fellow whose gun was aimed at him. The policeman staggered, but at the same time Tura felt a sudden stinging hotness coursing from his belly on through to his back. He held on for a while to his sack of rice, stalked on as if on air, half-consciously feeling the warmth of something trickling from his belly, vaguely hearing the noise around him. Then the sack slipped from his weakening fingers. He felt a swimming sensation and vaguely he saw the precious grain spilling on the dirty ground.

Oh, no! No! You cannot take that away from me. That is for my wife, my children. Tura heard himself calling his wife and children, as his fingers clutched at the rice. Tura dived face downward, face foremost for the scattered grains of rice on the ground. Here, here. Tura heard himself calling his wife and children, as his fingers clutched the rice. Here is the rice for you. You need not live on salabat any more. You need not be hungry anymore.

But his voice seemed strangely hollow. It seemed to come from a distance, a very far distance beyond. (69)

When, after he has been shot, Tura says, “You cannot take that away from me,” the context tells us that he is thinking about the rice, but that the rice means life. From everything we have seen of him, his worries about the hunger of his two daughters, Ine and Clara, his son Totoy and his wife Marta, we know that it was his life that was for his wife and children. Overall, the story works expeditiously to build a concept, the equation between blood and rice. The struggle being waged in the narrative is not just over rice but over blood. In Ocampo’s metamorphic mind, each “glittering white grain” becomes a drop of red blood, even though the blood never once appears in the story. Blood is the unseen, the idea that exists in the spaces between the other ideas presented in the story. Once this idea is clearly articulated by the elements around it, the warehouse piled high
with rice becomes a warehouse piled high with blood—with the lives of the peasants. As one understands the formal operations of Ocampo’s mind in the isomorphism established between the rice grains and the drops of blood, it becomes clear that blood is the unspoken third term for which rice is the first and bullet is the second term. The bullet offers itself as that which divides one from the other socially and links one to the other formally. Thinking visually, one can almost see the formal—that is, spatial and textural—metamorphosis of one element into the other: grain/bullet/drop. This flow of form is staged between the extremes of wealth and poverty (one thinks here of Ocampo’s Social Realist painting, *The Contrast*).

Attendant to this morphing of three forms then, there emerges in the story the fundamental contrast between “the vinegar-like gnawing in [Tura’s] stomach” and the hoarded rice in the warehouse—a contrast which is ultimately a contradiction between rich and poor, between morality and immorality, and between life and death. Each of these polarized factors serves as the *mise-en-scène* for the struggle that results at once in the death of the main character and the formal compression of rice into bullets into blood. Aside from having one of the central qualities of Maoist Realism, that is, the creation of an image that allows one person’s situation to stand in for many, the circulation of rice, bullets and blood within the story marks the general condition of the peasant producing for capitalized agriculture.

Thus we see already in “Rice and Bullets” that the circulation of color and form in Ocampo’s work is inscribed within the struggle between labor and capital. Such an insight would confirm the hypothesis developed in “Nationalism’s Molten Prayers” that the biomorphic abstraction of Ocampo’s neo-realist paintings (1950s-1970s), hallucinated twenty to forty years earlier by the principle characters in Ocampo’s serial novel (*Scenes and Spaces*, 1939-1940) results from the foreclosure of narrative possibility by history. If the 1937 short story shows the irresolvable subjective crisis precipitated in history and exploding in a revolutionary form of activity, the serial novel *Scenes and Spaces* shows us that by 1939 Ocampo viewed the fundamental historical contradictions of his period as irresolvable in narrative. The social crisis in and as the masculine subject undergoes a dramatic and qualitative shift that catapults it into the visual. Historically produced, the character’s personal traumas disrupt realism itself by producing intense visual hallucinations that refer to real conditions but at the same time provide a form of experience that is non-narrative and therefore, momentarily at least, beyond the reach of history. As mentioned in “Nationalism’s Molten Prayers” the political corollary to the historical foreclosure of narrative possibility that gives rise to visuality is guerilla war. Perhaps this is why so many
of Ocampo’s painting look like military camouflage.

From “Rice and Bullets” we may see clearly that Ocampo’s conception of narrative movement, so forcefully articulated in *Scenes and Spaces* as the working out of a fundamental antagonism between American imperialism and Philippine nationalist aspiration in the lives of Filipinos, is, in his mind at least, also a struggle between labor and capital. Though this will be obvious to some, I want to leave no space for doubt that it was also obvious to Ocampo. Even though his work undergoes a profound shift in emphasis, one might say from the narrative abstract, in which terms like labor and capital or the “United States” and the “Philippines” are the organizing principles of analysis, to the visual abstract, in which aesthetic form structures a non-narrative experience, the historical framework does not fall away. Indeed one can see Ocampo’s endeavors as an artist as precisely the aesthetic vehicle for his rise, albeit posthumously, to the status of national artist, thereby confirming a thesis underlying his work: historical struggle has achieved a dimension that exceeds rational language and must necessarily be waged in the realm of the senses.11

To put it another way, where the viscerality of historical narrative (realism) drives one toward a struggle which will end in death, the viscerality of visual abstraction (neorealism) drives to a struggle that may indeed be continued. The radical edge of this work was sheared off in H. R.’s canonization by the Marcoses, just as the Marcoses utilized a nationalist progressive discourse for fascistic ends. It is for us to return to the incompleted possibilities of Ocampo’s work and of Philippine modernism more generally in order to determine what potentialities for the contemporary struggle for justice still remain in the strivings of the past.

If we return now to our story of 1937, in which rice, bullets, and blood are given a formal, and therefore conceptual, continuity, we can see that the only red in the story is from the farmers’ protest banners and placards—as if the color of blood is to be drawn from the posters and as if the posters are drawn in blood. Blood is a language and, thus, so are rice and bullets. When formalized by Ocampo’s narrative, each of these elements achieves a linguistic dimension as well as a visceral one. White’s migration to red in the story (rice to blood) is echoed at another level because Mr. Remulla, the organizer, is an American—it is an American who catalyzes the bloodshed (white skin leads to bloodshed). This fact, coupled to the fact that the bolts closing the warehouse were “somehow” open (Tura “was among the first to reach the warehouse door where, somehow, the bolts were removed” [67]), raises a set of questions regarding the sequence of events in the story which, in turn, raises questions about the political relationship between viscerality and
reason.

We know that Tura’s politicization is first and foremost corporeal and visceral, even animal. The hungry crowd concentrated around the bandstand is likened to “a swarm of ants gathered around a lump of sugar” (63) and also to a “swarm of locusts” (67) as they swarm into the rice warehouse, and further described as “unshod.” And at one point, Tura moves through the crowd “with a strength hitherto alien to him, not unlike an animal athirst which had suddenly sensed water a short distance ahead” (65). However, if one reads the story carefully, one cannot but suspect that the warehouse scenario was a carefully reasoned trap organized by the merchants to flush out the rebel leaders. At the very least, the structure of the event and its morphology stages a dynamic interplay between the visceral and the rational. The men who move like a swarm or a herd are caged by the walls of the warehouse, the guns of the police and the “law” of capital. This law, which is at once a rationality of the irrational and an irrationality of the rational, functions through the dissolution of solid distinctions, that is, of objectivity: rice becomes bullets becomes blood. Indeed, the shifting point of view of the last three paragraphs of “Rice and Bullets” cited above, shows a flattening out of the distinction between subjective and objective. Tura’s “Oh no, No!” suddenly rendered subjectively is already part of the objective world. The last paragraph, “But his voice seemed strangely hollow. It seemed to come from a distance, a very far distance beyond,” at once takes the reader out of the story like a kind of zoom out to a long shot but also sutures the reader’s consciousness to Tura’s consciousness in death—as if we have gone infinitely out of and infinitely into the story’s canvas. Ocampo’s famous “elimination of foreground and background,” noticed as one of the powerful formal achievements in the later Neo-realist painting has a definite precursor here. This elimination of a distinct foreground and background could also be thought of as elimination of perspective, or rather, an intermixing of perspective such that many points of view are simultaneously available. It is here that “Rice and Bullets” alternate title, “We or They” becomes interesting. The reader identifies with Tura but that identification is not allowed to remain unproblematic. Is it “We” who will die in the struggle for justice, or is it “They?” In many respects, the success or failure of socialist revolution depends upon the answer to that question. The story creates a mediating structure in which it at once posits a schism between its readers and those engaged in social struggle, even as it allows its readers to hear the urgent call of those who have lost their lives in the fight against exploitation.
VISION IN EXCESS OF SIGNIFICATION

Ocampo’s subtle insistence that it is American capitalism and its logic that is the catalyst of the tragedy in “Rice and Bullets” implies that the dialectical interplay between rationality and corporeality is particularly complex. Like the Marlon Brando figure in Gillo Pontecorvo’s film *Burn*, the invisible hand of capital organizes the revolutionary desires of the colonized people of Quemada (who in *Burn* are first slaves of the Portuguese and later “free” wage workers for the British) to the benefit of empire. From “Rice and Bullets” and from *Scenes and Spaces* we may conclude that Ocampo saw the American presence as the condition of possibility for the particularity of his life and work. It was the past that would be prologue not only to his own creative activity but also to that of the Filipino people. In his work it is as if to Ocampo’s mind the West had had tremendous influence on Philippine literature and painting, to say nothing of Philippine life, history, and economy, but that the Philippines was not and would not remain the void, the space of non-representation forever. Precisely through the medium of literary and painted works, the Philippines might find a forum for its expression, its version of a world history to which it has been an essential yet nearly invisible component.

If one accepts Benedict Anderson’s thesis that by 1959, the year Leon Ma. Guerrero began his translations of the work Jose Rizal, Philippine Nationalism had passed from being “primarily a popular insurrectionary movement, outside of and against a state, to an era in which it is partially transformed into a legitimating instrumentality of a new-old state” (251), then it is tempting to associate Ocampo’s turn away from Social Realism to Neorealist abstraction as an intervention toward forestalling such a reactionary codification of the nation-state. At the very least, Neo-realism appears as an acknowledgement or symptom of a new dispensation of an emerging discursive regime regulating nationalist aspirations, which were once guided by the pleasure principle, with a reality principle. Anderson’s incisive translations of Rizal’s implacable satire and Anderson’s damning comparisons of these passages with the Guerrero translation’s inability to accommodate the universe of differences mobilized by Rizal under the rigid template of Guerrero’s post-war nationalism allow us to take the measure of the impending failure of a nationalist imaginary.

Regarding the fabulous play of difference in Rizal’s *Noli Me Tangere*, Anderson muses, “Everything here is a call to arms. But in the independent Philippines of the 1950s, how much of all this was really bearable?” (252). While Rizal had to unmask “the colonial state and its reactionary ecclesiastical allies” and simultaneously conjure a “Philippines profoundly distinct from Mother Spain,” Guerrero translates for a Philippines whose “real
freedom was enchained by American military bases and the American-imposed Parity agreement, and which was ruled by children of the revolutionary mestizo elite of the 1890s … who now intended firmly to be full masters in their own house” (251-2). Significantly, Anderson argues that Guerrero’s principal translation problem was in the obfuscation of what he calls Rizal’s “social realism” (252).

Returning momentarily to the argument of “Nationalism’s Molten Prayers,” it is worth recalling that the irresolvable contradictions, rigidly framed by real constraints and expressed in and through the narrative social realism of H. R. Ocampo’s novel Scenes and Spaces, erupt in the visual as abstraction: ludic, hallucinatory passages in an otherwise realistic reportage, which could well describe paintings that Ocampo would not execute for some twenty years. To say that social realism became no longer “bearable” (to borrow Anderson’s word) would be to assert that, where it was not entirely censored, the specter of comparisons was transformed into the specter of abstraction. This eruption of abstraction necessary for comparison into the visual itself, which follows what we can see as the foreclosure of narrative realism undergone by the postwar nation, suggests that the nation, if it is to be conceived in an insurrectionary mode, can only be compared not with another existing realm (Manila with Berlin in Anderson’s example), but rather with a place that does not properly, which is to say, does not yet, exist.

At the historical juncture marked by Neo-realism, the dismissal of the actual becomes the greatest indictment of it. Perhaps this giving way to an imaginary seemingly de-linked from history is what is meant by Clement Greenberg’s mysterious assertion that art for art’s sake became, for American abstract expressionism, the logical conclusion of social realism. In the conjuncture specified by World War Two and the period immediately following, both in the Philippines as well as elsewhere, only in a place outside of narrative and beyond logical history could freedom be posited. The realpolitik of the increasingly reactionary and increasingly totalitarian nation-state could not satisfy. Thus the specter of comparisons is, by 1945, not only a sense of other places existing simultaneously and interdependently with one’s own realm but also the sense of a human potentiality, an immediacy of pleasure and experience, which, in the universe of full commodification, exists only in the no-place of the imagination. Abstraction in painting was an afterimage of the experience and aspirations of a previous era. The province of abstract painting, of visuality not subservient to a signifier whose chain of signification was inexorably tied to the nation-state, offered a realm of freedom, was precisely the specter by which a comparison of the real might be gleaning. It became, for a short time, that imaginary realm which posited an alternative to the totalitarian grip of geography,
history, narrative and capitalist rationality. As will become clear momentarily, this space of the visual and of the imaginary, the Neo-realist abstract, was not a neutral zone, a mere chimera, to be left aside by statist regimes. The autonomous visual almost immediately becomes a site of struggle and has ever since been put under siege by state forms.

In his 1939 essay “Avant Garde and Kitsch,” Greenberg writes, “Kitsch is a product of the industrial revolution which urbanized the masses of Western Europe and America and established what is called universal literacy” (9). For Greenberg, Kitsch was akin to fascism, ersatz culture so realistic “that identifications are self-evident immediately and without any effort on the part of the spectator:

The ultimate value which the cultivated spectator derives from Picasso are derived at a second remove, as the result of reflection upon the immediate impression left by the plastic values. It is only then that the recognizable, the miraculous and the sympathetic enter. They are not immediately present in Picasso’s painting, but must be projected into it by the spectator sensitive enough to react sufficiently to the plastic qualities. They belong to the reflected effect. In Repin [Greenberg’s kitsch strawman], on the other hand, the reflected effect has already been included in the picture ready for the spectators unreflected enjoyment. (15)

What is correctly stated though improperly analyzed in this extremely confused essay (whose confusion is due precisely to a purported aesthetic clarity in distinguishing Avant Garde from Kitsch, the progressive from the reactionary) is that the forces of industrialization are also the cause for the emergence of modernism: “[a] society, as it becomes less and less able, in the course of its development, to justify the inevitability of its particular forms, breaks up the accepted notions upon which artists and writers must depend in large part for communication with their audiences” (3-4). The break-up of the forms of traditional society, the fragmentation of the public and universal literacy are simultaneous.

My point is that the movement from social realism to abstraction in the United States, and the simultaneous need to distinguish good abstraction (the avant garde) from what turns out to be bad abstraction (kitsch) by artists and critics on whom modernity has bestowed “a superior consciousness of history—more precisely, the appearance of a new kind of criticism of society” (4)—these developments in art and criticism occur almost simultaneously, albeit with different emphasis and on a different scale, in the Philippines.
Furthermore, and this is central to my argument, what was at stake ultimately involved for artist, critic, and state-maker alike, is the relation of the artwork to the signifier.

It is, I think, this relation to signification, which though nearly conceptualized by Greenberg, could not yet receive adequate theorization. For the avant garde artist, “[c]ontent is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself.” (6) But because the avant garde artist “cherishes certain relative values more than others”:

he turns out to be imitating not God—and here I use “imitate” in its Aristotelian sense—but the disciplines and processes of art and literature themselves. This is the genesis of the abstract. In turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft. (6)

This moment in the aesthetic, which today might be summed up as “the medium is the medium” characteristic of the thirties and forties, may be usefully contrasted with Marshall McLuhan’s formulation of some years later that the medium is the message, which, coincides with the emerging commercial and ideological success of abstract expressionism. The moment of abstraction in painting is the moment in which the visual achieves a definitive split with signification—the painting becomes something in itself. It is only in a second moment, which historically falls almost immediately after the first, that the medium itself becomes the message, that is, when these eruptions in the visual will be recuperated for and by a network of signification belonging to an emerging new order: the Western postmodern for those who like labels. In between, the Nazis, the Soviets under Stalin, and the conservative Right in the United States all rejected abstract art because of qualities related to its perceived decadence (its fall out of meaning). In hindsight, it is clear that it was the ostensible rejection of ideology and the very non-languagableness of abstraction that put off dogmatic regimes. Only during the Cold War, when congress sensed that abstract expressionism might do more to promote an ideology of American Freedom worldwide than it would to offend the taste of conservatives, did the CIA along with the Museum of Modern Art in New York get behind the promotion of abstraction both ideologically and financially. 15 From the point of view of the state, AE meant the national and cultural superiority of the US. Thus the contest over whether or not Abstract Expressionism in the United States belongs to its multicultural identifications and influences, unionization, communist sensibilities and the revolutionary politics of Latin American painters such as Siquieros, or to the CIA and the MOMA and to the production
of ideology for the international interests of US incorporated, mirrors to a certain extent the question of whether Ocampo’s neo-realism is part of the legacy of the full scale revolutionary movement of the Hukbalahap or of Marcos-style fascism.

The reterritorialization of a momentarily autonomous zone of visuality can be further grasped from the following. If in the 1940s Jackson Pollock could respond to the question, whether in his all-over drip paintings he painted from nature, with “I am nature” (Rubin cited in Craven) – an ideology of non-ideology if there ever was one – we can, for better or for worse, gain insight on the entry of his art making into the realm of signification from a passage describing a work by Boanerges Cerrato, in David Craven’s “Abstract Expressionism and Third World Art: A Postcolonial Approach to ‘American’ Art”:

[Boanerges Cerrato’s Triptych, 1986] is an all-over drip painting with brushstrokes that quite self-consciously echo those of Pollock. Yet in the upper register of the painting, where the all-over stops, are trees sprouting forth, so that the all-over suddenly represents the gnarled forms and twisted movements of undominated nature—a nature that in turn signifies anti-imperialist values in contemporary Nicaraguan culture. Such a reading of unbroken nature as a force for national liberation and against foreign intervention is found in much of the recent literature there, as for example in the famous testimonio of Omar Cabezas or in the geographical poetry of Ernesto Cardenal. (Craven 2)

Here Pollock’s style returns as code. As the massive literature on Pollock’s work testifies, his paintings, which for Greenberg were part of a movement that avoided content “like a plague” and aspired to create “something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid,” represented a tremendous crisis for semiotics and, one might well say, in the semiotic itself (5-6). The struggle to claim Pollock and Abstract Expressionism generally from and for various political quarters testifies less to the greatness of the work, which is all good enough, and more to the emergence of a new realm of visuality, the struggle for which characterizes the second half of the twentieth century. What appears is nothing less than a new arena of human expressivity and imagination, which then becomes contested semiotically, ideologically, and not least, economically.

The more general issue of whether or not cultural modernism in the Philippines, which became something of a battle cry even before the Second World War and is still heard with respect to economy and technology to this day (in, for example, the Ramos, Estrada and Arroyo presidential administrations’ repeated calls for the modernization
of the armed forces) – whether cultural modernism was/is a force of Imperialist Westernization seems central here, if, given what has been said, still somewhat undecidable. If the strategies for the production of visual works loosely grouped under the category modernism were (are) taken in part as technologies of visual production, then what is the role of these strategies of assemblage in the formation of consciousness, affect, and worldview? Furthermore, in what way is the new sensorium, thus (in)formed, related to the markedly political realm of western cultural and economic domination? These questions, which must be taken together, can in no way be answered rashly. Better, I think, to offer a dialectical hypothesis capable of sustaining two contradictory yet mutually presupposed strains of organization: Modernity as cultural production was simultaneously a force of oppressive domination and national liberation. Like industrialization and television, modernism is a name for practices constitutive of a world historical shift in human relations and sensibility, bringing with its harsh brutalities previously unimagined and lucid spiritual flights of re-creation (Berman). To bring this point home, one might refer to the modernism of dictatorship and simultaneously the modernism of the EDSA revolution. Each of these, it could be argued, is a child of modernity.

That H. R. Ocampo was chosen personally by Imelda Marcos to create the centerpiece of her monument to modern Philippine culture (the Cultural Center of the Philippines) and that such cultural endeavors (including the notorious Film Center, which collapsed during hurried construction upon still unaccounted-for workers, only to be summarily completed, upon the insistent command of Imelda, atop their unexcavated remains) were central to the justification of authoritarian rule does not reveal the essence of Ocampo’s paintings. These facts reveal, rather, the terms and stakes of the struggle over the realm of imagination opened by his plastic forms. Indeed this space of the autonomous visual was to be ramified by state propaganda, mass media circuits and advertising. The argument regarding the reactionary character of abstraction, its contentless formations, its bourgeois clientele, its emphasis on contemplation and its desire to ingratiate itself to an elite viewer are arguments that are fairly well known in the Philippines but they miss the most important event indexed by abstraction—the opening up of the visual itself. Indeed it was the same arguments which, presented in a different key, brought the US government around to abstract art—art was unconstrained and freed from representation (and offered up to be consumed by equally free patrons). Aside from missing the historical significance of abstraction, these arguments effectively posit an entity such as art or culture or modernism and take it as a static thing that is in itself reactionary or progressive. This way of talking about art covers over the fact that speakers about art are also users of art
and put art to work for specific purposes. Better I think to see cultural works themselves as negotiations of overbearing socio-historical forces and to understand that one works with art/text/artist to discover and re-transmit for the future their liberatory aspirations.

In considering the possibility of an ongoing dialogue about visual culture in the Philippines, I cannot help thinking here of an image discussed in Tony Perez’s video investigation of ghosts at the Film Center: a graffiti portrait of Imelda Marcos crying blood-red five-centavo coins, painted in the bowels of the abandoned building. Perez was at the Film Center on one of his controversial spirit quests in an effort to establish contact with some of the ghosts of the workers who were buried alive during an accident caused by overhasty construction and who had their protruding limbs hacked off and their cries ignored so that construction could continue right on top of them. The Film Center was to be the complement to the Cultural Center of the Philippines, another of Imelda’s cultural showpieces, positive proof of the humanity of the dictatorship and its “City of Man.” It seems all too appropriate that this painting haunts the Film Center and that, more generally, painting haunts film. The painting puts Imelda under the Film Center, abandoned to remain with the workers she claimed to love but in actuality so despised and betrayed. She pumps out tears of blood in the smallest denomination of devalued Philippine currency—each tear, a person. The painting becomes a part of the infrastructure that supports film and newer media, here left to console and to accuse, to remain with the dead and yet remind the living of what conditions underlie their perception. Imelda’s tears are worth five centavos, next to nothing, and that is what the people are worth to her. The entire edifice of the visual, this painting seems to assert, is built upon this devaluation of the people as coin, and their devaluation is at once buttressed and justified by the drama of the spectacle.

If one understands film as intensifying further still the struggle in and over the visual—opening it up, widening it out, part of a grand endeavor to codify every aspect of appearance, of visuality itself—then one can also understand some of the reasons for the re-emergence of figurative painting after the moment of abstraction. Painting returns to the battlefield of the visual fully aware that it is a mediation of forces, that no matter what is depicted it can never be anything other than abstract. Like the commodity form itself, which introduces and generalizes abstraction to all social relations, the image will have a use-value and an exchange value—it is what it is (precisely the aspiration of abstract expressionism according to Greenberg) and it is also a unit of social currency, of value and, therefore, of meaning.
MAGIC, MULTIPLE, MYRIAD PERSPECTIVES AND DENATURALIZATION

In their extremely important work *The Philippines: the Continuing Past*, Renato and Letizia R. Constantino write that “[t]he end of the war [and the installation of Manuel Roxas as first president of the Philippine Republic on July 4, 1945] did not usher in a new social order, it merely adjusted the national life in accordance with the imperatives of American imperialism and the goals of the restored native elite and their new allies, the American reserves from guerilla ranks” (188). Nonetheless, *The Continuing Past* describes a new level of CIA interference with Philippine media, a concerted effort which in my view marks a strategic shift related to the continuing expropriation of the country. Self-consciously now, media, particularly images, were utilized for the expropriation of the imagination.

The chapter entitled “CIA, Philippines” details the arrival of CIA operative Edward G. Lansdale in 1950 and the effort to foster US imperialist interests (which included the routing of the communists) through the cultivation and eventual election to the Presidency of Ramon Magsaysay.

Lansdale’s special baby was the Office of Psychological Warfare which was directly under Magsaysay. Subsequently renamed the Civil Affairs Office, it initiated a wide variety of counterinsurgency projects. That many of these activities also projected Magsaysay in the public eye was of course not accidental. Working closely with JUSMAG and the US Information Services, the CAO mounted a massive anti-Huk propaganda campaign, distributing in a two year period over 13 million leaflets and other materials and conducting over 6,000 meetings. USIS provided much of the literature and films; JUSMAG helped to select targets for air drops of propaganda materials. Thousands of safe-conduct passes with Magsaysay’s picture on them were airdropped over Huk territory. Interestingly enough, these same passes were also dropped over provinces where there were no dissidents at all. (238, emphasis mine)

This rain of images serves well to hail a new order of the organization of the social by means of the image. Without such a thesis there can be no adequate understanding of the current role of film and television either in the Philippines or worldwide. Though propaganda was by no means invented here, WWII had brought it to new levels of sophistication (from Hitler to Frank Capra), particularly regarding the waging of war with images. With US financial backing, Lansdale and Magsaysay were able to coddle an appreciative and therefore malleable press and radio, often staging events such as the firing
of an inefficient staff member or the capture of rebels for press photographers.

One of the most successful propaganda projects was Magsaysay’s own pet program, the Economic Development Corps or EDCOR. Hailed as Magsaysay’s answer to the Huks’ “land for the landless” slogan, EDCOR was supposed to resettle Huk surrenderees in public lands…. As a program to help the landless, EDCOR’s impact was negligible, but as propaganda it was a big success…. [P]osters, pamphlets and films depict[ed] EDCOR farms as the promised land.” (240-1)

While cameras were used to survey polling booths in 1951, the *Philippine Free Press* called Magsaysay the “Man of the Year,” and *Time* magazine carried his picture on its cover. Meanwhile, the Magic Eye, “a Huk surrenderee who, unseen by barrio folk would point out his former comrades as they filed past” (240), was installed among counter-guerilla tactics that included civilian commando units, dogs, and air force strafing and bombing with US supplied napalm.

The Magic Eye, which used the eye of the rebel as a reactionary weapon against rebellion, serves well to illustrate the dominant mode of social control in the visual sphere. Whether through propaganda, surveillance, cooptation or violation, the visual field operated as site of struggle and a means of imperialist-nationalist control. With the help of “more than three thousand instant journalists” (259) hired especially to cover his campaign, Magsaysay, “The Man of Action,” whom Pete Daroy called a “McCarthyist” and an “Anti-Communist,” won the 1953 Presidential elections, after which Lansdale and his CIA team went on to work in Vietnam.\(^{17}\)

The “Magic Eye” turns an organ of revolution into an instrument of counter-revolutionary surveillance. Both the “Magic Eye” and the “Public Eye,” showered in a rain of images—Magsaysay from the sky—testify to the fact that the visual organ is the target of macropolitical entities such as the Philippine State, the CIA, and the US Superstate. The EDCOR films mentioned by the Constantinos, showing the Huk surrenderees resettled in “the promised land,” attest to the general condition that to a large extent *necessitates* the rise of mass media—namely, that here in the moment of modernity, the masses emerge as both objects of representation and potential audience. Eyes are adjusted individually through the intimidation and torture necessary to produce “Magic Eyes,” and on a mass scale through a campaign of low-intensity psywar via print journalism, EDCOR films, commercial cinema and, in the case of the safe-conduct passes, aircraft. Visual technologies are henceforth to be grasped as weapons and, in turn, visuality, as an arena of struggle.
What emerged in Ocampo’s work as a realm of freedom becomes an arena of new types of contestation.

Another Lansdale psywar tactic was what he called the “eye of God” where government troops would identify villages known to be sympathetic to the Huks. At night, the psywar teams would creep into town and paint an eye on walls facing the houses of suspected sympathizers. The notion of an all-seeing malevolent eye was supposed to have been “sharply sobering.” (A8)

Here again Filipinos find themselves caught in the regard of an Other who resides in the materiality of things. Lansdale’s “Eye of God” is a literalization of the neo-colonial gaze of the US, now operating out of the materiality of daily life in the Philippines. In light of Salvador P. Lopez’s pronouncement, as he spoke of the emergence of Philippine realism in Literature in the 1930s, that “Filipinos have acquired eyes” and of the fact that the climax of Hernando Ocampo’s serial novel Scenes and Spaces occurs in a hallucination of an ontogenetic mutation, in which consciousness momentarily explodes into a transcendent, all-seeing collective eye, it is fascinating that Ocampo’s early figurative painting The Hat Weavers (1940, Figure 1) depicts a family of peasants without eyes. Their bodies are turned and their heads are bent as if looking at the hat-weaving work that the mother-figure is
doing. The detail in the fringe around the perimeter of the hats tells us that the overall resolution of the image as a whole should clearly resolve the eyes of the figures. But the facial features are completely blunted, at best dull, impressions. Bright spots on foreheads, shoulders, chests and legs show tension and it is clear that this family lives, feels and survives as an organic unit. But it is also clear that, although seen, they do not themselves see or, at the very least, see themselves as they are here seen. Just as the story “Rice and Bullets” builds an abstract form with and for a character who in certain ways is without abstractions, the very representation of these figures shows that they are caught in a new logic. They may have eyes to weave hats but they cannot see themselves with the eyes of modernity and history, eyes that see them as materials with which to weave the future.

Fig. 2. Practical Politics, 1949

By the time of Practical Politics (1949, Figure 2), figurative realism has almost entirely disappeared from Ocampo’s work. This painting, in which a small fish is pursued by a large bird that is pursued by a larger dragon, is like Big Fish Eat Little Fish, but this time the largest animal has a head that seems to grow organically out of the structure of things. The dragon-body is in fact the environment, and this environment ensnares its prey. The fiercest animal in the universe of the painting appears as an excrescence of its cosmic structure, a structure which in turn provides the mise-en-scène for the predatory politics depicted. And although the forms seem to be organically linked, respecting in every way Ocampo’s compositional mantra of “unity, coherence and emphasis,” the world depicted is in no way “natural.” Indeed the mathematics of nature appears to have generated some
abstract forms—geometric, even “futuristic,” forms and perspectives indicative of a new set of laws. These new laws of nature, modernity’s “second nature,” in which a human-made environment appears in its thrownness and confronts humanity as both alien and given, has here a strange efflorescence. Four red orbs with large blue dots covered by numerous small red spots seem to float on the canvas. Where the animal figures cross them, these orbs (or is it the animals themselves?) become transparent—in any case they can be seen through. Add to this transparency two significant details: 1) the eye of the fish is composed by one of the small red spots on the blue discs of the red orbs and 2) the colors of the animal eyes, red for the bird and blue for the serpent, match the colors of the orbs. Simply put, what these details add up to is that these outgrowths are the new eyes, disembodied, composite and what can be seen through.

The new visual organs, disembodied, composite and, to take the allegory one step further, composed of the eyes of the masses (the small red dots, one of which makes the eye of the fish) are organized by the upper classes (the largest most vicious animal). The multiple eyes organized by the form of single orbs yield new sights. Not the least of what can be seen is the vision of practical politics elaborated here, a vision that includes the predatory dynamics of an environment given form by the largest monsters and by the growth of new eyes.

Though not yet christened Neo-realism, this image could well qualify for the title: it is an autopoetic image, an image of the Philippines seeing itself in terms of a naturalized class violence, with the strange excrescence of its new organs of visuality serving as both object and means of representation. The new eyes are seen and seen through. The eyes appear in the landscape and apprehend it. What they apprehend is the predatory conditions that produced these new eyes. This efficiency of form, which produces something like a free-standing tautology particular only to a new mode of the present, fulfills the H. R. mantra, “Unity, coherence, emphasis” even as it provides a would-be nationalist image.

Particularly interesting for us here is that these eyes have many pupils. As already suggested by my reading of this work, these pupils represent the masses yet are organized—made into organs—by larger structures, giving them a form at once traditional yet hybrid: eyeball, iris, pupils. These organs, which, while singular, see and see through the multiplicity of the masses, are the outgrowth of an environment in which class exploitation has been naturalized. As noted in my discussion of Lansdale above, the cultivation and organization of eyes, becomes a central concern in mid-twentieth century Philippine politics. Ocampo’s painting both represents and sees through the new eyes while providing
a new type visual work for them in order to extend their capacities. Given its objects and themes, the painting appears deeply enmeshed in the dialectics of seeing and understands its engagement as at once a historical, political, and economic undertaking.

By the time of *Masks* (1956, Figure 3), it is not just eyes and allegorical icons that appear, new faces seem to grow out of the cellular material of the *socius*, each with a double set of teeth. These faces, maniacal, jovial, haunted and frozen, stare out at viewers as if to confront each of them as one of their own. The ambiguity of the affect of these faces, which almost sinisterly hit notes between mirth, cynicism and malevolent hypocrisy, has, I would argue, a freezing effect on viewers. Confronted by the undecideability of these masks, our own features freeze in similar ways, until the cellular material of the painting infiltrates our own faces and forces us to greet the staring masks with a mask of our own. It is as if viewers are absorbed by the logic of the painting and then overtaken, incorporated into its material. Are we having fun, are we encountering evil? We don’t know. Hence, in our bafflement, we are forced to wear the same undecidable expressions as those hallucinatory characters whom we face. This viral denaturalization of our faces, a denaturalization that causes our skin to freeze and then to be overtaken by the cellular material of the mask even as we grow a double set of teeth, is accomplished, I want to emphasize, through a visual exchange. Here again is the induction of “self-consciousness” through the being-constituted as both spectator and spectacle, which, as Rey Chow correctly claims, is the
necessary (pre)condition of postcolonial “third-world” nationalism. The masks are modern, alien, and well … Filipino. Is this Philippine art? Is this Filipineness? Is this me as Filipino? The profound resonance of such questions is only multiplied by their absurdity. In front of the painting, we are incorporated into an almost biophysical transformation through the viral logic of the gaze. Those masks in the painting could well be people just like you and me. Indeed, they probably are. It is only that we are all caught up in a transformative visual relation, co-present with the nation as crisis situation. The transformed medium of sight, like an ether that renders its elements abstract, spectral and alien, unavoidably induces a cellular mutation. A viewing of Masks thus dramatizes the operation of Philippine visuality on the process of subjectification for a particular historical moment.

A few years later, in Politico Cancer (1958, Figure 4), Ocampo portrays interlocked entities of shifting form and shape. Though this work precedes the Mutants period (1963-1968) and the Visual Melody period (1968-Ocampo’s death in 1978), it has attributes that will be picked up and emphasized in the later work. Here, crabs, frogs, scorpions, mushroom clouds, claws, snakes, antennae and amoebic blobs grin, eat and sense in the protoplasmic soup of the socius. What foreshadows the mutant period is the mutagenic stew, which gives rise to distorted yet lifelike forms, and what foreshadows the visual melody period is that each of the forms has shifting boundaries that allow it to be taken both as autonomous and as incorporated into a larger form. In a manner that will receive
far greater development in the late work of Ocampo, each form is territorialized and
deterritorialized by its context, as if the boundaries of its community and function are
constantly shifting. Thus amoebic entities become eyes in a larger structure, eyes that, as
in the masks, look out with a malevolent grin, with puzzlement, or not at all. Just as each
medium-sized section of distinct coloration collects the elements internal to it and posits
itself as an entity, the whole painting, in which all of the elements appear to be contained
in a bluish background, may well constitute a larger entity. The cancer here is precisely
the disorganization/reorganization dynamics imposed upon all entities by an unregulated
growth that renders boundaries and meaning undecidable.

SPECTACULAR ANTITHESIS / SPECTERS OF COMMUNISM

In the late 1970s, summing up the period under discussion here, Angel De Jesus
writes as follows:

In 1947 Nanding [H. R.] was cited in Manuel A. Viray’s article “The Best in
Literature in 1946,” published in Filipino Youth Magazine in its February issue as “a
writer of anguished poetry reflective of his proletarian tendencies and bitter inner
life.” Reviewing the Philippine cultural exhibition at the Carnegie Endowment
International Center in New York City in September 1953, the New York Times critic
commented that there could be no mistaking the politically-slanted symbolism in
Nanding’s canvasses. Similarly, in Alejandro Roces’ column, “Roses and Thorns” in
the September 15, 1961 issue of The Manila Times, there is quoted the conclusion of
a story written in 1937 entitled “Rice and Bullets.” Roces was reminded of the story
because a few days before, a group of squatters in Paco had assaulted a Namarco
truck and ripped open the sacks of rice that it was carrying. All these remind us that
Nanding has roots which link him ineluctably with the life of the common people.
This feeling is what even now suffuses his abstractions and keeps him the humane,
gentle man that he is. (62)

In his essay “Patronage, Pornography and Youth,” Vince Rafael elegantly
counterposes a spectacle-driven Marcos-era scopic regime, welded during the mid-sixties
to the co-factors of the emerging market economy and the traditional patronage system,
against “the destruction of the spectacle” achieved by the first quarter storm—the anti-
Marcos demonstrations of January 26 and January 30, 1970 (150). I mention this contest
Beller
From Social Realism

between (the) spectacle on the one-hand and (the) movement on the other because it seems to confirm the anti-fascist pro-people strains and strategies of Ocampo’s later work. In short, it will help us to reframe the question I posed in “Nationalism’s Molten Prayers” regarding H.R.’s later work: where did the socialist orientation go? Thus far I have shown that the visual emerges as a realm of freedom and then as a realm of contestation. Unable to find realization in representational narrative, Ocampo’s nationalist aspirations became the molten prayers in the visual that are his paintings. De Jesus says that Ocampo’s links with the people “suffuse” his abstractions, but how so?

Let us contrast Ocampo’s later work with Rafael’s concluding analysis of the four elements he discusses in “Patronage, Pornography and Youth,” namely, the biographies of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, their public performance of their relationship, three portraits of Imelda hanging in Malacañang, and the “bomba” or “bold” films that achieved popularity in the mid-sixties and after. Rafael writes:

[Imelda] served as his [Ferdinand’s] favorite bomba, exploding her lethal charms for an audience grown habituated as much to the staging of scandal as the commodification of politics. In both politics and the movies, women were made to represent instances of larger intentions at work, galvanizing the interests of people while demarcating their position as mere viewers of spectacles. (150)

While I analyze the bomba film and the exploitation of women “made to represent instances of larger intentions at work” elsewhere,18 my interest here is in the situation of spectators who, confronted by the Antonio Garcia Llama image of Imelda, “are at once in front of the portrait, yet also at the margins of the frame—spectators to the extent that [they] have been incorporated into a prior and largely invisible spectacle” (150). This painting and the other commissioned works discussed by Rafael are powerful, rhetorical instances designed to posit spectators and place them in a fantasy where acceding to Marcos power affords the security of patronage. They are, simultaneously, recorded traces of the architecture of the Marcos fantasy which balances the needs of the growing world market economy with the ‘traditional’ patronage system under a nationalist rubric.

Rafael finds the antithesis to the Marcos-pacified spectator who, like Kerkleveit’s proto-revolutionary peasants during the first half of the twentieth century, resort to a demand for the moral obligations of patronage to redress the injustices imposed by wage labor, in Jose (Pete) Lacaba’s account of the frenzied First Quarter Storm rally that marked his politicization:
Caught in the middle of the clash [the FQS], the writer finds himself confronted not with cops and youths but with the fleeting advance and retreat of images and sounds that are wholly removed from their putative origins. He thus finds himself in extreme intimacy with opposing forces at the very moment that he is unable to personalize those forces. His position therefore, differs considerably form that of the viewer of Imelda’s portraits. While the latter is the subject that receives and reciprocates a pervasive and ever distant gaze, the former is one who loses himself in the swirl of disembodied voices that he is unable to respond to and the rush of sights that he can barely recognize. He is shocked out of his position as a spectator and finds himself contaminated by the confusion that he witnesses. As a result, he is cut off from his identity as a reporter. “It was impossible to remain detached and uninvolved now, to be a spectator forever,” Lacaba writes. “It was no longer safe to remain motionless. I had completely forgotten the press badge in my pocket.” (158-9)

As Rafael notes, Lacaba’s experience of the chaos of the FQS, which Lacaba says leads to his own politicization, results from the loss of a stable perspective that is “reinforced by the radical detachment of images from their sources unleashed by the clash” of demonstrators and police. From a formal and aesthetic point of view, one cannot help noticing that the loss of a stable perspective and the radical detachment of images from their sources—the “swirl”—also characterize the abstractions of Neo-realism. But reading with the grain of Lacaba’s account, Rafael makes another important point here. Lacaba’s politicization does not result from these dissociations alone. When Lacaba tries to help a student only to find himself attacked, he screams “Putanginamo!” [“You son of a bitch!”] at the cop. “Responding to the force of authority, the writer begins to assume a position allied with the students. He takes up the language of youth” (159). Rafael is quite specific here that this *language*, its taunts to the police, its chants and slogans, is collective and communal in character. “The rally itself created a context that made language seem coterminous with community. The power of slogans came from the sense that they gave adequate expression to individual impulses, indeed gave those impulses a form that one did not realize they had” (157). In short, without the context of mass action, the abstraction of images from events remains only a freeing up of objective identifications and a pre-condition of dis-identification with power. As the freeing up of images from their sources, abstraction is a condition of revolution but not a sufficient cause.

Rafael concludes thus: “As the events of January 26 and 30 showed, the politics of
youth, at least during its wild but short-lived moments, offered an alternative to existing conceptions of authority and submission. Rather than accede to the state’s attempt to reify power, they sought to literalize politics, converting mass spectacles into a mass movement. By disordering the calculated disorder launched by the Marcos regime, they furnished a counterlegacy to the years of dictatorship that were to follow” (161).

It is this anti-reificatory gesture designed to unbuild the edifice of sight that also characterizes the work of the later Ocampo. Wanting to see in the late Ocampo’s work a communist art is misplaced. Rather, what one sees is stunted revolutions, socialism in a bourgeois frame, where it is understood that the frame is the pressure of national bourgeois society on visuality and the socialist imagination, the separation of nationalist democratic aspirations from a discourse that can sustain them. We can identify this frame with the world-media-system, with a global sea-change in the dispensation of language and visuality and with the specificity of the latter half of the twentieth century in the Philippines. What is in process inside the bourgeois-imperialist-nationalist frame is a churning and ceaseless attack on the conventions of the picture plane and hence on the static and reificatory character of the frame itself—that is, on the way hegemony wants us to see.

Ocampo’s late images are, then, specters of communism, the brilliant potentiality of a set of communal desires for an interdicted community. I want to emphasize that Ocampo’s work is not a series of idyllic pictures of “what things would look like if we had egalitarian society.” What is important here is process. The work is a continual engagement with a violent world that foists compromise and humiliation on national-democratic aspiration, a world that has rendered Ocampo’s nationalist and proletarian hopes for the Philippines abstract and is thus rendered abstract in turn. It is an abstract realization of the “frustrated desires” and “feverish dreams” of an artist who “had to make a living” in the postcolonial context of the Philippines.

Why is it important to argue thus? First, to call Ocampo’s work socialism in a bourgeois frame is not to diminish Ocampo, in spite of what ultimately may be for us his disappointing compromises and ideological depoliticization. Ocampo’s stature is, finally, not central here. What is important is that seeing Ocampo’s work as socialism in a bourgeois frame, as specters of communism, restores the revolutionary aspirations of Philippine nationalism to the center of artistic innovation and creativity in the Philippines. What is great in this national artist and indeed what is most unique, came from the revolutionary identifications, inclinations and exigencies that composed him.

If Ocampo’s work constitutes the imaginary satisfaction of a real desire, it is still not
the imaginary reconciliation of a real contradiction. Rather it is a working through of real contradictions on the imaginary plane, one of the historically ascendant arenas of political struggle. Radicals and activists perhaps had good reason to dismiss his work during the rise of Socialist Realism in the late sixties and early seventies. But thirty years later, it is perhaps better for us not to dismiss Ocampo’s work but instead to claim it, just as the land, the state, and all that has been expropriated in the name of private property are to be claimed by and for the people. In building a revolutionary culture, part of what we must do is to show how what is comes from the people and how it can be used by the people. This struggle involves unearthing the social logic that, though repressed, nonetheless drives the production of the object world, including art and visuality, but also private property and labor. Furthermore, we must indict the reactionary social logic that reifies and enframes the world of objects, of art, of commodities, and of vision itself. In Ocampo’s words, “The organic totality and unity of things give the whole, as well as each cell, its significance.”

As in Ocampo’s paintings, we must break the spell of reification and show the social splines competing for the significance of the work and, more generally, for the future of all things.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION: CAN THE SPECTER SPEAK?

Having said all this, I must admit that some of the later works of H. R. leave me somewhat frustrated because the aesthetic uplift I experience in front of these works has nowhere to go, less perhaps I claim it as a motivation for writing this article. While his portrait Che (Figure 5, 1968) and the painting Man and Carabao (Figure 6, 1969), which Ocampo considered to be one of his most important works, still resonate in a figurative register, paintings such as Sampayan which is still just figurative, The Last Days of September (Figure 7, 1972), which one assumes was done just after the declaration of Martial Law, and Homage to Gomburza (Figure 8, 1977) have a different set of effects. Alice Guillermo writes:

H. R. Ocampo’s Man and Carabao is no longer the romantic pastoral image of man and his faithful beast of burden. The image has become depersonalized. It is not a painting of a particular man or a specific carabao. Yet it is precisely the depersonalization of the image which made it possible for H.R. Ocampo to imbue the painting with his own imprint. The shapes are fragmented just as reality now demands to be viewed according to relatively different contexts.
Unity, coherence, and emphasis would still be valid, but their validation depended on the highly individual perception and manipulation of the artist. Colors are given harmonic sequences of carefully arranged tones and intensities—harmonies so precise that the artist could formulate them in numbers—but it was a formulation, a system unique to H. R. Ocampo because he devised it. He strictly followed rules but they were rules he made. Eternal verities as palpable truths evident to everyone were—like prewar peace and plenty—dimly remembered memories. There are only facets of truths now just as in H. R. Ocampo, there are only fragments of shapes hinting at an image, a personality. (109-12)
Guillermo is right to note the non-realization of the image and the personality, or rather its realization in fragmentation and abstraction, as being the distinguishing feature of Ocampo’s work and, one could add, of post-war nationalism. The later works achieve a near total detachment from referentiality.

While it is clear that many of the visual melody paintings achieve a dynamism and unity heretofore unimagined by Ocampo or perhaps any other Filipino painter, perhaps the moment has not yet arrived for an adequate reading of these works beyond what has
already been said regarding their de-reification of objects, their engagement of visuality as process, their inducement to aesthetic pleasure through visual process, and their philosophico-aesthetic effort to restore agency to the viewer in an era when sight has been grasped as an alienable activity through the mass production and reproduction of power.

Such frustration was the conclusion of the upcoming generation of painters and filmmakers who would turn again to social realism. I have said that Neo-realism opened a realm of freedom, the visual, which almost immediately became a site of contestation. Formally speaking, abstract art was one result of this contest. However, as intellectual sharpshooter Pete Daroy writes, in a critique of liberalism, “as the Filipino intellectual became more abstract in defense of freedom, the more he was increasingly forced to abandon his criticalness towards the status quo” (82). The liberatory power of abstraction had its moment and, with capital’s near total encroachment on the visual today, still has something to offer us. But as the social situation itself during the late sixties and early seventies grew increasingly abstract and as poverty and violence grew more concrete, the people demanded more.
NOTES

1. See for example, Torres, *Philippine Abstract Painting* 62-3.

2. “Pinoy Baroque: a festive spirit, love of image-clusters or that fear of emptiness (horror vacui) which compels the Pinoy to fill every space with busy detail, flattened perspective, and lush, curvilinear forms designed to reflect the grass-roots *Pinoy’s* taste for the flamboyant and exuberant in his lifestyle, environment, and decor…. It is abstraction more at home with subject-matter — specifically the human figure — than without it. It also welcomes the decorative element found in folk, popular and indigenous arts and crafts.” (Torres, *Philippine Abstract Painting* 24)

3. The pursuit of such a question however, is not my immediate purpose here. Suffice it to say that the abstraction of cultural form in and as concept presupposes a set of conditions that take the cultural worker beyond the sheer appearances of things and give him or her some acquaintance with their inner logic or systems. Thus Deleuze writes of the most radical challenge to signification in history, that is, the cinema, in a country which has largely dominated intellectual production during the latter twentieth century and which developed the theory of the signifier – France. Such intellectual formations can in no way be separated from the fact of France’s “anthropological tradition,” meaning its imperialism, and the dialectic of empowerment and threat posed by its domination of the Other. One might say similar things about Marx, Freud Lukacs, Althusser and the other great theorists of abstraction.


5. Though some might object that Ocampo was much favored by Imelda Marcos, even commissioned by her to create the curtain for the stage of the cultural showpiece of Martial Law, the Cultural Center of the Philippines, and that such a connection vitiates any possibility of a radical political agenda in the latter life and work of H. R., one should also remember here that the late Lino Brocka also on many occasions made films primarily to make money—for other films. Do such compromises place the work of an artist beyond redemption? I am suggesting that it is possible to amplify the radical strains in a lifework. Neither a work nor a life is necessarily over just because either the viewing is finished or someone dies. There is a trace or a legacy, and so much depends upon what we make of it.
“Non-objective “ here is meant as used in discourse about the “13 moderns,” that is, in contradistinction to the objectivity of realism. Romanatic allegory (Juan Luna), and impressionism (Amorsolo) all had their moments prior to and during what is considered to be modernism.

“The term Neo-Realist was coined by the writer and painter E. Aguilar Cruz, simply to indicate a new mode of looking at reality, perhaps with the same unflinching vision as the Neo-Realist film makers of Italy.” (Paras-Perez 6)

See Nemenzo. See also Kerkvliet.

See De Jesus.

“Rice and Bullets” first appeared in the Sunday Tribune Magazine, April 18, 1937. The text I am using is from Philippine Cross-Section: An Anthology of Outstanding Filipino Short Stories in English. All subsequent page references to this work will be given in the main text. The story has also appeared under the title “We or They”, in Philippine Short Stories: 1925-1940 edited by Yabes. De Jesus, 60-9.

Reynaldo C. Ileto, in his important work Filipinos and Their Revolution, makes an important point on the issue of emphasis, “Controversies in Philippine history have arised out of the practice of locking events and personalities to singular, supposedly factual meanings.” (167) As I am trying to show, Ocampo’s strategies for the organization of form work precisely to unlock elements from rigid (“realist”) templates in order to at once portray real social contents as multiform: interlocked, yes, but not in a static determination. Such a formal endeavor has an aesthetic as well as a political aspiration, to show interconnectivity but also to return emotional and intellectual agency to the subject/viewer — to engage an audience as a participant in social creation. This has, if I may be so bold, a democratizing effect, rendering to viewers equal agency rather than forcing them to conform to a hegemonic interpretation, but also rendering figurative elements in a canvas compositionally equal in terms of their fluidity and import.

See Paras-Perez on HRO and the elimination of foreground and background.

It is noteworthy that “the specter of comparisons,” the title of Anderson’s consummately erudite study is taken from a phrase penned by “the first Filipino,” Jose Rizal himself. As already noted, Anderson writes that “What he [Rizal] meant by this was a new, restless double-consciousness which made it impossible ever after to experience Berlin without at once thinking of Manila, or Manila without thinking of Berlin. Here indeed is the origin of nationalism which lives by making comparisons.” (The Spectre of Comparisons 229)
In his essay “The Late Thirties in New York,” dated 1957, 1960, Greenberg writes, “Abstract art was the main issue among the painters I knew in the late thirties. Radical politics was on many people’s minds, but for these particular artists Social Realism was as dead as the American Scene. (Though that is not all, by far, that there was to politics in art in those years; someday it will have to be told how ‘anti-Stalinism’ which started out as ‘Trotskyism,’ turned into art for art’s sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come.” See Greenberg 230. As is becoming well known, this claim has an ironic twist: In New York and around the globe, Abstract Expressionism was being promoted by the CIA because it was viewed as a viable cold war weapon proclaiming American freedom. See Pollock and After.

For an excellent history and analysis of this moment in the history of AE, see Francis Frascina, ed., Pollock and After.

Renato Constantino is one of the exemplary Philippine historians of the twentieth century.

Daroy’s brilliant and biting critique in “Magsaysay: Our New Folk Hero” sets out to debunk the myth of Magsaysay, describing him as someone who never confronted the big questions regarding the significance of his capitulation. “So it is but proper that instead of suggesting ‘grandeur,’ Magsaysay’s life should suggest ‘glamour,’ and instead of being described in tragic terms, it should be described as ‘The Story of the Fellow Who Made Good.’” (See Daroy 48.) What is startling about the essay cited above is that in a section entitled “Portrait of the Anti-Communist, it grasps Magsaysay as an intellectual type exhibiting personality traits and mental habits apparently becoming widespread in the Philippines.

This text also contains the important essay “The Failure of Liberalism.” Daroy writes, “Since criticism of democratic institutions was readily submitted to the rigid terms of Cold War politics, liberalism became merely a commitment to ideas, in principle. A criticism here could be made of the liberal Filipino intellectual: he did not protest enough against the forces which tended to limit the freedom of expression and of thought in the national culture. Instead, he contented himself with the rhetorics of his own liberalism, which rhetoric, in turn became expressive of his incapacity to manifest his commitments in action” (82).

Almost as if to confirm Greenberg’s thesis that art for art’s sake is the logical conclusion of social realism, Ocampo said of his Transitional Period (1945-1963): “It was during this period also when I eliminated cast shadows, single-source-of-light and chiaroscuro, modeling, all in the interest of flattening the planes and making my forms, hues, tonal values and texture achieve notable composition and design. In other words, the canvas itself became my subject matter, and my sole objective in painting became
the production of a living, organic and logical unit. I tried to achieve this objective, not by disregarding nature. As a matter of fact, I studied nature more closely and diligently, not for the purpose of copying its visual aspects, but more for the purpose of learning its logic and principles.” (Zafaralla, Philippine Daily Inquirer 9 June 1991)

In “An Interview With H. R. Ocampo” conducted by Torres and Munoz,” Torres says, “Whether you paint non-objective or abstract-surrealist, one notices a preoccupation with Freudian symbols, metaphors of frustrated desires that lie buried in the unconscious, the images of fevered dreams.” Although the comment is provocative, strictly speaking, the paintings are not metaphors; they are the realization of these desires in the abstract, not symbols but activations. Ocampo would agree. He responds, “That is true, although frankly, I have never done a painting with a conscious intention of producing Freudian symbols. I do not say to myself I will do a painting that will demonstrate this or that idea.” (18-9)
WORKS CITED


