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2016.04.07 Thu, by Glenn Geffken Translated by: Translated from the German by Jeni Fulton

WASAK!

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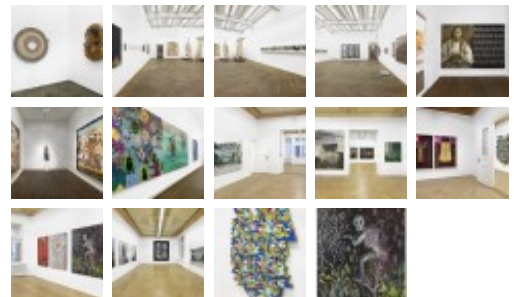
The Philippines, it might be said, is a country in search of an identity. — Raymond Bonner

In the 1970s, the Philippines were the pearl of South East Asia and a popular travel destination. My father was backpacking there on his way to Japan, but decided to stay in this island paradise. Several visits later, he married my mother and returned to Bremen, Germany with her. She adapted to her new circumstances very quickly; she learned the language, found a job, and is now so integrated into local society that her presence at afternoon coffee fails to attract any sort of special attention. As a child, I felt awkward when it came to questions regarding my heritage. I felt very German and that Germany was my home. I couldn't relate to the imagery of beaches, palm trees, and poverty. I envied my half-Japanese best friend; Japan seemed so much more interesting — an Asian high culture with all its fascinating aspects: samurais, kimonos, sushi, Manga, Play Stations and Godzilla. Aside from family visits, I have never felt a strong attraction to the Philippines.

Recently, the Philippines have swung back into focus in the West. Following the China years and the attention lavished on Vietnam and South Korea, this lesser-known South East Asian country is now in the spotlight. Berlin's Arndt gallery recently showed a survey exhibition of 19 artists who reflect the lively Filipino art scene, accompanied by a catalogue published by *Distanz*. The title, "Wasak!", can be translated as "in ruins" or "destroyed."

The curators Norman Crisologo and Erwin Romulo are aware of the dangers inherent in investigating concepts of cultural or national specificity. The question of what makes Philippine culture specifically Filipino was addressed in the introduction to the catalogue, and confirmed my instinctive reaction: that the specificity of the Philippines lies in there being nothing specific about the country. The island nation consists of a thousand atolls and innumerable dialects and has been, since its discovery by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century, colonized by some nation or other. "In ruins" is therefore a programmatic title that alludes to the fact that any artist who examines the identity or the history of the Philippines must also confront these conflicting tendencies. With the increasing force of globalization and the aftershocks of postmodernism, this aspect of the Philippines is increasingly relevant, and perhaps explains the art market's indecisive approach to the country. Everything we see is uncannily familiar and appears as a revenant of something recognized. It is not the unknown, the Other, that we see. It would seem that many artists only blossom through the adaptation of another culture. It is therefore unsurprising that a quarter of the population works outside the country, and that many of the most significant entertainers, musicians and artists do not attribute their success to an autochthonous identity, but to, say, an "exotic misunderstanding." The Western gaze on the Philippines is all too easily led by an eccentric mix of picturesque nature, friendly inhabitants and folklore, as well as natural catastrophes, corruption and intensive religious self-abasement.

These elements, then, also made an appearance in the exhibition with its promise of a full Filipino experience. Aside from the medium—painting (assemblage)—there was little to unite the artists presented. Plurality was therefore emphasized, and the question of a movement explicitly negated. The exhibition was a survey in the best and the worst sense—a pie chart of the



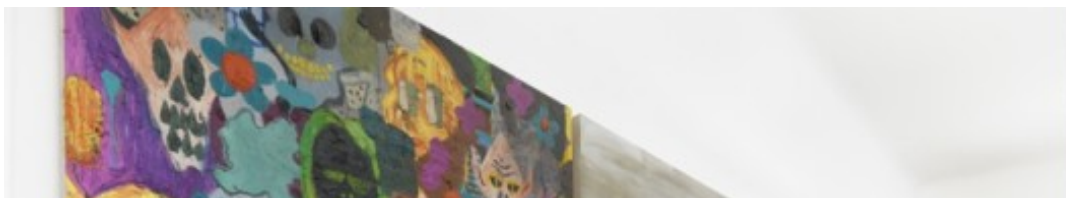
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contemporary art scene. Norberto Roldan's and Kawayan de Guia's assemblages are materially charged and slightly portentous: both confront questions of colonial heritage and President Marcos' dictatorship. Social conflicts, mythology and the phenomenal commingle in the works of Pow Martinez and Zean Cabangis. A pale nostalgia inhabits the paintings of Kaloy Sanchez and Zean Carbangis, who use photographs as a base for their work.

Jigger Cruz, Louie Cordero and Manuel Ocampo take a globalized perspective. Manuel Ocampo's humorous, ironic textual works perhaps best describe the dilemma of Filipino identity and the role of the artist. The statement "Lack of Originality is Made Up for by Craftmanship" (2015) can be read as a breezy but pointed comment on the surrounding works. Thus, the most ambivalent question regarding the identity of Filipino art arises. "One Person's blasphemy could be another person's form of spiritual expression." Manuel Ocampo elucidates his often misunderstood art forms, stating that if a work starts to offend someone's tastes and values, then it has succeeded in "staking a claim of its meaning in the world [...] as a statement of existence."



"WASAK!", exhibition view, Arndt gallery, Berlin

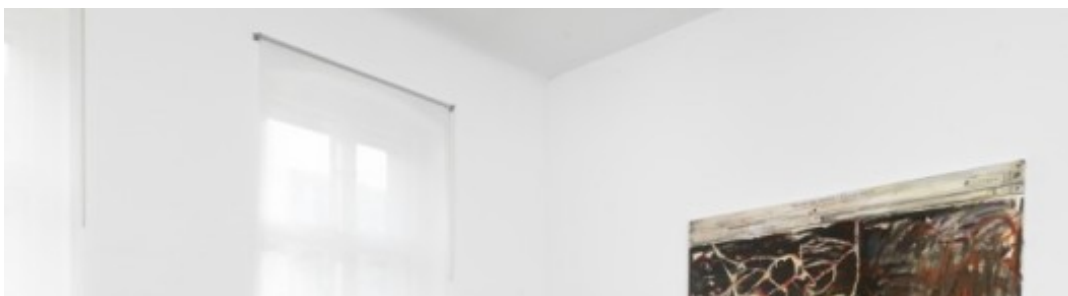




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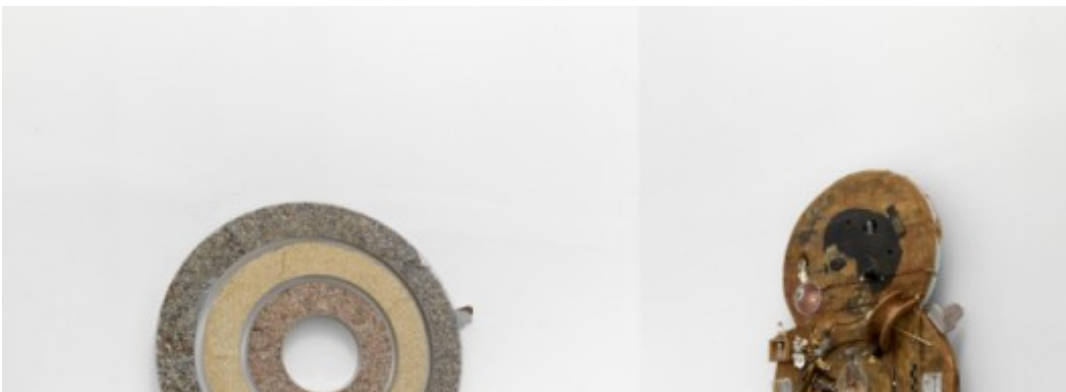




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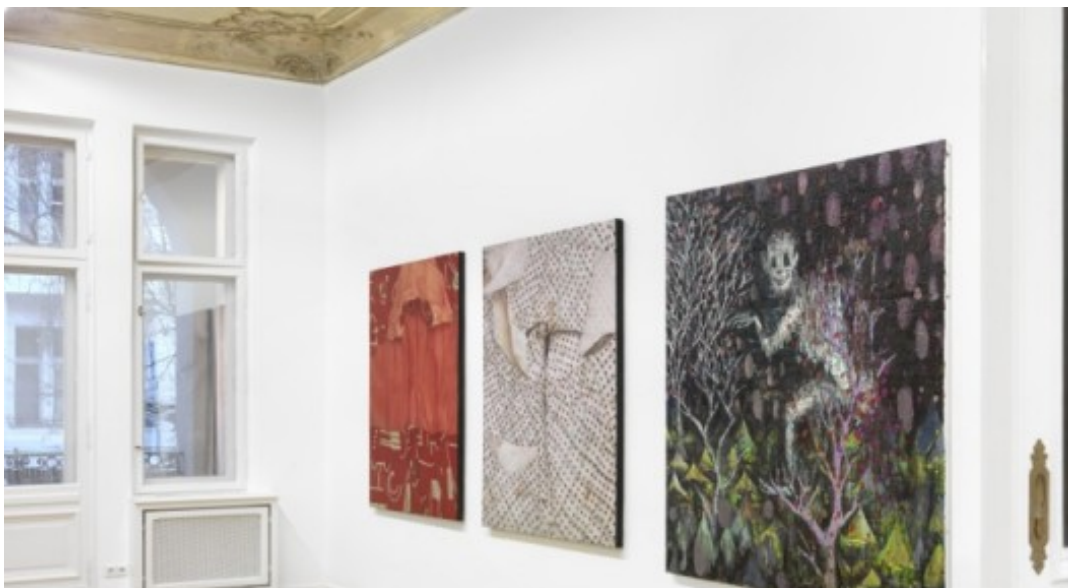


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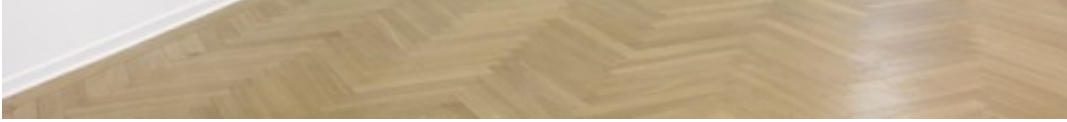


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