

# Rodriguez Speaks with Billy Woodberry

## MANUEL OCAMPO: GOD IS MY COPILOT

**Q: Can you talk about the context in which you made *Manuel Ocampo: God is My Co-Pilot* (1999) - how you chose Manuel Ocampo and the particular cultural and political context of that decision.**

A: I was first introduced to the work of Manuel Ocampo during the same year as the Los Angeles Riots, 1992. He was in a show called *Helter Skelter* at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

There was something in his craft that evoked a haunting. His works seemed to portray the fallout of the spiritual damage of the Latin American colonized headspace. I was immediately drawn to the power of it. At the same time, Ocampo was undermining the seriousness of the subject matter with a cheeky, playful, irreverent, rude take on race in America that the art world has always treated as so sacrosanct. On the one hand he was laying down some heavy shamanism and on the other he was undermining it – and all in the same strokes. This was really refreshing for me.

This became the basic question of the film. Is the artist a shaman or a multi-cultural opportunist?

**Q: The film seems to be a singular project, because of its vision and commitment.**

**You decided to shoot the film knowing that you would make a 35mm copy for theatrical distribution. Knowing the film would not only have a theatrical life but also a life as a film – did this require a particular approach?**

A: I felt like the paintings merited a kind of classical mechanical treatment. There was something about Ocampo's work that demanded, or certainly suggested, an association with the Spanish classical painting tradition. I felt like to shoot electronically would be to shortchange the richness, the depth, the texture, the mystery, the old fashioned-ness of the images.

But, ultimately, I was motivated by you know, simple, sentimental film school vanity - the notion that it could be "big." You know, the pursuit of bigness, just for the sake of it. Nothing more high-minded than that. There were a lot of considerations, but ultimately it was probably that I thought the paintings would look best. And I did this despite the fact that the film negative process would limit the creative possibilities, because I'm increasingly drawn to the possibility of digital imagery.

**Q: I think of the film as an intervention, a way of participating in the ongoing discourse and dialogue around these issues. It is in the painting and it is also in the**

**decision to make the film. The context of the film is really important. It is important for people to understand how you understood what was being called “multiculturalism” and “diversity” - how this was lived, experienced, and observed by you. There is an older movement of minority groups and cultures that have their own complexity, but this was a new moment and there was an apparent welcoming of it, with reluctance, but there as a willingness to talk about these issues.**

A: Well, the film rather fortuitously became a questioning or repudiation in some ways of multiculturalism. I think this film can be seen as a document of an enormously talented and intelligent young artist who becomes trapped by the politics of the moment, panders to it, and is ultimately limited to that space. He is the Filipino guy, who, despite his enormous talent and intelligence, can only be appreciated and sold and taken seriously if he's playing the race card. As a brown filmmaker in Los Angeles, it had become apparent to me as a brown person there were a lot of factors over-determining my prospects of expression. What was expected of me was to speak, not just as an American son, but as a brown son, so I can relate to him. The film is about this trap of the identity game. This is why the first line of the film is “identity is your worst memory.”

Though we Western brown sons of Asia and Mexico are often more worldly and cosmopolitan than our gringo counterparts, very often we afford ourselves a smaller space of creative possibility in these barrio-ized spaces. Part of the film was to insist upon the world.

**Q: But it's also anchored -**

A: Yes, it's decidedly a Los Angeles film – the idea that this artist and this film could emerge

from a place like this is decidedly there. Increasingly, greater numbers from Asia and Mexico are coming to the US and to the West coast. Our imagination is no longer bound to Big Ben. As a result there are these new and interesting identity formulations, that look to and come out of the Pacific and the south rather than New York and Europe. Many of us are no longer able to see ourselves as simply Americans or Americans from Mexico. Our identities are being shaped by a wide variety of influences.

The engagements you see in the film with the collectors reveal a great deal about the real lack of cultural capital among those who seem to be the consumers of cultural capital. Those who broker world culture are not necessarily the most culturally qualified, or deft, or hip; very often they are quite the contrary. I would hope under everything else, this film is an examination of creativity. It is an exploration of this cat who just lived to draw and to paint on the walls with his fingernails or whatever else was available. It impressed me and I really admired this man. But I also wanted to witness the capital and social relationships that determined the way in which creativity becomes possible for people like that.

**Q: It's a very rich film visually, in terms of textures, the variety of approaches, and the ways of filming. It is lyrical and poetic.**

A: From the first day of shooting it was evident the biggest assets were the paintings themselves. Ocampo himself was obviously very shy and wasn't very forthcoming. He was very self-protecting, very soft spoken.

I looked at a lot of films and tried to find a strategy or way to make the film powerful given the limits of this man's persona and given the greatest visual commodity I had,

which were these paintings - just these flat things. I watched a lot of films about paintings and I walked away extremely unsatisfied by the way the paintings jumped off the screen. I worked with a very innovative cinematographer, Esteban De Llaca (with the help of Claudio Rocha), and we figured out a way to bring life to these images and textures in the paintings – a way to animate them. We experimented with the speed and frame rate and transfer rate, 16 frames per second. I think we successfully evoked the power, mystery, the movement and experience you get in a gallery when tripping off a powerful painting. That was the first element, the cornerstone of what I knew I wanted to make a film about.

At the same time, I didn't want to fix Ocampo into any hole. He was this Asian guy who was certainly no Picasso in terms of being a dynamo, or the commonly portrayed tragic drunk, Pollock or Bacon type tortured artist. I feel like I was a co-conspirator with him. We were both manipulating and helping to contrast an image. Ocampo played cat and mouse with me and at times I wanted to catch him. Sometimes I didn't and sometimes I couldn't.

**Q: That relationship is present in the film.**

A: He is a talented and wonderful and recognized artist. We had a lot of the same concerns and so I guess I used him to express my own preoccupations and reservations and frustrations with the state things as far as art and culture and this part of the world.

Q: It is a very successful collaboration. It is **apparent you honor and respect his work, but also that you wanted an exchange. You question and elicit responses or statements from him. What is important is you respect him but you are critical as you would be with anybody you care about in order to strengthen them. You are almost**

**protective of him in your insistence of questioning those around him. But you elicit a whole range of opinions about him, about his work, about his place, and from younger artists who may be both a bit inspired or a bit envious. It is a complicated film because of this range of voices.**

A: So often documentaries seem to be sons of privilege examining the less privileged, so part of what my work is hopefully about is reexamining the elite. It is about turning a camera toward those who traditionally can protect themselves, but those whose opinions and assumptions have so much of an impact on the way the world turns.

**Q: I think in this film and in your other film, Mixed Feelings: San Diego/Tijuana (2002), there is a high regard for art and for imagination. Your projects sometimes touch upon other areas: culture, politics, culture, but what I appreciate is how you take the visual and visual producers seriously. You use them as a way to engage and to understand the world.**

A: I am a pragmatist. But I am drawn to the romantic, less pragmatic types. These films are my way of paying respects to that Third World romanticism that has no place in my world.

**Q: I wanted to ask you about the figure of Jean Michelle Basquiat. I think he emerges in an organic way during the course of your film. We know he is part of the dilemma in Ocampo and in other artists.**

A: Schnabel's Basquiat YEAR (1996) was definitely something I was using and responding to. Certainly Ocampo was terribly aware of the fate of Basquiat. Certainly he was aware he was inheriting, or potentially occupying the space Basquiat had created in the art world

that had been so lily white. I think Basquiat was a cautionary tale for him. Ocampo is ultimately a middle class guy who wanted to end up like most people - happy and healthy and loved and comfortable. I think he was a little suspicious, as I was, of the space being offered to him. Basquiat was there with us. He was the cautionary tale.

**Q: But inspiring as well.**

A: Well, sure. One wants to be inspired to be like someone who lives large and lives long, like Picasso. You want to be able to exist and to be permitted and encouraged to keep changing and growing.

In American movies, the black and the Mexican still don't get to kiss the leading lady, and still die young. Take Eastwood's Bird or Nava's Selena. Films about non-white artists who need to die at the end. And that's fine, it suits somebody's guilty conscience, but it also suits somebody's sense of superiority. I don't want to hear anymore about how we cannot handle success, creativity, or drive a Lamborghini. That is patronizing, demeaning and racist. I am a middle class boy with a sense of entitlement of a middle class American, and when my brownness rubs up against that sense of entitlement, I don't like it.

That is why I feel a need to investigate those culture makers, those culture brokers, those art dealers, those studio executives, those museum curators, those professors, those editors of the newspapers, who are determining the culture, who are writing the culture, and who are determining how so-and-so is to be understood and portrayed.

**Q: But you persist in developing your own path. Along that path, you tell of your own formation as an artist. When you were twenty-three years old you published a**

**magazine. I look at your work as a cultural producer then and your work now and I see continuity.**

A: Two generations ago my grandparents were peasants in middle Mexico. They were semi-literate. They came here and two generations later I'm going to UC Berkeley and to film school! I think my people have time traveled quite a bit in a short period of time. What I'm trying to accomplish is to understand the trajectory of this process, this traveling, and where it takes us to next. That has been my preoccupation. And sure, it has been a real privilege to do it. †